

Screen Asceticism (Fr. Micah Hirschy)

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I am not a Luddite. I am sitting in front of a computer screen, I have an iPhone in my pocket, and I watched the news this morning on the television. I enjoy a good film now and then, and I have been known to binge watch a favorite television show. I make a playlist for road trips, time at the gym, and even household chores. It is not an entirely rare occurrence for Presvytera to take my Nook out of my sleeping hands at night.

Despite being a world away and living many centuries ago, I feel that Abba Isaac's voice is eternally contemporary and has a great deal of relevance for the world in which we find ourselves. Concerning our unconscious and near constant use of technology, he reminds us that the true love of wisdom is "that even in the most trivial and insignificant things that happens to a man, he is still vigilant." He calls us to be attentive to every image we allow to enter into us through our eyes, and to be aware of the effect that each word heard, read, typed, or spoken has upon our heart. That we are to "watch over our belly, but still more over our sight" and to "shun impudence in speech as you would death."

For those of us who have written an angry e-mail or joined in on one of those endless Facebook debates, our holy Abba tells us, "Do not resist anyone on any

matter; do not fight, do not lie, do not swear. Be despised, and do not despise. Be wronged, and do not wrong,” and “It is better for you to be slow of tongue, yet full of knowledge and experienced, rather than to pour forth a flood of teaching because you are sharp of mind.”

Abba Isaac calls us to strive for moderation in all things, just as the wise Solomon reminds us that, “If you have found honey, eat only enough for you, lest you be sated with it and vomit it.” (Proverbs 25:16 RSV) This vigilance and moderation should certainly be applied to our screen time.

But what if we struggle with this moderation and vigilance and find any privation to be painful? Our wise Elder does not hesitate to remind us that, “when the body beholds the sight of luxury and worldly things and nearly every hour sees the causes of laxity, a burning desire for them is enkindled in it. Therefore the Lord Redeemer very rightly commanded whoever would follow Him to strip himself and leave the world; for a man ought to cast off the causes of his slackness...”

If you cannot use the screen in moderation, if social media leaves you depressed, if the 24-7 “news” industry pushes you towards despair, if prayer and reading have fallen along the wayside, if you look into a screen more than into the face of another person... turn the screen off and as Abba Isaac said, “Cast off the cause...”

We cannot cast the screen away, some might say, even if and when we feel enslaved to it. For some of us, it has become a near necessity. Or perhaps we simply don’t want to give it up. Even for those of us who are immoderate, inattentive, and still refuse to avoid the cause of our slackness, for us Abba Isaac calls us in his unassuming and gentle way:

And if you cannot fast for two days on end, at least fast till evening. And if you cannot wait till evening at least take care not to eat [or use the screen] to your fill. If you cannot show mercy, speak as a sinner. You are not a peacemaker; do not be a troublemaker...

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