

Article

The Contemporary Discourse of Public Theology in the Face of Technological and Socio-Environmental Crises

Jesús Sánchez-Camacho 

Faculty of Theology, Comillas Pontifical University, 28049 Madrid, Spain; jscamacho@comillas.edu

Abstract

This study explores the role of public theology in addressing contemporary societal challenges, emphasizing ethical dialogue in response to secularization, pluralism, technological transformation, and social and environmental issues. It situates pastoral theology in the Christian tradition as an active social practice aimed at promoting justice, equality, and the common good. The study highlights the emergence of public theology as a response to the participation of religious discourse in the public arena, considering communication and digital technology, and articulating theological reflection with real-world social issues. Additionally, it examines the profound significance of dialogue within religious discourse and stresses the importance of ethical reflection in technological advancements, particularly concerning AI (Artificial Intelligence). Moreover, Catholic social thought and the concept of integral ecology are analyzed in dialogue with the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), underlining the potential of public theology to promote socio-environmental justice through a holistic approach.

Keywords: public theology; Christian ethics; communication; integral ecology; sustainable development



Academic Editors: Victor Manuel Pérez Martínez, Miguel Ángel Motis Dolader and Carmen Herrando Cugota

Received: 23 June 2025

Revised: 9 July 2025

Accepted: 14 July 2025

Published: 17 July 2025

Citation: Sánchez-Camacho, Jesús. 2025. The Contemporary Discourse of Public Theology in the Face of Technological and Socio-Environmental Crises. *Religions* 16: 923. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16070923>

Copyright: © 2025 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

In order to transmit a religious message today, it is necessary to listen and discern the signs and the voices of our time. Theology begins with pastoral experience and practice; *a modus conversationis* that places the theologian at the frontier of his discipline in order to enter into dialogue with society (Galli 2024, p. 17). Pastoral, or practical, theology is a theological sub-discipline in charge of reflection on ecclesial action, understood as the actualization of the praxis of Jesus by the Church, to implant the kingdom of God in society. This theoretical reflection should be carried out from the experience of the ecclesial community, to understand and promote Christian life in a more equal world (Floristán 1990, p. 187). Indeed, practical theology is related to pastoral theology because it reflects and guides the concrete actions of the Church in society, rooted in the lived experience of the community of faith. Therefore, reflection of this experience, made from an existential ecclesiology, gives theology a public voice—public theology—for social transformation, so that it leads the actions of the Church towards the construction of a better society.

In that sense, pastoral theology is a social theology, which is a religious discipline oriented towards ecclesial praxis. It is an existential ecclesiology, in which the formal object is the concrete action developed by the Christian community in the midst of the environment in which it is being developed (Segovia Bernabé 2015, pp. 423–24). Such a practical theology should overcome fragmented approaches to knowledge, promoting

a dialogue between various theological, philosophical, scientific and social disciplines, so that knowledge is constructed in an integrative way (Martínez 2023, pp. 94–109). Likewise, the preferential option is that of the poor, in which charity does not represent mere social assistance or immediate aid to the disadvantaged, but a constitutive dimension of the Church. Indeed, the poor are not only the recipients of evangelization, but also the protagonists of faith (Mora Rosado 2021, p. 76). Consequently, a theology should think of the poor with the poor, who are an irreplaceable voice in society (Mora Rosado 2023, p. 184).

This study addresses the concept and role of public theology in contemporary society, examining it in relation to social and environmental injustices from the perspective of a pastoral approach to social communication. First, the study introduces public theology as a response to secularization and pluralism, highlighting its prophetic voice and ethical contribution to societal challenges. It then explores the social discourse of faith in the public sphere, highlighting the importance of communication in shaping religious dialogue in a secular world. The discussion then turns to the challenges and opportunities presented by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, considering how the digital transformation affects theological reflection and the field of ethics. Finally, the study examines Catholic social thought, focusing on its contribution to integral and sustainable human development. Through these interconnected sections, the study aims to show how public theology can engage in the public sphere, fostering dialogue, ecological awareness, attention to the suffering of the excluded, and the promotion of human dignity.

2. Public Theology: Neither Silence nor Stridency; The Prophetic Voice of Faith in a Pluralistic World

Addressing the study of what the contemporary discourse of faith should look like in the face of secular and socio-environmental crises, this section explores the emergence of public theology, described as a theological effort to speak publicly in a pluralistic society, with the aim of recovering the relevance of theological discourse in contemporary society in terms understandable to the public (Villagrán 2017, p. 8). Indeed, a public theology is “a theological statement about some social issue addressed to the whole society in terms that can be understood by all societal actors” (Villagrán 2013, p. 94). Public theology seeks to engage modern society using language which is comprehensible to society and to contribute ethically to the common good. It addresses three main actors: the Church, academia, and society, drawing on sources such as Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. Its relationship to moral theology is evident, as public theology is seen as a practical theology that listens to the social reality it inhabits, responds to it, and influences the direction of society (Villagrán 2017, p. 71). In this regard, public theology is a theological discipline born in the Church, critically reasoned in the academy, and offered to the culture at large for the common good (Peters 2022, pp. 3–12).

From different perspectives, critiques of public theology have been developed, highlighting issues such as neglect of identity, inability to articulate norms, lack of social transformation, or methodological vagueness. However, public theology is not a theological school or method, but rather an emphasis or accent highlighted by the theologian in doing theology (Villagrán 2013, pp. 98–99). It is seen as a style—not merely a literary matter—that implies a specific understanding of identity and relationship to the world. There are various reasons for the presence of public theology in public life, such as the growing social pluralism and the privatization of religion (Villagrán 2013, pp. 17–18), which José Casanova analyzes by examining the role of public religions in the modern world. In relation to theories of secularization, this sociologist of religion argues for a process of

deprivatization of religion in which religion acquires a growing importance in the public sphere (Casanova 1994, pp. 65–66).

Originally, the concept of public theology is linked to that of civil religion, describing it as a unifying framework of religious values, beliefs, symbols, and rituals institutionalized within a community (Bellah 1967). Subsequently, the category of civil religion was criticized, noting that public religion is neither imposed by the state nor does it seek religious uniformity. On the contrary, it allows for diverse religious expressions in public spaces, as long as religions respect freedom of conscience and contribute to the common good without imposing a common orthodoxy (Marty 1974).

Reflection on the mission of public theology has also attempted to respond to the marginalization of theology, especially in universities, by proposing theological reflection that critically examines society and religious tradition (Cady 1993). In this respect, it is argued that the time has come to build a public theology that confidently articulates Christian commitments in the Church, in the university, and in the wider culture to pursue the common good (Peters 2022, pp. 51–80). Furthermore, how to construct a public theology in a pluralistic culture is also discussed, and how faith seeks to understand the relationship between Christian convictions and the social and cultural context (Thiemann 1991, p. 21). Public theology has tried to seek dialogue with society, to the point of synthesizing faith—in this case, from the Lutheran creed—to offer a framework for social action (Benne 1995).

Even the question of public philosophy has been raised in dialogue with public theology seeking a social consensus (Courtney Murray 1960, p. 126). In this sense, the public character of theology has been advocated to avoid its privatization by articulating systematic theology with existential human realities. Hence, it has been argued that theology, by revealing meanings and truths, can potentially transform all human beings in some recognizably personal, social, political, ethical, cultural, or religious way (Tracy 1981, pp. 155, 449).

As pluralism is a central element of contemporary society, a public theological method adapted to such reality and an ecclesiastical mission aligned with this theological approach have been proposed (Hollenbach 1976, pp. 302–3). Hence, the Church has a social mission to respect and engage with other public institutions (Himes and Himes 1993, p. 2). In order to present Christianity in such a plural context, an anthropological framework for grounding public theology has also been projected, considering decision-making as central to theological reflection, where freedom presupposes consciousness for action, pointing to the role of individual conscience in interacting with community perceptions (Valadier 1994, p. 149)¹.

Since the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, the Catholic Church has developed a public theology aimed at dialogue with the secular world and with other religious traditions (Second Vatican Council, GS 1965). Since then, the Magisterium of the Church, especially in the area of social morality, has played a guiding role by proposing principles for reflection, criteria for judgement, and guidelines for action which enlighten the practical life of believers. Hence, Catholic moral doctrine assumes a public projection by offering ethical foundations that can dialogue with a pluralistic society and contribute to a more humane culture (Paul VI 1971, no. 4).

3. The Social Discourse of Faith in the Public Sphere and in the Media

Western societies have experienced a secularization that has changed the interest of people in transcendence, the purpose of life, and new forms of religious expression (Martínez and Sánchez-Camacho 2024, p. 177). In the face of a vast consumer culture and a widespread individualism that drives people towards personal benefit, theology should discover ways to transmit the joy of faith to contemporary society through a renewed style

of evangelization (Francis 2013, nos. 2–18). The Church needs to seek means of conveying that the Christian message cannot be lived in isolation within the Church or within a particular group or nation, since the proclamation of the Gospel is intrinsically universal (Francis 2013, no. 181). Therefore, the People of God, in all their diversity, have the mission of sharing the Good News in an increasingly globalized and multicultural world.

The role of the media, as well as the development and application of digital technology, serve as vehicles for religious language in the contemporary world (Sánchez-Camacho 2022). In fact, religious communication—and indeed cybertheology as a new theological subdiscipline—has even been proposed to reflect on the content of faith using the logic of communication and the new language of the web (Sánchez-Camacho 2020, p. 57). Therefore, pastoral agents of religious communities must plan strategically how to convey messages to their target audience. Consequently, it is essential to consider the fundamental elements of the communication process that decisively influence how information is received: the source, the code, the channel, and the noise, each of which is crucial in shaping the meaning perceived by the receiver (Shannon 1948, p. 379). Specifically, the communication channel, which is the medium through which the message is transmitted, has acquired significant importance with the rise of mass media, becoming a central element in social influence and the formation of public opinion (McCombs and Shaw 1972, p. 176). The relationship between the message and the medium is so significant that it has been said that the medium is the message itself (McLuhan 1969).

Since the middle of the last century, some Christian denominations such as the Catholic Church have been concerned with the effective transmission of the Christian message, emphasizing both the participation of believers in media spaces and the dissemination of Christian social thought through high-quality news content (Sánchez-Camacho 2024c)². Instead of considering the media simply as tools, there has been a move towards understanding communication as a cultural phenomenon. This shift requires integrating the religious message into contemporary communication culture by adapting language and pastoral actions accordingly (John Paul II 1990, no. 37). Digital technology represents a new frontier for religious communities, offering opportunities for meaningful encounters between believers and non-believers (Sánchez-Camacho 2022, p. 48). To effectively navigate it, pastoral agents must receive specialized training to manage the unique challenges of digital interactions, fostering peaceful, caring, and meaningful relationships online. Therefore, through a constructive and creative approach, a culture of neighborly love is sought and promoted in the digital environment that pays special attention to the excluded (Dicastery for Communication 2023, nos. 41–44).

The recent increase in social polarization has been accompanied by certain Christian circles, closely aligned with extreme right-wing nationalist parties, strategically using religion to influence political decisions (Gorski and Perry 2022). Alluding to an alleged “culture war”, issues related to gender rights, immigration policy, environmental protection, and Agenda 2030 are presented as threats to the Christian worldview. Aggressive language is sometimes used to defend religious freedoms, which some perceive as under siege due to the expansion of rights for marginalized communities. This confrontational Christianity not only stands in stark contrast to the Christian message but also risks taking society back to an earlier stage, when Catholic moral principles formed the basis of national legislation (Sánchez-Camacho 2024a, p. 901). Religious symbols, which are adopted or deformed by secular discourse, can be reclaimed, not by confrontation or by allowing them to become ideological instruments of power, or nationalism, but by clarifying the theological narrative that seeks the common good (Peters 2022, pp. 81–110).

Although dialogue involves the risk of accepting views that might compromise the purity of the Christian message, adopting a confrontational pastoral approach raises bound-

aries that isolate the Church from social movements and people who genuinely wish to make positive changes towards justice and ecological care (Sánchez-Camacho 2024a, p. 902). Theology, far from isolation, fear, or rejection, should actively seek dialogue with the world today. The proclamation of the Gospel cannot remain confined within rigid formulations, but should creatively engage with specific cultural contexts, fostering a new synthesis with that culture (Francis 2013, no. 129). Instead of defending institutional interests narrowly or resisting proselytizing, Christian institutions are called to adopt a pastoral approach of listening, dialogue, accompaniment in solidarity, and critical commitment to the development of society (Francis 2013, nos. 169–73, 187–92, 238–58). Christianity in the 21st century should prioritize positive communication and compassionate accompaniment, sensitive to ongoing social processes, transmitting hope and openness towards the future, and should be a source of hope and openness towards the future. It should also foster collaboration with non-Christian organizations and individuals, united in the common pursuit of social justice and environmental sustainability (Sánchez-Camacho 2024a, p. 903). And as Pope Leo XIV declared in his first address, the ecclesial community should seek to be “a missionary Church, building bridges, dialogue, always open to receiving with open arms for everyone” (Leo XIV 2025).

4. Public Theology on the Threshold of the Fourth Industrial Revolution

Technological advancement has accelerated the process of digital transformation, which has led to the Fourth Industrial Revolution. It has created stronger connections between physical and online realities, moving from physical to digital and back to physical interactions. The notion of a culture of real virtuality, introduced at the end of the 20th century, has become even more evident today, reshaping the way we conceive of educational, recreational, and work environments (Castells 1999, p. 405). Currently, public and private institutions are looking towards a Fourth Industrial Revolution, characterized by the automation of Industry 4.0 and the rise of remote working models, which will significantly alter consumption patterns and, consequently, reshape labor markets (Schwab 2017).

Currently, it is possible to foresee the development of technology designed to accomplish functional tasks through combinations of algorithms. However, these machines, known as AI (Artificial Intelligence) in its weak sense—*narrow AI*—can go one step further: learning on their own—*deep learning*—and making concrete decisions autonomously. There are even researchers who hope to develop so-called Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), which would be the most radical example of AI in its strongest sense. It would be a unique system that could accomplish any task within the reach of the human mind, even surpassing it. That would be so-called Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI) (De Spiegeleire et al. 2017, pp. 26–30).

The development of biotechnology increases the possibilities of improving physical and mental capacities. Transhumanism, which advocates a new conception of the human being in which it could change its nature according to its own interests, follows this path (Lumbreras 2020). When John McCarthy wanted to make an intelligent machine in the middle of the last century, no one could have supposed that, in contemporary times, the term intelligence would be used in the same way to refer to both human intelligence and machine-created intelligence (McCarthy et al. 1955). It is now acceptable to use the term AI from a functional perspective. However, technically, machines can perform computational procedures, but a human being is one who comprehends, rationalizes, thinks critically, and feels. Hence, Thomas Aquinas defined the intellectual act as an operation of the human being as a human being (Santo Tomás de Aquino 1266, I, q. 76, a. 1).

In this evolving context, the United Nations encourages government institutions to integrate the seventeen SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) into their agendas,

with an emphasis on digital technology because of the digital divide that affects people living in poverty, leading to greater inequality (United Nations 2015). In the next decade, technological breakthroughs will offer substantial benefits to everyday human activities. However, the negative effects of over-dependence and misuse of technological tools will be experienced. Indeed, it is necessary to study the potential consequences of technological devices during their development, thoroughly evaluating their uses to wisely determine which technologies to adopt and how to use them. Neglecting this precaution exposes society to significant vulnerability amid rapid technological innovation (Moor 2005, p. 14).

New information technologies offer positive benefits in the field of medicine and research. But they also present important challenges for the work and personal lives of people with risks such as a crisis in the labor market, mobile phone addiction, excessive use of video games, dependence on social networks, and pathological gambling. This is why society must apply preventive methods (Chóliz Montañés and Marcos Moliner 2020, pp. 56–64). To address critical questions about the relationship between humanity and technology, a new field of ethical research has emerged, known as information ethics or *infoethics*. This discipline embraces all ethical concerns related to the Internet and digitization processes, also referred to as *network ethics*³. The primary task of digital ethics is to ensure freedom, justice, cultural pluralism, and equal opportunities for citizens (Capurro 2005, p. 96).

First efforts have already been made from various perspectives to explore the ethical dimensions of technology. To this extent, Christian ethics should also critically examine the meaning of digital technology for human existence. Considering Protestant theological reflection, a moral and public theology of the digital space is built on the parable of the Good Samaritan (Campbell and Garner 2016, pp. 81–96). This raises essential questions: Who is my neighbor, where is my neighbor, and how should I treat my neighbor in virtual spaces? Drawing on the ethical dimensions presented in Micah chapter 6, it applies justice, mercy, and humility to the digital context (Campbell and Garner 2016, pp. 115–23).

The Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church has begun reflecting on how to harmonize technological advancement with authentic human flourishing, emphasizing the dignity of the human person and integral human development (Sánchez-Camacho 2022, pp. 396–98). This vision invites individuals to transcend a purely materialistic perspective and seek a deeper dimension of meaning and fulfillment that technology alone cannot provide (Benedict XVI 2009, no. 77). The question of integral human development and AI raises the fundamental question of peace and whether this technology will help to prevent war or the opposite (Francis 2023). There are also other issues related to the scope of work, assumption of responsibilities, transparency in algorithms, authorship, sources, veracity of images, pluralism, sustainability, and developing countries which raise the need for regulation (Francis 2024).

From the perspective of Christian anthropology and ethics, in an interdisciplinary approach, the possibility has been explored that machines can be developed in such a way as to make humans more humane, as well as respectful of the common home (Dicastery for Culture and Education of the Holy See, AI Research Group of the Centre for Digital 2023). The Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church notes technological and scientific progress and development at the service of human dignity and the common good. It distinguishes AI from human intelligence, focusing on cognitive, spiritual, bodily, and relational human dimensions. Beyond a utilitarian vision, Christian social thought reaffirms human dignity, calling for rigorous moral discernment, and recognizes the challenges, especially in the accountability and control of autonomous AI decisions (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and Dicastery for Culture and Education 2025)⁴.

Christian ethics has much to contribute in relation to these developments, which in principle seem to promise significant progress for humanity. At the same time, ethical reflection must also continue to deepen the risks associated with the use of technology, especially as society moves towards the Internet of Things model. Challenges such as the digital divide, depersonalized communication, data protection issues, loss of privacy, cybercrime, intellectual property rights, proliferation of misinformation and rumors, cyber-fundamentalism, hyper-connectivity in leisure and work, digital addiction, and all that leads to transhuman society cannot be ignored (Sánchez-Camacho 2020, p. 64). These issues must continue to be explored by public theology, particularly as the boundary between online and offline realities becomes increasingly blurred.

5. The Role of Catholic Social Thought as Public Theology for Integral and Sustainable Development

For the Social Doctrine of the Church, development is understood from an integral and solidarity-based perspective, which encompasses not only the material aspect but also the intellectual, moral, spiritual, and religious dimensions of the human being (Second Vatican Council, GS 1965, nos. 33–39). Christian social thought does not seek to supply a technical formula to the problematic issues of development; rather, it reflects on human persons from the perspective of the Christian message (Paul VI 1967, no. 123). In that sense, integral human development is defined as a complete human realization, since this concept transcends mere economic growth (Paul VI 1967, nos. 6–42).

Furthermore, integral development is identified with solidarity, the common good, and care for the environment, which has considerable ecological implications (John Paul II 1987, nos. 26, 34). Hence, it is a challenge for public theology, within the framework of sustainable development, to connect the issues of consumption and waste of the resources of the earth. In this sense, Catholic social thought considers the destruction of the natural environment an anthropological error (John Paul II 1991, nos. 36–37)⁵.

With the concept of integral ecology, the Social Doctrine of the Church establishes its commitment to integral human development, considering all the existing dimensions of life. Integral ecology represents a terminological and conceptual advance that brings holistic solutions to the interrelationships between natural and social systems (Francis 2015, nos. 137–62)⁶. This holistic worldview supports two central principles: “everything is interconnected” and “the whole is greater than the part” (Francis 2015, nos. 138, 141)⁷. Moving away from a distorted anthropocentrism, the concept has important implications for public theology and advocates an ecological conversion, supported by a spirituality that motivates the protection of the planet (Francis 2015, nos. 68–69, 118–19, 122, 216–21). This ecological spirituality should have a direct impact on the life of the Church and significantly influence society, government, economy, culture, and education, with the aim of reducing poverty, restoring dignity to the marginalized, and safeguarding nature (Francis 2015, nos. 137–62).

Integral ecology is a catalyst for a public theology that attempts to dialogue with the contemporary world, arguing that the environmental crisis and the social crisis are not two separate problems, but rather one complex crisis. Consequently, an integral solution is required to combat poverty, restore dignity to the marginalized—economic and social inclusion—and protect nature (Francis 2015, no. 139). This approach explicitly rejects erroneous and tyrannical anthropocentrism (Francis 2015, nos. 68–69, 118–19, 122) and promotes an ecological conversion that involves the defence of justice, the integration of the biosphere into economic considerations, the promotion of national and local policies, the adoption of sustainable lifestyles, and the education system toward an integral ecological culture (Francis 2015, nos. 137–62). This holistic worldview explains what socio-

environmental justice is, referring to the interrelationship of environmental degradation and social injustice, and that the burden of ecological damage often falls most heavily on vulnerable communities. This calls for the transformation of unjust structures to achieve both ecological sustainability and human dignity (Francis 2015, no. 139).

Public theology and integral ecology are deeply linked in the Magisterium of the Church, which emphasizes that the ecological crisis is not only technical or economic, but ethical and spiritual, which calls for a global response with moral foundations and a cultural conversion. Public theology, being a theological reflection situated in the common space and directed towards the common good, finds in integral ecology a concrete framework from which to dialogue with society, the sciences, religions, and political actors (Francis 2015, nos. 163–201). This theology is committed to clarifying public discourses, to denouncing unjust structures, to proposing more humane economic and political models, and to fostering a spirituality of solidarity and responsibility (Francis 2015, nos. 163–201). Thus, public theology not only brings ethical principles to environmental management but also invites a transformation of personal and collective conscience towards an integral care of the common home.

This Christian vision of sustainable development can enter into a fruitful dialogue with other secular perspectives on development, such as the 2030 Agenda, which, with 17 goals and 169 targets, integrates the three indivisible dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental. Thus, the SDGs conceive of the environment as a transversal issue that is related to the other goals linked to the economic and social spheres. And from these different spheres, they aim to end poverty, protect the planet, ensure peace, and promote a more prosperous world (United Nations 2015)⁸.

The Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church offers a distinctive perspective that provides an enrichment of the primarily technical, ethical, social, and political dimensions of the framework of the 2030 Agenda. Far from being radically against it as some groups within the different Christian and traditional religious denominations, the Holy See actively participated in the intergovernmental negotiations of the SDGs and subsequently articulated its position, characterizing the 2030 Agenda as embodying “proper and laudable aspirations” (Auza 2016, no. 1). To align the SDGs more closely with the vision of integral human development inherent in Catholic Social teaching, the opening section of the document of the Holy See emphasizes foundational principles, including the dignity of the poor, the integration of spiritual and material resources, justice, education, the rule of law, peace, the common good, and universal fraternity (Auza 2016, nos. 6–14). It explicitly affirms agreement with most goals and targets outlined in the Agenda, yet provides essential clarifications and expresses reservations regarding specific interpretations of concepts such as human dignity, gender—highlighting biological identity—health issues, including abortion and maternal surrogacy, family definitions particularly concerning marriage, religious freedom, and the broader vision of integral human development, which it prefers over the narrower term sustainable development (Auza 2016, nos. 18–25).

At this critical time, when global warming threatens to exceed 1.5 °C and approach 2 °C, it is essential to address sustainability in a holistic manner. The urgency to significantly reduce CO₂ and other greenhouse gas emissions in the coming decades (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2021, p. 18) calls for exploring sustainability in all its facets: ecological, political, ethical, socioeconomic, democratic, cultural, and theological (Vogt and Weber 2019)⁹. While the 2030 Agenda provides practical guidance for action, integral ecology deepens this perspective even further by integrating environmental concerns within the framework of Christian anthropology and spirituality (Martínez 2020, pp. 34–35). In addition, the SDGs, which prioritize economic, social, and environmental dimensions, find valuable complementarity in Christian social thought, enriching these areas through

spiritual, ethical, cultural, and theological insights (Tatay 2020, p. 250). Consequently, the integration of the SDGs with the principles of integral ecology can offer meaningful and effective solutions to contemporary global challenges (Sánchez-Camacho and Villegas Moreno 2024, pp. 5–6). In this respect, public theology plays a fundamental role in order to dialogue and cooperate, through the Christian message, with other non-religious institutions that also wish to defend human dignity, especially of the poorest and most excluded, as well as to protect and care for the common home.

6. Conclusions

This study highlights the role of public theology in addressing contemporary social challenges, which are determined by increasing secularization, cultural pluralism, and rapid digital transformation, and pressing social crises in the face of war and poverty, as well as environmental crises regarding to climate change. Public theology provides a framework for dialogue and engagement, offering a prophetic voice that neither withdraws into silence nor resorts to divisive stridency. By encouraging ethical reflection and emphasizing the social implications of faith, public theology seeks constructive interaction with society, academia, and religious communities.

This theology recognizes the power of media and digital platforms, which, if used appropriately, can promote inclusiveness and communicate religious messages authentically and effectively in a rapidly changing public sphere. However, public theology critically addresses the ethical dimensions of technological developments associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution. By reflexively focusing on issues such as AI, digital ethics, and information ethics, it underlines the importance of upholding human dignity, social justice, and the responsible use of technology in an increasingly digital world.

Integral ecology, as articulated in Catholic social thought, further enriches public theology by offering a holistic perspective on sustainable human development. This approach integrates spiritual, ethical, cultural, and theological perspectives with socioeconomic and environmental considerations, fostering an ecological conversion that prioritizes care for the common home and solidarity with the poorest. Ultimately, public theology serves as a crucial interdisciplinary bridge, advocating dialogue, ethical responsibility, and social transformation. Its commitment to listening, solidarity, and active participation in social debates ensures that theological discourse remains relevant and impactful. By advocating for inclusive solutions, public theology can make a significant contribution to shaping a more just, sustainable, and compassionate world.

Public theology must move beyond abstract reflection or passive proclamation to actively engage with the complex realities of our time: secularization, digital transformation and socio-environmental injustice. Though rooted in pastoral tradition, theology cannot remain confined to ecclesial boundaries or romantic notions of community; instead, it must assume a prophetic role that challenges power structures, questions cultural norms, and champions marginalized voices, not as mere recipients of charity but as agents of social transformation. However, public theology faces its own tensions: the risk of diluting Christian identity for the sake of accessibility, or of becoming ethically ambiguous to dialogue with plural frameworks. Communication, especially in digital contexts, must be critically evaluated, not simply accepted, for its ideological influences, its biases, and its potential to reinforce inequality or consumerist logic. From this point of view, the Fourth Industrial Revolution is not only an opportunity but a field of action for Christian ethics, where the human person risks being redefined in mechanistic or utilitarian terms. Catholic social thought offers a strong narrative, but its way of communicating the message must also be questioned. The concept of integral ecology demands that theology not only talk about sustainability, but embody it, ecologically, economically, as well as spiritually. It

can offer a holistic response to a deeply divided world. Public theology must therefore regain its critical character, resisting reduction to a public relations strategy, and become a transformative force both within the Church and society.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ In recent years, since the pontificate of Francis, the Catholic Church has undergone a profound transformation in the way it communicates the Christian message. Avoiding aggressive communication and offensive discourse, Christian communication is exploring new ways in which, without losing its essence, the message can be expressed with its own categories in each socio-cultural context. This is the option for a culture of encounter, where dialogue is a fundamental element (Sánchez-Camacho 2024b).
- ² Since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has laid the foundations for a public theology of communication that addresses an increasingly pluralistic society. The Church recognizes that communication is fundamental to promoting social values such as truth, freedom, human dignity, education, and the common good, rooted in a Christian theological vision. Official Church documents since the pontificate of Paul VI stress the right to truthful and complete information, the educational role of the media, the need for media literacy among young people, and the professional responsibility of communicators. The Church considers the media to be essential for evangelization, catechesis, and the promotion of dialogue both internally and externally, and advocates a qualified and faith-guided Catholic presence in media spaces. In the midst of contemporary challenges such as the erosion of privacy, misinformation, and polarization, the social teachings of the Church on communication focus on the balance between freedom and communion, the importance of truthful communication, and the significance of active and informed audience engagement (Sánchez-Camacho 2024c, pp. 226–27).
- ³ Originating in the 1970s as ‘computer ethics’, this discipline initially addressed ethical issues related to the storage of data in bibliographic databases. With the advent of the Internet in the 1990s, it evolved into cyberethics, infoethics, or information ethics, distinct from media or communication ethics, which focuses specifically on journalism (Capurro 2005, p. 90).
- ⁴ The Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church seeks to identify various social impacts of Artificial Intelligence, highlighting ethical challenges such as inequality, technocratic dominance, the anthropomorphizing of AI, job displacement, environmental impact, threats to freedom, autonomous weapons, and existential dependence on technology. To this end, it promotes accountability and prevention of algorithmic bias, ensuring socio-environmental justice, privacy, transparency, and peace (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and Dicastery for Culture and Education 2025, nos. 49–107).
- ⁵ Prior to the coining of the term integral ecology, the Social Doctrine of the Church reflected on responsible environmental freedom, criticizing neo-pagan and pantheistic positions that prioritize nature over human value, as well as instrumental technological approaches to nature. The natural world is therefore seen as the work of the Creator, which requires intelligent governance (Benedict XVI 2009, no. 49). In this respect, the proposal of the social teaching of the Church on consumption and waste of resources pleads for a circular model of production capable of preserving resources for present and future generations, limiting as much as possible the use of non-renewable resources, moderating their consumption, maximizing their efficient use, reusing them, and recycling them (Francis 2015, no. 22).
- ⁶ Integral ecology is based on a philosophical view of biology, which considers the Universe as a network of closely interrelated and interdependent open systems. In addition, it is deeply rooted in a Trinitarian theology of creation, which has its foundation in intra-Trinitarian relationships and communion (Amo Usanos 2019, pp. 20–21).
- ⁷ These assumptions provide their theological foundation based on universal communion, in which the interrelationships of the natural world are a manifestation of the relationships of Trinitarian life. By stressing the relationships between God, humanity, and creation, this theology conceives of the universe as a universal family, in profound respect and communion (Edwards 2017, p. 81).
- ⁸ These goals pursue the eradication of poverty in all its forms and dimensions, the realization of human rights, the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, and the protection of the environment (United Nations 2015).

- ⁹ It is worth noting that there are alternative perspectives to conventional approaches to sustainability by challenging the prevailing narrative of environmental decline and urgency. One example is that of Bjørn Lomborg, founder of the Copenhagen Consensus think tank, who, rather than focusing on making drastic changes in lifestyle, emphasizes a pragmatic cost-benefit analysis to determine the most effective use of the global resource base. His approach suggests the need to prioritize resources to address other problems in the world, so that the environmental problem is balanced with such issues (Lomborg 2001).

References

- Amo Usanos, Rafael. 2019. Fundamentos de ecología integral. *Estudios Eclesiásticos* 94: 368. [CrossRef]
- Auza, Bernardito. 2016. *Note of the Holy See on the First Anniversary of the Adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals*. Vatican City: Holy See. Available online: <https://holyseemission.org/contents/statements/5806914667987.php> (accessed on 22 June 2025).
- Bellah, Robert Neelly. 1967. Civil Religion in America. *Daedalus* 96: 1–21. Available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20027022> (accessed on 22 June 2025).
- Benedict XVI. 2009. *Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate*. Vatican City: Holy See. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html (accessed on 22 June 2025).
- Benne, Robert. 1995. *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-First Century*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Cady, Linell. 1993. *Religion, Theology, and American Public Life*. Albany: University of New York Press.
- Campbell, Heidi, and Stephen Garner. 2016. *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Capurro, Rafael. 2005. Ética de la información. Un intento de ubicación. *Revista Códice* 1: 89–97.
- Casanova, José. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Castells, Manuel. 1999. *La Era de la Información: Economía, Sociedad y Cultura. La Sociedad de Red*. México: Siglo XXI.
- Chóliz Montañés, Mariano, and Marta Marcos Moliner. 2020. *Detección Temprana y Prevención de Adicciones Tecnológicas en Adolescentes*. Valencia: Departamento de Psicología Básica, Universidad de Valencia. Madrid: Fundación MAPFRE.
- Courtney Murray, John. 1960. *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- De Spiegeleire, Stephan, Matthijs Maas, and Tim Sweijs. 2017. *Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Defense: Strategic Implications for Small- and Medium-Sized Force Providers*. The Hague: Hague Centre for Strategic Studies.
- Dicastery for Communication. 2023. *Towards Full Presence. A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media*. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/dpc/documents/20230528_dpc-verso-piena-presenza_en.html (accessed on 22 June 2025).
- Dicastery for Culture and Education of the Holy See, AI Research Group of the Centre for Digital. 2023. *Encountering Artificial Intelligence: Ethical and Anthropological Investigations*. *Journal of Moral Theology* 1: i–262. [CrossRef]
- Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Dicastery for Culture and Education. 2025. *Antiqua et Nova. Note on the Relationship Between Artificial Intelligence and Human Intelligence*. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_dcf_doc_20250128_antiqua-et-nova_en.html (accessed on 22 June 2025).
- Edwards, Denis. 2017. “Everything is interconnected”: The trinity and the natural World in *Laudato Si’*. *The Australasian Catholic Record* 94: 81–92.
- Floristán, Casiano. 1990. *Teología Práctica. Teoría y Praxis de la Acción Pastoral*. Salamanca: Sígueme.
- Francis. 2013. *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World*. Available online: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (accessed on 22 June 2025).
- Francis. 2015. *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’ on Care for our Common Home*. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html (accessed on 22 June 2025).
- Francis. 2023. *LVII World Day of Peace 2024. Artificial Intelligence and Peace*. Available online: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/20231208-messaggio-57giornatamondiale-pace2024.html> (accessed on 22 June 2025).
- Francis. 2024. *LVIII World Communications Day, 2024. Artificial Intelligence and the Wisdom of the Heart: Towards a Fully Human Communication*. Available online: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/20240124-messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html> (accessed on 22 June 2025).
- Galli, Carlos María. 2024. La pastoralidad de la Teología: Dimensión y disciplina. *Revista Teología* 61: 11–57. [CrossRef]
- Gorski, Philip, and Samuel Perry. 2022. *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Himes, Michael, and Kenneth Himes. 1993. *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology*. Mahwah: Paulist Press.
- Hollenbach, David. 1976. Public Theology in America: Some Questions for Catholicism after John Courtney Murray. *Theological Studies* 37: 290–303. [CrossRef]
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. 2021. *Climate Change 2021. The Physical Science Basis*. Available online: https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_Full_Report.pdf (accessed on 22 June 2025).

- John Paul II. 1987. Encyclical Sollicitudo Rei Socialis. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html (accessed on 22 June 2025).
- John Paul II. 1990. Encyclical Redemptoris Missio. On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate. Available online: http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html (accessed on 22 June 2025).
- John Paul II. 1991. Encyclical Letter Centesimus Annus on the Hundreth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html (accessed on 22 June 2025).
- Leo XIV. 2025. First "Urbi et Orbi" Blessing of the Holy Father Leo XIV. Available online: <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/messages/urbi/documents/20250508-prima-benedizione-urbietorbi.html> (accessed on 13 July 2025).
- Lomborg, Bjørn. 2001. *The Skeptical Environmentalist*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lumbreras, Sara. 2020. *Respuestas al Transhumanismo: Cuerpo, Autenticidad y Sentido*. Madrid: Digital Reasons.
- Martínez, Julio Luis. 2020. Los caminos de la ética contemporánea ante la agenda 2030. In *Desarrollo Humano Integral y Agenda 2030*. Edited by José María Larrú. Madrid: BAC, pp. 25–46.
- Martínez, Julio Luis. 2023. *Teología Moral en Salida. Deshacer Nudos y Afrontar Retos*. Santander: Sal Terrae.
- Martínez, Julio Luis, and Jesús Sánchez-Camacho. 2024. Religion as the Global Horizon of Human Happiness. In *Humanistic Perspectives in Happiness Research*. Edited by Luísa Magalhães, Maria José Ferreira Lopes, Bruno Nobre and João Carlos Onofre Pinto. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 175–89. [CrossRef]
- Marty, Martin Emil. 1974. Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion. In *American Civil Religion*. New York: Harper and Row, pp. 139–57. Available online: <https://ixtheo.de/Record/1894159667> (accessed on 22 June 2025).
- McCarthy, John, Marvin Lee Minsky, Nathaniel Rochester, and Claude Elwood Shannon. 1955. A Proposal for the Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence. Available online: <http://jmc.stanford.edu/articles/dartmouth/dartmouth.pdf> (accessed on 22 June 2025).
- McCombs, Maxwell, and Donald Shaw. 1972. The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36: 176–87. [CrossRef]
- McLuhan, Marshall. 1969. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. London: Sphere Books.
- Moor, James. 2005. Why We Need Better Ethics for Emerging Technologies. *Ethics and Information Technology* 7: 111–19. [CrossRef]
- Mora Rosado, Sebastián. 2021. Del asistencialismo al "sueño de una fraternidad universal". *Corintios XIII: Revista de Teología y Pastoral de la Caridad* 179: 75–98.
- Mora Rosado, Sebastián. 2023. Los interrogantes filosóficos de la pobreza. *Diálogo Filosófico* 116: 150–84.
- Paul VI. 1967. Populorum Progressio. Encyclical on the Development of Peoples. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html (accessed on 22 June 2025).
- Paul VI. 1971. Apostolic Letter Octogesima Adveniens. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens.html (accessed on 22 June 2025).
- Peters, Ted. 2022. *The Voice of Public Theology: Addressing Politics, Science, and Technology*. Adelaide: ATF.
- Santo Tomás de Aquino. 1266. *Suma Teológica*, 1989th ed. Madrid: BAC.
- Sánchez-Camacho, Jesús. 2020. Ciberteología para la era poscovid. *Misión Joven* 524: 57–66.
- Sánchez-Camacho, Jesús. 2022. The approach of Pope Benedict XVI to media and digital culture in Catholic social thought. *Church, Communication and Culture* 7: 391–414. [CrossRef]
- Sánchez-Camacho, Jesús. 2024a. La comunicación de la Doctrina Social de la Iglesia: El Ad Intra y Ad Extra desde la ecología integral. *Sal Terrae: Revista De Teología Pastoral* 112: 891–903.
- Sánchez-Camacho, Jesús. 2024b. Las fracturas en la comunicación de la Iglesia católica. In *El espíritu se derrama en la fragilidad: Teología desde las fracturas y grietas de nuestro mundo*. Edited by Francisco Javier de la Torre Díaz. Madrid: Dykinson, pp. 153–62.
- Sánchez-Camacho, Jesús. 2024c. The Rise of Catholic Thought on Social Communication in the Pontificate of Paul VI. *International Journal of Public Theology* 18: 207–28. [CrossRef]
- Sánchez-Camacho, Jesús, and José Luis Villegas Moreno. 2024. Foundations and Implications of the Integral Ecology and Sustainable De-velopment Goals in Catholic University Education. *Religions* 15: 480. [CrossRef]
- Schwab, Klaus. 2017. *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*. New York: Currency Press.
- Second Vatican Council, GS. 1965. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et Spes. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (accessed on 22 June 2025).
- Segovia Bernabé, José Luis. 2015. En torno al estatuto, naturaleza, método y contenidos de la Teología Pastoral (Social). *Salmanticensis* 62: 413–47.
- Shannon, Claude. 1948. A Mathematical Theory of Communication. *The Bell System Technical Journal* 27: 379–423. [CrossRef]

- Tatay, Jaime. 2020. La ecología integral como respuesta a los retos globales de la sostenibilidad. In *Desarrollo Humano Integral y Agenda 2030*. Edited by José M. Larrú. Madrid: BAC, pp. 247–66.
- Thiemann, Ronald. 1991. *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Tracy, David. 1981. *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*. New York: Crossroad.
- United Nations. 2015. Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Available online: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/291/89/PDF/N1529189.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed on 22 June 2025).
- Valadier, Paul. 1994. *Éloge de la Conscience*. Paris: Seuil.
- Villagrán, Gonzalo. 2013. *Public Theology in a Foreign Land: A Proposal for Bringing Theology in Public into the Spanish Context*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing.
- Villagrán, Gonzalo. 2017. *Teología Pública: Una Voz para la Iglesia en Sociedades Plurales*. Madrid: PPC.
- Vogt, Markus, and Christoph Weber. 2019. Current challenges to the concept of sustainability. *Global Sustainability* 2: 1–6. [CrossRef]

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.