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The Catholic Perspective on Social Communication in the Pontificate of John Paul II

Katoliški pogled na družbeno komuniciranje v pontifikatu Janeza Pavla II.

Abstract: This study explores the social teaching of the Catholic Church on communication during the pontificate of John Paul II, placing it within the broader historical development of Christian reflection on the media. It analyses key magisterial documents – encyclicals, apostolic exhortations, World Communications Day messages, and texts from the Pontifical Council for Social Communications – highlighting how media serve the human person and the common good when guided by truth, ethics, and dignity. The study addresses major themes such as the meaning of media in society, ethical challenges, principles of Christian communication, the digital revolution, the theological-pastoral foundation of communication, and the need for integrated pastoral planning. It emphasizes the importance of responsible media use, digital formation, cultural dialogue, and inclusive participation. While centred on the contributions of John Paul II, this study is intended to complement prior analyses of other pontificates and invites further research on communication and digitalization during the pontificate of Pope Francis.

Keywords: John Paul II, Christian social thought, practical theology, media, digital culture

Izvleček: *Študija obravnava družbeni nauk Katoliške cerkve o komuniciranju v času pontifikata Janeza Pavla II. ter ga umešča v širši zgodovinski razvoj krščanskega razmišljanja o medijih. Analizira temeljne cerkvene dokumente – okrožnice, apostolske spodbude, poslanice ob svetovnem dnevu sredstev družbenega obveščanja in besedila Papeškega sveta za družbeno komuniciranje – ter izpostavlja, kako mediji služijo človeku in skupnemu dobremu, kadar jih vodijo resnica, etika in človeško dostojanstvo. Študija se osredotoča na glavne teme, kot so pomen medijev v družbi, etični izzivi, načela krščanskega komuniciranja, digitalna revolucija, teološko-pastoralni temelji komuniciranja in potreba po celostnem pastoralnem načrtovanju. Poudarja pomen odgovorne uporabe medijev, digitalne vzgoje, kulturnega dialoga in vključujočega sodelovanja. Čeprav se osredinja na prispevek Janeza Pavla II., želi študija dopolniti prejšnje analize drugih pontifikatov in spodbuditi nadaljnje raziskovanje o komuniciranju in digitalizaciji v času papeža Frančiška.*

Ključne besede: *Janez Pavel II., krščanski družbeni nauk, praktična teologija, mediji, digitalna kultura*

Introduction

The first Magisterium document reflecting on the media is Encyclical *Vigilanti Cura*, which focuses on the cinema and examines its positive and negative consequences (Pius XI 1936). Subsequently, the Encyclical *Mirandi Prorsus* addresses the mass media, considering their potential to contribute to truth and the common good (Pius XII 1957). This was the beginning to the reflection of the Catholic Church on social communication. Later, the Vatican II paves the way for a public, moral, and pastoral theology of communication. In fact, the Ecumenical Council introduced the subject of social communication with the Decree *Inter Mirifica*, which announced the world communications day messages to reflect on communication from a Christian perspective (Second Vatican Council 1963). Hence, the first World Communications Day Message launched the preparation of a Pastoral Instruction on communication, entitled *Communio et Progressio*, which established the theological, doctrinal and pastoral principles that would be developed in successive ecclesial documents (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1971).

Various official documents in the Pontificate of Pope Paul VI explored the relevance of communication in the contemporary world, the role of the media in society, the right to information and to public opinion, the place of the media in education, the formation of communicators and receivers, the ways in which the Church conceives the media, and the participation of Catholics in the media (Sánchez-Camacho 2024, 226). The ecclesial documents of this pontificate, especially the *Decree* of the Council, the *Pastoral Instruction on Communication* and the messages of the World Communications Day, indicate that the principles of Christian communication are theologically rooted in the communication of the Trinitarian mystery. It has important implications for communion, dignity of the person, right and plurality of information, common good, welfare society, educational sector, family, teaching of communication, evangelization of the Church, Catholic communicators, religious information, and pastoral plans for communication which includes communication offices (Sánchez-Camacho 2024, 226–227).

In order to advance in this line of research, and to further complement another study carried out on communication in the magisterium

of Benedict XVI (Sánchez-Camacho 2022), this article explores the ecclesial documents published during the pontificate of John Paul II (1978–2005), in which the subject of communication is addressed.[1] For this reason, the primary sources of research are the encyclicals, the apostolic exhortations, the messages of the World Communications Day, and the documents of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. Although there has been insufficient research on the teachings of the Church on mass media in John Paul II pontificate, a quantitative study revealed that in the last decade of the papacy (1995–2005), there was an unusually high production of documents focusing extensively on the media (Michele Martini 2022). For this reason, it is convenient to carry out a qualitative analysis that interprets the contents of the teaching of the Church in the field of communication during such pontificate.

This study not only aims to delve into the perspective of the Church on communication, but also to explore the documents analysed from the social, technological, and religious context, inferring their ethical consequences. The study seeks to answer several research questions about the relationship between social doctrine and communication during the pontificate of John Paul II: What is the role and significance of the media in contemporary society? What are the main challenges facing communication today? How can Christian ethical principles influence media practices and the ethical use of the Internet? How does the theological pastoral care of communication address the opportunities and challenges that the Internet presents for ecclesial life? Finally, how can the Church design and implement a comprehensive pastoral plan for social communications? To this end, firstly, the study presents the meaning of the media for society. Secondly, the main challenges of communication in society are explored. Subsequently, principles of Christian ethics in the media and the ethical dimension of the Internet are examined. In addition, the theological pastoral care of communication is introduced with the opportunities and challenges of the Internet for ecclesial life. Finally, the study explores

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1   Other publications, from different perspectives and approaches, have also studied the impact of the media on Catholic social thought (Javier María Pascual 1976; Arasa, 2012; José María Díaz Dorronsoro 2022; José María Díaz Dorronsoro 2022; Michele Martini 2022; Alessandra Vitullo and Mastrofini 2023).

how to develop a comprehensive pastoral plan for social communications in the Church.

The meaning of the media for society: at the service of the humans and the common good

Since newspapers, radio, television, and cinema emerged as mass media, communication has played a crucial role in enhancing our understanding of global events (McQuail 1987). The media plays a key role in reporting events and influencing public opinion on social, political, and cultural matters (Webster 1995). In the last century, mass media brought about a fundamental change in the lives of people. As *Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture* states, »the advent of the information society is a real cultural revolution« (Pontifical Council for Culture 1999, no. 9). The media are so imbricated in the daily lives of people that they influence the way of understanding the meaning of life itself (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1992, no. 4). Similarly, the media are capable of creating unity and progress in the human family (John Paul II 1991b).

The teaching of the Church believes that the modern equivalent of the Areopagus is the world of communication, which is bringing humanity together into what is often called a global village. Social communication channels have become so influential that, for many, they serve as the primary source of information, education, guidance, and inspiration, shaping their personal lives, family interactions, and role in society (John Paul II 1990, no. 37). In that context, faith and culture are meant to converge and engage with one another, particularly within the realm of communications. In fact, »culture itself is communication«, making the media a powerful bridge not only for connecting people but also for fostering dialogue between faith and culture (1984, no. 2.6).

However, while the media can promote unity and understanding, they can also be used to spread »divisive ideologies and distorted perspectives on life, family, religion, and morality«, potentially threatening human dignity and destiny (John Paul II 1981a, no. 76). In this regard, media professionals have the power to dismantle barriers of hostility that separate individuals and nations, diminishing misunderstanding and mistrust (2005,

no. 5). That is why the media should play a role in fostering »the integral development of the person which embraces the cultural, transcendent and religious dimensions of man and society« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1992, no. 7).

According to the perspective of the Church, the question of how the media is used is becoming increasingly crucial, particularly in the hands of those who shape its structures, policies, and content – corporate executives, governing board members, owners, publishers, station managers, editors, news directors, producers, writers, correspondents, and even the audiences themselves, including viewers, listeners, and readers (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 1). In an era of transition from mass media to digital culture, depending on how they use the media, people can grow in sympathy and compassion or become isolated in a narcissistic, self-referential world.[2] Thus, the contents of the world of communication can »range from hard news to pure entertainment, prayer to pornography, contemplation to violence« (no. 2).

In an era of rapid communication, it is essential to ensure that information is guided by truth, ethical reflection, and human dignity. In that sense, »the Church's culture of wisdom« provides a moral framework that prevents media from becoming merely a collection of facts, instead transforming information into meaningful knowledge that serves the common good (John Paul II 1999a, no. 3). That is why the media are called to serve human dignity by encouraging people »to be conscious of their dignity, enter into the thoughts and feelings of others, cultivate a sense of mutual responsibility, and grow in personal freedom, in respect for others' freedom, and in the capacity for dialogue« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 6).

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2 The pontificate of John Paul II was marked by the mass media characteristic of the information society and electronic communication such as newspapers, magazines, radio, television and cinema. At that time, citizens were beginning to make their own non-professional sound recordings and videos. The Pontiff defines videocassettes and audiocassettes as follows: »[They] are truly remarkable gifts of God to our times, making it possible for us to conserve and easily transport.« (John Paul II 1993) In fact, it was also the beginning of Internet communication, which was able to redefine the communication industry.

Principal challenges of communication in society

Social communication brings economic, political, cultural, educational and religious both benefits and challenges (Webster 1995). Furthermore, digital networks are shaping a new framework for social interaction and communication (Castells 1996), and with the rise of the Internet, the media has revolutionized its practices, industry, and impact on citizens through the use of digital technology (Thorburn and Jenkins, 2003). According to the Catholic teaching on communication in the Pontificate of John Paul II, these are the main challenges in the issue of media:

a) *The media in the economy: serving human development or reinforcing the neoliberal system?*
In the economic field, the social doctrine of Catholic thought during the pontificate of John Paul II notes that the media can serve the humans by supporting businesses, stimulating economic growth, creating employment opportunities, and promoting prosperity. They can also encourage improvements in the quality of goods and services, foster responsible competition for the public good, and empower citizens to make well-informed choices. However, in some cases, the media are used to sustain the neoliberal economic system, prioritizing greed and profit over social responsibility. This fails to prevent the gap between the »information rich« and the »information poor« at a time when access to information is crucial for both prosperity and survival (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 7.14).

b) *The political power of the media: ally of democracy or instrument of control?*
In the political area, Catholic thought during this pontificate focuses on the issue that the media can benefit society by supporting democracy, providing citizens with access to information, encouraging public participation in the political process, enabling leaders to communicate with the people, and ensuring transparency by holding those in power accountable (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 8). However, some politicians misuse the media to manipulate public opinion, spread false information, and justify unjust policies or oppressive regimes, using propaganda to distort the truth and create social tensions. Even in democratic countries, the media can be exploited to influence

public opinion in favour of policies that oppress certain groups and violate fundamental rights (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 15). That is why professionals in social communication have a duty to shape and share public opinion based on truth and the common good (John Paul II 1986, no. 5), as misinformation can have serious consequences, including threats to the right to life.[3]

c) *The influence of media on culture: artistic*
   flourishing or cultural decline?

In the cultural sphere, the social doctrine of communication argues that the media can contribute to the common good by offering people access to literature, drama, music, and art, as well as by preserving and enriching the cultural heritage of nations and promoting human development (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 9). However, the media sometimes succumb to superficiality and degradation, such as sexuality and violence.[4] Similarly, the media sometimes distort the true meaning of family or portray family life in a misleading way. Nevertheless, when used responsibly, the media can also be a valuable source of cultural enrichment for families (John Paul II 1980).[5] In addition, on a global scale, the media often impose cultural dominance by prioritizing certain

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3   Therefore, Christians should distinguish themselves by promoting justice, peace, fraternity, and moral values, in order to build the Kingdom of God founded on truth, justice, and peace (John Paul II 1986, no. 5). In connection with the right to life, the document on ethics in communication states that often »the media popularize the ethical relativism and utilitarianism that underlie today's culture of death« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 15). In this regard, the Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* adds that the media often support a culture that portrays contraception, sterilization, abortion, and euthanasia as symbols of progress and freedom, while labeling pro-life positions as contrary to progress (John Paul II, 1995a, no.17). The Encyclical notes that it is often difficult to recognize the signs of the culture of life in society because they do not receive sufficient attention in the media (John Paul II 1995a, no. 26).

4   Media's inadequate portrayal of realities such as infidelity, sexual activity outside marriage and the absence of a moral and spiritual vision is often a subject of criticism. The Church tries to encourage a realistic and sympathetic presentation of the family in the media, highlighting not only the failures and disappointments of marriages, but also the virtues that are manifested in love, fidelity, forgiveness and the generous giving of oneself for others (John Paul II 2004, no. 3). According to the teaching of the Church, parents also need to regulate the use of media at home. This should include planning and scheduling media use, strictly limiting the time children devote to media, making entertainment a family experience, putting certain media entirely off limits and periodically excluding all of them for the sake of other family activities (no. 5). It is important to consider that »pornography and sadistic violence debase sexuality, corrode human relationships, exploit individuals – especially women and young people, undermine marriage and family life, foster anti-social behavior and weaken the moral fibre of society itself« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 1989b, no. 16).

5   To avoid the risks of the media and to make them a benefit to the family, parents can educate themselves and their children, choose programs wisely, and critically evaluate their content, since with proper control, media becomes a tool for positive growth rather than a risk (John Paul II, 1980). Specifically, television can enrich family life, but it can also harm it, when programs are not morally

perspectives while excluding traditional cultural expressions, particularly those from less developed countries (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 16).[6]

d) *The educational role of media: developing
    knowledge, freedom, and responsibility*

In the field of education, in accordance with Christian social teaching on communication, the media play an important educational tool throughout life, from school to the workplace (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 10). However, they can sometimes distract us from learning or be used for indoctrination, limiting access to information and restricting knowledge. In such cases, instead of expanding knowledge and capabilities, the media serve an ideology, narrowing human horizons (no. 17). Social communications should protect children and promote their best interests in both family and society (John Paul II 1979c). The media can also help young people develop their vocation as individuals and Christians through a free and responsible choice, preparing them to be future leaders (1985). Additionally, women play a key role in advocating for better representation in the media by promoting solid media education programs, raising awareness of the dignity of women, and recognizing their role in both media and society (1996a).

e) *Media and faith: navigating dialogue,
    misrepresentation, and understanding*

In the religious context, the media play a crucial role in bringing religious life to many people by sharing news about events, ideas, and religious figures. In the Catholic Church, they serve as tools for evangelization, catechesis, spirituality, and prayer (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 11; John Paul II 1979a, no. 46). However, tensions exist between the media and religion. The media may ignore

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objectionable. In this regard, television channels, whether publicly or privately managed, must »exist to serve the well-being of society as a whole« (John Paul II, 1994).

6   Today, the spiral of silence theory, which explains how public opinion is shaped by the fear of isolation that people experience, presents a significant challenge (Noelle-Neumann, 1984). The Pastoral Instruction *Aetatis Novae* explains that many people perceive reality based on what the media acknowledges. This means that when the media ignores certain individuals or groups – such as the voice of the Gospel – they can be effectively silenced, preventing their message from reaching society (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 1992, no. 4).

or marginalize religious ideas, misrepresent faith, promote certain religious trends while undervaluing traditions, treat religious groups with hostility, or assess religious experiences through secular lenses, favouring rationalism and scepticism. On the other hand, religious institutions may view the media negatively, misunderstand journalistic objectivity, present messages manipulatively, use media for control, practice unnecessary secrecy, downplay the call to conversion, or foster fundamentalism and exclusivism, leading to hostility toward others (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 18).

Principles of Christian ethics in the media

Technological advances are improving everyday life, but their misuse can have unintended consequences. It is therefore crucial to analyse the potential impact of new technologies as they evolve, evaluate their applications and make informed decisions about their adoption and use (Moor 2005). This is the focus of information and communication ethics (Capurro 2005), which in recent years has begun to explore the ethical aspects of technology from a variety of perspectives (Anderson and Anderson 2011), also from a Christian ethical perspective (Campbell and Garner 2016). The nature of the social doctrine of the Church, having as its source Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Fathers, theologians and the Magisterium, formulates permanent ethical principles to be applied in the field of communication.[7]

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7   The principles of the teaching of the Church are as follows: dignity of the human person, based on the fact that he or she is created in the image and likeness of God and elevated to the transcendent end of life; human rights, which have philosophical and theological foundations and legal, social, political and ethical implications, and are inscribed by the Creator in human nature; the person-society relationship, because of the intrinsically social nature of human beings; the common good, which is the social conditions that favour the full development of the person; solidarity, which goes beyond any mere individualistic conception; subsidiarity, which protects intermediate groups from the danger of losing their legitimate autonomy; the organic conception of social life, which, starting from the family, reaches up to supranational bodies and the universal society of all peoples; the participation, in a just, proportionate and responsible manner, of all members and sectors of society; the human structures and community of persons, in accordance with the development of true humanism; and the universal destination of goods, since the riches of the earth are destined for the use of all in an equitable way (Aparicio Malo 2015, 30–34).

Is the human person becoming better because of the media?[8] In the face of the trend of replacing human interaction with greater use of the media, it should »stimulate interpersonal communication rather than substituting for it« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1992, no. 7). According to the social doctrine, it is necessary that all who employ the media must be acquainted with the norms of morality and conscientiously put them into practice (Second Vatican Council 1963, no. 4). The mission of the Church is not to indicate a specific model for the media, but to point out the ethical and moral criteria to be considered in the way of human solidarity and the integral development of the human person (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1992, no. 12–13).[9]

Jesus emphasized that communication is a moral act, teaching that a word from a person reflects their inner character and warning against causing harm to others, especially the most vulnerable (Mt 12:34-37; Mk 9:42). The social doctrine is concerned with the moral attitude of those who receive the communication – viewers, listeners, readers – and especially the ones who determine their structures, policies, and content – public officials and corporate executives, members of governing boards, owners, publishers, station managers, editors, news directors, producers, writers, correspondents. From a theological perspective, depending on the way in which the media are used, the history of human communication can be seen »as a long journey from Babel, site and symbol of communication's collapse (Gn 11:4-8), to Pentecost and the gift of tongues (Acts 2:5-11) – communication restored by the power of the Spirit sent by the Son« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 3).[10]

Social communication can either serve or harm the human person. Indeed, media play a fundamental role in enriching the lives of people

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8   The Pontiff considers that the human being is becoming better whether he or she is being more »mature spiritually, more aware of the dignity of his humanity, more responsible, more open to others, especially the neediest and the weakest, and readier to give and to aid all« (John Paul II 1979b, no. 15).

9   It is stated that the core ethical mission of the media is to serve the human person, promote a community based on justice, solidarity, and love, and communicate the truth about human life and its ultimate purpose in God (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 33).

10   Ethical responsibilities in social communication go beyond professional communicators and extend to audiences as well, requiring discernment and informed consumption by recipients. For this reason, the Church, educational institutions and parents play a crucial role in guiding the use of the media (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 25).

by »encouraging men and women to be conscious of their dignity, enter into the thoughts and feelings of others, cultivate a sense of mutual responsibility, and grow in personal freedom, in respect for others' freedom, and in the capacity for dialogue« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 6). Nevertheless, media can also undermine the integral good of human beings. In this context, communicators must responsibly exercise their freedom by consciously selecting what they communicate, just as users are called upon to practice their own freedom and responsibility (John Paul II 1981b, no. 3).[11]

A fundamental principle on communication in the social teaching of the Church is the commitment to truth, as it is essential for individual freedom and genuine human relationships (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 20). Other key principles of Christian social ethics, such as solidarity, subsidiarity, justice, equity, and responsibility, also apply to communication. The ethical dimension of communication extends beyond the content and process of messages to include how they are received. It also involves broader structural concerns, such as economic and political implications related to media ownership and the common good, ensuring that financial interests do not overshadow the responsibility to serve the public (no. 20).

In the areas of message, transmission, and systemic structures, ethical communication should prioritize the dignity of individuals and the well-being of the community. Media should serve as a means for people to connect and contribute to personal and collective growth, ensuring that communication fosters human development on all levels (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 21).[12] This foundational principle is fol-

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11   The media can become tools of oppression when controlled by powerful interests, even in free societies, violating religious freedom and exploiting people (John Paul II 1981b, no. 3).

12   For this reason, the integral development of the person requires not only the provision of material goods and products, but also attention to the inner dimension of the human being (John Paul II 1987b, no. 29.46). In that sense, »everyone deserves the opportunity to grow and flourish in respect to the full range of physical, intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual goods« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 2). The issue of growth needs to be challenged by the media, which should not merely expose »trends of opinion through carefully orchestrated repetition« (John Paul II 1991a, no.41). The Encyclical *Laudato si'* brings a new perspective that broadens that anthropocentric horizon. Indeed, integral ecology presents a holistic approach to reality with the goal of »combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature« (Francis 2015, no. 139).

lowed by another key idea: the well-being of individuals is closely linked to the common good of the communities they belong to (no. 22). In this sense, the common good should be understood inclusively, ensuring that all members of society benefit. It also calls for global equity, addressing the unequal distribution of communication and information technology resources, which are essential for productivity and economic development.[13]

Another important principle is the need for inclusive participation in decision-making about media content, communication processes, and the systems that control resources. A key challenge is ensuring the involvement of the most vulnerable. Media should prioritize issues such as poverty, aging populations, illiteracy, political repression, human rights violations, social and political conflicts, interreligious tensions, and the suppression of indigenous cultures (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 22).[14] However, since government intervention can sometimes result in exclusion and oppression, it is recommended that regulation follow principles of public service and public responsibility (1992, no. 5). In this sense, the presumption should always be »in favour of freedom of expression«, though this principle »is not an absolute, indefeasible norm« (2000, no. 23). The media have a special role in promoting responsible human freedom (John Paul II 1981b), which requires balancing freedom of expression with truthfulness, impartiality, and respect for privacy through ethical standards for media professionals (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 23).

A further principle underlines the importance of public participation in decision-making on communication policy, which should be organized,

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13   The virtue of solidarity is defined as »a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good«, and ought to govern all areas of social life – economic, political, cultural, religious – (John Paul II 1987b, no. 38).

14   In this regard, the most vulnerable groups are identified as the poor, the elderly, unborn children, youth, the oppressed and marginalized, women, minorities, the sick and disabled, as well as families and religious communities (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 22). It is noteworthy that the way in which particular groups are set against each other in the name of »class conflict, exaggerated nationalism, racial supremacy, ethnic cleansing, and the like« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 22). Communication companies are becoming increasingly »multinational« so that some countries are becoming more dependent on foreign material to the detriment of a specific local culture (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1992, no. 5). Regarding elderly people, the media should not only provide entertainment but also offer appropriate programs and materials to support their lifelong learning, with particular attention to those who are confined to their homes (John Paul II 1982, no. 5).

systematic, genuinely representative and impartial towards any specific group, even when the media are privately owned and for-profit. In that sense, communicators »must seek to communicate with people, and not just speak to them« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 24).[15] Market studies are sometimes presented as the best indicators of public opinion; however, decisions about media content and policies should not be based solely on economic factors, but must protect the public interest as a whole, including the legitimate interests of minorities (no. 24).[16] In this sense, »the first Areopagus of the modern age is the *world of communications*, which is unifying humanity and turning it into what is known as a *global village*« (John Paul II 1990, no. 37). Social communication, therefore, can contribute to peace by promoting the correct, fair, and constructive use of information, preventing oppression, abuse, and discrimination, and by fostering values based on human dignity and rights (1983, no. 3–4).[17]

Regarding media models (Hallin and Mancini 2003), Catholic social teaching criticizes the risks associated with both public and liberal systems. On one hand, governmental intervention in public systems can lead to their misuse for »ideological and political manipulation«, turning media into an »instrument of oppression and exclusion«. On the other hand, it warns that »unregulated commercialization and privatization« characteristic of liberal systems can also yield negative outcomes, particularly when »profit, not service, tends to become the most important measure of success«. This is notably apparent with advertisers who, driven by profit rather than genuine public needs, create »artificial needs and patterns of consumption«. Given these potential deviations inherent in both models, Catholic

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15   It emphasises the importance of understanding the needs and struggles of the people, and to communicate with the sensitivity that respects human dignity (John Paul II 1987a, no. 4).

16   Problems in the media such as the exclusion of some groups, the restriction of the right to information, and the power of economic, social and political elites, point to profound challenges in media policies and structures. However, the essential function of the media is to contribute to the realization of the right to information, to promote justice in the pursuit of the common good, and to assist in the search for truth by giving all voices the opportunity to be heard, especially the voice of the voiceless (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1992, no. 4, 14).

17   In the fortieth anniversary of the Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, John Paul II explores the relationship between *media and truth*, regarding society, the common good, and God; *media and justice*, in connection with human relationships at all levels of society; *media and freedom*, following the demands of communicators moral conscience and serving the real needs and interests of society; and *media and love*, keeping the highest standards of commitment to goodness (John Paul II 2003a, no. 3).

social thought advocates for »regulation according to criteria of public service and in greater public accountability« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1992, no. 5).[18]

Regarding ethical practices in the Church, communication praxis should exemplify truthfulness, accountability, and sensitivity toward human rights.[19] Additionally, internal Church communication must encourage a two-way exchange between pastors and the faithful, supporting freedom of expression, responsible public opinion, and respect for the role of the Magisterium (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 26). For social communication to truly serve justice and peace, media should undertake key actions: raise awareness about the connection between injustice and war; identify, expose, and reject the root causes of violence and injustice; overcome obstacles to achieving »works of justice« that build peace; support and promote initiatives favouring peace and justice; and affirm the inalienable rights of every human being.[20] Indeed, »the qualified information of public opinion has a direct influence on the promotion of justice and peace« (John Paul II 1987c).

The ethical dimension of the Internet

In a cybercultural context, where digital technologies mediate communicative practices, social interactions and cultural expressions, new dynamics emerge and profoundly influence the creation, dissemination and interpretation of information (Lévy 2001). Digital journalism has created

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18   The document *Ethics in advertising* examines the increasing influence of advertising, acknowledging its economic and cultural benefits while addressing ethical concerns such as manipulation and consumerism. It emphasizes the responsibility of advertisers to uphold truth, human dignity, and social welfare. While advertising serves as a tool for information and engagement, it must avoid exploitation and misleading practices. The Church advocates for ethical standards, public awareness, and appropriate regulations to mitigate potential harm. Ultimately, it calls upon advertisers to contribute positively to human development and the common good (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1997).

19   In connection with communication practices in the ecclesial community, the Church aims to foster dialogue and cooperation with public authorities, cultural and academic figures, other religions, and media professionals to ensure that communication serves »for the glory of God and the service of the human race« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2000, no. 30).

20   It warns that the media often distort reality by isolating people, promoting false values, encouraging conflict, spreading false or trivial content, and neglecting meaningful messages like the Gospel (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2000, no. 13).

a new media ecosystem, pushing the industry to adapt to changing information landscapes and business models (Thorburn and Jenkins, 2003). This contemporary form of journalism provides audiences with multimedia experience through the integration of textual, auditory, and visual content, while fostering higher levels of interactivity and participatory engagement (Manovich 2001).

Today, the Internet is generating profound transformations in various fields, including commerce, education, politics, journalism, and intercultural and international relations, influencing not only communicative practices but also the way people understand their own lives. This raises the ethical consideration of whether such changes contribute »to authentic human development and helping individuals and peoples to be true to their transcendent destiny« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002b, no. 1). New media constitute powerful instruments for educational advancement, cultural enrichment, commercial activities, political engagement, intercultural dialogue, and religious expression. Nonetheless, these same communication technologies, despite their potential to serve positive human and communal ends can be used »to exploit, manipulate, dominate and corrupt« (no. 1). In fact, Internet raises concerns about some of the »radically new consequences it brings: a loss of the intrinsic value of items of information, an undifferentiated uniformity in messages that are reduced to pure information, a lack of responsible feedback and a certain discouragement of interpersonal relationships« (Pontifical Council for Culture 1999, no. 9).

According to the social teaching of the Church, the Internet is perceived not merely as a source of challenges but also as an instrument capable of bringing substantial benefits, provided that appropriate resources are effectively applied to resolve these issues (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002b, no. 6). The Internet offers several favourable characteristics, being instantaneous, immediate, global, decentralized, interactive, flexible, and egalitarian (no. 7). Additionally, the rapid expansion of information technologies has greatly increased the ability of individuals and groups to communicate, enabling the Internet to support responsible exercises of freedom and democracy, broaden educational and cultural perspectives, mitigate divisions, and facilitate human development in a variety of ways (no. 9).

There are individualistic, libertarian and entrepreneurial approaches that fall into a use of the Internet that would allow all kinds of expressions, as well as commercial activity according to a neoliberal model to the detriment of human dignity (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002b, no. 8). Additionally, the Internet can accentuate divisions among individuals and groups along ideological, political, economic, racial, ethnic, intergenerational, and religious lines, creating circumstances propitious to international conflict and contributing to phenomena such as cyberterrorism (no. 9). Consequently, cyberspace should function as an inclusive resource for information and services, freely accessible to all and available in a variety of languages, with public institutions responsible for ensuring this accessibility.

One of the main concerns in academic discourse is the digital divide, which separates rich and poor populations, both within and between countries, due to unequal access to new information technologies (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002b, no. 10). Accordingly, »cyberspace ought to be a resource of comprehensive information and services available without charge to all, and in a wide range of languages«, of which public institutions have a responsibility to ensure (no. 11). Furthermore, an additional cultural preoccupation emerges from the potential use of the Internet not as a facilitator of intercultural dialogue and understanding, but rather as an instrument contributing to cultural imperialism.[21] Another area of concern pertains to freedom of expression, recognized as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of democratic societies.[22] Moreover, from a journalistic perspective, while the Internet significantly enhances the rapid dissemination of news and information, it simultaneously facilitates sensationalism and blurs distinctions between news, advertising, and entertainment. Therefore, it is necessary that »honest journalism is essential to the common good of nations and the international community« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002b, no. 13).

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[21] An example of this is the fact that the Internet spreads Western secular values to societies unprepared to handle them, contributing to serious issues such as the global crisis of marriage and family life (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002b, no. 11).

[22] It notes that governments often restrict or manipulate media to control information, limit free expression, and spread propaganda, problems seen not only in dictatorships but also in democracies influenced by money and political distortion (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002b, no. 12).

Educational institutions should incorporate training on the proper use of the Internet within comprehensive media education, promoting both technical knowledge and critical discernment of digital content (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002b, no. 15).[23] Moreover, social teaching on the Internet advises against governmental censorship, advocates regulation limited to necessary interventions, and calls for international consensus on issues such as privacy, security, intellectual property, rights of women, and bridging the digital divide (no. 16–17).

Pastoral theology of communication

Pastoral or practical theology reflects on the action of Church as the continuation of the praxis of Jesus, aiming to realize the Kingdom of God within society (Casiano 1991, 187). A key aspect of this reflection is the pastoral ministry of the word (*martyria*), involving proclamation of the Gospel both *ad intra* (e.g., catechesis, homilies, parish bulletins) and *ad extra* (e.g., mass media, interdisciplinary and interreligious dialogue) (Guerrero Rodríguez 2012, 747–748). Thus, pastoral ministry is fundamental to a theology committed to receiving and communicating divine revelation.

The foundation of Christian communication is the communicative action of the Trinity, which directly fosters love and communion in human relationships (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1971, no. 8–11). The Son is the Word eternally »spoken« by the Father; and through Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, God communicates Himself and His salvation to humanity (2000, no. 3). Thus, divine self-communication calls all human persons into communion with God, where »Christ is both the content and the dynamic source of the Church's communications in proclaiming the Gospel«, inviting humanity to live out »God's reconciling love in creative new ways« (1992, no. 6).

From a theological perspective, human communication can be viewed as a journey: Babel symbolizes the breakdown of communication (Gen 11:4-8),

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23   It is stated that »the virtue of solidarity is the measure of the Internet's service of the common good« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002b, no. 15).

while Pentecost represents its restoration in Christ through the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:5-11). As Scripture states: »In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.« (Heb 1:1-2) And with the incarnation, resurrection and Pentecost human communication is restored with the sending of the Spirit sent by the Son (Acts 2:5-11). In its mission, the Church is sent into the world to proclaim the Good News (Mt 28:19-20; Mk 16:15). Thus, all human communication finds its foundation in the Trinitarian communion; consequently, »communication in and by the Church finds its starting point in the communion of love among the divine Persons and their communication with us« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 3). Because »communication therefore is of the essence of the Church« (2002a, no. 3) the ecclesial community must actively foster a »genuine and profound communication of the truths of the faith« (John Paul II 1998a, no. 105).

A positive theological view of communication must include a critical evaluation of mass media and its cultural impact. Accordingly, the Church offers ethical and moral guidance, rooted in human and Christian values, to shape the development and use of communication technologies (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1992, no. 12). Given the contemporary split between the Gospel and culture, described as a profound fracture (Paul VI 1975, no. 20), culture today represents a modern *Areopagus* for the mission of the Church. Consequently, »it is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message and the Church's authentic teaching. It is also necessary to integrate that message into the new culture created by modern communications«, since this new culture emerges from novel languages, techniques, and psychologies, not merely from the conveyed content (John Paul II 1990, no. 37).[24] Thus, the role of the media in new evangelization demands a critical, evaluative approach, following the methodology of »see, judge, act« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1992, no. 11–12).[25]

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24   Although the Encyclical of the John Paul II goes beyond an instrumental vision of the media, seeing them as a new culture, the subsequent document *Ethics in Communications* notes that »the media do nothing by themselves; they are instruments, tools, used as people choose to use them« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 3).

25   The Pope recalls the activities of Catholics, mentioning particularly »the three great Catholic Media Organizations: The International Catholic Office for Film and Cinema (OCIC), The International

In continuity with the post-conciliar Magisterium, the Church views media not merely as tools for disseminating religious information, but as means for authentic dialogue and active participation within secular media. To achieve this, a developed anthropology and theology of communication is required »so that theology itself may be more communicative, more successful in disclosing Gospel values and applying them to the contemporary realities of the human condition« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1992, no. 8). Such dialogue also applies internally within the Church, reflecting the »radical equality in dignity and mission which arises from baptism«, expressed through an »honest and respectful sharing of information and opinions« (no. 10).[26]

The Church encourages pastors and the People of God to deepen their understanding of communication issues and to explore the pastoral implications of new media realities (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1992, no. 2–3). It affirms the fundamental nature of the right to information, closely linked to religious freedom, which extends beyond mere freedom of worship (no. 15). The Church also emphasizes the essential role of the laity, particularly media professionals, in spreading the Gospel through modern communication (John Paul II 1988b, no. 44), recognizing a continued public interest in religious matters despite secularization (1989).

The following points represent the essential theological and pastoral priorities that the Church identifies as central in the context of communication in contemporary society:

• *Defense of human cultures*. Instead of developing new media solely for evangelization, the Church should strive to »preserve and promote folk media and other traditional forms of expression«. In doing so, the Church should pay special attention to minorities, ensuring their active, autonomous, and responsible participation in communication

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Catholic Press Union (UCIP), and the International Catholic Association for Radio and Television (Unda)« (John Paul II 1992).

26 Nevertheless, the document refers to the *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* to clarify that, in cases of dissent, freedom of expression does not justify pressuring public opinion as a suitable method for resolving doctrinal issues (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1990, no. 30).

processes that »help to shape the conditions of their lives« (Pontifical
Council for Social Communications 1992, no. 16).

- *Development and promotion of the Church's own media of social com-
munications*. Communication should be an essential part of every
pastoral plan. At the same time, the Church must continue to develop,
maintain and promote its own Catholic media initiatives, including the
press, publishing houses, radio, television, public information offices,
media relations, communication organizations, formation programs,
and research institutes (Pontifical Council for Social Communications
1992, no. 17).[27]
- *The formation of Christian communicators*. Christians working
in Church media must be professionally trained and well-formed in do-
ctrine and spirituality (Pontifical Council for Social Communications
1992, no. 18). Communication education should also be a key part
of the formation of all pastoral agents and priests in seminaries, theo-
logical faculties, and formation institutes (Congregation for Catholic
Education 1986; John Paul II 2003c, no. 30).
- *Pastoral care of communications personnel*. Pastoral care programs,
including ongoing formation, should be developed to support com-
munication professionals in addressing moral challenges through the
lens of Christian ethics (Pontifical Council for Social Communications
1992, no. 19).

While professional Christian communicators play a key role in evangeli-
zation, the entire Church is called to be present in the media and to pro-
claim Christ effectively today (John Paul II 1996b, no. 99). This mission
requires collaboration among Christian denominations and cooperation
with other religions to ensure a meaningful religious presence in mass
media (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1989a, no. 1; John
Paul II 1999c, no. 48). Communicators must also engage in the search for
meaning in human life (John Paul II 1999a), recognizing that Catholic
communication involves not only sharing the Gospel explicitly, but also

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27   In the case of cinema, the Pope exhorts directors, filmmakers and all actors who profess themselves
     Christians to act in full coherence with their own faith and to take initiatives to make the Christian
     message more present in the world (John Paul II 1995b). Cinema could be a vehicle for cultural
     exchange and invites human beings to reflect on realities that are foreign to their own education
     and mentality (John Paul II 1995b).

highlighting real human needs, especially those of the most vulnerable (2000).[28]

The opportunities and challenges of the Internet for ecclesial life

The media are valuable tools for spreading the Christian message (John Paul II 1990), offering inspiration and support to both religious communities and those confined at home (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000, no. 11). Understanding the new media languages is essential (John Paul II 2003b, no. 63), making the Internet a current pastoral priority. Effective communication today requires knowledge of how to use the Internet well (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002a, no. 5). While it cannot replace real community, sacraments, or liturgy, the Internet can complement and enrich religious life (no. 5). Its immediacy, interactivity, and participatory nature improve both internal and external Church communication, moving beyond past one-way models (no. 6). It also benefits administration, governance, public communication, expert consultation, pastoral planning, education, and collaboration at all Church levels (no. 6–7).

The Internet poses specific challenges for the Church, including hostility toward Christian values, defamation, attacks on religious and ethnic groups, pornography, violence, hatred, and lack of regulation (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002a, no. 8). Another concern is the rise of self-identified Catholic websites that promote doctrinal confusion, mixing authentic Church teaching with eccentric interpretations and ideological agendas (no. 8). Therefore, alongside research, the Church should promote positive pastoral planning for the Internet, aiming »to lead people from cyberspace to true community and how, through teaching and catechesis, the Internet might subsequently be used to sustain and enrich them in their Christian commitment« (no. 9).

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28   In the context of the Great Jubilee of the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the World Communications Day Message underlines the opportunity for Christians to witness through the media (John Paul II 2000).

Everyone in the Church is called to use the Internet creatively and responsibly to support its mission: *Church leaders* should integrate media into pastoral plans and ensure doctrinal accuracy, possibly through voluntary certification;[29] *pastoral workers* – clergy, religious, and laity – need media training to improve communication and deepen theological understanding; *educators and catechists* must teach ethical media use, while Catholic institutions should offer specialized communication courses; *parents* should model and guide responsible Internet use at home (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002a, no. 10–11). In the *celebratory* area, although the Internet cannot replace the deep experience of God in liturgy and sacraments, it can support and prepare believers for that encounter and accompany them on their faith journey (John Paul II 2002, no. 3).

According to the Pontiff, digital communication offers new and valuable opportunities to proclaim the Christian message to the entire human family, breaking through barriers and borders (John Paul II 2001a). While online relationships cannot replace direct human contact, the Internet is a new public forum that calls the Church to use its potential for evangelization: »This challenge is at the heart of what it means at the beginning of the millennium to follow the Lord's command to ›put out into the deep‹: *Duc in altum!* (Lk 5:4).« (John Paul II 2002; no. 2)

An integrated pastoral plan for social communications

Institutional communication is essential for the Church to share its message, shape its public image, and engage with society, especially through digital media. This includes news coverage, media strategies, and crisis communication (La Porte 2012, 11–39). The Church calls on each episcopal conference and diocese to develop a pastoral communication plan, which should include a clear vision, media analysis, evangelization strategies, outreach to media professionals, and financial planning. A dedicated team,

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29   Due to the sometimes confusing proliferation of unofficial websites labeled as Catholic, it is proposed a system of voluntary certification at the local and national level under the supervision of representatives of the Magisterium: »The idea is not to impose censorship but to offer Internet users a reliable guide to what expresses the authentic position of the Church.« (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002, no. 11)

composed of Church members and media experts, should guide this process in two phases (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1992, no. 23–25):

Research. It is a crucial first step in developing a pastoral communication plan. At this stage, information is gathered on the structure of internal communication, identifying both its strengths and weaknesses, as well as the opportunities and challenges the new plan may face. This process includes three components: a needs *assessment*, to identify pastoral areas that require special attention; a *communications audit*, to evaluate current communication practices; and a *resource inventory*, to determine the communication tools available to the Church, technologies, personnel, and potential collaborators, including stakeholders from business, industry, or other religious communities (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1992, no. 26).

Design. In the second stage, the communication strategy focuses on several key areas. In *education*, to promote communication training through Catholic schools, universities, and courses for parents, teachers, pastoral agents, writers, artists, and media professionals; *spiritual formation and pastoral care*, to support the faith journey of communication professionals through retreats, seminars, and support networks; *cooperation*, to encourage partnerships among Church institutions, other religious groups, public organizations, and private companies in the communication sector; *public relations*, to promote active engagement through public relation offices, media awards, World Communications Day, publications, and media productions; *research*, to foster academic and theological study of communication and the mission of the Church via institutes and universities; and *development of peoples*, to contribute to freedom of expression and support peace and justice in society (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1992, no. 27–33).

In summary, the Church is called to communicate the Christian message not only to believers, but to all people of good Will (John Paul II 1997b). When properly used, social communication can help build and sustain a human community rooted in justice and charity, becoming a sign of hope (1998b). To achieve this, the Church should invest in the formation of competent communicators (1997a, no. 111; 1999b, no. 72), and

develop pastoral communication plans at national, diocesan, and parish levels (2001b, no 21). In many less developed regions, Churches require greater solidarity, making continental cooperation programs essential for advancing these communication initiatives (1995c, no. 126).

Conclusion

The Catholic social thought on communication under John Paul II highlights media as means to serve the human person and the common good. It calls for ethical use, formation, and inclusion to face digital challenges. The Church must integrate faith with culture and develop pastoral plans to evangelize responsibly. The following are more focused and concrete conclusions drawn from the analysis of the teaching of Church on communication:

- Media plays a key role in shaping culture, informing society, and influencing values. The Church sees it as a space for dialogue between faith and the modern world. While it can promote unity or cause harm, its true purpose is to serve the human person and the common good. Therefore, communication must be guided by truth, ethics, and dignity.
- Social communication offers great benefits in economic, political, cultural, educational, and religious life but also presents serious challenges. It can support justice, development, and dialogue or be misused to manipulate, divide, or marginalize. The Church emphasizes using media ethically, which requires truth, inclusion, and respect across all sectors.
- Christian ethics in media call for communication rooted in fundamental principles such as truth, human dignity, the common good, solidarity, subsidiarity, justice, and responsibility. Media should foster dialogue, promote inclusion, and support both personal development and communal well-being. The Church encourages freedom of expression guided by moral responsibility, inclusive participation in decision-making, and ethical regulation. Ultimately, communication must serve peace, protect human rights, and reflect the dignity of every person.

- The Internet has transformed communication, culture, and society, offering great potential for education, dialogue, and human development. However, it also raises ethical concerns such as manipulation, inequality, and cultural domination. The Church calls for responsible use rooted in human dignity, truth, and the common good, emphasizing that media education, regulation, and inclusive access are essential to ensure it truly serves all.
- Theological and pastoral priorities in Church communication include proclaiming the Gospel as a continuation of the mission of Jesus, grounded in Trinitarian communion and oriented toward human dignity and the common good. Communication must foster dialogue with culture, integrate faith into new media, and support truth, solidarity, and justice. The Church emphasizes the formation of communicators, the development of Catholic media, and the protection of cultural diversity. Above all, it calls the entire Christian community to evangelize through responsible, inclusive, and ethically guided communication.
- The Internet offers valuable opportunities for the Church to evangelize, support community life, and enhance communication, education, and collaboration. It complements but does not replace live liturgical and community experiences. At the same time, it presents challenges like misinformation, hostility to faith, and doctrinal confusion, to which the Church must respond through ethical use, formation, and pastoral planning to proclaim the Gospel effectively in the digital age.
- An integrated pastoral plan for communication is essential for the Church to share its message, engage society, and respond to modern media challenges. This involves research and strategy design, focusing on education, formation, cooperation, public relations, and social development. Each diocese should develop a clear plan with expert collaboration. To be effective, the Church must form skilled communicators and promote solidarity, especially in less developed regions.

This study presents key findings which reflect the teaching of the Church on communication, particularly during the pontificate of John Paul II. However, it must be understood in context and in continuity with the broader historical development of Christian social thought on communication already explored in previous studies. The pontificate of John Paul II presents its continuousness with the social doctrine of communication developed during the pontificate of Paul VI after Vatican II, which shows

the extent to which communication is a significant issue for public theology and delves into the right to information, public opinion, the media and education, the training of communicators and receivers, the importance of the media for the Church, and the participation of Catholics in the media (Sánchez-Camacho 2024).

Subsequently, the issues surrounding communication ethics and the Internet developed by John Paul II will be addressed by the teachings of the Church in a context of greater technological urgency. Therefore, during his pontificate, Benedict XVI explores the benefits and dangers of technological progress and its relationship with information ethics, the use of the Internet and social media, and the implementation of digital technology as a vehicle for evangelisation (Sánchez-Camacho 2022). For a more updated and comprehensive view of the social doctrine of the Church on this matter, it is particularly significant to complement such analyses with the study of communication and digitisation during the pontificate of Pope Francis. His encyclicals, apostolic exhortations and World Communications Day messages will offer a valuable continuation of the reflection developed here. At a time when the crisis of communication has intensified due to manipulation and misinformation, especially because of the use of social media, reflection on the Christian ethics of communication become more important for building a more just society where the question of our neighbour arises.

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