

BOOK REVIEW by Archpriest Jude Lepine

The New Media Epidemic: The Undermining of Society, Family and Our Own Soul

by Jean-Claude Larchet

Several good books have been published about the effects of social media and our culture of constant online communication and entertainment. This particular book is written by the eminent French Orthodox scholar and patrologist, Dr. Jean-Claude Larchet, with a focus on the effects of the new media on the mind, the soul and even the body, as well as their impact on our social life, the private life of the family and on marriage.

Larchet's analyses for each type of virtual communication and experience are clear and detailed. He warns us about the fact that what looks like benign behavior, in fact, meets the definition of a powerful addiction, all to the financial benefit of the Big Tech corporate dealers.

Based on the rich notion of the passions in spiritual literature such as the *Philokalia*, Larchet develops a pathology of the multi-layered erosions of our mental (conceptual, analytical, critical, creative, cognitive) and emotional capacities which result from spending a disproportionate amount of our time online. Emotional capacities, drained by online stimulations, can eventually numb the heart in real life, resulting in the absence of interest and time—not to mention love and compassion—for our neighbor and our loved ones while, more often than not, amplifying harmful polemic attitudes.

At the deepest level, i.e. the spiritual one, the virtual world of instant and ever changing gratification undoes in us the necessary sense of effort, watchfulness and stillness which are the foundations of spiritual life. Likewise, our capacity for slow, deep, linear reading—which most spiritual reading is— is undermined as online attention hardly needs to be sustained for more than a few disconnected snippets of time. Moreover, the constant search for guidance in the virtual world for practically all aspects of our lives gives the web the status of an all-knowing religious entity to which we commend ourselves and all our lives multiple times a day. For Larchet, this is a major problem which asks for a radical solution, a retaking possession of, and a re-commending of our lives once again to Christ our God.

As this brief review barely begins to approach the treasure trove of insights offered by this book— insights which you may find confirm your own intuitions— please check it out yourself. Two other excellent books about the effects of the new media on us are: *Amusing Ourselves to Death* by Neil Postman— a classic— and *The Shallows: What the Internet Does to Our Brains* by Nicholas Carr.

FRIENDS' GATHERING UPDATE

Regrettably, due to the complications caused by the road closure between Santa Paula and our monastery, we will have to cancel the next few Friends' Gatherings until Ojai Road (Highway 150) reopens, God willing, during the summer. Stay tuned for updates.

St. Barbara Orthodox Monastery

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***Friends of the Monastery Gathering
Sunday, March 31st, 2024:
Cancelled due to mudslide***



Dear Friends of St. Barbara Monastery,

Once again, we find ourselves journeying along the narrow path of Great and Holy Lent—an intense (and hopefully joyful) time of reflection, contrition, repentance, and reorientation towards Christ in all areas of our lives. For those who would embrace it as the Church offers it, Great Lent is a spiritual arena of struggle, testing, and a particular time of revelation of our weaknesses and inadequacies. Fasting, extra church services, saying “no!” to our insistent appetites and sinful patterns, cutting off our self-will, can truly be a struggle and exposes our weaknesses and insufficiencies in short order.

During Great Lent, we may well find our internal resources sorely tested (it’s part of God’s “program”!) and, at times, our nerves brought to their very limits. Furthermore, we may notice that God may bring us “special” circumstances to try and test us. Welcome to Lent—a blessed time of trial, testing and, hopefully, purification.

One might argue, however, that it is these particular moments when we are brought to the edge of ourselves, when we feel that what confronts us is simply too much, that the potential for growth and purification is present. We may find ourselves humbled by our limitations and inadequacies, helpless in face of perplexing situations, and confronted painfully by our failure to love others in the midst of our own struggle. (After all, even when we are struggling, aren’t we still supposed to love our brother?)

Thankfully, the Holy Fathers teach us not to despair in the face of such testing. Rather, they teach us that where there is humility and a recognition of our weaknesses, there is room for God to work and, thus, real opportunity for growth. In fact, in this very state, we now possess the perfect material to offer to God in prayer –i.e. our weaknesses, our difficulties, our pain— in order for Him to make something beautiful of it. He is waiting for us to bring Him all of our soiled and ragged material so that He may fashion it into raiment of light with which we may clothe ourselves to meet Him at Pascha!

Brothers and sisters, let us not fear being brought to the edge of ourselves during Lent, knowing that all things are brought to us by God for our salvation. With help from Heaven, we can meet all of life’s difficulties with humility, bowing down in reverence before the holy will of God, vowing to endure all things for the sake of Christ, and all the while saying in our hearts, “May it be blessed!” In due time, God will resolve all of our difficulties. However, during this season of preparation for Pascha, if we accept the crosses He sends our way peacefully and with firm conviction that His will governs all, we will soon experience the unshakeable joy of the resurrection together with our Lord as we meet Him at His all-glorious Resurrection! We wish you all a blessed and fruitful Lent!

—The Sisters of St. Barbara Monastery

THE HILLS ARE ALIVE!

The Scriptures tell us that faith can move mountains, however, the sisters certainly did not pray that a nearby hillside move onto the main road that leads to the monastery. In late February, record-breaking rains and flooding triggered a massive mudslide a few miles south of the monastery measuring 15 ft high and 150 feet wide which now blocks Highway 150 (aka Ojai Road).

This road closure has impacted many local residents. What used to be a 10 minute drive to the town of Santa Paula to visit the post office, doctor’s office, and grocery store, now takes 1 hour (one way) following a circuitous detour involving multiple freeways. Furthermore, the US Postal Service has ceased all mail delivery to the monastery and to our neighbors. (Apparently, their motto of “neither snow nor rain nor heat...” did not include mudslides!) As of now, Caltrans officials conservatively estimate a potential reopening of one lane of the road in late May, even as they currently await the completion of a geotechnical investigation before deciding how best to tackle this massive amount of mud and rocks safely. In short, no “dirt” has been removed yet!

On the bright side, the sisters are now enjoying the relative lack of traffic and the increased friendliness of our neighbors during this most unusual set of circumstances.



HELP WANTED: BAY LEAVES PROJECT

The annual Lenten harvesting and cleaning of bay leaves, destined for Holy Saturday, has begun. Somewhat to our dismay, the road closure between Santa Paula and the monastery means that the groups who come out from parishes in southern California to spend a day at the monastery helping with this project, are not able to arrive here with enough time to make the trip worthwhile. As such, the vital help the monastery counts on to fulfill the large amount of bay leaf orders during Lent has suddenly dried up. In light of this, we invite all individuals who are willing to make the (now longer) trip, to come and help us!

Please also consider whether you would like your leaves to be sent as leaves on unprocessed branches so that a parish work party can spend a day together on a special Lenten project processing and cleaning leaves.



Friends in years past processing bay leaves.