

Orthodox Monasticism and Online Preaching

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Abstract

The research in the field of online ministry and evangelization is still in its very incipient stage of development. In recent years, we are witnessing an increasing use of the Internet, but also the growing efforts of the Church to secure its online presence. The websites of the Church institutions are well known, as well as the individual activities of some parish priests. However, when it comes to monks and nuns, their mission in the Orthodox virtual space is not analysed as much in the specialized literature. How does this catechetical-missionary activity reconcile with the monastic discretion in the Orthodox world? How compatible is the virtual profile of a monk or nun with that of a person entering a monastic community in a need of isolation from the world? What impact can the online ministry of the monks or nuns have, if presented in a professional manner? In the present study, the authors try to highlight the way in which two personalities of the monastic world in the West perform their online mission and indirectly promote a new type of monasticism, insufficiently known in the Orthodox Church, a missionary monasticism on the ‘digital continent’.

Keywords

Orthodox Monasticism, Digital Ministry, Abbot Tryphon, Coffee with Sister Vassa, Facebook

Introduction

The presence of the Church in the virtual environment is no longer a novelty: it is merely a reality that concerns us, some more so than others. In this ‘charming’, tempting, promising, and equally engrossing and versatile medium the Church seeks to continue fulfilling its role to preach the Gospel (Mt 28, 19-20). Whereas the involvement

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of ecclesiastical institutions comes as no surprise to anyone anymore, being perceived as perfectly normal especially by the laity, the analysis of this online presence is just in its early stages, as is perfecting a methodology designed to help understand how, to what extent, and in what way the Church should be present. Analysis, prognosis, diagnosis, and impact studies have only just recently been written in the Orthodox world. There are many Protestant and Catholic initiatives in this direction, but far less in the Orthodox milieu². Isabell Jonveaux's studies have been the point of departure for our research: in her papers she talks about two dimensions of the digital media in a monastic context. In an extensive study she conducted over a period of four years, I. Jonveaux supports the idea that the digital media presented monastic communities with a new opportunity. Her main argument is that these communities are now able to bring their contribution to contemporary society in various forms, while at the same time remaining enclosed in their monastic environment, which enables them to lead a spiritual and contemplative life. Thus, the digital media can become a means of engaging in a mission 'ad extra': 'Thanks to their websites, they can acquire a new visibility in the secularized society through a religiously neutral medium. Furthermore, monks intend also to use the internet as a new medium for evangelization'³. Nevertheless, there is also an aspect pertaining to the mission 'ad intra', namely using digital media for personal development and for building valuable relations and partnerships between monastic communities⁴.

The most important and visible conferences organized in the Orthodox sphere on the topic of digitalizing the Orthodox mission are those held in 2015 and 2018 by the International Association of Digital media and Orthodox Pastoral Care⁵. They were directly supported by the Orthodox Churches, especially by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and were massively attended, among others by the delegates of the Greek, Russian, and Romanian Churches. The debates addressed all aspects of the impact of the new technologies on the life of the Church and reached a series of conclusions. One of the resolutions of the first edition highlights the wish shared by some monks to 're-evangelize' the world through the internet⁶. Even though to 're-evangelize' seems a bit much, if we were to consider the stances adopted in the last decade within the Catholic

² The documents of the papal commission on social communications. See the online collection (translated into Romanian), 26 February 2020, <https://www.magisteriu.ro/categorie/dicastere-vaticane/cons-pontif-pt-comunicatiile-sociale/>.

³ Isabelle JONVEAUX, "Facebook as a monastic place? The new use of internet by Catholic monks," *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 25 (2013): 102.

⁴ See Isabelle JONVEAUX, "Internet in the Monastery. Construction or Deconstruction of the Community?," *Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 14 (2019): 61-78, doi: 10.17885/heiup.rel.2019.0.23948.

⁵ See the conclusions of the conferences, *DMOPC*, 26 February 2020, <http://dmopc.org/?p=2167>.

⁶ See *DMOPC*, 20 February 2020, <http://dmopc.org/?p=2167>.

world, we would understand that things look different in the Diaspora and in the Orthodox communities in the West, and that they need to be assessed from another perspective. Along the same lines, it is important to mention that Orthodox theologians are split into three camps: those who firmly reject all new technologies, those who espouse a more moderate vision, and those who lay far too much emphasis on the role of new technologies. Although not many in the monastic world have adopted an official position on this issue, a noteworthy statement was made by Irineu Pop, the Archbishop of Alba-Iulia at the monastic assembly of 2019: ‘the contemporary monk does not need a virtual identity to communicate with the world, not even out of a desire to do missionary work’⁷.

This position is perfectly justified if we bear in mind the monastic vows and the ascetic calling, and it points towards the sometimes-hazardous twists and turns taken by some monks in their online activities; it is nevertheless visibly opposed to the DMOPC (Digital media and Orthodox Pastoral Care) proposal. We will not be commenting here on who is right or wrong in this matter, especially since each position addresses the problem from a different angle, but we will try and analyse one piece of the ‘puzzle’ that is the Orthodox monastic mission in the virtual world.

The aim of this study is to pass the online presence of monastics through the filter of theology, namely that of mission and catechesis. How can monastic life align with the virtual world, how can ascetism accommodate globalism? Is there a real impact on internet users? What are the believers’ expectations? Which type of content do they prefer? We will ultimately come to a set of conclusions that will hopefully improve our understanding of the presence of monks and nuns in the virtual world.

Methodology

In order to be as objective as possible in our analysis, the method we used was inspired by the so-called ‘triangulation methodology’, meaning a methodological mix combining elements of theological and netnographic analysis of collecting and interpreting data⁸.

The subjects chosen are monastics who have constructed and embraced their online identities, with active social media profiles, which makes them suitable for academic analysis. They are Varvara Georgievna Larina and Father Tryphon, known as

⁷ See the conclusions of the assembly, *Basilica*, 20 February 2020, <https://basilica.ro/arhiepiscopul-irineu-le-reaminteste-monahilor-ca-nu-au-nevoie-de-o-identitate-virtuala>.

⁸ The same methodology was used in the second section of my doctoral dissertation, “The Impact of Sermons and Catechesis on the ‘Digital Generation’ as a Result of the Use of New Information and Communication Technologies” written under the supervision of Fr. Prof. Vasile Gordon, Ph. D., and Prof. Adrian Opre, Ph.D. It will be published by Cluj University Press.

‘Sister Vassa’ and ‘Abbot Tryphon’. There are two reasons behind this choice: their online popularity and the fact that they are both active in the international English-speaking Ortho-network.

We will present the general statistics of the two content authors for the sample period of June 1st – 30th 2019, considering all their posts. We will then analyse their highest and their lowest rated posts, according to the number of reactions they totalled. We did not always choose the absolute lowest rating posts for statistical reasons, because they had a very similar content. Even so, they were selected from the bottom 15% of the lowest rating ones.

Biographical aspects

Sister Vassa

Sister Vassa (Varvara Georgievna Larina)⁹ is an Orthodox nun who taught Liturgical Studies at the University of Vienna in 2009-2017. She was born on December 11th, 1970, in New York, in the family of a priest. She studied in Europe (in Italy and Germany), writing a doctoral dissertation in Liturgical Studies under the careful supervision of Prof. Robert F. Taft. Her thesis was published in 2010 as volume 286 of the prestigious collection *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*. In 1989 she took the habit in a French monastery belonging to the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROCOR). Sister Vassa is the author of the web series ‘Coffee with Sr. Vassa’¹⁰, a programme of videos and daily meditations in which she sets out to get her audience acquainted with various liturgical and practical aspects of the Orthodox faith¹¹. She promotes an uncommon catechesis via the new media. Her programme has a clear structure and is easily accessible on Facebook, YouTube and on her own website; many of the videos have subtitles in several languages, pointing to the fact that she was able to create a community of ‘contributors’ who help translate her material. Most of her posts are aimed at an audience who can understand the nuances of the various Byzantine liturgical elements, often quoting the Greek biblical text or employing terms of church Slavonic. We could say her audience have an above average education, are probably intellectuals and beginners in the study of theology.

Abbot Tryphon

⁹ Sr. Vassa has an official web page where we can glean valuable biographical elements. Some of them will be listed in our description, the rest can be accessed here, *Sr. Vassa*, 17 March 2020, <https://www.coffeewithsistervassa.com/aboutsrvassa>.

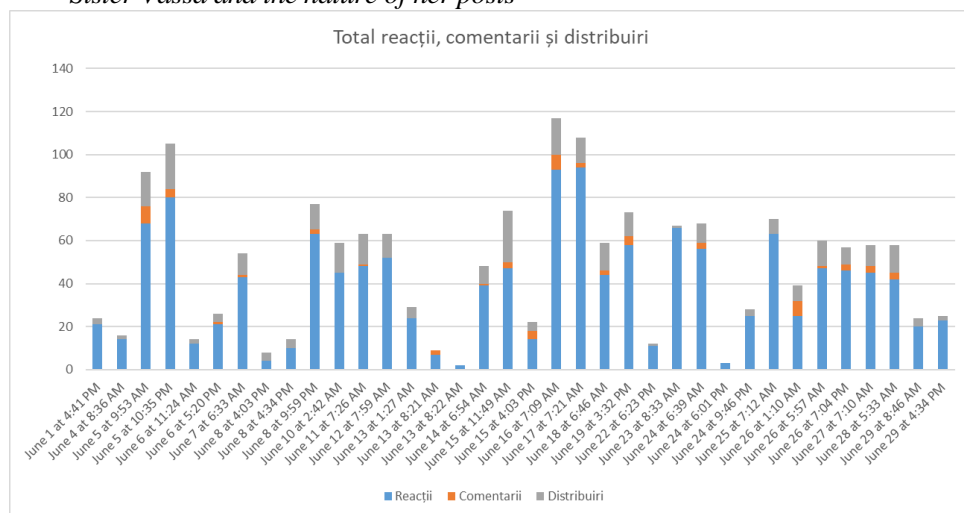
¹⁰ See the biography of Barbara Larin, here: http://media.wix.com/ugd/26b36d_dc588da5510148abbbf70d5c122a087f.pdf, 17 March 2020.

¹¹ *Facebook Page*, 20 February 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/CoffeeWithSisterVassa/>; *Youtube channel*, 20 February 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCH-FBwgf93rU-g8BH3xiuUQ>. On this day, the *Coffee with Sr. Vassa* channel had 11.400 subscribers and 229 videoclips, whereas her Facebook page had 17.080 followers and 17.188 likes.

We have very little information on Father Tryphon. He is the abbot of an Orthodox monastery on the Vashon island, Washington, the United States of America, belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR). A trained psychotherapist, his spiritual journey began in the Lutheran Protestant faith, veered off towards atheism, and then was steered towards Orthodoxy by his desire to explore the origins of Christianity¹². His online mission began with his short meditations called ‘The Morning Offering’, broadcast by the Orthodox Ancient Faith Radio in the USA and continues successfully on his daily updated Facebook page. Considering his background, his spiritual path, and the views on his Facebook page, we could say his mission is authentically Orthodox, open to other Christian traditions, but not expressly and intentionally ‘ad extra’. His catechesis is also atypical, suited to the virtual environment: the texts are concise, and they combine elements of faith with practical advice.

Results

Sister Vassa and the nature of her posts



The day of the Holy Spirit (June 17th 7:21)

Statistics: Total reactions 94, Likes 76, Love 18, Comments 2, Shares 12.

¹² Most of the Facebook posts are also found on his blog, *Ancient Faith*, 12 January 2020, <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/morningoffering/author/themorningoffering/>. For a very short biography, see <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/northwest-wanderings-vashon-monk-anything-but-orthodox/>, 17 January 2020. Most of his biographical details are to be gathered from the interviews and videos posted by the author.

The post consists of a text explaining the feast of the Holy Spirit and an image taken out of its context. The date of the post matches the Monday of the Holy Spirit in the Byzantine rite.

The 396 words text is divided into 5 paragraphs. The first one refers to the Person of the Holy Spirit in the Nicene-Constantinople Creed. Sister Vassa points out some aspects of the Orthodox doctrine of the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father, then talks about how the Spirit is present now in the contemporary world, breathing life into all living people, not just a small group. Throughout the text she quotes passages from the Scriptures that mention the person and the works of the Holy Spirit. At the end of the post, the author asks for her public's prayers for a trip she had to make in the following days. The image appended to the post is a photograph of Sister Vassa in a natural setting, wearing the monastic habit.

There is just one comment, praising the topic chosen, to which Sister Vassa responded with a personalized message of appreciation.

The post is shared on two pages belonging to Orthodox parishes from the UK and by individuals, as well as in two discussion groups.

Pentecost (June 16th 7:09)

Statistics: *Total reactions 93, Likes 73, Love 20, Comments 7, Shares 17.*

The post is made up of a text explaining the feast and an illustrative image, and its date is correlated to the feast of the Pentecost in the Byzantine calendar.

The text is 362 words-long and has three paragraphs of 8-9 lines each. The first contains the biblical excerpt of the episode of the descent of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2, 1-6). Sister Vassa goes on to clarify concepts, such as 'grace' or 'divine energies' as elements of the Spirit Who gives the sacred gift of life. In the last paragraph she reminds her audience of this feast's significance for the Orthodox Christians of our times and ends with the prayer 'O, Heavenly King'. The image is explained at the conclusion of the text; it depicts the inside of an Orthodox church, with a flower arrangement surrounding the icon of the Holy Trinity.

The comments contain blessings on the feast of the Pentecost and praises for the image uploaded with the post. Sister Vassa answers some of the comments and likes or loves the other ones.

The post was mostly shared by individuals, apart from two shares by an Orthodox parish from the UK and a study centre connected with an Orthodox parish in the USA.

Tune in to our all-NEW audio podcast! (June 24th 18:01)

Statistics: *Total reactions 3, Likes 3, Love 0, Comments 0, Shares 0.*

With this post Sister Vassa sets out to make her Patreon channel known, so she publishes a descriptive image, along with a short explanatory text, and a link to the Patreon platform. The users cannot view the uploaded video unless they give their

support in the form of a money donation; the resources are therefore not free of charge, being made available only to a small number of people.

The text is a compact 50 words-long paragraph. The author describes the content of the new episode she published on the Patreon platform, namely her text on the Holy Spirit in the Nicene-Constantinople Creed, in connection with the beginning of the Fast of the Holy Apostles. The image is highly evocative, and the graphics used are tailored for episode 251 of ‘The Podcast Coffee with Sister Vassa’ series.

This post has neither comments, nor shares.

Sister Vassa’s weekly ‘Here’s A Thought’ video on ‘Taking Care of the Body’ (June 6th 11:24)

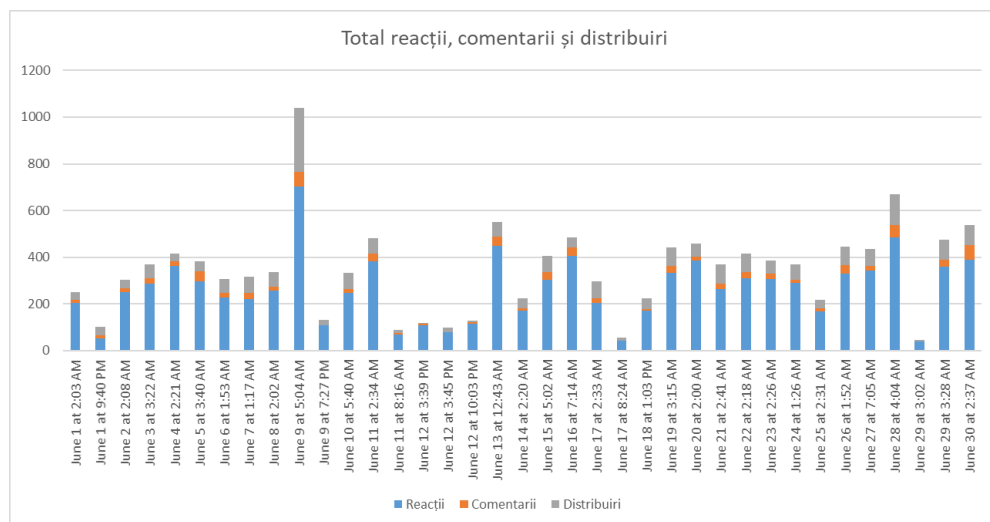
Statistics: *Total reactions 12, Likes 11, Love 1, Comments 0, Shares 2.*

The post promotes the author’s Instagram account and consists of a short informative message, a poster-type image, and a link to the Instagram video resource. The video can be accessed for free and having an Instagram account is not a prerequisite.

The text is 26 words-long and has just one paragraph. The author uses three hashtags: #ascension, #orthodoxy, and #ilovedogs, and describes the video recording in which she talks about caring for the body. The image is that of the ‘Weekly Instagram Video’ series’ credit titles.

There are no comments and the post was shared by just one person and by the page of a Greek-Catholic parish in the USA.

Abbot Tryphon



How to Forgive (June 9th 5:04)

Statistics: *Total reactions* 703, *Likes* 487, *Love* 216, *Comments* 64, *Shares* 272.

The post is an invitation to forgiveness: a text accompanied by an unrelated image.

The text has 345 words and 5 paragraphs. The beginning is dedicated to an explanation of the term ‘forgiveness’: it does not mean complete oblivion, but rather the absence of resentment; this is followed by a method that can be used by those who find it difficult to forgive: remembering how they offended others in the past. Finally, the post lists the fruits of forgiveness and of praying for one’s enemies: the heart is healed and opened, and it receives the gift of grace. The text concludes with a quote from 1Peter 3, 9.

The image is a group photo of the author and the monks of his community in front of a wooden church.

Out of the 65 comments, 34 are messages of thanking Abbot Tryphon for his inspiring thoughts. Other comments are questions or meditations on this text. Abbot Tryphon reacted to the first 23 with a like. He also answered one of the questions, offering a pastoral solution for the issue of forgiveness.

The post was shared by 9 pages belonging to Orthodox parishes in the USA, to an Orthodox parish from Belize, to two Orthodox missions in the USA, to an Orthodox parish from the UK, to an Australian Orthodox students’ association, and by other people, as well as six times in discussion groups.

A Christian Home (June 28th 4:04)

Statistics: *Total reactions* 486, *Likes* 341, *Love* 144, *Comments* 51, *Shares* 134.

The post describes a Christian home in a contemporary setting and is comprised of a text message and a descriptive image.

The text has 787 words and is divided into 9 paragraphs. Abbot Tryphon begins by talking about the prayer corner as an element of practical use and of Christian mission, a sign of the Christian presence in a house. He then encourages his readers to commission icons of the patron saints of every family member, he encourages them to eat dinner together with their families and to accompany the meal with all the due Christian gestures. The author highlights the danger of the digital media encroaching on the Christian home and recommends a series of protective measures. He finally advises people to attend church services and to give alms, all practical recommendations that can be easily adopted by most families.

The image is that of the prayer corner found in the author’s study; it is not captioned in the main post, but the author describes the photograph when answering one of the questions in the comments section.

Of the 50 comments, many express appreciation and gratitude for these pastoral guidelines. Four people have also included in their comments a photograph of their prayer corners. Abbot Tryphon reacts to the first 5 comments with a like and answers

each question in a personal manner. Some comments suggest readdressing the topic with single-parent families in mind, something Abbot Tryphon promises to do in the future.

The post is shared on the page of an Orthodox bishopric from the USA, by 9 Orthodox parishes from the USA, by 2 Orthodox associations, as well as in 4 discussion groups and by various people. When the post was shared on the parishes' pages it was followed by advices on how to implement its points in the lives of the faithful.

Morning Offering (June 29th 3:02)

Statistics: *Total reactions* 38, *Likes* 30, *Love* 8, *Comments* 0, *Shares* 7.

Abbot Tryphon shares an audio interview (external link) taken for Ancient Faith Radio, USA. In the 7 minutes-long interview he talks about the Christian home, a topic he had written about the day before. This resource can be accessed free of charge, but not directly on the Facebook page: the users are redirected to the Ancient Faith Radio website.

The video has no caption, nor any message by Abbot Tryphon, so the user must access the Ancient Faith page for further details.

The post has no comments, and out of the 7 times it was shared, just once was it shared by an Orthodox parish, all the other times, by individuals.

What is Christian Freedom (June 17th 8:24)

Statistics: *Total reactions* 41, *Likes* 33, *Love* 8, *Comments* 1, *Shares* 12.

Abbot Tryphon shares an audio interview (external link) with a YouTube content creator who produces spiritual programmes in the USA. The users can watch the video for free, but this is not possible on the Facebook page: they are redirected to the YouTube channel. This means there is an additional step that might discourage some users from accessing this content.

Abbot Tryphon provides no description for this video, so the user must go to the YouTube video for more information.

There is a sole comment thanking the author and 12 shares, just one of which was to a group.

Conclusions

The difference between the most and the least popular posts resides in their content. A well-argued theological text published at the right time and illustrated by an expressive image will be far better received than a post that redirects you to another site, such as *YouTube*, *Patreon* or *Instagram*, especially if accessing this resource requires creating an additional account.

A significant number of comments are messages expressing gratitude, sending the users' blessings (when the text is posted on a church feast) or conveying their appreciation of the image accompanying the post.

The length of the text is not a critical element; what really count is how topical and relevant the message is.

Practical advices, that can be easily applied in the day-to-day lives of the faithful, have a far better chance of being shared on the pages of local churches or associations and thus benefit from an even wider dissemination. Common people do not find academic theology particularly appealing, because they are searching for answers to the questions they are faced with in their personal lives.

By comparing Sister Vassa's popular posts with those that have generated an average number of reactions, we could note that the topics associated with the liturgical calendar are far better received. The theological content of her posts is relatively constant, but the differences emerge depending on the moment when a post is linked to a significant liturgical celebration. Here are some of the topics that have produced an average number of reactions: *A continuous Pentecost*, *We are all 'sent'*, *Bearing spiritual fruit*, *We are called upon to be the salt of the earth*, *Hope in God* or *The meaning of fasting*.

By comparing Abbot Tryphon's popular posts with those that have generated an average number of reactions, we were able to notice that the posts dedicated to purely theological analyses, with no immediate practical applicability are at a disadvantage. However, with respect to the comments, most of them are pertinent to the topic and voice the user's theological questions or interpretations. Some of the above mentioned purely theological topics are: *The relationship between grace and good deeds in the context of our salvation*, *The personality of the critic*, *Virtue and courage*, *The connection between the temple of the Old Testament and the new temple*, *False humility*, or *The joy of the heart*.

The timing of a post is not necessarily directly responsible for getting more views or less.

The people reading the posts are not based exclusively in the USA or the UK: some of them come from the European Orthodox spaces, even from Romania. What can we understand from this desire to read an Orthodox text written in a foreign language? From our point of view, the need to read online, mainly on social media sites where distracting elements abound, is just another way of seeking peace.

Those who follow the two authors are not all Orthodox: some of them are also Catholics or Protestants. We could say, exaggerating, that many of the non-Orthodox who read these posts are on the same journey as the auditors (catechumens) of the early Church.

Sister Vassa's discourse is addressed to an educated audience who resonates with the deeper, more profound elements of the faith. In other words, Sister Vassa's message is better suited for the 'illuminated' (baptized), whereas Abbot Tryphon's preaching works for both auditors, neophytes and the baptized.

To conclude, we believe that the online presence of monks and nuns is important in as much as it is restricted to preaching the Gospel in a constant, selfless, and theologically consistent fashion. Furthermore, we believe that it is necessary to train people for this kind of mission during their Theology studies. It is important to analyse, to study and to improve the online component of our Christian mission and preaching: it will not replace the classical form of mission, but it does have its place. Concerning how appropriate it is for monastics to be present on the virtual world, we believe that what the Archbishop of Alba-Iulia has stated perfectly reflects the Orthodox teaching; nevertheless, his statement should be nuanced in the case of monastic missions that have the blessing of a bishop. If the monk or the nun are well versed in theological matters, if they have been entrusted by God with the rare gift of being able to do mission online and if they assume the risks their online presence entails, the effects of their mission could be the ones promised in the Gospel of Matthew, ch. 28, 19-20.