

Double Virtuality

June 13, 2009

Most, if not all, of you know that in the early hours of June 1 an Air France jetliner with 228 souls on board fell out of the sky on its way from Rio de Janeiro to Paris, and crashed into the Atlantic Ocean. An extraordinary event? Or is not the extraordinary thing rather that not all of these 100- to 150-ton monsters fall out of the sky? Has not man's technology virtually mastered reality?

The technology of these aerial Leviathans is indeed something to be marvelled at. Every day now thousands of them all over the world defy gravity to climb six miles high and blast hundreds of passengers at a time over mountain ranges, across vast oceans, from continent to continent, mostly in complete safety. The crashes always make headlines in the media, but they are so rare when compared with the total number of flights that the passengers may fear, but never think, that they will crash.

So with confidence they step into the monsters' bellies at the airport of departure, stepping off earth and its real time-zones into the virtual world of soothing sounds, plastic meals and – virtuality within virtuality – “in-flight entertainment,” meaning, more and more, your own selection of movies in your own seat. Wrapped in this cosy cocoon of all-embracing technology, one has, normally, only the plane's occasional shudder or change of its engines' pitch to remind one that there is outside, starting only a few feet away, a potentially deadly reality, not always perfectly tamed . . .

. . .What must those last moments have been like inside the cabins of Air France # 447? Horrible to imagine! Eleven days later the exact cause of the crash is still not known. Did blocked speed sensors so confuse the fly-by-wire computers as to cause erratic changes of speed, highly dangerous on flying

into turbulence? Lucky for the passengers and crew if the plane broke apart on high, so that the instant depressurisation will have deprived them of consciousness for the several-minute tumble through darkness down to certain death on impact with the water, which behaves in the circumstances like concrete!

Or were they unlucky? Of the 228 souls on AF 447, how many will have had the need to make a perfect act of contrition before losing consciousness? Of these, how many will have had the necessary faith and presence of mind, not overwhelmed by panic and fear, to do so? In brief, how many were ready to save their souls? Concerning the moment of death, Our Lord tells all of us, "Watch ye therefore, for you know not when the lord of the house cometh . . . lest coming on a sudden, he find you sleeping" (Mk.XIII,38). And concerning apparently random accidents he says, "Except you do penance, you shall all likewise perish" (Lk,XIII,5). Penance enough today is to live by our Faith. Still too much? Anything less is haunted by AF 447.

Kyrie eleison.