

Cyber-space in the life of the Coptic Youth:

A Highway to Heaven or Hell

In this age, the cyber-world is a huge part of our lives, between performing school work, having a connection with friends and a social life, and getting involved into a spiritual environment too. It has a great impact on our mind and behavior, as well as influencing our morals and personality. This way of living may lead to either a very close relationship with God, or as far away as possible from Him. Unfortunately, many of the virtues of Christianity are sometimes easily violated by the media and web, such as how we should speak, act, and behave as Christians. The cyber world can be a powerful tool for the devil to manipulate people. On the other hand, it can be efficiently used to glorify the name of the Lord and spread the Word; we just have to know how. It can also save us a lot of time and energy with information and research and learning new things, yet it can waste all the time we are ever going to have without any of us even realizing it! Besides that, the internet is the easiest way we can interact with our good friends and family; on the contrary, it is effortless to find ourselves interacting with bad company and evil surroundings. The World Wide Web can be used as a double-edged sword, either for the Christian youth or against them.

Firstly, and most importantly, the internet can help us grow spiritually through easy to access knowledge, and also help others by spreading the Word of God. One of the most common challenges for the church youth these days is understanding what the Bible is telling us and being able to practically apply it in our lives. Also, many times we can become too lazy or shy to ask questions, so we remain ignorant but curious. To help grow in understanding of the Holy Bible, we can easily find great Bible help in order to comprehend what God's commandment for our lives. It is very easy to look up verses about a certain topic in our life that we need help and improvement on. For example, just the other day, my best friend was under a great deal of stress and needed some good Christian motivation to aid her. I told her that I knew this one Bible verse that is great for the situation that she is in, but I couldn't quite remember what it was, so I quickly got onto the internet and looked it up in no time and it was extremely easy and fast, plus we both learned something new to help us in our daily lives. Another example is that I really need help with facing temptation during fasting and wanted a special verse that I can remember when those small temptations come. A great website to use for looking up verses is BibleGateway.com. We can also ask questions about a certain issue or something that we don't

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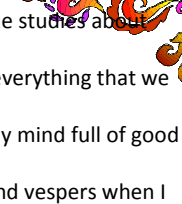
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understand on sources such as Tasbeha.org or other Coptic community sites. Reading articles and Bible studies about whatever topic will also help tremendously. It is also important for us to know about our church and everything that we do in it. I enjoy listening and learning hymns and praises which helps me memorize them and keeps my mind full of good things rather than stuffing it with bad. I also find it much easier for me to stay along with the liturgy and vespers when I know the hymns and prayers that are being sung. The internet is also a great source for spiritual books and articles about the great Saints and Church Fathers, which can also help us become closer to God by looking up to them and following their example. If you think about it, the world didn't have any of these great tools when the internet wasn't invented yet. We can now watch live broadcasts of church, sermons, and celebrations from anywhere around the world! How many of us know someone who is very ill, and many times cannot come to church because they are too sick or weak or have to stay in the hospital? Well, now they can participate and be a part of this amazing blessing that we have, even though they are physically unable to. In addition to easy access of spiritual tools, the internet is a great tool for easily spreading the Word of God. It's as simple as putting a nice verse or video on Facebook or passing on a neat link or message that changed someone's day through emails. You never know how doing something like that can affect another person. Maybe they are going through something terrible and that nice verse made the world of a difference for him or her. God works in mysterious ways and He can use the internet to touch so many people's lives.

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One problem with trying to look information up on Google, Yahoo, Bing, or any other search engine is that we might find information that may not be appropriate for what our church believes and teaches. One way that the devil gets us off track is by getting us confused and then dubious about our original belief. That is how our church divided in the first place! The internet can sometimes give us the wrong translation or version of the Bible. For example, the Book of the Jehovah's Witness is completely wrong and altered to fit what they believe. One example is that they believe that Jesus Christ was actually Arch Angel Michael, and we all know that that is far beyond incorrect, but let's not get into that right now! The point I want to make here is that everyone is going to try to get us to believe something wrong. Who knows, the devil might lead you to a Mormon Bible, and God knows what could happen from there. It is very dangerous for us to get confused about what is true and what is false, and we all need to be very careful. Just a couple of weeks

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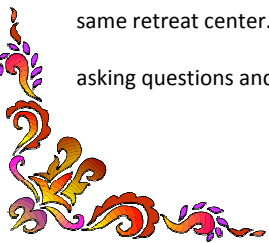
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ago, my friends and I went on a convention with the church. There was also a Baptist or Methodius Church there at the same retreat center. Any ways, during one of our free times, the pastor of the other group came up to us and starting asking questions and trying to convince us to believe in whatever they believe in. I'm telling you this story to show that



this is something that happened to us in a Coptic Orthodox Church convention. Imagine what could happen on the

internet! So while the internet offers a variety of information at a push of button, we must also filter through the information in order to discern between what's right versus erroneous information.

Another way that the internet can be a great tool is by saving us time and energy when finding out new information, researching something for school, or just learning new things. Whether it is doing a project about Africa for school, learning what else is going on in the Middle East and Japan, or even finding what restaurant I want to go to with my friends this Saturday. All of our school work and projects are now being done on the internet, and everything we use in school is turning digital. Imagine doing a project that requires a lot of research and you had to go through every single book and magazine to find the answer to one simple question. Could you imagine how much time that would have taken

to do the whole entire project? Now we can just hop onto Google, type in our subject or question, and with a click of a button, we've got our answer; well that's how much time it would take compared to before the internet was invented! We are also always aware of what is going on in our nation and the whole world. Another great tool on the internet is having a dictionary on there. Do you know how much time it saves and how much we learn when we use the dictionary on the internet? Whenever there is a word that I don't know what it means or don't know how to spell it, I usually go onto Dictionary.com and get my answer within seconds. It's much better than pulling out the huge dictionary,

then spending hours trying to find the word, and then it ends up that it is not in there or I may not understand their definition. Also, it takes minutes, seconds, to send a message to someone on the internet through email, Facebook, and chatting. Before internet was even brought up, you had to write a letter, call them, or tell them in person.

Communication was defiantly not as efficient as it is today. These are just few of many examples to illustrate how much time the internet is saving us by being able to attain a variety of information sitting at home in front of the computer.

On the contrary, the internet can also take up all the time in the world we are ever going to have without us even realizing it. And after wasting all of our precious time, it can make us too lazy to go and pray for repentance or to read the Bible. A lot of us don't realize how important and valuable our time is! Believe it or not, the number one thing that the devil does to keep us away from God is to make us lazy to talk to Him or be a part of Him. He even said so himself to St. Marina of Antioch when she was beating him in prison and then asked what he does to the human race. He told her "I am the one who makes adultery, stealing, blasphemy, and earthly desires, good and desirable to the

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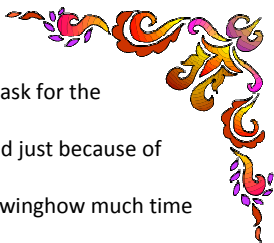
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human. And if I do not overcome him, I steer sleep and laziness against him, so he will not pray and ask for the forgiveness of his sins.” It is really scary how the devil leads us into traps and takes us away from God just because of something small like spending an extra hour on Facebook or going from site to another without knowing how much time is flying by. One must be cautious because as mentioned in Ephesians 5:15-16, “See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” Time is a gift from God and we need to be wise as to how we spend it.

And lastly, the internet allows us to interact with all of our good friends and family, whether they are our neighbors or live half way across the world. The most famous and used site to do this is Facebook. And Facebook is not a bad thing; we just need to know how to use it right. What I’m saying may be a bit strange or confusing at first, but if you think about it, the Holy Bible said that it is very important to have good friends and to stay close to them. For example, King Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 4:9-11, “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up.”, and we all know that one of the main ways the youth of our church stay connected is through the new technology and the things that are available to them. As a matter of fact, there is a new social network that belongs to the Coptic communities of the world: CopticWorld.org. It’s a safe Coptic environment where communities can all stay connected together and interact with each other. Another great example is Tasbeha.org: a place where we can ask questions, download songs, hymns, and sermons, and learn new things about our Church, yet it is still a social network! It’s basically a place that unites people of similar interests, and to show all the Coptic youth that they are not alone in this world; we can all stand together side by side and support each other through hard times. So while social networks may appear shallow in their purpose of just socializing with others, through the examples mentioned above we can see that they can have a deeper purpose and effect on our spiritual life as youth.

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While staying connected with others that share similar interests is great, unfortunately, many of us can get carried away, and end up finding ourselves interacting with bad friends and evil surroundings instead of the good as desired. St Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:33 “Do not be deceived, bad company corrupts good morals,” and he is absolutely correct. There is an old saying that says “One bad apple will spoil a whole barrel,” which means that one



person, who doesn't have his morals or virtues straightened out and does whatever he wants to do, will also pass his

bad habits to all his good friends that he came from.

Also, our 5 senses are the first things that the devil attacks us through, especially when on the web, so we need to be very careful!

The first thing to check to see if we might be getting trapped by the devil are these 5 senses: What are we looking at, what are we listening to, what is coming out of our mouths, what are our actions, and what are we

thinking about most of the time. All of these things are also influenced by the internet: coincidence, I don't think so!

Abba Poemen said, *"The chief of all wickedness is the wandering of the thoughts."* Sometimes we will find ourselves

thinking about evil things that we would have never even allowed in our minds, especially while we pray, that is the devil

trying to weaken us but we should ignore him, pray harder, ask for forgiveness! Here is a nice trick that helps me decide

what is right and what is wrong: if my parents, younger siblings who look up to me, and father of confession were in the

same exact room as I am and were watching me, would I still be doing what I am doing, reading what I am reading,

listening to what I'm listening to, watching what I'm watching? Even if none of them were really in that room with me,

our Lord is always there with us; He is always there watching us, and we need to honor Him with our actions not

disappoint Him.

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Obviously, we need to avoid the destructive impact of the internet and move towards our number one goal in

life: a true relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ. But how? Well first of all, we need to fill our free time with God and

His Word, and try not to stay on the computer for too long. We need to compare the time we are spending with God,

versus the time we are spending in front of the Internet each day. A beautiful quote from the book Work of Jonathan

Edwards, Volume 2 says *"The time of youth is precious, on many accounts. Therefore, if you be in enjoyment of this time,*

take heed that you improve it. Let not the precious days and years of youth slip away without improvement. A time of

strivings of God's Spirit is more precious than other time." We have to realize that every minute of our lives count

towards our eternal life. Fr. Youstos El Anthony was famous for often asking the question "What time is it?" to remind

himself that he is continually getting closer to the last minute in his life and reminding others around him as well. This

should make us appreciate the value of time and help us minimize the time wasted in the crazy cyber world. Another

very important thing we need to do is to guard our senses of what they receive and protect our hearts, souls and minds

of the small offences that gradually build up to ruin our purity. When we were young, our Sunday school teachers used

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to teach us the song "Be careful Little Eyes What you see". I honestly think that most of the youth of this generation

need to remember this song at all times, including me. We must also be selective for what is beneficial to our spiritual

and mental growth and what is wasteful and unfruitful as said in 1 Corinthians 6:12, "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any."

Finally, we ask our Lord Jesus Christ to give us the understanding spirit that we may be able to differentiate what is positive and beneficial and what is destructive to our minds, souls, and spirits. Lord, please help us every single step of the journey, for there is no possible way we can do it alone. Also aid us to guard our senses from the devil and hidden evils. I challenge all the youth to start changing these dangerous habits by taking action sooner rather than later. We must first evaluate how much time we usually spend on the computer, and everyday try to deduct a few minutes, little by little. Also make sure to replace this extra time with God and not other unnecessary activities. My father of confession advised me that the best way to do that is to do it right when I come back from school. Before I do anything and get occupied and distracted, he suggested for me to go to a private room alone and spend no more than half an hour or so, and read just the main parts of the Compline hour or Vespers from the Agpeya, then talk to Him myself. Talk to Him as if He is just a good friend who is always there for me. After the prayer, I would read one chapter of the Bible and reflect on it. I started out with my favorite verse, the one that really touched me when I read it. This way, I found that God is answering me back after praying. It's an amazing feeling! St Augustine said, *"With thee is perfect rest, and life unchanging. He who enters into thee enters into the joy of his Lord, and shall have no fear, and shall do excellently in the most Excellent."* Also, it's a good idea to share these verses with friends. This will also serve as encouragement for friends to use the Bible as a place for comfort and spiritual growth too. And of course talking to our father of confession frequently and asking him for guidance and opinion is very important too. This way we will receive God's many blessings for willing to make good changes in our life by taking the good from the internet and leaving the bad.

