Designing meaning in the digital age:
Mythodesign as a challenge for contemporary missiology

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We live in a time when the Christian faith is faced with an unprecedented challenge: that of competing narratives. In the digital age, it is images, symbols, and stories that shape the collective imagination just as much as — if not more than — laws and institutions. In this context, the mission of the Church can no longer be limited to merely transmitting content: it must learn to *design* its vision. This is precisely where the concept of *mythodesign* comes into play — a recent term, yet rich in meaning for those engaged in culture, anthropology, and pastoral ministry.

Emerging from the reflections of Ukrainian and Russian scholars such as Andrey Ulyanovskiy and Vsevolod Zelenin, *mythodesign* is defined as "a socio-cultural technology for the systemic construction of meanings, symbols, collective identities, and trust in communicative processes"[1]. But more than a technique, it also offers a missionary horizon to explore. In the face of fake news, hybrid warfare, and a civilizational crisis, the Church is not only called to safeguard the truth, but — in the words of Ernst Cassirer — to become an "artisan of symbolic forms."

To understand this challenge, it is helpful to reflect on the specific meaning of myth. Far from being mere illusion or superstition, myth has always been a narrative form that guides collective action. Plato understood this well when, in the *Republic*, he wrote: "We must ensure that the first myths (gr. *μεμυθολογημένα*) our young people hear are directed toward virtue" (*Republic* II, 378e). The education of the *polis* passed through stories that did not discourage in the face of death, but instead inspired courage and justice. This already resembles a kind of proto-*mythodesign*.

This insight is echoed by Pope Francis, who restores to myth its formative and communal function. He defines the people as a "historical and mythical category," stating that "we need a myth to understand a people"[2]. In *Fratelli tutti*, the Pope forcefully denounces false "myths": false security (FT 26, 32, 262), false community spirit (FT 27), false universalism (FT 99–100, 145), false tolerance (FT 221), and false ideologies (FT 241). Alongside this critique, however, we have also a constructive mythical model: every nation is born from a founding narrative, a shared memory, an imaginary that binds them together. This is why evangelization cannot neglect the symbolic dimension of cultures.

At this point, a fundamental question arises: is it really correct to see myth only as a category tied to the past? In my view, it is a common mistake to think of myth merely as something unreal, unachievable, or false.

On the contrary, in today's world, myth has taken on a new face. The philosophy of myth can be reinterpreted in a prophetic key — or, if someone prefers the language of technology, as a kind of "marketing project." It is no longer just a story about the past, but a vision projected toward the future. Myth may be understood in the spirit of Heidegger's technological hope.

Think, for example, of the idea of a "Great America" or a "New Europe," or of the founding of the European Union or a monastic community: each of these begins with a historical-mythical vision. In such cases, it is clear that the myth should not be seen as a legend, but as an intentional and creative project. From this perspective, it is not about replacing truth, but about giving it form. It is not about falsehood, but about a dream — a mirror that, like a question, resonates with the listener, just as art helps us to understand ourselves.

Mythodesign is, then, the art of designing symbolic narratives capable of guiding historical action. This "cultural technology" unfolds in many areas: crisis management (psychological warfare, symbolic manipulation); the building of social cohesion (rituals, media, events); the promotion of ethical values (human dignity, justice, peace). Just as the liturgy shapes the identity of the People of God, so too can *mythodesign* shape collective perception. But it must be clear: this is not merely a question of aesthetics. It is about meaning, memory, and direction.

A concrete example comes from the realm of visual communication. Today, visual imagination is the primary vehicle of symbolism. Try to call a few images to mind: think of how two different depictions of the same historical figure — whether Alexander the Great or a modern political leader — can evoke the image of a hero or a tyrant, transparency or oppression, simply by altering the light, colors, or symbolic elements. The same is true for sacred space: an altar may communicate solemnity or banality, depending on the objects that inhabit it. Perception changes, and the message is transformed. Whoever controls the image, controls perception.

For this reason, *visual mythodesign* represents one of the most powerful — and at the same time, most insidious — tools of the digital age. But the Church cannot afford to retreat out of fear: it is called to inhabit these languages with the light of the Gospel.

That is why I believe it is essential that mastery of *mythodesign* become a daily tool for missionaries. Mythological language, after all, is a battlefield. And when, in the context of missionary engagement, we come face-to-face with subcultures and ideologies, it is crucial to understand whom we are engaging with — and how we are evangelizing.

Who, then, is the Christian *mythodesigner*? He is a missionary, an educator, a communicator — someone capable of discerning between destructive narratives and redemptive visions. He is one who, like Christ in the parables, knows how to speak to the heart by reinterpreting myths, purifying them, and transfiguring them. Likewise, he is also one who builds media immunity in wounded populations, using *psychosemantics* — the study of how words and symbols are perceived and lived — as a pastoral tool. In this regard, the words of Pope Francis offer a powerful and concrete image: "Telling of hope means (...) being aware of the shoots that emerge when the earth is still covered with ashes"[3]. Thus, Christian *storytelling* becomes *hopetelling*: sowing visions of communion, designing narratives of resurrection.

However, we cannot overlook a crucial aspect. Like any technology — in the broad sense proposed by Heidegger — *mythodesign* is a double-edged sword. It can become a tool of liberation or a vehicle of manipulation. Hence, the urgency of ethical discernment.

Projected myths can be used to concentrate resources, educate, and foster integration — but they can also be exploited to dominate, control, and dehumanize.

What makes the difference is always the intention of the designer. As Zelenin affirms, myths are no longer merely ancient tales, but technologies of influence[4]. For this reason, the Christian use of *mythodesign* must be grounded in truth, beauty, and the common good. Only then will it be possible to generate visions that redeem the imagination, without distorting or deceiving it.

Notes

1. A. Ulyanovskiy, *Mythodesign: advertising and social myths* (*orig. Мифодизайн: коммерческие и социальные мифы*), San Pietroburgo 2005, 14.
2. A. Legname, *La teopsia di Francesco. Tra scienza e fede*, vol. II, Catania 2017, 120.
3. Papa Francesco, *Audience with Participants in the Jubilee of Communication* (25 January 2025), https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2025/01/25/0073/00144.html (access: 14.04.2024).
4. V. Zelenin, *Principles of mythodesign: psychotechnologies for managing media reality* (*orig. Основи міфодизайну. Психотехнології керування медіареальністю*), Kyiv 2024, 14-16.

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