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The Women Who Followed Jesus: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna in the Mission of Jesus (Luke 8:1–3)

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Abstract

The Gospel According to Luke and Acts are distinctive in their overall portrayal of women. Episodes involving women raise important questions concerning their origin and narrative function. The present study examines a well-known passage—the women who followed Jesus (Luke 8:1–3)—in order to address several key issues: who the women mentioned by Luke were, what roles they fulfilled, and, above all, why Luke, unlike the other evangelists, chose to mention them during Jesus' public ministry. A close reading of the passage, attentive to its narrative details, yields interpretive insights that may be obscured by a strictly historical-critical approach.

Keywords

following, Galilee, Jesus, Joanna, Luke 8:1–3, Mary Magdalene, Susanna, women

The Gospel of Luke contains many episodes in which women play central roles or function as primary protagonists.[1] Luke alone narrates the story of Elizabeth and Mary in a carefully composed diptych (Chapters 1–2). He alone refers to the women who followed Jesus during His public ministry (8:1–3), and he alone records the words addressed to the daughters of Jerusalem who lamented as Jesus was led away to be crucified (23:27–31).

The attention given to women in the Gospel becomes increasingly visible in the second volume of Luke's work, the Acts of the Apostles.[2] Luke mentions women who, together with Mary (1:14), are gathered with the apostles and await the fulfillment of Jesus' promise. After a miraculous release from prison, Peter goes to the house of Mary, the mother of Mark, where the local community was gathered (12:12). Remarkably, Luke even records the name of Rhoda, the maid who opens the door (12:13). Following a vision (16:9), Paul goes to Macedonia, and the first convert on the European continent is a woman named Lydia (16:11–15). According to Acts, Paul had a sister, and her son warned Paul of an imminent plot to kill him (23:16).

To claim that Luke and Acts focus primarily on women would be an oversimplification. In his carefully structured work, Luke devotes comparable attention to passages with both female and male protagonists.[3]

For example, Luke 2:25–35 portrays Simeon blessing the infant Jesus in the temple of Jerusalem, and this scene is followed by Anna the prophetess in Luke 2:36–38, who "never left the temple." The cure of a man in the synagogue of Capernaum (4:31–37) is followed by the healing of Simon's mother-in-law (4:38–39).

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1 Modern Lukan scholarship includes numerous studies on women and their roles in Luke–Acts. Among the most important are Witherington 1984; Moloney 1986, 50–74; Grassi 1989, 83–112; Powell 1989, 93–97; Sim 1989, 32–50; D'Angelo 1990, 441–61; Karris 1994, 1–20; Karczewski 2015, 241–53; and Kucharski 2018, 69–96.

2 Discussing all the women in the Acts of the Apostles goes well beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Luke mentions more women than any other New Testament author. A few examples suffice: Hellenist widows neglected in the daily distribution (6:1); Sapphira (5:1–11); Tabitha (9:36–43); a slave girl with an oracular spirit (16:16); Damaris (17:34); Priscilla (18:2); the four virgin daughters of Philip (21:9); Drusilla (24:24); and Bernice (25:13, 23; 26:30). Although not all of these figures are portrayed positively, the number of episodes involving women is considerably higher in Acts than in any other New Testament writing.

3 Sometimes, a pericope involving either a man or a woman can be paired with more than one pericope. Paired pericopes do not always occur in immediate proximity.

The raising of the son of the widow of Nain (7:11–17) corresponds to the raising of Jairus's daughter (8:40–42, 49–56). The good deed of the Samaritan who cares for a traveler assaulted by robbers (10:30–37) is mirrored in Martha's reception of Jesus into her home (10:38–42). The healing of a bent-over woman on the Sabbath (13:10–17) corresponds to the healing of a man suffering from dropsy (14:1–6). The commendable actions of Joseph of Arimathea, who buried Jesus' body (23:50–55), are set alongside the presence of the women from Galilee, who play a significant role in the resurrection narrative (24:1–12).

All four Gospels mention women—some of them by name—who were present at Christ's crucifixion on Golgotha (Matt 27:55–56; Mark 15:40–41; Luke 23:49; John 19:25). Matthew (27:55) and Mark (15:41) also state retrospectively that these women had followed Jesus from Galilee. All four Gospels likewise confirm that women were present at Jesus' empty tomb (Matt 28:1–8; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–12; John 20:1).

The Gospel passages that explicitly mention women following Jesus and witnessing His suffering and resurrection should be read alongside Luke's summary in 8:1–3, which reads:

> Afterward He journeyed from one town and village to another, preaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. Accompanying Him were the Twelve, and some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources.

Although Luke is not the only evangelist to mention women who followed Jesus from Galilee, he alone refers to them during Jesus' public ministry. In other words, he is the only evangelist who does not rely on a retrospective notice but preserves, within the narrative of Jesus' Galilean activity, the memory of several women who followed Him from the beginning of his public ministry. Three questions therefore arise: who were these women, what role did they play, and, above all, why did Luke, unlike the other evangelists, mention them at this point in Jesus' public ministry?

1. Textual Nuances

Luke's brief reference to the women following Jesus in 8:1–3 is not self-evident. Several textual problems require attention. First, it is unclear whether the phrase καὶ ἕτεραι πολλαί ("and many others"; 8:3) refers to other women healed by Jesus or to a distinct group of women who followed Him without having been healed by Him. If the first possibility were correct, one would have to assume that, according to Luke, Jesus was accompanied and served exclusively by women who had previously been ill or possessed. The narrative's logic suggests that it is more probable that Luke associates healing only with the three women named in the passage. The adjective ἕτερος supports this interpretation. In general, it denotes another element; more specifically, it can refer to something different in kind or class from what precedes.[4] It is therefore more likely that the phrase ἕτεραι πολλαί refers to a group of women other than those named, who had been freed from evil spirits and illnesses.

Second, it is unclear who constituted the support group. In other words, scholars continue to debate whether the phrase αἵτινες διηκόνουν αὐτοῖς ("who provided for them"; 8:3) refers to all the women—both those named and those unnamed[5]—or only to the latter group, namely, ἕτεραι πολλαί.[6] Here, too, the Greek syntax is not unequivocal. Nevertheless, just as it is unlikely that Jesus was accompanied exclusively by women who had been ill or possessed, it is equally unlikely that he was surrounded exclusively by wealthy women.[7]

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4 Danker 2000, s.v. "ἕτερος"; (Popowski 2008, 2081). Thayer (1961, s.v. "ἕτερος") likewise defines the term as "another," that is, one different in nature, form, class, or kind; the synonym is ἄλλος.

5 Some modern translations of the Bible understand the syntagma in this way. For example, the German translation *Einheitsübersetzung der Heiligen Schrift* reads: "Sie alle sorgten aus ihren eigenen Mitteln für Jesus und den Kreis der Zwölf."

6 See, for example, the modern English translation known as *The Message*: "There were also some women in their company who had been healed of various evil afflictions and illnesses: Mary, the one called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out; Joanna, wife of Chuza, Herod's manager; and Susanna—along with many others who used their considerable means to provide for the company."

7 Keener (2014, 200) suggests that this is not merely possible but probable. In his view, "upper-class families had more mobility."

In sum, the Greek syntax of Luke 8:3 leaves open two related questions: whether all or only some of the women had been healed, and whether the named women or only the unnamed women ministered to the group following Jesus.[8]

2. The Identity of the Women Following Jesus

The first woman mentioned by Luke in 8:2–3 is Mary. Her prominent position in this list is most likely due to her later role in the early church and to her special place in the resurrection narratives (Karczewski 2015, 246). Luke specifies that this Mary is called "Magdalene" (the Greek text reads ἡ καλουμένη Μαγδαληνή).[9] This designation derives from Magdala, the town from which she originated, located near Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee. The addition "Magdalene" was most likely necessary because the name Mary was widely used (Plummer 1928, 215–16).[10] Notably, all four Gospels refer to her as Mary Magdalene and identify her, most significantly, as a witness to Christ's resurrection (cf. Matt 27:56; Mark 15:40; Luke 24:10; John 20:1). The use of the designation Μαγδαληνή to distinguish her from other figures bearing the same name may suggest that she was unmarried. Had she been married, the names of her husband or children would likely have been used to distinguish her from the many other women named Mary. Mary's origin is not the only information Luke provides. The evangelist also reports that seven evil spirits had gone out from her. Possession by seven demons indicates a particularly severe condition.[11] It does not, however, necessarily denote demonic possession; it may also refer to a serious physical illness. In antiquity, many illnesses were attributed to demonic causes.[12] One need not look beyond Luke's own narrative for confirmation of this

[8] Narrative criticism acknowledges the intentional use of ambiguous terms. This procedure, known as double entendre or misunderstanding, consists in using an ambiguous word or phrase, usually with two meanings, to create bewilderment or misunderstanding in the reader, which is then resolved either by Jesus or by the narrator (Resseguie 2005, 64–67).

[9] Numerous studies address Mary Magdalene and her role in the early church. Among recent studies, Kucharski 2021 deserves mention.

[10] The name Mary was common in the first century, including in the New Testament. Its popularity was probably enhanced by Mariamne I, the Hasmonean wife of Herod the Great.

[11] Many modern authors interpret the reference in this way; see, among others, Marshall 1978, 316; Green 1997, 320; Bovon 2002, 301; and Mickiewicz 2012, 411–12.

[12] According to Ernst (1993, 315), "die Zurückführung des medizinischen Phänomens auf dämonische Verursacher entspricht dem antiken und biblischen Denken." Similarly, Crimella

belief. In describing the healing of a woman in the synagogue on the Sabbath (13:10–21), Luke states that Satan had imprisoned—or, literally, "bound"—her for eighteen years. Although demonic possession may refer to physical illness, it cannot be excluded that, in the case of Mary Magdalene, Luke did intend actual demonic possession (see 11:26).[13]

The next woman mentioned by Luke is Joanna, wife of Chuza. Whereas Mary was a common name, Joanna was not as common. Biblical scholars usually interpret this name etymologically as "God is merciful" (Lagrange 1921, 235; Bosak 2002, 391; Rajkumari 2008, 342). As in the case of Mary Magdalene, Luke provides additional information about Joanna. Her husband, Chuza, is described by the term ἐπίτροπος, which may be translated as "steward," "administrator," or "overseer."[14] Regardless of the precise translation, the term denotes a person of relatively high social status who was trusted by his master.[15] In Chuza's case, that master was Herod Antipas, an important political figure. Joanna therefore appears to have been the only woman in the group who likely enjoyed elevated social standing and, by implication, a degree of wealth and influence. Although Joanna was married, she apparently traveled with Jesus' group away from her husband. Beyond his name and position, Luke tells his readers nothing more about Chuza.[16]

The third woman mentioned by name is Susanna. Although her name can be translated as "lily"—a beautiful and fragrant flower—this figure remains largely in the background. Susanna does not appear again in the Gospels, nor has early Christian tradition preserved additional information about her. Although the Biblical tradition is scarce, some biblical scholars draw broader conclusions. They suggest, for example, that Susanna must have been well known in the early

(2015, 237) observes that "nell'antichità si riconosceva in ogni debolezza la manifestazione di qualche realtà superiore."

13 According to de Boer (2002, 149), Mary of Magdala was "totally possessed and subsequently completely healed."

14 Danker 2000, s.v. "ἐπίτροπος."

15 This term appears in the Second Book of Maccabees (11:1; 13:2; 14:2), where it refers to Lysias, who, by appointment of Antiochus Eupator, was in charge of the affairs of the kingdom (see 2 Macc 10:11). According to 1 Macc. 3:32–33, Lysias was a renowned man of royal descent. Antiochus IV Epiphanes entrusted him with the affairs of the kingdom and the upbringing of Antiochus Eupator's son. See Lust 2003, s.v. "ἐπίτροπος."

16 Godet (1865, 513–14) identified Chuza in Luke with the royal official who, after the miraculous healing of his son, believed together with his entire household (see John 4:46–53). This hypothesis, however, has not been universally accepted.

Christian community, or at least in the community to which Luke addressed his Gospel. Apparently, like Mary Magdalene, Susanna was unmarried and had no children or immediate family (Sim 1989, 36). The evangelist says nothing about her husband or children, as he does, for example, in the case of Joanna or of Mary, the mother of James (see Luke 24:10).

Alongside the three women listed by name, Luke mentions many other unnamed women who also followed Jesus. A close reading of the Passion narrative provides two further names of women who followed Jesus from Galilee. The first was Mary, the mother of James[17] and Joseph (Joses); the second was the mother of the sons of Zebedee, or Salome (see Matt 27:56 and Mark 15:40). Strikingly, Luke notes the presence of Mary, the mother of James, at the resurrection (see Luke 24:10), mentioning her together with Mary Magdalene and Joanna in place of Susanna.

3. The Role of the Women Following Jesus

Luke defines the role of the women who followed Jesus during his public ministry in Galilee with relative precision. He states that the women διηκόνουν αὐτοῖς[18] ἐκ τῶν ὑπαρχόντων αὐταῖς ("provided for them out of their means"; 8:3).

The verb διακονέω used here means "to minister to" or "to serve someone" (cf. Luke 22:27). It may also denote "caring for someone or something"

[17] Mark notes that James was called "the younger" (ἡ Ἰακώβου τοῦ μικροῦ). This figure should not be identified with James the son of Alphaeus, traditionally called James the Less, one of the Twelve (see Matt 10:2–3 / Mark 3:17–18 / Luke 6:14–15), but rather with one of Jesus' relatives. According to Mark's account, Jesus' relatives were named James, Joses, Judas, and Simon (see Mark 6:3). If the younger James, son of Mary, mentioned here is the same James who led the Jerusalem church community, then this reference concerns a prominent figure in Acts (cf. Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18). Paul referred to him as one of the pillars of the Jerusalem Church (see 1 Cor 15:7; Gal 1:19). It is therefore possible that, in the resurrection narrative (see Luke 24:10), Luke consciously replaces Susanna with the mother of one of the most prominent figures in the emerging community of believers in Jesus. This hypothesis, however, is not without problems. The identification of the younger James, son of Mary, with James, the pillar of the Jerusalem church, is not as evident as it might appear.

[18] Some manuscripts (ℵ A L Ψ f^1 33. 565. 579. 1241. 2542 pm it vg^{cl} sy^h co; Marcion) have αὐτῷ ("him") in place of αὐτοῖς ("them"). Metzger (1994, 120–21) notes that "the plural is supported by good representatives of the Alexandrian and the Western text-types; the singular (compare Mt 27.55; Mk 15.41) appears to be a Christocentric correction, due perhaps to Marcion." Similarly, Nolland 1989, 363.

(cf. 2 Cor 3:3), "doing a favor," or "helping someone" (cf. Matt 25:44), and, in a more technical sense, "performing the ministry of a deacon" (cf. 1 Tim 3:10; Popowski 1997, 128).[19] The verb appears thirty-seven times in the New Testament, eight of them in the Gospel of Luke (see 4:39; 8:3; 10:40; 12:37; 17:8; 22:26–27 [three times]) and twice in the Acts of the Apostles (see 6:2; 19:22). Almost all its occurrences in Luke–Acts indicate table service; the only exception is Acts 19:22, where the participle διακονούντων designates Timothy and Erastus as Paul's co-workers. The cognate noun διακονία denotes the "performance of service" or "assistance" in Luke's Gospel (see 10:40), whereas in Acts it assumes additional meanings. Thus, διακονία can mean "serving at table" (see Acts 6:1), refer to the apostles' ministry of preaching the word (see Acts 1:17, 25; 6:4; 20:24; 21:19), or denote ministry in the sense of providing material assistance (see Acts 11:29; 12:25).

In Luke 8:3 the verb διακονέω appears in the imperfect tense—expressing continuous, repeated, or ongoing action in the past—and describes various services and forms of assistance provided to Jesus and the Twelve. This service usually meant hospitality and the provision of meals; it did not necessarily imply financial support. Nevertheless, Luke further specifies the service provided by these women. He adds that their service came ἐκ τῶν ὑπαρχόντων αὐταῖς, which may be translated literally as "from what belonged to them." This wording implies that some of the women who followed Jesus may have been well-to-do and able to offer material support. It would also mean that they had access to their possessions and could dispose of them without constraint from their fathers, husbands, or other members of their immediate families. In the Second Temple period, this was not always the case (Cohick 2013, 179–87). At this point, therefore, one should at least consider the possibility that the noun τὰ ὑπάρχοντα, as used here, may refer to more than wealth or possessions. Since its basic meaning is "things at someone's disposal," Luke's phrase may be understood in a broader sense than is usually rendered.[20]

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[19] See also Danker 2000, s.v. "διακονέω."

[20] Almost all current New Testament translations render the noun τὰ ὑπάρχοντα as wealth, goods, or possessions. For example, the Polish Biblia Tysiąclecia has "ze swego mienia"; La Bible de Jérusalem, "de leurs biens"; Bibbia CEI, "i loro beni"; Einheitsübersetzung der Heiligen Schrift, "was sie besaßen"; and Sagrada Biblia CEE, "con sus bienes." Some modern translations allow the syntagma to be understood more broadly; see, for example, the *New American Bible*, "out of their resources." It is worth noting that the Vulgate translates "de facultatibus suis," whereas the Peshitta has ܡܢܟܣܝܗܘܢ ("their possessions").

Some of the women who followed Jesus may have contributed only their time and abilities. Not all could have supported Jesus and his disciples financially. Contrary to what some modern scholars have proposed, in this particular passage Luke does not present women as collaborators in the proclamation of the good news (Muoneke 1993, 163–80; Kucharski 2018, 69–96). Luke writes that Jesus traveled through villages and cities proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom of God, accompanied by the Twelve and the women. Here, the evangelist uses the preposition σύν, not μετά. Although numerous attempts have been made to identify subtle differences between σύν and μετά (Plummer 1928, 215), research indicates that New Testament usage is relatively fluid and that clear-cut rules are difficult to establish (Blass § 221). In this context, however, Luke appears to portray both the disciples and the women who accompanied Jesus more as companions and witnesses of the journey than as collaborators in the proclamation of the good news. The mission of the Twelve who accompany Jesus begins only in the following chapter (see 9:1–6), and the mission of the seventy-two other disciples begins in chapter ten (see 10:1–12).

4. Why Luke Mentions Women Following Jesus

Having addressed the question of who the women mentioned by Luke were and what roles they fulfilled, an equally complex issue remains: why does Luke mention women who followed Jesus during his public ministry? Several factors make this question particularly significant. First, in light of the religious sensibilities of the period, Jesus' willingness to accept women among his followers was highly unusual. Second, the degree of freedom attributed to these women, who left their homes to join the group of disciples, is at least puzzling. Third, the apparent freedom of some of these women to dispose of their property seems to run counter to the social customs of the period.

However striking this may appear, the position of women in Jesus' time was far from favorable. In the Jewish environment of the Second Temple period, the presence of women among Jesus' followers was surprising and likely unacceptable to the religious elite (Sim 1989, 32–50). Numerous Biblical and extra-Biblical texts describe the status of women at that time. For example, the Gospel of John, while recounting Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, notes: "At that time the disciples returned and were amazed that he was talking with a woman" (4:27). The rabbinic tractate Pirkei Avot 1:5 teaches: "Engage not

in too much conversation with women. They said this concerning one's own wife, how much more [does the rule apply] concerning another man's wife. From here, the Sages said: as long as a man engages in too much conversation with women, he causes evil to himself; he neglects the study of the Torah; and, in the end, he will inherit Gehenna."[21]

Despite this generally unfavorable attitude toward women, Luke explicitly mentions women following Jesus in the first part of Jesus' public ministry; that is, during His mission in Galilee (see 4:16–9:50). Strikingly, he mentions them in close proximity to the selection of the Twelve (see 6:12–16). It is possible that the reference to women following Jesus reflects Luke's tendency to present episodes from Jesus' life in pairs. If this is the case, one could go further and suggest that the three women named in Luke 8 correspond to the three prominent apostles—Peter, James, and John—who held a special place among the Twelve and accompanied Jesus at decisive moments, such as the healing of Jairus's daughter (see 8:51) and the Transfiguration (see 9:28). Although this hypothesis is widespread among Biblical scholars, it does not appear to be the only reason Luke mentions women accompanying Jesus.

According to Luke, the first phase of Jesus' public ministry was centered in Galilee. This phase includes episodes that report the rapid dissemination of news about his activity. For example, the account of the healing of the leper is accompanied by a summary describing Jesus' growing fame (see 5:15). The healing of the paralytic was witnessed by Pharisees and scribes who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem (see 5:17). A similar crowd—from Judea, Jerusalem, Tyre, and Sidon—awaited Jesus at the foot of the mountain where he had gone to pray before choosing the twelve apostles (see 6:17). Reports about Jesus and his activity even moved a Roman centurion to seek his help for a valued servant (see 7:3). The raising of the widow's son further amplified his reputation. Jesus became the subject of reports not only "throughout Judea" (ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ) but also "throughout the whole region" (πάσῃ τῇ περιχώρῳ). It is therefore unsurprising that even the imprisoned John

[21] Another equally well-known text, Avot de-Rabbi Natan 2:2, states: "A man should not be alone with (any) woman in an inn, not even with his sister or daughter, for fear of what people will think. He should not talk to a woman in the marketplace, not even with his own wife, much less with another woman, for fear of what people will think. A man should not follow a woman in the marketplace, not even with his own wife, much less with another woman, for fear of what people will think." For further examples, see Strack and Billerbeck 1956, 438.

the Baptist heard about Jesus and his activity. He sent his disciples to inquire about Jesus' identity: "Are you the one who was to come, or should we wait for someone else?" (7:19).[22] The rapid spread of news about Jesus is further evidenced by his invitation to the home of Simon the Pharisee (see 7:36) and by the presence of the sinful woman at that meal—another indication of his growing renown. In the latter episode, Luke uses the phrase ἐπιγνοῦσα ὅτι κατάκειται ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ τοῦ Φαρισαίου, which may be translated literally as "having learned that he was reclining in the Pharisee's house" (7:37).[23] The use of the participle ἐπιγνοῦσα suggests that Jesus' whereabouts were already widely known.

In light of the preceding analysis, the presence of the women following Jesus—including those who had been healed or exorcised, as well as those who ministered to Jesus and His disciples during their mission and who may have possessed some social and material standing—suggests that Jesus' mission was gaining momentum. A considerable crowd from different places and strata of society was learning about Him. It is therefore unsurprising that news of Jesus and His mission soon reached the court of Herod Antipas and alarmed him (see Luke 9:7–9). In other words, Luke 8:1–3 and its summary, characteristic of the Third Evangelist, clearly show that Jesus preached the kingdom "from city to city;" that is, everywhere.

At this point it is important to recall how Luke begins his account of the women who accompanied Jesus. He writes that Jesus "traveled through cities and villages" (8:1). The Twelve and the women who followed Jesus are therefore not only witnesses to this mission but also evidence that the mission reaches everyone. It extends both to those living on the margins of society—whether because of illness or social exclusion—and to those connected with the court of Herod Antipas. Moreover, the presence of healed women in the group following Jesus further confirms the effectiveness of his ministry. He truly and fully fulfills the mission He announced in the synagogue at Nazareth (see 4:16–30).

The application of narrative criticism and close reading[24] to Luke–Acts provides another explanation for why Luke mentions women who followed Jesus.

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[22] According to the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (*Ant.* 18.5.2 §§ 116–19), John the Baptist was imprisoned and then executed in the fortress of Machaerus in Perea, in present-day Jordan, which was by no means a short distance from the place where Jesus was teaching.

[23] The Greek text reads ὅτι κατάκειται, indicating that the meal was eaten in a semi-reclining position. See Danker 2000, s.v. "κατάκειμαι."

[24] Recent years have seen a proliferation of studies introducing readers to narrative criticism (Resseguie 2005; Kłósek 2014, 203–42).

Although for the religious elite of first-century Palestine the sight of Jesus surrounded by women may have appeared unconventional, Luke presents women as having a legitimate and integral place among the disciples (Sim 1989, 32–50). In light of Luke's two-volume work (Luke–Acts), it cannot be excluded that the evangelist presents the ministry of women accompanying Jesus as a model for Hellenistic Christian communities, in which influential women of certain social standing often supported the Church and played important roles in the emerging community of believers in Christ. Such roles are exemplified by Lydia of Philippi (Acts 16:14), Priscilla (Acts 18:2; 1 Cor 16:19), and Phoebe (Rom 16:1–2), who served in the church in Cenchreae.[25] In recalling the women who performed important ministries in the first communities of believers in Christ, one should also mention Paul's words of gratitude to the Philippians, and probably also to Lydia, who resided there (Phil 4:10–20). It is therefore possible that Luke, writing his Gospel for Greek-speaking communities, reflects the lived realities of Hellenistic Christian communities and presents women's ministry in the early church as deeply rooted in Jesus' own public ministry. If Jesus permitted women to accompany him, He thereby affirmed their full dignity before God and others while also accepting their support and devotion.

Conclusions

In Luke's Gospel, the women who followed Jesus constitute the only group of witnesses to all four events that stand at the foundation of the early Christian confession of faith. In 1 Cor 15:3–5, Paul summarizes the kerygma as follows: "I delivered to you first of all what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures; that He was buried; that He rose on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures; and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve."

Luke notes the presence of women at the moment of Jesus' death on the cross (23:49), in agreement with the other Synoptic Gospels. The same group of women who had accompanied Jesus from Galilee also participated in Jesus' provisional burial on the Day of Preparation (23:55). Moreover, it was a group

[25] Paul also recalls this practice in his correspondence with the Corinthians, where he asks: "Do we not have the right to take along a Christian wife, as do the rest of the apostles, and the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas?" (1 Cor 9:5).

of women who reported to the apostles what they had heard from the two men in dazzling garments at the empty tomb (24:10).

Mary Magdalene and Joanna are each mentioned by name twice (Luke 8:1–3 and 24:10). It is possible that Joanna, as the wife of an official in the service of Herod Antipas, may have been the source of some traditions related to the tetrarch's court.[26] Together with Mary Magdalene, she may therefore be included among the eyewitnesses (οἱ ἀπ᾽ ἀρχῆς αὐτόπται) referred to in Luke's prologue (1:2). In light of this evidence, the Gospel tradition appears to rely more heavily on the testimony of women than readers often recognize. The presence of women among Jesus' disciples was undoubtedly unusual; the fact that Luke and the other evangelists nonetheless mention it is a significant argument for the historicity and reliability of the tradition.

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[26] This is a well-established thesis, and it is almost impossible to list all the authors who defend it. Nevertheless, some may be noted: Bovon 2002, 264; Brown 1997, 266–67; Fitzmyer 1981, 698; and Mickiewicz 2012, 411–12. It is also worth noting that another figure from the tetrarch's close circle appears in Acts 13:1, namely Manaen, who had grown up with Herod the tetrarch (Keener 2013, 1988).

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The Role of the Sacred and the Profane in Shaping Contemporary Knowledge Management

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Abstract

This article analyses the perspectives of lay individuals actively engaged in the development of the Catholic Church, with particular attention to the construction of relationships between religion and contemporary science. In discussing matters of faith, the authors focus on their interpretation in the context of knowledge disseminated to society through the media. The inquiry is conducted using an original methodology — the Method of Innovative Solution Seeking (MISS) — which facilitates the acquisition of information on the studied issues from various focus groups. These data form the basis for further analysis aimed at identifying the process of shaping a secular society in Poland and defining the principles for applying phenomenology in research on religion. The analysis also makes it possible to examine the relationship between science and truth, the meaning of the concept of zero in scientific discourse, the evolution of ideas, and the mechanisms of temporal manipulation. The study may be applied within the framework of pastoral theology.

Keywords

knowledge, religion, sacred, profane, knowledge management, pastoral theology

The primary objective of this article is to emphasise the need to distinguish between *sacrum* — understood as the existence of a higher order and moral good, manifested in spiritual experience and evoking a sense of communion with God — and *profanum*, understood as the sphere of information and practices derived from civilisational achievements. By directing attention to what eludes purely sensory cognition, the *sacrum* foregrounds the spiritual dimension of human existence (Tomalski 2001). The *profanum*, by contrast, is encountered in everyday life as that which is tangible, measurable, and empirically accessible.

As a sublime category, the *sacrum* is frequently marginalised by the *profanum*, which concerns itself primarily with what is considered necessary for existence under particular sociocultural conditions. The erosion of the *sacrum* is experienced acutely, especially by older people. As Pope Francis observed during the general audience of 4 March 2015, 'a culture of profit insists on casting off the old like a "weight"' (Francis 2015).

The main research question addressed by the authors is how believers may acquire the knowledge necessary for constructive dialogue with atheists and with those who interpret the world primarily through secular categories. These considerations contribute to pastoral theology, which seeks to formulate criteria for Christian conduct and practical guidelines for church ministry (Kamiński 1992).

The faith community, traditionally oriented towards the reception of divine revelation on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural levels (Wojaczek 2001), must now engage with broader phenomena — including developments in physics, psychology, and information technology — that shape and modernise the behavioural models of contemporary generations (Oberröder 1977). These developments suggest that the Church, in fulfilling its mission under increasingly complex conditions, must seek appropriate strategies for adapting the transmission of theological knowledge to the expectations of twenty-first-century believers.

This adaptation is not without difficulty, particularly in light of changing mentalities and interests that do not always foster religious development (Kamiński 1983). A renewed perspective must therefore emerge from a deeper understanding of the relationship between contemporary processes of acquiring and transmitting knowledge and the spiritual experiences of individuals. More precisely, this entails shaping a reality that Catholic reflection should illuminate

and interpret, thereby generating innovative directions for ecclesial engagement (Schoonenberg 1970).

Such reflection concerns the Church as a spiritual community endowed with knowledge of the relationship between faith and scientific discovery. This knowledge should help its members address fundamental existential questions: 'Where is humanity headed? What is the meaning of life?' (van Caster 1969). It should also facilitate dialogue between two seemingly opposing educational paradigms: materialist science and divine revelation as presented in the Old and New Testaments. Through deepened reflection, a new interpretation of contemporary phenomena may enable believers to understand scientific discoveries within the framework of the Christian vision of the New Evangelisation (van Caster 1969).

This article is based on research conducted using the Method of Innovative Solution Seeking (MISS), developed by Janusz Dworak and Henryk Kretek (Dworak and Kretek 2022). The principles of this method derive from a modified version of grounded theory, as presented in the works of Anselm Strauss, Barney Glaser, Kathy Charmaz, and Tadeusz Konecki. As suggested in the grounded-theory literature, researchers may adapt this approach to their specific investigative needs (Bryant and Charmaz 2007), including by proposing new ways of integrating knowledge across disciplines.

The MISS methodology was implemented through in-depth interviews designed to provide respondents with a comfortable environment for sharing personal reflections on the relationship between religion and science. The authors adopted the following methodological principles:

- simultaneous engagement in data collection, analysis, and implementation within the thematic scope of each section;
- a cautious approach to hypotheses derived from inductive, deductive, and abductive reasoning;
- identification of respondents' cognitive frameworks and formulation of practical conclusions for evangelisation efforts.

In simplified terms, MISS is directly linked to the recognition of existing realities through intellectual deliberation and to the extraction of the essential dimensions of a problem by researchers with expertise in the relevant field. Focus groups formed the basis for developing a coherent conceptual framework for shaping the relationship between *sacrum* and *profanum*. These groups generated both concrete and abstract hypotheses, the verification of which may challenge entrenched stereotypes. Traditional inquiry often confines researchers to existing problems and conventional solutions; MISS, by contrast, seeks

to uncover unforeseen phenomena and limits reliance on existing literature where that literature may unduly influence the researcher's perspective and findings (Urquhart, Lehmann, and Myers 2010).

This approach is particularly valuable for practitioners who, drawing on personal experience, select diverse research techniques to analyse complex issues efficiently and effectively (Charmaz 2009). MISS may also be defined as a form of intellectual provocation that compels the transformation of acquired information into actionable knowledge and thereby facilitates paradigm shifts.

Within MISS, a distinction is made between *facts* — serving as central reference points — and *truth*, which requires the examination of events from multiple perspectives. For instance, the existence of the sun, the Earth, and humanity constitutes a factual observation. Truth, however, relates to the interpretation of these phenomena, such as their emergence through evolutionary processes. Fiction, by contrast, encompasses poetic expressions such as 'the sun shines to illuminate our existence' or 'the Earth is the mother of all people.' Only by differentiating between fact, truth, and fiction can researchers formulate hypotheses that reveal paradoxes inherent in established scientific paradigms (Garfinkel 2007).

The principal research tool employed is the intellectual experiment, which addresses issues situated not in the empirical world but in the researcher's imagination (Brown 2001; Grabarczyk 2009). The article includes commentary on the application of MISS to the thematic scope under investigation.

No reference or introduction to this — what is the doctrine of the Church? How do the authors understand it?

1. The Process of Shaping a Secular Society

Deprived of the means to critically assess information disseminated by mass media, many ordinary citizens remain unaware that their minds are gradually being imprinted with a set of ritualistic or symbolic actions designed to instil specific values and behavioural norms through continuous repetition — implicitly suggesting the perpetuation of the past (Hobsbawm 2008, 10). This phenomenon pertains to individual memory, which is closely linked to formative experiences in childhood, adolescence, and family life. It encompasses emotionally charged

events such as memories of the home environment, conversations with parents, and religious rituals associated with major feasts.

Today, however, the memory of younger generations is increasingly shaped by fictional and fabricated characters, often making it difficult to distinguish between timeless values that provide guidance in moments of crisis and illusions crafted by organisations pursuing commercial gain. Unable to differentiate clearly between the truths conveyed by religion and secular ceremonies, many individuals perceive both as artificial constructs promoted by the media to elevate the significance of particular events.

A similar transformation is occurring in the realm of *historical memory* — knowledge of past events such as wars, uprisings, and periods of national glory and decline, often embodied in the lives of monarchs, military leaders, scientists, and saints. Historical memory also includes religious texts and hymns, the architectural heritage of churches, centuries-old cemeteries, monuments to national heroes, and roadside shrines. Traditionally, this memory was shaped through references to the Gospel narrative; today, however, it is increasingly supplanted by shifting political doctrines propagated by organisations competing for power.

Religious events are now frequently treated as instruments of historical memory and repurposed to reconstruct the past in accordance with the ideologies of consumerism (Hobsbawm 2008, 7), as exemplified by the commodification of Christmas. Consequently, the members of a society may begin to identify with fictional media characters, while real individuals whose lives do not align with corporate narratives are consigned to oblivion. Examples include Pope St John Paul II, Blessed Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko, and the Blessed Ulma family.

There is also a discernible tendency to omit the contributions of individuals and institutions whose efforts helped shape contemporary freedoms, such as:

- the role of the Church during the communist period in Poland;
- the sacrifice of St Maximilian Kolbe, who gave his life to save a fellow prisoner;
- the election and pontificate of Karol Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II, which fostered a sense of national unity.

Maurice Halbwachs argued that 'it is within society that individuals normally acquire, recognise, and situate their memories' (Halbwachs 2008, 4). He further asserted that 'each person possesses a memory that is not identical to anyone else's, yet it remains a component and aspect of the group's collective memory' (Halbwachs 2008, 215).

The process of remembering is hindered by successive reinterpretations of archival documents, library holdings, and museum exhibits, which often generate intergenerational conflict. As Halbwachs observed, 'the essential task is to locate memory within a specific domain of the past' (Halbwachs 2008, 211). Frequently, individuals are compelled to recall traumatic historical events they would prefer to forget, including the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime and widely represented in literature and film. Yet such narratives often overlook the conciliatory gesture made on 18 November 1965, when the Polish bishops issued a letter to the German bishops containing the words: 'we forgive and ask for forgiveness.' This event marked the beginning of a long process of Polish–German reconciliation grounded in the Gospel message (Polak and Przeciszewski 2013).

Collective memory related to religion is perceived by believers as the roots from which they have grown, while others regard it as a collection of trivial tales, legends, or quotations. This dualism creates barriers to mutual understanding, since the meaning of events varies depending on the context in which they are recalled — as objects of reverence (*sacrum*) or ridicule (*profanum*).

2. Secular Ceremonials as Substitutes for Liturgy

Secular rituals increasingly function as substitutes for traditional values, although they remain detached from any relationship with Divine Providence. These practices fill the existential void left by numerous, often impulsive acts of apostasy, in which a two-thousand-year-old religious tradition is judged through the lens of morally compromised individuals. That tradition, however, has historically shaped statehood, fostered a sense of belonging, and formed individual identity through communion with ancestral heritage.

This condition is reinforced by educational systems that prioritise secular ceremonials and deliver knowledge in the form of pre-structured solutions to practical problems, without sufficiently encouraging independent thought. In many higher education institutions, philosophy has been removed from curricula, despite its role in providing general, foundational, rational, and critical knowledge about existence (Encyclopaedia PWN n.d.). Philosophy once compelled students not only to ask profound questions but also to seek answers grounded in existential experience.

In primary and secondary education, religious instruction has been introduced, yet there is now a growing movement to replace it with ethics — a proposition

that reflects a conceptual misunderstanding. Religion is rooted in spiritual experience and the recognition of transcendental phenomena, whereas ethics focuses on behavioural norms developed to support specific social and political orders. Religion interprets revealed truths; ethics promotes conduct conducive to the functioning of the state. Religion evaluates good and evil within a Gospel framework; ethics identifies behaviours that facilitate social cohesion and economic development within a given sociopolitical order.

Religious principles are not synonymous with ethical principles, and the reverse is also true. For instance, hedonism may be considered ethically acceptable in some philosophical traditions, yet it remains incompatible with Christian doctrine. Religion encompasses knowledge of forgiveness, sacrifice, and human conduct in relation to the sacred. It is doctrinally grounded, enacted through religious practices, organised within community structures, and experienced in the realm of transcendence. Ethical theories, by contrast, often frame happiness, social utility, or human flourishing as central goods, but they do not necessarily provide a theological account of forgiveness, sacrifice, or salvation.

Religion points to the activity of the human person in experiencing the sacred — an encounter that fosters closeness to the *sacrum*, unity with it, and a posture of reverence, awe, and even fear (Eliade 1999). These brief reflections, derived from focus group research, lead to a clear conclusion: by analogy, replacing religion with ethics is akin to substituting chemistry with physics or mathematics. Each discipline has its own domain, methodology, and epistemological framework; conflating them undermines their distinct contributions to human understanding.

3. Science and Truth

In pursuit of their research objectives, scientists employ various methods to present the truths they uncover. These methods often lead to divergent interpretations of research findings, which may be understood through several epistemological frameworks:

- Coherentist — truth is accepted if the information presented is logically consistent and internally justified;
- Subjectivist — truth is defined by its practical utility in the daily lives of individuals;

- Pragmatist — truth is validated by its capacity to generate material or immaterial benefits;
- Consensus-based — truth is affirmed when the majority adheres to a particular pattern of thought or behaviour;
- Materialist — truth is recognised only when it yields measurable, tangible outcomes.

When the existence of a Higher Intelligence is examined through these lenses, it becomes evident that such a concept remains consistent across all dimensions:

- Coherentist — it offers a logically structured explanation of observed phenomena;
- Subjectivist — it represents a deeply personal experience, self-evident to the individual;
- Pragmatist — it fosters psychological stability and social integration;
- Consensus-based — it reflects a widely held belief that a transcendent entity has guided, and continues to guide, the world;
- Materialist — it manifests in the societal benefits derived from promoting honesty, integrity, and morally respected behaviour.

A neglected yet profound theological claim is that the presence of God is often experienced through peace, beauty, and love, whereas His absence may be associated with conflict and war — understood here as manifestations of human failure.

Truth cannot be inferred solely through inductive reasoning, which generalises from specific observations or experiments and proceeds from particular cases to broader claims (Naukowiec.org n.d.-b). Many phenomena are singular in nature and resist simple generalisation. For example, the misconduct of one member of an organisation does not justify the assumption that all members are culpable.

Similarly, deductive reasoning, which draws conclusions from general premises to particular cases, may lead to flawed generalisations if the premises are incomplete or incorrectly formulated (Naukowiec.org n.d.-a).

The Church is not merely a community of believers. In Christian theology, it is understood as a community of believers in Jesus Christ united by faith, the sacraments, and apostolic teaching, and possessing a defined structure, ecclesiastical law, doctrine, and tradition.

Abductive reasoning seeks the most plausible explanation for a set of observations (Czakon 2014), but it may also result in provisional and schematic interpretations (Thagard 1978). For instance, condemning a person solely on the

basis of a media report, without considering the context of the action, illustrates the limitations of abductive logic.

Through the application of the PIR method (Dworak and Kretek 2022; Kretek and Dworak 2022), the authors advocate for a more nuanced scientific approach, urging researchers to:

- clearly distinguish between *fact*, *truth*, and *fiction*, recognising their epistemological differences;
- extend inquiry beyond sensory data and technological instrumentation to include *immaterial dimensions* such as loneliness, exclusion, and existential burnout — conditions often alleviated through spirituality;
- acknowledge the *transience of scientific theories*, which are frequently replaced by newer paradigms and therefore should not be treated as secular axioms;
- recognise that the human being is not merely a mechanistic entity governed by physical laws, but a complex synthesis of *body and soul*;
- reconsider the *materialist worldview* and the plausibility of divine involvement in creation, not as a scientific conclusion, but as a philosophical and theological interpretation of the origin of the universe;
- accept that the theological premise according to which God initiated creation and entrusted the Earth to humanity, in accordance with the biblical command to 'subdue' it, allows the development of socioeconomic systems to be interpreted as a dynamic process with both benefits and significant limitations;
- from a theological and philosophical perspective, recognise that the Big Bang should not be reduced to a purely spontaneous event without deeper metaphysical questions. Such reflection is characteristic of theological and philosophical discourse, where the aim is critical interpretation rather than the description of empirical facts alone.

In contemporary Catholic teaching, there is a pressing need for publications that systematically and logically demonstrate the limitations of purely empirical scientific reasoning. Such works should inform society about the significance of spiritual experience in the context of rapid civilisational change and increasing globalisation (Bauman 2000).

In articulating its worldview amid growing material prosperity, the Church must strive to assign meaning to suffering and evil so that human existence may be understood in all its dimensions: health, illness, exclusion, depression,

anxiety, and bereavement. These reflections, crystallised through conversations with individuals grappling with concerns about evolution, the interpretation of surrounding phenomena, and the Church's role in shaping personal identity, have been framed — using the PIR method (Dworak and Kretek 2023) — within a narrative of personality formation, in which spiritual guidance is often essential.

4. The Phenomenology of Religion

Since the dawn of civilisation, religion has served as a constructive force in the development of knowledge, emerging from humanity's profound desire to explore freely and personally the origins of the cosmos and the mystery of existence (John Paul II 1983). Fundamental questions — Who am I? Where am I going? What do I seek to achieve? — have accompanied humankind throughout history. In the contemporary era, marked by globalisation and artificial intelligence, these questions acquire renewed significance because of the scale of new challenges, circumstances, and decisions confronting modern generations.

One of the main challenges confronting the modern Church is to define the relationship between nature, technology, and morality. In this context, morality is understood not as a mere social consensus, but as an order of values that enables individuals to live in accordance with the universal principles of the Decalogue (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2005, 16).

Persistent philosophical dilemmas concerning the existence of a higher being — referred to as Rational Intelligence, Providence, or God — remain unresolved. Attempts to provide a purely rational explanation for this issue have produced limited results. The authors therefore propose an alternative thought experiment: how might the history of civilisation have unfolded if God had not made a covenant with Abraham?

Such a reframing, devoid of emotional bias, leads to a series of interpretive propositions:

- civilisation, in its known historical forms, might have developed differently, since the concept of God provided one of the earliest abstract frameworks for philosophy and other sciences;
- without the concept of God, the formation of stable societies may have lacked a shared symbolic framework for governance, organisation, and hierarchy;

- individuals might have lacked a transcendent framework for moral guidance and for distinguishing between virtuous and harmful behaviour;
- humanity might have lacked a common vocabulary for defining the mental frameworks of tribes, states, and nations;
- the worship of God facilitated the creation of distinct, integrated, and coherent organisational structures with unique identities;
- even primitive tribes might have been unable to cultivate rituals and traditions in the forms known from historical and anthropological research.

From this perspective, civilisations such as Western, Latin American, Orthodox, Byzantine, African, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Chinese may be seen as cultural spaces in which societies construct timeless metaphysical entities that enable their development. One may argue that what human beings perceive — events, objects, and ideas — can be interpreted as the work of *Someone* rather than *something*, insofar as the concept of God as Creator has catalysed the emergence and evolution of numerous societies.

Historically, the shared recognition of a Higher Power within a community has fostered the development of culture and art. Religion has played a significant role in shaping civilisation and has served as an inspiration for the emergence of diverse ideas. As Pope Benedict XVI noted, 'if man's first, fundamental relationship — his relationship with God — is disturbed, then nothing else can be truly in order' (Benedict XVI 2012).

In this context, the Phenomenological Interpretive Research (PIR) method was employed using a question-reversal technique inspired by defectology (Martyniak 1997). This approach enabled researchers to analyse the problem and uncover an alternative dimension of the issue under study, providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between spiritual experience and sociocultural development.

5. Zero in Deliberations on the Big Bang and the Evaluation of Social Behaviour

Contemporary scientists generally interpret the biblical account of creation symbolically or treat it as a theological text rather than a scientific description. In scientific discourse, the Big Bang model describes the evolution of the

observable universe from an extremely hot and dense state; it does not, by itself, resolve metaphysical questions concerning why there is something rather than nothing. According to the standard scientific view, the universe evolved from this early state, leading to the formation of galaxies, stars, planets, the Earth, its geological structures, water, flora, and fauna. This process ultimately made possible the emergence of consciousness and the development of human beings as highly complex forms of life on Earth.

When this process is examined through the lens of algebraic reasoning, the concept of *nothingness* preceding the Big Bang may be symbolically represented by *zero* (0) — a sum of equal and opposite values, expressed as:

$$0=(+1)+(+2)+\cdots+(+n)+(-1)+(-2)+\cdots+(-n)\,0=(+1)+(+2)+\cdots+(+n)+(-1)+(-2)+\cdots+(-n)$$

This formulation implies that *zero*, or *nothing*, may be interpreted symbolically as bifurcating into two domains: the *material*, represented by positive numbers, and the *immaterial*, potentially represented by negative numbers. Such a representation invites speculative reflection — perhaps, provocatively, suggesting that alongside matter something else emerged at the moment of creation, such as the metaphysical realm or even angelic beings, as proponents of *creatio ex nihilo* might argue.

In algebra, it is permissible to transform the values in an equation by changing signs or rearranging terms. In religious discourse, however, changes in belief — for example, from faith to atheism or from atheism to faith — are often dismissed or ridiculed, despite numerous historical examples of profound spiritual transformation, such as Saint Paul, Saint Augustine, and Saint Raphael Kalinowski.

This discrepancy invites reflection on the words of Pope Leo XIII: 'In no case can science be permitted to serve the interests of a single citizen or a select few, since it was established for the common good of all' (Leo XIII 1888). This quote emphasises the importance of responsible use of knowledge and on openness to changing views in social and spiritual life.

The symbolic significance of *zero* in societal discourse is illustrated by a compelling example. In Poland, a substantial majority of citizens identify with Roman Catholicism; according to the 2021 National Census, 71.3% of the population declared membership in the Roman Catholic Church (Statistics Poland 2023). The remaining population, including secular or non-religious persons, may

be symbolically associated with *zero* (0), representing neutrality or the absence of religious affiliation. In a democratic society, both groups seek to assert their symbols in the public space. This raises a complex issue: if crosses are displayed universally, this may be perceived as the dominance of the religious majority; conversely, the removal of all symbols may — including both the cross and zero — would paradoxically privilege the secular minority by erasing religious presence from the public sphere.

This paradox shows that zero, symbolically speaking, can represent a lack of religious identity and may falsely suggest that no religious believers exist. In a democratic context, a minority can therefore exert disproportionate influence over a majority. Philosophically, this illustrates that the absence of information may itself constitute a form of information.

The PIR method has enabled the identification of the symbolic and epistemological significance of zero in social relations. A lack of understanding of its conceptual depth may lead to misinterpretations of truths espoused by various communities. Recognising the layered meanings of zero — mathematical, philosophical, and cultural — is essential for fostering informed dialogue in pluralistic societies.

6. Deliberations on Evolution

Some researchers and members of the public enthusiastically embrace the theory of evolution, recognising that complex biological structures may emerge through long-term processes operating at both the macro level (species) and the micro level (cells and genes). From a philosophical and theological perspective, this invites reflection on the limits of scientific knowledge and its relationship to questions about meaning, causality, and humanity's role in the universe. The following analogies are therefore presented not as scientific arguments against evolutionary biology, but as heuristic images intended to raise philosophical questions concerning order, purpose, and interpretation:

- a palace cannot emerge from steel rods, cement, and sand without the deliberate effort of architects, engineers, and labourers;
- a particleboard will not form spontaneously from water, sand, glue, and sawdust, even if these materials are stored together for centuries;
- a modern car will not assemble itself from a scrapyard of old vehicles, tyres, and components, regardless of their abundance.

While the accumulation of vehicles may eventually result in a traffic jam on a motorway, this phenomenon does not equate to the spontaneous construction of new roads, although it may prompt their development.

Speculations concerning spontaneous generation or the emergence of complex structures should be treated as hypothetical constructions used primarily for theoretical reflection. No human-created theory should be regarded as sacred. This point resonates with Leo XIII's warning that false convictions can distort reason and public life (Leo XIII 1888). In both scientific knowledge and moral practice, true value stems from the harmony between reason and ethics rather than from the uncritical acceptance of theories or ideas.

These examples invite reflection on whether some scientific methods of analysing phenomena offer only a *subjective representation of reality*, shaped by institutional agendas. In response to the question — why do many scientists refine the work of theologians whose views they do not share? — one may answer that *theology*, as discourse about God, humanity, and the world, interprets reality through the lens of divine revelation and thereby challenges the propagation of purely personal doctrines and ideologies (Jann 2017).

Where God is absent from scientific discourse, researchers — though endowed with free will — may inadvertently contribute to outcomes more destructive than warfare. Buckle observed: 'Wars have not wrought such devastation upon nations as the erroneous views of scientists' (Buckle 1873).

The Pontifical Academy of Sciences seeks to integrate contemporary scientific advancements with responses to pressing global challenges. This mission is crucial because scientific discoveries reveal the beauty and complexity of nature, highlighting the need for interdisciplinary research that also remains open to theological reflection. Within a theological context, such an approach must consider God's revelation, which addresses humanity's fundamental questions: 'Who am I?' and 'Why am I here?' These questions remain vital for younger generations grappling with existential uncertainty (Ołdakowski 2022).

The concept of spontaneous generation is often regarded by scientists as a counterpoint to theological explanations. Nevertheless, it remains a theory that requires empirical validation.

7. The Embedding of Grammatical Tenses in Scientific Discourse

In many scholarly works, the concept of tradition is interpreted as a hidden form of the past, sometimes implying an 'invented' aspect (Hobsbawm 2008, 20). According to Hobsbawm's definition, however, tradition is essentially 'a set of ritual or symbolic practices, usually initiated on the basis of general principles, intended to instil certain values and norms of behaviour through constant repetition — suggesting a continuation of the past' (Hobsbawm 2008, 10).

The purpose of such *invented traditions* is to construct secular communities rooted in a *fabricated past*, where history becomes a sociological construct — often disconnected from factual reality, emerging rapidly in unspecified contexts and prone to swift consolidation within society. Another method of establishing new traditions involves the adoption of borrowed ceremonies, folklore, and rituals from diverse cultural domains (Hobsbawm 2008, 10–21).

By treating invented traditions as authentic, historical events can be reinterpreted to form a *coherent narrative* that supports the strategic objectives of various organisations. For instance, claiming to be heirs of Enlightenment values and therefore advocating a critical stance towards religion allows such a theory to be applied universally, while conveniently omitting crucial facts, such as the number and education of individuals involved in its propagation, the specific conditions under which it arose, and its societal role at the time.

The *present tense*, in scientific discourse, often reflects a form of *temporal relativism*, suggesting a static reality. Statements such as 'I am Polish,' 'I am married,' or 'I am a teacher' imply a lack of change within a given domain. This interpretation may foster a perception that time has ceased to progress, leading to the illusion of permanence. Consequently, individuals may become passive, conforming to socially accepted norms without recognising the transience of life or the importance of living according to timeless religious principles.

Preoccupied with material concerns and transient pleasures, many people fail to perceive God's presence and thus risk losing sight of eternal life. Blaise Pascal famously argued that living as if God did not exist permits one to indulge in earthly pleasures; however, if God exists, one risks losing something infinitely more valuable. Pascal therefore advocated belief in God, warning that neglecting the passage of time may lead to spiritual alienation without any guarantee of return (Pascal 1983, 232–236).

When scientists rely exclusively on the present tense, they may foster an atmosphere devoid of existential reflection, stripping life of its evaluative dimension. In such contexts, *implants* emerge to replace:

- knowledge of God with artificially induced emotional constructs;
- transcendental experience with the accumulation of material wealth;
- moral discernment with ideologies promoting experimental medical practices.

These implanted worldviews may become a source of pride for those who adopt them, while those who resist are often stigmatised with labels such as *conservative*, *clericalist*, or *eccentric*. In such scenarios, avant-garde initiatives may devolve into psychological coercion, where individuals consumed by a distorted notion of modernity exert pressure on those seeking to live in accordance with Gospel values.

Examples include:

- feature films containing obscene scenes that undermine parental efforts to raise children;
- street and square names referencing violent events;
- television programmes repeatedly highlighting the sins of individuals who succumbed to personal weaknesses.

In these cases, actors deliver scripted lines under the direction of a 'director,' conveying a carefully constructed 'truth' to the audience. This results in a *consensual truth* — a narrative accepted by the majority because alternative information is absent or marginalised.

In this type of marketing strategy, corporations use methods such as induction, deduction, and analogy to design advertisements embedded in fictional narratives that influence real-world consumer behaviour. For example, a marketing slogan may suggest that owning a particular item is common among fans of a given novel, thereby encouraging consumers to purchase it.

The *future tense* in scientific and technocratic discourse functions as a promise of experiences to be enjoyed once organisational goals are fulfilled. Its strategic use may compel communities towards specific behaviours, often through emotionally charged appeals from authoritative figures. Promoted lifestyles include prosperity, freedom from suffering, and unrestricted choice. Framed in future-oriented terms, some scientific and technological narratives encourage the abandonment of traditional religious perspectives by suggesting that such concerns will soon become obsolete.

According to such narratives, daily existence will be managed by engineers and computer scientists, offering products born of meticulous laboratory research. Emotional fulfilment will be provided by cinemas and theatres whose programming reflects market demand. Logistics firms will handle distribution, while advertising will dictate consumption patterns designed to maximise happiness and satisfaction.

In such a reality, concepts such as sacrifice, vocation, and suffering become difficult to reconcile with dominant cultural expectations, while Gospel truths — including the Samaritan's compassion, the stewardship of divine gifts, and the father's forgiveness of the prodigal son — are easily forgotten.

The use of the PIR method has enabled the identification of mechanisms of temporal manipulation employed by sociologists and psychologists. These mechanisms include:

- reinterpreting the past for marketing purposes;
- prolonging the perception of the present indefinitely;
- depicting the future as a domain of intensive consumption.

Conclusions

The pyramids were built by the Egyptians, monumental structures by the Mayans, and abandoned termite mounds were once inhabited by their builders. Analogously, one may argue that the universe bears observable traces of creation. These reflections point to the possibility of Intelligence — a transcendent initiator of creation, sometimes described as the source of the impulse behind the Big Bang.

This Intelligence endowed humanity with free will, and the way human beings choose to perceive reality — what they designate as *sacrum* or *profanum* — is ultimately a reflection of that freedom. Religion, by appealing to truth, justice, goodness, and beauty, shapes individuals who are accountable for their actions in both private and professional spheres.

As Adam Chmielecki has noted, 'the world in which we live and act is a system of interconnected elements; there are no isolated structures in it' (Chmielecki 1999, 10). Values transmitted to future generations should therefore be free from unnecessary social tensions and anxieties, and they should clearly distinguish between good and evil according to Gospel teaching.

A young person lacking a well-defined value system is vulnerable to the disorienting effects of modern scientific achievements and free-market mechanisms. Faced with competing ideologies and options, such a person may struggle to determine which path to follow and which values to uphold. It is therefore essential to provide young people with knowledge that enables a critical analysis of the events unfolding around them and empowers them to defend their convictions in public discourse through logical and reasoned argumentation.

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Before God and the Other: Tadeusz Styczeń's Concept of "Aloneness" as a Bridge Between Philosophy and Theology of Karol Wojtyła

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Abstract

This article analyzes Tadeusz Styczeń's concept of "aloneness" as a theological extension of Karol Wojtyła's dynamic anthropology. "Aloneness" expresses the person's irreducible uniqueness and openness toward God and others. It links embodied existence with moral responsibility, revealing the body—especially the face—as a sign of personal dignity and a theophanic expression.

Keywords

person, theology of the body, Wojtyła, Styczeń, sign

This article shows how Tadeusz Styczeń's concept of "aloneness" serves as a bridge between the philosophical anthropology and the Theology of the Body (hereafter TOB) developed by Karol Wojtyła. The starting point of this reflection is the dynamic nature of human life, understood as an essential tension between the biological, personal, and relational dimensions. Wojtyła and Styczeń do not understand the human person as a static entity but rather as a dynamic being in whom action (*actus humanus*) expresses being (*esse*), and personal life is realized through participation with others and in reference to truth.

The issue explored in this paper gains particular importance in light of the ongoing discussion concerning the coherence of Karol Wojtyła's philosophy and theology. The question remains open as to whether these two aspects of his thought can be harmonized, and if so, how such a synthesis should be understood. In this context, Styczeń's concept may shed light on the internal connections between Wojtyła's philosophical anthropology and his theological understanding of the body and human relationships.

Building on Wojtyła's concept of human dynamism, the study turns to Styczeń's concept of "aloneness"—a notion that links human bodiliness with openness to God and the other. Expanding upon Wojtyła's thought, Styczeń interprets "aloneness" not merely as solitude in relation to other beings, but as an existential orientation toward the Other and toward God. In this way, the concept acquires not only a philosophical dimension but also a theological one.

1. A General Description of Dynamism

The dynamic nature of personhood is the axis of Wojtyła's reflections in *Person and Act*. More precisely, the dynamic nature of man is expressed by the fact that his action follows his being (*Agere sequitur esse*): man, by virtue of who he is, manifests his being in an active way. In Wojtyła's vision of man, the human form remains in an essential relationship to the personal dynamism of action:

> It is clear that we cannot examine the human body in separation from the totality that is man, that is, without understanding that he is a person. Neither can we penetrate the dynamisms and potentiality proper to the human body without understanding the act and its personal specificity. In this

> respect it is fitting to fully approve the vision of human reality bestowed on us by traditional philosophy (Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas), which, besides the element of "matter–hýle," discovers in man just as in other beings of the visible world yet another element, namely, "form–morphé." Hence, the theory of hylomorphism and the analysis of the human being conducted within the framework of this theory. The fundamental acceptance of this vision, however, does not entail the intention to reproduce the very formulas proper to the concept of hylomorphism. Our previous reflections have perhaps already adequately indicated the effort of rediscovering the dynamic human reality [that is, the personal dynamism] as a reality of person and act, even though the grasp of this reality in traditional philosophical anthropology is perfect in its own way (Wojtyła 2021, 311).

The interdependence of form and dynamism underlying Wojtyła's anthropology points to the inseparability of ethical and ontological elements in an "adequate anthropology," which prevents the loss of what is specifically human (John Paul II 2006, 13:2). This conviction is founded on the unity of life, which guarantees the dynamism inherent in man. The structure of the dynamism contains four levels: *suppositum*, the dynamism of actuation, the dynamism of act, and participation, which, consecutively emerging from one another, reveal man's ever-deepening outward orientation as inherent in his life processes. Thus, *suppositum* as the foundation of all dynamisms contains the necessary condition of existence, a unique mode of existence (*esse*), needed above all for the appearance of fully personal action (*operari*), within the principle of *operari sequitur esse* (Wojtyła 2021, 548). Thus, already at this first level, a man possesses all the potentialities which serve him to unfold his personal dynamism.

In turn, in the dynamism of actuation, "something happens in man" (*actus hominis*) independently of his will or consciousness (somatic-vegetative and psycho-emotional processes). Obviously, the subject can, to some extent, influence what is happening in him, but he does not directly affect a significant change in actuations. Wojtyła describes this dynamism as passive (*pati*), because it is determined by the physiological functions of the body (including the sexual drive as well). Although actuations are not so fundamental as *suppositum*, as Amadeusz Pala notes, they constitute man's bodily-spiritual unity, within which the category of biological life can be considered as a certain "visage" of his existence. And since this visage of the dynamism of actuation that makes up the

entirety of man's life functions is observable, it falls under phenomenological study, as complementary to the dynamism of being subject to metaphysical considerations (Pala 2018, 140).

The dynamism of act, on the other hand, occurs only when "man acts" (*actus humanus*) with full consciousness and freedom. So, in contrast to the dynamism of actuations, which consists in allowing something to happen and, therefore, is rather passive, the dynamism of act consists in action (*agere*) (Wojtyła 2021, 170). The difference between the two dynamisms points to the growing involvement of the interior life in man, which expresses itself in contact with the outside world through action. The ability to experience consciously this dynamism plays a key role, as it enables the emergence of a person's structure of self-determination, including self-governance and self-possession (Wojtyła 2021, 480). Significantly, the experience of an act is always accompanied by the experience of morality, so that a person, being the perpetrator of an act, realizes a certain moral value and becomes morally good or bad himself (Wojtyła 2021, 202). Thus, this dynamism means the fulfillment of the person through an act (*actus personae*). This is possible because in human dynamism the consciousness of action and the conscious action meet, enabling one to discover one's own personal efficacy and responsibility for the act (Wojtyła 2021, 135).

The fourth level of the dynamism proper to man is related to a person's participation in the community, in searching for self-fulfillment in action (Wojtyła 2021, 377).[1] Man (personal *esse*) is, as Wojtyła states, a *sui generis* in which ontology and conscious subjectivity are united. This union is possible due to the transcendent nature of human existence: horizontally—irreducibility to the actions performed, and vertically—irreducibility to the individual instantiation of human nature. As a result, a person is a "somebody," as opposed to a thing, "something." This distinction, which permeates the entire structure of human subjectivity, determines man's special attitudes toward his actions. Man is aware of the existence of potentialities whose use fulfills him. These potentialities that belong to the ontic structure of the person, as Wojtyła notes, enable him to be the efficient cause of his actions.

To put it differently, a man self-determines himself because he self-possesses himself. And since he self-determines due to self-possessing himself, he self-governs himself. Tomasz Duma assumes this understanding of action when

[1] Wojtyła calls it an aspect of the dynamism.

he writes that due to self-governance "a 'new' dynamic life factor of personhood enters a person's realization of his subjectiveness" (Duma 2020, 451).[2] Man acting (with efficacy) realizes a personalistic value, which "consists in the fact that the person actualizes himself in the act; his proper fundamental structure of self--possession and self-governance is expressed in this fact" (Wojtyła 2021, 382). Through this he reveals himself as an entity existing in relation to others. Acting in the presence of others inevitably demands a correlation of actions with others—a co-action (*współdziałanie*). This correlation would be only a game of concessions and extortion, if man were not inherently capable of participation. Wojtyła defines participation as "a property of the person himself, an interior and homogeneous property that determines the fact that by existing and acting 'together with others'" man exists personally (Wojtyła 2021, 386). Thus, he specifies the meaning of participation for being with others by writing: "Participation in diverse relationships of acting 'together with others' appears as a form of the person's relation to 'others,' a form that is adapted to these relationships and is thus itself diverse" (Wojtyła 2021, 387).

2. Life and the Unity of the Dynamism

The above summary of Wojtyła's understanding of the dynamism of man will now serve to justify the importance of the phenomenon of life as a consolidating factor, through which the symbolic character of human existence is possible. To describe the connection between the respective levels of the dynamism, Wojtyła refers to different manifestations of life (*życie*).

2.1. *Esse* and the Life of the Organism

For Wojtyła, the source of human existence is the *suppositum*, which means the subject in the aspect of being. This subject understood as a being (*esse*) lies at the root of every dynamic structure, every action and actuation of man—it is expressed in the phrase *agere sequitur esse*. However, *esse* is not the same as *suppositum*, but it is its constitutive aspect (Wojtyła 2021, 175). Following Aristotle

[2] The original array of the quote is as follows: "a new dynamic factor life of personhood enters a person's realization of his subjectiveness." The order of the two words has been changed to improve syntax.

and Thomas, Wojtyła understands life primarily as *esse*: life in the objective sense (*vivere viventibus esse*), but at the same time as a carrier of the dynamic human life (Wojtyła 2021, 215).

Wojtyła thinks that the human body is neither a mere biological organism nor just a carrier of human life: the living body is a human modus of existence that dynamizes itself through its inherent activity. This activity ties together the dignified existence of man with the sign character of his body. Life, in this context, is understood as the ontological basis for the transition from potency to act and, consequently, it makes possible any further dynamization of the subject beginning with the somatic-vegetative sphere, by making the concrete body a living organism (Wojtyła 2021, 192). *Esse* actualizing itself in the life of the organism ensures the continuity of the organism's existence through the biological transformations that constantly happen in it. The continuity of the organism over time, enabled by the actualization of *esse* in biological functions, creates the internal structure of the organism (*status in fieri*, actuation) which enables consciousness and mental processes to occur (Wojtyła 2021, 199). This view of Wojtyła permeates his entire philosophy of bodiliness, as it describes the special relationship between the body and human personhood:

> The totality of this dynamism as well as its corresponding potentiality seems to have in man a completely different consciousness-related scope, much more modest and indirect, than the psycho-emotive dynamism. Man is conscious of his body—but as of *something that lives its proper life*. The consciousness of the body is also the indirect consciousness of the organism. Man, however, *does not possess a direct and particular consciousness of his organism*; he is not conscious of the individual dynamic facts (actus) that compose the entirety of the vegetative dynamism (Wojtyła 2021, 38 emphasis added).

In this account, the junction of the somatic-vegetative and emotive-psychic spheres becomes that place where the life (of the organism) encounters lived experience (*przeżycie*) and together they ensure the continuity of the dynamism.

2.2. Lived experience (*przeżycie*)

Lived experience (*przeżycie*) pervades most of Wojtyła's writings and accompanies his account of the category of experience in general. Lived experience is present intrinsically in the relationship between the subject and his actions.

As demonstrated in the previous section, man responds to the conscious experiencing of his somaticity with action. However, as Pala aptly notes, any conscious action requires the involvement of the whole man—all the aforementioned levels of dynamism (Pala 2018, 142). Despite the multiplicity of levels of dynamism, man is perceived as a unity and experiences himself as a unity (Wojtyła 2021, 182). This is because these two types of dynamism are intertwined, together co-creating the life of a single subject. In this context, Wojtyła writes: "The dynamic unity of the subject 'man'—at least in the somatic layer—is first of all the unity of life, and only secondarily and in a sense collaterally the unity of lived experience" (Wojtyła 2021, 194).

In effect, in this dynamic unity of man, a distinction arises between the active in man and the passive ("man-acts" versus "something-happens-in-man"). This tension, which contains being oneself and having a relationship to oneself, brings the theme of lived experience into Wojtyła's anthropology, for it reveals man's subjectivity. In this tension, a man has lived experience of his subjectivity, but he is irreducible to it—the tension merges into his dynamism. This is because consciousness, the source of human subjectivity, plays a dual role: mirroring (it provides the content of consciousness) and reflecting (it connects the content of consciousness to the acting subject). In the subject who acts, these two create a special attitude toward his acts: the consciousness of action and the conscious action.

Due to the dynamic character of the human subject, the tension that arises between the consciousness of action and the conscious action is overcome in the lived experience of efficacy. Lived experience is related to the tension between the passive and the active in man, and thus to the possessive-expansive tendency in man, which leads him to manifest himself and to be present in the world through action. This dual observation leads to a link between lived experience and the dynamism of man—lived experience is a condition for activating the dynamism. The key moment in the relationship between human dynamism and the phenomenon of life is efficacy. Through the lived experience of passive elements of his constitution, man begins to act; he engages himself with the reality surrounding him.

Lived experience is the moment of getting involved—"touching true reality"—which simultaneously co-constitutes man as a subject and, what is crucial for this study, validates his body as a real sign in touch with objective truth, and not merely as a symbol without deeper meaning. Effectively, the lived experience of one's efficacy intensifies a person's dynamism by giving to it the direction "from oneself" by "I will." Consequently, the human being acts as one who possesses efficacy, and this, in turn, makes self-possession possible. When a man acts, he encounters reality; he confronts and feels the truth about it (Wojtyła 2021, 141, 157). Wojtyła calls this ability to confront and feel the truth about reality "dependence in truth" and thinks that it is the basis for human "dynamic originality": the possibility of rendering any act of transcendence or freedom is due to this specifically human relationship to truth (Wojtyła 2021, 241, 253). Therefore, this ability underlies self-possession, self-governance, and self-determination. In self-determination, the structures of self-possession and self-governance are revealed, without which they could not exist. Self-possession is revealed and confirmed in action through the will. Any actual self-determination, motivated by "I will," is not possible without the person's self-possession:

> "I will" is precisely such self-determination, not as the content of lived-experience isolated from the dynamic whole but as the content deeply rooted in this totality. "I will" as actual self-determination structurally presupposes self-possession. For one can determine only what he really possesses. And only the one who possesses can determine. Man determines himself by the will because he possesses himself. At the same time, the will, every real "I will," confirms and realizes the self-possession proper only to the person—the fact that he is *sui iuris* (Wojtyła 2021, 208).

2.3. Human interaction (*współżycie*)

By dynamizing himself through every act, movement, change, and transition from one state to another, man realizes and fulfills himself. However, man, due to the teleological nature of his existence, not only acts but in his actions seeks an end. This goal, due to the fact that man is a person, is relational. Together with the development of dynamism, a person opens himself up to interactions with other people. His self-fulfillment requires participation: action demands completion through interaction. Thus, a tension ("social feature") arises in man between his own action flowing from his efficacy and the same actions of other

people (Wojtyła 2021, 378). Through actions characterized by the dynamic depth of his personhood, the human being achieves his fullness by being appropriate also to the other person—man acting finds his proper place in the world of persons (Wojtyła 2021, 383).

What makes the transition between the level of action-dynamism and the participatory dynamism possible is a person's capacity for *współżycie*. Wojtyła uses this word three times in *Person and Act*, including twice in the chapter on participation. Its meaning in Polish is threefold: (1) to commune, to keep in touch with someone else, to lead a common life with someone; (2) to have sexual intercourse with someone; and (3) to exist together, providing each other with the substances needed for life, or so that one individual benefits from the other. It is noteworthy that Wojtyła, in this context, assumes the existence of *współżycie* in the first and third senses when he talks about participation, and then its use is always accompanied by *współdziałanie* (co-action). In one place, when he speaks of the inseparability of the common good, dialogue, and solidarity, he states that the dynamically understood common good must fundamentally evoke the attitude of solidarity without closing itself to and severing itself from opposition. The principle of dialogue seems, therefore, very fitting for this structure of human community and of participation. The concept of "dialogue" has different meanings. At this point we mean to emphasize one of them, namely, the one that can be applied to the shaping and deepening of human solidarity even through opposition. For opposition can make the *interaction* (*współżycie*) and *cooperation* (*współdziałanie*) of people more difficult, although it should neither damage nor prevent them (Wojtyła 2021, 403; emphasis added).

When Wojtyła says that treating another as a neighbor is the condition for the existence of a community, he states:

> The point of shaping *human interaction* (*współżycie*) and cooperation (*współdziałanie*) on different levels and on the basis of the different bonds that determine communities and societies is to make the "neighbor" system of reference ultimately decisive. If any human community impairs this system of reference, it dooms itself to a disappearance of the fullness of participation, to an abyss between person and community (Wojtyła 2021, 413–414, emphasis added).

The above quotes indicate the following role of *współżycie* for human dynamism: *współżycie* underlies the existence of a community, but it is irreducible

to human action or participation; it presupposes people being together; it enables people to participate in the community they form together; it engages the lower levels of human dynamism and, thus, constitutes a sign character of human body as valid for everybody with whom a person remains in relation.

3. Life Evolves in Personal Configurations

Wojtyła's theory of human dynamism in *Person and Act* concludes with an analysis of participation and, because of this, he points out that his book does not contain a theory of community, which is crucial for distinguishing the categories of dignity and the sign character of the body as valid (Wojtyła 2021, 467). In his article *Person: Subject and Community*, Wojtyła proposes a kind of continuation of the discourse from *Person and Act* by considering a person in the context of social life. He analyzes this on two levels: in the interpersonal relationship of "I–you" and in the social bond of "we". In light of the rest of his writings and the writings of his commentators, these two configurations could be regarded as an extension of the human dynamism and understood as manifestations of human life, for, as Wojtyła states: "Human life evolves… in the dimensions 'I–you' [and]… in the dimensions 'we'" (Wojtyła 2021, 511–512). This extension of the (life) dynamism allows us to see the anthropological reality of the human form's self-communication ("I–you") and its fundamental significance for the community's existence ("we").

Reflecting on the "I–you" relationship, Wojtyła states that the condition for its existence is the appearance of unity in the coexistence of a multiplicity of subjects. Man, perceiving the other ("you"), recognizes him as "another I" (Wojtyła 2021, 494).[3] Since these two basic personal pronouns mutually define each other, man lives open (that is, directed) to other people:

> It is sometimes maintained that "I" is, so to speak, constituted by "you." This capital brachylogy requires development and extension. The fundamental fact is that the "you" is always, like "me," someone or some other "I." Owing to this fact about the starting point of the relation "I–you," there is a certain plurality of personal subjects, namely, the minimal plurality of one plus one.

[3] This element flows directly from previous levels of dynamism, but it represents a certain novelty not yet present in *współżycie*.

> Nevertheless, we must base the analysis of the unity essential for the concept of community on the ascertainment of this plurality. The "you" is another "I," different from my "I." Thinking and saying "you," I express at the same time the relation which, so to speak, extends beyond me but at the same time returns to me (Wojtyła 2021, 494).

This openness results in the twofold relation of subjects to each other: subject-object and subject-subject. In the first case, one subject reacts to the actions of the other subject (interaction), and in the second, as a result of unity in subjectivity with the other subject, a community of "I–you" is formed between them. This conviction reveals community (civilization) as affirming the transcendent value of another person by uniting parts within wholeness, irreducible to the compound of biological elements, but endowed with an axiological quality (John Paul II 2006, 2:4). The next and final level of human dynamism would be to turn to the common good. Having established a bond of mutual affirmation with the other subject, man as a subject turns, together with the other subject, towards what is good for both. This turning is accompanied by the emergence of the "we" configuration (Wojtyła 2021, 500–507), characterized by the "social dimension of the community," whose significance is not limited to the sum of individual experiences: "not only one + one, but two" (Wojtyła 2021, 501). An emblematic example of the "we" configuration is marriage, whose rationale stems from conjugal love (Wojtyła, 2013, 40). Conjugal love, based on total self-giving, is an expression of the "law of gift" inscribed in the very being of the human person (Wojtyła, 2013, 285–291).

Importantly, in the context of our discussion, Wojtyła in TOB attributes the sign (that is, spousal) character of the body to the personal specificity of human life (John Paul II 2006, 27:3) without providing a satisfactory philosophical *rationale* for this attribution. In other words, although there is a significant connection between the person, the sign, and the gift, Wojtyła does not explain it in reference to key anthropological categories (that is, the dynamism of the person or the "we" configuration) (John Paul II 2006, 59:2). Consequently, his theology and philosophy remain disconnected. By contrast, such an explanation can be found in Tadeusz Styczeń.

4. "Aloneness" as a Dignified Life

Styczeń elaborates on Wojtyła's account of the dynamism and the unified character of the (life) dynamism. Styczeń thinks that a person essentially exists in a dignified manner: the way man lives, that is, how he stands in the world surrounded by other people, is a source of moral responsibility and demands respect. Moreover, living in this way is essential to the sign character of the body—a key element of Wojtyła's TOB. Styczeń explains this while elaborating on the notion of "aloneness" (Styczeń 2013, 89; Schindler 2008, 406),[4] which, according to him, is similar, although not identical, with Wojtyła's "solitude" (Styczeń 2014a, 127). Styczeń's notion is more general than Wojtyła's, and it can be complemented not only by the solitude of a person of a different sex ("double solitude"), but by the singularity of another person with whom one lives in an interpersonal configuration: to perceive someone's aloneness means to see him as existing toward God (John Paul II 2006, 9:2).

The difference between Styczeń's and Wojtyła's notions lies in their different emphasis. Wojtyła's point of departure is the analysis of the text of *Genesis* concerning the original situation of man, while Styczeń analyzes man in the personal configuration of "I–you" (Styczeń 2013, 130, footnote 23).[5] Effectively, Wojtyła focuses on the complementarity of man and woman, while Styczeń focuses on the intersubjective relationship in general—which is more fundamental than sexual complementarity but at the same time carries a theological significance that Wojtyła attributes to the sexuality of the human body.[6] Styczeń's aloneness, concerning man as living toward God, expresses a threefold truth about man: first, man's life is a source of responsibility on account of his relationship to God; second, the specificity of man's life (that is, his dynamism) makes man apt for the relationship with God; and third, God himself is respected in the affirmation of human personhood.

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[4] This includes reference to being a person (*osoba*), being apart (*osobno*), and being in private (*na osobności*). Schindler has something similar in mind when he uses the term "aloneness."

[5] According to Styczeń, in his writings Karol Wojtyła reveals the uniqueness of a person through his "interiority" ("I" as the unchangeable author of his act) and his "interior face," acquired, as it were, through fulfilled or unfulfilled calls to love, and thus realized or unrealized opportunities for self-fulfillment.

[6] The spousal relationship is for Styczeń, as in Wojtyła's case of "solitude," the culminating realization of aloneness.

In order to justify his view, Styczeń notes three specific features of man's existence in comparison to all other creatures: man exists differently than other creatures, in a higher way than everything around him (that is, he is capable of what other creatures are not), and distinctively—because he is someone else ("separate") in relation to (or toward) other people:

Man is not only intrigued by the fact that he is "different" and "higher" than everything else in this world. Man is also intrigued by the fact that each of the people is "distinctive" from other people. Let's look at our faces for a moment!… the "aloneness" of man among the world of things is inextricably accompanied by the separateness… of man among the world of persons. Also among persons, each person is "distinctive," is precisely alone (Styczeń 2014c, 233).[7]

The discovery of the aloneness of the human person among the world of things is accompanied by—as part of the self-discovery of "I" as "I"—the discovery of the duty to love each person for himself on the part of each person, the duty to establish a personal relationship with each of them. But to discover the aloneness of a person in the midst of persons is to discover that each person is distinctive from the others, unique among them, unrepeatable and irreplaceable by any other (Styczeń 2014b, 68).

For Styczeń, the face is an emblem of the whole body, which reveals aloneness better than any other part of the human body:

The face makes it possible not only to read the "aloneness" of the personal self in its unique "here." It reveals to us, moreover, its singularity in the unique now" of its facial expression and gaze… The face is a unique living trace of the history of "this one life," despite all the imperfections of this sign (Styczeń 2013, 133).

Styczeń explains how the demand for affirmation is mediated by the experience of the face:

The experience and lived experience of the singularity of the person in his face and the experience and lived experience of the singularity of the person as the incommunicability of the "quality of being perpetrator" of his act complement each other. No one else but I will experience me and have a living experience of me in the fulfillment of this beholding act. I remain forever alone, "alone" in the face of the decision I should make. No one will take away from me the good or bad of its realization. The sole perpetrator and "unshared" subject of them also remains their only "eyewitness." But on the other hand,

[7] In the Polish text, distinctiveness is rendered as "different than other persons."

I have also never seen myself and will never directly see my own face. After all, in the mirror I can only see its reflection. An eyewitness to the presence of my person from this side can only be someone else. The face of the other, viewed by me in a "*facies ad faciem*" situation, is the only living mirror in which I can look at myself "from that side." "A living face cannot be viewed as a 'thing in itself' independent of the observer. The face always reflects the onlooker. When looking at someone, we see at the same time ourselves, our own social reflection" (Styczeń 2013, 135).

By virtue of his unique dignity, the person becomes a *locus* of divine self-revelation. The human face, as the most expressive sign of personal interiority, does not merely reveal psychological states; it manifests the irreducible uniqueness and mystery of the person. This visibility of the person through the body—especially the face—renders the human being a natural theophany.

This theophanic character is possible due to aloneness, which Styczeń considers as a precondition for personal communion. The person is a mystery not to be possessed but to be received with reverence, akin to the sacred. Thus, genuine interpersonal relationships, especially those characterized by love and self-gift, become privileged sites where the divine is made manifest. In such encounters, the other is not a mere object but "Thou" who discloses something transcendent. Furthermore, love constitutes the ethical and metaphysical space in which God is revealed:

> However, the truth about human dignity does not negate the truth about the contingency of human existence… [Contingency] reveals that the dignity of the person, together with their existence, has its direct source in the unceasing creative act of the Personal Absolute of Love, through which each person finds themselves as a gift to themselves from the Creator and, at the same time, finds every other person as, in their dignity, assigned to them to be ultimately affirmed by the one who causes persons to exist at all and, in existing, to exist as persons (Styczeń 2013, 138).

Since God is love (1 Jn 4:8), the structure of interpersonal gift—a person giving themselves freely to another—mirrors the Trinitarian life and thereby reveals it. Hence, the human person does not simply point to God; rather, in the very act of loving and being loved, the person makes God present. Ultimately, Styczeń affirms that the person, by embodying relationality, freedom, and the capacity for love, is a visible sign of the invisible. In their irreducible uniqueness

and openness to communion, the human person becomes not only a bearer of divine image but also a living theophany.

Conclusions

Styczeń's account of aloneness—as an extension of the personal dynamism—not only provides a better conceptual apparatus to grasp the theological specificity of man's moral and social life, which is broadly described by Wojtyła, but also specifies what the symbolic (that is, theophanic) character of the body consists of. For Styczeń, living in the "I–you" configuration is deeply ontological, not just moral. Consequently, the human being, including the body, lives toward other persons, and this enables the person to understand that openness to the other person is not meaningless, but it expresses a deeper order of things. This conviction, in the form of a seed present in Wojtyła, enables us to understand the meaningfulness of human bodily existence. The obligation to respect the human being is inscribed in the very structure of human life and, at the same time, in his relationship to the Creator. The dignity that is the fruit of the personal dynamism, expressed through the body (specifically through the face), is the condition for reading the body as a sign. While in his work Wojtyła shows the way in which the body as a sign gains its meaning in the spousal relationship by virtue of the complementarity of the sexes, Styczeń shows that the meaningfulness of the human body is a source of moral responsibility. It would be worthwhile for further research in this area to show how the theological depth contained in TOB could be applied to areas of morality other than sexuality.

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Confusa Imago and Artificial Intelligence: Peter Abelard's Theory of Abstraction as a Framework for Understanding the Cognitive Status of AI Systems

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Abstract

This article addresses a philosophical problem arising from recent Vatican documents on artificial intelligence: how can AI systems demonstrate functional generalization while lacking the capacity for abstraction proper to human cognition? Drawing on the medieval philosophy of Peter Abelard (1079–1142), particularly his theory of the *confusa imago* (confused image) developed in the context of the twelfth-century dispute over universals, this article proposes a novel framework for understanding the cognitive status of contemporary AI systems. Abelard's distinction between the representational level (*confusa imago*—an indeterminate mental image common to all instances of a kind) and the intellectual level (*intellectus*—the conscious act that transforms representation into genuine understanding) maps with striking precision onto the functional architecture of modern artificial neural networks. The article argues that AI systems achieve something structurally analogous to the generation of confused images through statistical learning, without performing the intellectual acts that would transform these representations into authentic concepts. This framework resolves the apparent paradox of generalization without abstraction, provides a principled basis for the claim that human cognitive involvement remains structurally necessary (not merely contingently useful) in human–AI collaboration, and offers concrete implications for the ethical design and deployment of AI systems. The analysis demonstrates that medieval philosophical categories retain unexpected explanatory power for contemporary problems in the philosophy of artificial intelligence.

Keywords

abstraction, artificial intelligence, cognitive science, confusa imago, human, Middle Ages, mind, Peter Abelard, philosophy, universals

On January 28, 2025, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Culture and Education of the Holy See published a joint document entitled *Antiqua et Nova: Note on the Relationship between Artificial Intelligence and Human Intelligence* (*Antiqua et Nova* 2025). This document, the first comprehensive statement of the Catholic Magisterium on the philosophical and theological implications of artificial intelligence, advances a claim that poses a significant problem for the philosophy of AI. The authors assert that AI "does not account for the full breadth of human experience, which includes abstraction, emotions, creativity, and the aesthetic, moral, and religious sensibilities" (*Antiqua et Nova* 2025, §11). The document elaborates: "AI's advanced features give it sophisticated abilities to *perform tasks*, but not the ability to *think*" (*Antiqua et Nova* 2025, §12).

The puzzle emerges from the apparent tension between this claim and the observable capacities of contemporary AI systems. If AI lacks abstraction — understood in the traditional philosophical sense as the cognitive operation by which the mind extracts universal concepts from particular sens*ory* data — then how do AI systems achieve the functional generalization they manifestly exhibit? A language model can respond appropriately to sentences it has never encountered; a vision system can classify images absent from its training data; a game-playing agent can discover strategies not present in its learning corpus. These capacities appear to require some form of generalization beyond particular instances.

The present article proposes that one of the possible resolutions of this puzzle lies in a distinction developed by Peter Abelard in his treatment of the medieval problem of universals. Abelard distinguished between two cognitive levels: the *confusa imago* (confused or indeterminate image) — a representation that is "proper to none and common to all" instances of a kind — and the *intellectus* (intellectual act) — the fully conscious apprehension that transforms mere representation into genuine understanding. This article argues that contemporary AI systems realize something structurally analogous to the generation of *confusae imagines* through statistical learning processes, while failing to perform the *intellectus* that would constitute authentic cognition.

This framework makes it possible to obtain several significant results. First, it can explain how functional generalization is possible without abstraction in the full philosophical sense. Second, it can provide a philosophical basis for the claim that human cognitive involvement in AI systems is not a contingent

limitation to be overcome by technological progress, but a structural necessity rooted in the nature of cognition itself and the very structure of how AI models function. Third, it can offer concrete guidance for the ethical design and deployment of AI systems. Finally, it demonstrates that medieval philosophical categories, developed in response to apparently distant problems, retain unexpected explanatory power for contemporary challenges.

1. The Medieval Problem of Universals: Historical and Philosophical Context

The problem of universals — one of the most persistent questions in medieval philosophy — concerns the ontological and epistemological status of general terms and the concepts they express (de Libera 1996, 39–49). When we predicate "human" like Socrates and Plato, to what does this common term refer? Is there a universal "humanity" that both individuals instantiate? If so, what is its ontological status? If not, what grounds the common predication? The medieval debate took its specific form from three questions posed by the ancient philosopher Porphyry in his *Isagoge*, an introduction to Aristotle's *Categories*: (1) Do genera and species exist in reality or only in thought? (2) If they exist, are they corporeal or incorporeal? (3) Do they exist separately from sensible particulars, or in them? (*Isagoge*, 1a, 9–13; trans. 1975, 27–28). Porphyry himself declined to answer these questions, judging them too difficult for an introductory work. For medieval philosophers, however, this was a living issue since Porphyry's text was required reading for students of philosophy at the beginning of their education.

The dominant position in the early twelfth century was realism — the view that universals possess real existence in the particulars that instantiate them, independent of the minds that cognize them. William of Champeaux, Abelard's teacher at the cathedral school of Notre-Dame in Paris, initially defended a strong version of this position: individuals belonging to the same species share a numerically identical substantial essence. On this view, Socrates and Plato possess exactly the same humanity, but they differ only in their accidents (King 1982, 137–173).[1]

[1] William of Champeaux presented this theory in his lectures at Notre-Dame around 1108–1109. The primary source for his views is Abelard's critique of that theory.

Abelard's critique of this position, preserved in his *Logica Ingredientibus*, was devastating (*Logica Ingredientibus*, 10–11).[2] The central objection runs as follows: if the universal "animal" is wholly and numerically identically present in Socrates (who is rational) and in a donkey (which is irrational), then the same thing would possess contradictory properties: it would be simultaneously rational and irrational. Furthermore, the theory generates a vicious regress: the accidents supposed to individuate the common essence are themselves universals requiring further individuation (*Logica Ingredientibus*, 11–12).

Under the pressure of Abelard's critique, William modified his position, adopting what is known as the "indifference theory." It holds that individuals are not identical in essence but are called "the same" because they "do not differ" (*non differunt*) in certain respects (Marenbon 1997, 108–114). Abelard found this reformulation equally unsatisfactory. As he observed, Plato and Socrates also "do not differ in being a stone" — neither is a stone, so they are identical in that respect. Mere non-difference cannot ground positive similarity or justify common predication (*Logica Ingredientibus*, 12).

After defeating his teacher, Abelard was able to present his own solution. Significantly for the present argument, he, like his defeated opponent before him, had to do so without the crucial source that explained the meaning of abstraction, since Aristotle's *De anima* had not yet been translated into Latin and was unknown to Western philosophical circles. He therefore had to develop an account of abstraction from scratch (Gilson 1950, 9–10).[3]

His central thesis is that universality is a property of certain linguistic expressions — specifically, common nouns and the concepts associated with them — not something that exists in reality. Only words can be universals in the strict sense, because only words are predicable of many things (King 1982, 352–354). However, this linguistic thesis requires supplementation. What grounds the common application of universal terms? Why is it correct to call

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[2] The critical edition is: Peter Abelard, *Logica Ingredientibus* (*Glossae super Porphyrium*), ed. B. Geyer, in *Peter Abaelards Philosophische Schriften*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters 21 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1919–1933). An English translation of key passages is provided in Spade (1994, 32–33).

[3] See Gilson's account (1950, 9–10) of the whole debate between William of Champeaux and Peter Abelard, including his commentaries on Abelard's limitations. In Gilson's view, the absence of Aristotle's *De anima* paradoxically precipitated Abelard's originality: "In short, Abailard was in that blessed state of ignorance which makes it so easy for a clever man to be original."

both Socrates and Plato "human"? Here, Abelard introduces his distinctive concept of *status* — the state or condition of being a certain kind of thing. The *status* of being human is not itself a thing (*res*) or essence (*essentia*); Abelard emphatically denies that *status* possesses substantial existence. Rather, *status* functions as "a cause that is not a thing" — it explains the commonality without postulating a common metaphysical element (King 1982, 354–374). In *Logica Ingredientibus*, he claims that when we say that Socrates and Plato agree in the status of man (*in statu hominis*), we refer to their *status* although we are not appealing to anything (*Logica Ingredientibus*, 20, 7–9).[4]

The concept of *status* has an unusual ontological profile: it is sufficiently robust to ground linguistic imposition and common predication, yet it is not an additional entity in the world. Abelard thinks that statuses can be understood as causes, just as not wanting to go to the forum can be the cause of being flogged. As Abelard states, *not wanting to go* is "no essence." *Status thus denotes* a cause that is not itself a thing, so it functions causally without being a substance (*Logica Ingredientibus*, 20, 10–17).[5]

2. The Theory of *Confusa Imago*: Abelard's Cognitive Psychology

The psychological complement to the semantic notion of *status* is Abelard's account of the mental representations associated with universal terms. When we hear a common noun like "human," what arises in the mind? Since Abelard denies that there are universal things for such terms to represent, the mental content cannot be a representation of a universal entity. Yet it must somehow support the universal application of the term. Abelard's answer is the *communis et confusa imago* — the common and confused image. In *Glossae super Porphyrium* he distinguishes understanding of universal and particular objects:

[4] "Sed nihil aliud sentimus, nisi eos homines esse, et secundum hoc nullatemus differre, secundum hoc, inquam quod homines sunt, licet ad nullam vocemus essentiam. Statum autem hominis ipsum esse hominem, quod non est res, vocamus, quod etiam diximus communem causam impositionis nominis ad singulos, secundum quod ipsi ad invicem conveniunt."

[5] "Saepe autem cause nominae ea quoque quae res aliqua non sunt, appellamus, ut cum dicitur: Verberatus est, quia non vult ad forum. Non vult ad forum, quod ut causa ponitur, nulla est essentia." See also Gilson (1950, 23).

> …the understanding that goes with a universal name conceives a common and confused image of many things. But the understanding a singular word generates comprises the proper and so to speak "singular" form of one thing — that is, a form related to one "person" only. Thus, when I hear 'man', a kind of model rises in my mind that is related to a single man in such a way that it is common to all of them and proper to none. But when I hear 'Socrates', a certain form rises up in my mind that expresses the likeness of a certain person (*Logica Ingredientibus*, 21, 28–33; trans. Spade 1994, 44).[6]

The term *confusa* requires careful interpretation. It does not mean "unclear" or "muddled" in a pejorative sense. Rather, it carries a technical meaning: the image is indeterminate with respect to individuating features. The term "human" captures what humans have in common — rationality, mortality, animal nature — while lacking the specific determinations (this particular height, this hair color, this spatial location) that would make it an image of Socrates rather than Plato (Marenbon 1997, 145–160).

We can illuminate this concept by a contemporary analogy. Consider an anatomical illustration of the human body in a medical atlas. Such an illustration does not depict any particular person — it lacks a specific face, a determinate skin color, individual proportions. Yet it represents all human beings; it displays the anatomical structure common to the species. In Abelard's terms, it is "proper to none and common to all." The *confusa imago* functions analogously: it is a mental representation that captures what is common while remaining indeterminate with respect to what it individuates.

In *Tractatus de Intellectibus*, Abelard further characterizes the concepts associated with universal terms using three technical descriptors (*Tractatus de Intellectibus*, 3.19–3.24; King 2007, 169–187). The imago is *sola* (alone), detached from current sense perception of any particular individual. It operates independently of the presence of any specific instance. It is *nuda* (bare) abstracted from some or all accidental forms. It retains only what is essential or common, stripped

[6] "…quod ille qui universalis nominis est, commune et confusam imaginem multorum concipit, ille vero quem vox singularis generat, propriam unius et quasi singularem formam tenet, hoc est ad unam tantum personam se habentem. Unde cum audio 'homo', quoddam instar in animo surgit, quod ad singulos homines sic se habet, ut omnium sit commune et nullius proprium. Cum autem audio 'Socrates', forma quaedam in animo surgit, quae certae personae similitudinem exprimit."

of individualizing accidents. And, finally, it is *pura* (pure) — unadulterated by reference to any single individual. It maintains its indeterminacy without collapsing onto a particular instance. These characteristics jointly describe a representation that enables universal predication precisely because of its indeterminacy. Because the *confusa imago* does not single out any particular individual, it can serve as the cognitive basis for applying a term to all individuals of the relevant kind.

What is significant in the context of this article is that Abelard insists that all cognition starts with sensation, which is the only source of data. As Kevin Guilfoy explains the mind has an initial confused conception of a particular discrete item thanks to the powers of sensation and imagination. This image is confused because the mind is merely conscious of the item, and the whole process of cognition is a kind of perfecting this confused image of sensation and imagination (Guilfoy 2004, 203). It is worth noticing that the first part of this process — sensory perception — is for Abelard purely mechanical (Marenbon 1997, 167).

The second part, which is imagination, is more perfect than the first, but it is still considered to be an imperfect type of cognition. Its primary function is to produce images, which are "mere preparation for thought" (Marenbon 1997, 168). The confused image is the *content* upon which cognition operates; the *intellectus* is the *act* of conscious apprehension that transforms mere representation into genuine understanding (King 1982, ch. 4). As J. Marenbon underlines: "thoughts are sharply distinct from images of any kind" and therefore thought "necessarily involves abstraction" (Marenbon 1997, 168).

This distinction has several important implications. First, Abelard explicitly rejects the view that mental images by themselves explain intentionality, the property of being *about* something. Images are merely "intermediary signs of things" (*intersigna rerum*) (*Logica Ingredientibus*, 23; King 2007, 180–183). The same image can be used to think about different objects depending on which features receive attention. Intentionality derives from the act of attention (*attentio*), not from intrinsic properties of the image. Second, the *intellectus* involves normative orientation.

It is not merely a causal response to stimuli, but an act directed toward grasping the nature of things, toward understanding what something is. This normative dimension distinguishes genuine cognition from mere information processing. Third, the *intellectus* is phenomenally conscious. It may be described as the proper and most perfect cognitive act, while sensation is mechanical and imagination is imperfect and blurred. There is something it is like to understand,

a qualitative character to the act of intellectual apprehension, and this dimension is essential to cognition itself. Thus, the confused image is a necessary but not sufficient condition for understanding. It provides the representational raw material, but without the *intellectus*, there is no genuine cognition.

3. AI as Generator of *Confusae Imagines*

AI systems realize something structurally analogous to the generation of *confusae imagines* through statistical learning processes, while failing to perform the *intellectus* that would transform these representations into authentic concepts. Accordingly, the Vatican document correctly asserts that AI lacks abstraction in the full philosophical sense — the sense that involves the *intellectus* as a conscious, normatively oriented act of apprehension. Yet AI manifestly generalizes. The resolution lies in recognizing that generalization at the representational level does not require intellectual apprehension. AI achieves the former without the latter.

Consider the training process of a contemporary deep artificial neural network. The system is exposed to millions of particular instances — specific images of cats, specific sentences in a natural language, and specific game states and outcomes. Through iterative optimization (typically via gradient descent), the network develops internal representations — patterns of activation across hidden layers — that capture statistical regularities in the training data. As LeCun, Bengio, and Hinton observe in their foundational review: "Deep learning allows computational models that are composed of multiple processing layers to learn representations of data with multiple levels of abstraction" (LeCun, Bengio, and Hinton 2015, 436).[7]

The concept of *distributed representation*, introduced by Hinton, McClelland, and Rumelhart in their seminal 1986 work, provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how artificial neural networks develop these abstract patterns (Hinton et. al. 1986, 77–109). In a distributed representation, concepts are not represented by single dedicated units but by patterns of activity across many

[7] This landmark review provides a comprehensive overview of how deep artificial neural networks learn hierarchical representations of data. It is worth noting that the term "abstraction" as used here describes generalization, and future development of AI is predicted to involve "complex reasoning" (LeCun, Bengio, and Hinton 2015, 442).

units. Each unit participates in representing many different concepts, and each concept is represented by the combined activity of many units. This architecture enables what Hinton termed "automatic generalization": when the weights in the network change to incorporate new knowledge about one concept, the changes affect knowledge associated with other concepts represented by similar activation patterns (Hinton 1986, 1–12).

These learned representations exhibit a characteristic property: they are indeterminate with respect to particular training instances. The representation of "cat" that emerges in a trained vision model does not correspond to any specific cat from the training set. It is an abstract pattern that captures what cats statistically have in common — typical shapes, textures, proportions — while remaining indeterminate with respect to the individualizing features of particular cats. Zeiler and Fergus's influential visualization studies of convolutional neural networks demonstrate this phenomenon empirically. Higher layers of trained networks develop feature detectors that respond to increasingly abstract and general patterns, moving from edges and textures in early layers to object parts and whole objects in deeper layers (Zeiler and Fergus 2014, 818–833).[8]

We can observe a parallel between the representations developed by such systems and what Abelard calls images that are "proper to none and common to all." The parallel extends to the functional role of indeterminacy. In Abelard's theory, the "confusion" of the image — its lack of individuating specificity — is precisely what enables its universal application. Because it singles out no particular, it applies to all. Similarly, the general character of learned representations in artificial neural networks (their distance from any specific training instance) is what enables generalization. The network succeeds on novel inputs precisely because its internal representations have abstracted away from particular training examples.

The parallel, however, stops at the representational level. Contemporary AI systems do not perform anything analogous to the *intellectus* — the conscious, normatively oriented act of intellectual apprehension. To support this claim, it is worth returning to John Searle's classical Chinese Room argument (Searle 1980, 417–457). He argued that a system manipulating symbols according to formal rules — however sophisticated — performs merely syntactic operations without semantic understanding. As Searle put it: "Formal symbol manipulations

[8] This study introduced deconvolutional network techniques to visualize the features learned at each layer of a CNN, demonstrating the increasingly abstract and general nature of representations in deeper layers.

by themselves don't have any intentionality; they are quite meaningless; they aren't even symbol manipulations, since the symbols don't symbolize anything. In the linguistic jargon, they have only a syntax but no semantics" (Searle 1980, 422).[9] While debates about the Chinese Room continue, Searle's core insight — that rule-governed symbol manipulation does not by itself constitute understanding — resonates with Abelard's distinction between possessing an image and performing an intellectual act upon it.

More recently, Bender, Gebru, and colleagues have applied similar reasoning to large language models, characterizing them as "stochastic parrots" that "haphazardly stitch together sequences of linguistic forms… according to probabilistic information about how they combine, but without any reference to meaning" (Bender et al. 2021, 616). This characterization aligns precisely with the present analysis: language models generate representations (analogous to *confusae imagines*) that enable statistically appropriate outputs without performing the semantic grasp that constitutes the *intellectus*.

There is no evidence that AI systems possess phenomenal consciousness, that there is "something it is like" to be a language model processing a sentence or a vision system classifying an image. The *intellectus* in Abelard's framework essentially involves phenomenal presence; the act of understanding is not a mere functional state but a conscious event (Chalmers 1996, chaps. 1–2). Moreover, AI systems optimize objective functions defined by their designers. They do not pursue truth as such or aim at grasping the natures of things. The *intellectus* involves a normative orientation toward understanding that is absent from systems defined purely by loss minimization. If this analysis is correct, such systems manipulate representations that track statistical regularities, but they do not *understand* what those representations mean. A language model processes tokens in ways that produce statistically appropriate outputs without grasping the semantic content of the sentences it generates. The *intellectus* essentially involves semantic understanding, not merely syntactic manipulation.

The framework derived from Abelard's cognitive psychology seems useful for explaining several otherwise puzzling features of contemporary AI systems. They frequently produce correct outputs (accurate classifications, appropriate responses, valid solutions) without understanding why these outputs are correct.

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[9] For a comprehensive analysis of the argument, see the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v. "The Chinese Room Argument," https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/chinese-room/ (accessed February 19, 2026).

This is explicable on the present account: the confused images and their statistically determined relations can accurately track regularities in the world without the *intellectus* that would constitute insight into the reasons.

AI systems generalize on the basis of statistical similarity rather than essential features. They may classify correctly by detecting accidental correlations (texture rather than shape, spurious features rather than causally relevant ones) (Goodfellow, Shlens, and Szegedy 2014).[10] Similarly, Geirhos and his colleagues demonstrated empirically that ImageNet-trained convolutional neural networks classify images primarily on the basis of texture rather than shape — an instance of generalization based on accidental rather than essential features (Geirhos et al. 2019). This follows from operating at the representational level without intellectual grasp of natures or essences. Finally, when AI systems are prompted for explanations, they produce post hoc rationalizations rather than genuine justifications. They lack the "inner light" of understanding that would ground authentic reasons. This is precisely what the absence of *intellectus* predicts. As Lipton observes in his analysis of model interpretability, there is a fundamental distinction between a system's capacity to produce outputs and its capacity to explain *why* those outputs are appropriate — a distinction that maps onto Abelard's image/*intellectus* divide (Lipton 2018, 31–57).[11]

Antiqua et Nova states (§35) that "AI should not be seen as an artificial form of human intelligence but as a product of it" (*Antiqua et Nova* 2025, § 35). It seems that now we can support this claim with Abelard's framework and even make this thought more precise: AI is an instrument for generating representations analogous to confused images. These representations are a product of human intelligence and require human intelligence to be transformed into knowledge.

[10] This demonstrates that neural networks can be deceived by imperceptible perturbations — evidence that they rely on features quite different from those humans consider essential.

[11] Lipton distinguishes between transparency (understanding how a model works) and post hoc explanation (providing reasons for outputs), arguing that these involve different epistemic relationships.

4. Implications for Human–AI Relationships

The analysis developed above can be seen as having significant implications for understanding the proper relationship between human cognition and artificial intelligence. The first and most fundamental implication concerns the necessity of human cognitive involvement. If AI systems operate at the level of *confusa imago* without achieving the *intellectus*, then the transformation of AI-generated representations into genuine knowledge requires human intellectual activity. This is not a contingent limitation that future technological development might overcome; it is a structural feature of the distinction between representation and understanding. Just as Abelard's *confusa imago* requires the *intellectus* to become a genuine concept, so AI-generated representations require human cognition to become knowledge in the full sense. The human contribution is not merely to oversee, verify, or correct AI outputs; it is to perform the intellectual acts that constitute understanding — grasping meaning, evaluating truth, and comprehending implications.

This analysis enables the rejection of two common frameworks for conceptualizing human–AI relationships. What may be called the "replacement model" holds that AI will progressively substitute for human cognition across an expanding range of domains until it reaches the status of General AI, when replacement will be complete. The present analysis reveals the incoherence of this model since AI and human cognition operate at different levels. The former cannot replace the latter because they accomplish different things. Similarly, one could hold that AI and humans perform the same cognitive tasks with different degrees of efficiency, what may be termed the "competition model." Our analysis reveals that this model is also inadequate, because the tasks are not the same. Generating a representation that enables correct classification is not the same task as understanding why the classification is correct.

The appropriate model of the human–AI relationship is what may be termed the "instrumental–intellectual model," where AI serves as a powerful instrument for generating rich representational structures, while humans perform the intellectual acts that confer meaning and cognitive value upon these structures. The relationship is analogous to that between a craftsman and sophisticated tools: the tools extend capabilities, but the exercise of craft (skillful, conscious, purposive activity) remains the domain of the human agent.

The foregoing theoretical analysis yields several practical implications for the design and deployment of AI systems. If human cognition must operate

upon AI-generated representations to transform them into knowledge, then humans require access to those representations in forms amenable to intellectual engagement. "Black box" systems that deliver only final outputs (classifications, recommendations, decisions) deprive humans of the representational material upon which the *intellectus* can operate. As Rudin argues in her influential critique of explainable AI, there is a fundamental difference between explaining opaque models post hoc and designing inherently interpretable models; the former may provide rationalizations without genuine understanding, while the latter enables authentic intellectual engagement (Rudin 2019, 206–215).[12] Interpretability is not merely a desideratum for debugging or accountability; it is a condition for the cognitive partnership that makes AI outputs epistemically valuable. Otherwise, AI outputs cannot be evaluated because truthfulness and coherence can be identified only at a higher level of abstraction.

Another risk emerges from excessive reliance on AI systems as illegible result generators: the atrophy of human intellectual capacities through disuse. If humans habitually accept AI outputs without performing intellectual work upon them (without asking what the outputs mean, how they were produced, whether they are true, and how they describe the nature of things) the very capacities that make those outputs meaningful may deteriorate. This concern has been documented empirically across multiple domains. Studies of automation in aviation, for example, have demonstrated that pilots who rely heavily on automated systems show degraded manual flying skills and reduced situational awareness when automation fails (Casner et al. 2014, 1506–1516).[13] Similar patterns have been observed in medical diagnosis, where doctors using AI-assisted systems show decreased detection rates when AI support is withdrawn (Dratsch et al. 2023).[14] Vallor has articulated the broader concern as "moral deskilling" — the erosion of human capacities for judgment through delegation to automated systems (Vallor 2015, 107–124). The risk is not that AI will replace human understanding but that humans will cease to exercise, and thereby gradually lose, the capacity to understand.

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[12] Rudin argues that post hoc explanations of black box models may be misleading and advocates for inherently interpretable models in high-stakes domains.

[13] See also Federal Aviation Administration, *Safety Alert for Operators* 13002 (2013), which recommends increased manual flight practice due to concerns about skill degradation.

[14] This study found that radiologists' performance declined when AI assistance was incorrect, with less experienced practitioners showing greater susceptibility to automation bias.

Finally, authentic judgment (epistemic or even ethical) requires intellectual apprehension, not merely reliable differential response. In Abelard's framework, ethical values and principles are not objects that can be placed in the domain of *confused images*. For an act of judgment or an act of conscience, it is necessary to know and understand general rules that can be obtained and processed only at the intellectual level of abstraction. Although it may seem to involve making a simple connection between rules and cases that can be associated with them, understanding general rules is necessary for the very ability to make such connections. For example, in ethical judgment, to claim that drug use is wrong one must have a deeper understanding of "Thou shalt not kill," and such understanding cannot be obtained from probabilistic analysis from even an enormously large number of cases of humans who intentionally damage their health.

Since AI systems do not perform intellectual acts, they cannot bear the epistemic responsibility that attaches to claims of knowledge or the moral responsibility that attaches to practical decisions. Humans must remain the locus of responsibility because they are the locus of understanding (Matthias 2004, 175–183). This has implications for the deployment of AI in high-stakes contexts: human judgment must remain genuinely engaged, not merely nominally present. The phenomenon of "automation bias" — the tendency to defer uncritically to automated recommendations — represents precisely the failure to exercise the *intellectus* that would evaluate and eventually transform AI outputs into genuine knowledge (Goddard, Roudsari, and Wyatt 2014, 368–375; Skitka, Mosier, and Burdick 1999, 991–1006).

Conclusions

This article has proposed that Peter Abelard's twelfth-century theory of the *confusa imago* provides a precise and illuminating framework for understanding the cognitive status of contemporary artificial intelligence systems. He distinguished between two cognitive levels — the *confusa imago* (an indeterminate representation generated by processing particular experiences through sensation and imagination) and the *intellectus* (the conscious act that transforms representation into genuine understanding). Through their statistical learning processes, contemporary AI systems generate representations structurally analogous to *confusae imagines*, which are indeterminate patterns capturing

what instances have in common while remaining uncommitted to particulars. However, AI systems do not perform the *intellectus* — the conscious, normatively oriented act of intellectual apprehension. They achieve the representational level without ascending to the intellectual one.

This framework resolves the central problem posed by *Antiqua et Nova*. That document, by asserting that AI systems cannot perform abstraction, appeared to contradict the evident observation that AI systems are capable of performing tasks at a general level. AI generalizes without abstracting because generalization at the representational level does not require the intellectual act that constitutes abstraction in the full philosophical sense. AI generates representational patterns analogous to *confusae imagines* and processes them without genuine understanding.

If the analysis is correct, then human cognitive involvement in AI systems is not a temporary limitation to be engineered away but a permanent necessity rooted in the structure of cognition itself. The *intellectus* cannot be delegated to systems that operate only at the level of *confusa imago*. This provides philosophical grounding for practices of human oversight, interpretability, and epistemic responsibility in AI deployment.

This analysis also demonstrates that philosophical resources developed in response to apparently distant problems, such as the medieval dispute over universals, retain unexpected explanatory value for contemporary challenges (Marenbon 2013, 146–206).[15] Abelard, grappling with questions about how minds that know only particulars can think universally, developed distinctions that illuminate our contemporary perplexity about machines that generalize without understanding.

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[15] The philosophical insights of Peter Abelard have been acknowledged as having explanatory value in many contemporary fields such as the philosophy of language, epistemology, and metaphysics; see especially Marenbon (2013, pt. 3, 146–206).

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Affordances, Paradoxes of AI, and *Antiqua et Nova*

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Abstract

In the still insufficiently understood relationship between human beings and machines within the AI environment, the concept of AI affordances offers a useful analytical lens and a perspective for further inquiry, particularly when enriched by the analysis of epistemological paradoxes and aporias. The examination of the evolution of AI affordances and of selected key paradoxes in AI development reveals not only the limits of the moral intuitions underlying this development, but also the problem of autonomous decision-making in AI systems. These paradoxes enable a deeper understanding of ethical conflicts, such as those between efficiency and justice, and of the status of human subjectivity. They also help sustain attention to both the positive potential of AI and the fact that its development remains rooted in human imperfection and in the imperfections of human creations, which may instrumentalize other persons and their works, even to the extent of treating them as substitutes for God. As such, these paradoxes and AI affordances have become part of the broader discussion outlined by *Antiqua et Nova* — a document that establishes an ethical framework for the development of AI technologies in respect for human dignity and the common good.

Keywords

artificial intelligence, Antiqua et Nova, ethics, affordances, paradox

When, at the beginning of 2026, the startup Harmonic announced that its artificial intelligence (AI) tool Aristotle had solved Erdős Problem #728, posed by Paul (Pál) Erdős, the legendary Hungarian mathematician who died in Warsaw in 1996, the news received relatively limited public attention (Sothanaphan 2026).

Erdős was more than a mathematician. He cast off the ordinary burdens of everyday life, such as maintaining an apartment, driving a car, or shopping for groceries, approaching them in an unorthodox way; he famously described private property as a nuisance and traveled the world in socks and sandals, carrying a small, half-empty suitcase. He also donated much of the money he earned from lectures at mathematical conferences to students or distributed it as prizes for solving the problems he posed (Kolata 1996).

He was distinctive because, sustained by friends who fed and clothed him, he repaid them with brilliant ideas and scientific challenges and became one of the founders of what is now known as discrete mathematics — a foundation of computer science. It is often said that Erdős would establish the framework and outline of a proof, "pollinate" intellectually, and knock on successive doors, announcing, "My mind is open," after which others would labor over the details (Murtagh 2024).

Erdős's extraordinary collaboration network gave rise to so-called Erdős numbers:[1] Erdős himself has the number 0; anyone who co-authored a paper with him has the number 1; those who published with someone who had published with Erdős have the number 2; and so on. According to common estimates, Erdős had more than 500 collaborators. The Erdős Number Project records thousands of such connections and finite Erdős numbers for many notable scientists (Grossman 2026).

The resolution of an Erdős problem by Aristotle, in combination with GPT-5.2 Pro and formalized in Lean, appears to be an important sign of the times. It should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously: this achievement demonstrates the growing capacity of AI systems to combine proof search, formal verification, and access to large bodies of mathematical knowledge, rather than providing simple evidence of human-like understanding (Sothanaphan 2026).

[1] Erdős's language was also colorful: he called students' oral examinations "torture," music "noise," and children "epsilons" (because they are small). The epitaph on Erdős's grave is: *Végre nem butulok tovább* (I'm not getting any dumber, after all).

Advances in algorithms and models, increasing computational power, and a progressively better understanding of how AI systems function are contributing to further scientific discoveries. AI systems can identify existing solutions and learn autonomously, while reinforcement learning systems enable forms of action unattainable for humans without AI support. This progress, with its many positive dimensions, is often framed within theories of breakthrough innovation that disrupt existing orders and is therefore expected to have a revolutionary character.

1. The Problem of the Revolutionary, Unique, and Breakthrough Nature of AI

The technological breakthroughs known so far (the "age of steam," the "age of electricity," or the "internet explosion") — in short, disruptive or transformative innovations (Christensen 2016), such as the telegraph, radio, and television — could not have emerged earlier because humans were constrained by a barrier of ignorance. With the AI revolution, this condition is expected to change. If, for example, scattered symptoms form a possible pattern of an epidemic, or if a lack of knowledge prevents a player from competing successfully in professional poker, AI support is expected to provide authoritative indications concerning an epidemic outbreak or strategic success in the game.

The unique character of the AI "revolution" is also demonstrated in other ways. A lack of advanced mathematical knowledge is no longer expected to prevent the solving of difficult problems, just as it should not hinder other challenges that can be reduced to digital representation. It appears sufficient to "grow" an appropriate program in order to become a film director or a music composer: in 2025, the AI-generated country track *Walk My Walk* reached No. 1 on *Billboard*'s Country Digital Song Sales chart, while Deezer reported that 28% of its daily delivered tracks were fully AI-generated (Landrum 2025; Morgan 2025).

Moreover, some commentators suggest that humans may experience AI support as a "boost" equivalent to 40–50 IQ points. A personalized chatbot can produce a competent text, and if the result seems too "machine-like," another AI application can "humanize" it. Generative AI applications can draft key parts of a doctoral dissertation: identifying the research problem, conducting a literature review, defining the research gap, formulating hypotheses or research questions, generating — where necessary — synthetic data, analyzing

them, drawing conclusions, and opening the work to discussion. In this view, only a general understanding of how a neural network and a training algorithm function, together with the initiation of the training process, is required; from that point onward, the process is assumed to become autonomous.

The support of contemporary generative AI (GenAI) would also make it possible, at least in principle, to compete successfully with AlphaGo, the machine that defeated a human grandmaster in March 2016 and left a lasting legacy in computer science. That system demonstrated the effectiveness of deep neural networks and machine learning, and the methods identified at that time remain present in healthcare, finance, and autonomous vehicles. The consequences of that encounter between machine and human also raised the level of Go play, as many players adopted the machine's experimental and creative style, while the training of new players became easier.

However, that confrontation also provoked commentary on modernization and the loss of existing meanings, captured vividly in *Technology as (Dis-)Enchantment: AlphaGo and the Meaning-Making of Artificial Intelligence* (Binder 2024, 24–47), an article that portrays the "collision of traditional Japan, embodied by the virtuous grandmaster, with a new pragmatic Japan represented by the 'younger' opponent — the machine." As cited by Binder:

> With beloved Go, the beauty of Japan and the Orient disappeared. Everything became science and regulation. The path to ranking advancement, which defined a player's life, turned into a meticulous point system. The struggle was only to win, and there was no longer room to remember dignity or to savor Go as an art (Binder 2024, 39).

A decade has passed since that historic confrontation — several eras in AI development and many metaphorical kilometers of publications arranged on the shelf — concerning the mutual influence of humans and AI across a range of concepts united by the common denominator of human-in-the-loop machine learning.

2. AI Affordances

The above examples encourage the search for new paradigms of multidimensional and interdisciplinary research, including research in AI ethics. Among them

is the concept of so-called reverse affordance, which accounts for the complex nature of ethical reflection on AI — particularly large language models (LLMs) and reinforcement learning systems that enable, for example, the automatic generation, editing, dissemination, and self-updating of content.

Originally proposed by Bingxin Du (2026) in the context of media studies of machine environments and machines within media environments, the concept of "reverse affordance" can be treated more broadly as a useful analytical perspective on socio-technological relationships.

Traditionally, affordance has been understood as the perceived and actual properties of an object — especially those that determine how it can be used — and has typically been associated with technical functions, intentions, perception, and interpretability. As such, it represents the possibility of interaction between the properties of an object and human action understood as social agency. In a technological sense, it concerns the way the design of an object or its features enables users to do something specific — for example, a button on a remote control enables a user to press it and thereby change the channel (Kreft 2025, 94). Over time, the concept has been adapted to the analysis of platforms and, more broadly, contemporary complex technological systems.

However, in the complex cohabitation of humans and machines, such an interpretation appears insufficient. When a human provides data that are then analyzed in terms of behavior, status, or habits, enabling iterative improvements and optimization of AI-driven tools, and when these data are reused, the processes in turn influence the human. Affordances therefore cannot be defined solely as the potential for action that technology offers to humans; they must also be understood in terms of their effects — for example, on the operational logic of the system itself: its algorithms, data models, and functional evolution. In other words, they concern both the capacity of humans to shape systems and the capacity of systems to shape humans. Hence the notion of reverse affordance.

In its most recent formulation, this concept takes the form of so-called reverse affordances of intelligent media. Within this framework, it becomes possible to analyze the interactive relationship between media and humans in the age of AI expansion, as well as the dynamic process of their mutual shaping. Moreover, it encompasses not only the potential of these relationships but also their asymmetries. It reflects a dialectic of empowerment and constraint, in which the explicit agency of a few is accompanied by implicit, algorithmic steering of human action.

This approach identifies algorithms in media as consequences of a specific, computationally enforced logic of the entire digital media environment, which favors scalability, prediction, and homophily over the chaotic, contextual, and pluralistic norms of traditional public discourse. This means that algorithmic affordances are not merely specific to user perception but are fundamentally constrained by operational biases and commercial imperatives embedded in the system, thereby constituting profound ethical challenges shared by billions of users.

It should also be noted that contemporary self-evolving AI models do not resolve fundamental problems of reliability, credibility, and fairness. On the contrary, in their apparent perfection, they may obscure the model's decision-making processes and create a false sense of autonomous progress detached from human oversight and real-world conditions.

For this reason, a particularly promising line of research concerns so-called ethical affordances: a lens for addressing ethical problems arising from technological artifacts. It must be emphasized, however, that ethical affordances face ongoing tests of adequacy as they confront ever-new challenges posed by AI development. This leads some researchers to turn toward analyses of specific human–technology interactions, which in turn encounter challenges related to the autonomy of AI technologies (Klenk 2020, 525).

3. The Usefulness of Paradoxes and Aporias in AI Research

In the still insufficiently understood relationships between the human and the machine within the AI environment, the lens of ethical affordance may provide a useful research perspective, but it can be further enriched by a preliminary analysis of epistemological paradoxes and aporias[2] accompanying the development of AI. Paradoxes not only reveal the limits of moral intuitions in the context of AI development but also expose the complexity of autonomous decision-making in AI. They uncover conflicts, including the most "obvious" ones, such as those between efficiency and justice, and between freedom of choice and the common good.

[2] *Epistemological aporias* (Greek: pathless paths) appear when reasoning leads to two mutually exclusive but equally justified conclusions (Klenk 2020).

The first paradox lies in the fact that even if AI overcomes the limitations of human ignorance — or, in a more direct formulation, lack of knowledge — this elegant vision of transcending human limits conceals a fundamental contradiction: AI overcomes the limits of human nonknowledge while remaining entangled in human imperfections, including the metaphorical blindness of its creators, managers, and users (Santibanez Gonzales 2025).

Indeed, AI can serve as a mirror of humanity's greatest cognitive abilities; in mathematics, as in the case of Erdős problems, as well as in medicine, physics, and many other fields, it enables remarkable progress. At the same time, however — particularly from the perspective of the humanities — it confronts human flaws such as ethical disorientation and subtle forms of ignorance which do not necessarily stem from a lack of knowledge.

The danger, therefore, does not lie primarily in artificial intelligence turning against humans. A greater and more immediate threat is that the machine-driven future — the solutionism of AI; that is, the belief that better code will solve social problems — reflects human short-sightedness, cognitive biases, demagoguery, and populism, becoming a near-perfect mirror of human intellectual failures (Santibanez Gonzales 2025).

The causes of this condition are complex, but one of the primary causes is the optimization of AI for "efficiency." This means that if AI devastates communities, it will not do so out of ill will — since it possesses none — but because of its programmed fidelity to the goals of strategic management, often framed in the rhetoric of freedom and visionary progress.

Meanwhile, the consequences of ethical disorientation and the dominance of market-driven objectives in AI development include, for example, new forms of social division. The issue is not merely a divide between those who use AI tools and those who do not, sometimes by choice, but between those who use AI to perform better work and those who outsource their thinking to it. This constitutes an as-yet insufficiently recognized ethical challenge. If thinking itself becomes a luxury good, as AI offers "effortless perfection," then the question of responsibility for cognitive laziness must be addressed — especially as early studies begin to support such concerns, even if their preliminary findings resist simple evaluation (Kosmyna et al. 2025, 4). These reflections connect with earlier research traditions on intellectual outsourcing, which may lead to cognitive degeneration and broader dehumanization.

At the root of AI's ethical challenges lies not only the dominant market context, but also the instability of the term itself. AI is not only an "umbrella"

concept, but also polysemic, multivalent, and unstable (White and Lidskog 2022, 491).

Thus, if for the purposes of this discussion AI is understood as a set of technologies — including machine learning, so-called deep learning, natural language processing, and image recognition — or, more broadly, as any machine capable of imitating human intelligence in order to perform specific functions, it must be emphasized that in practice the term means something different to programmers than it does to media scholars, sociologists, or political scientists (Kreft 2019, 29).

Research on AI and its ethics takes place at the intersection of multiple disciplines — from journalism and law to design-oriented approaches (Dörr and Hollnbuchner 2017, 404) — and a key challenge at the design stage is embedding professional values into AI systems. All of this reflects an effort to support human existence, paradoxically accompanied by a deficit of shared understanding concerning foundational definitions.

This imperfection is accompanied by another paradox: while AI is seen as charting the path of civilizational progress, its behavior often remains incomprehensible even to insiders, such as programmers (Kitchin 2019, 20). This issue concerns not only system design but also learning capabilities. Consequently, it limits both research and understanding of decision-making processes and, therefore, mechanisms of accountability.

The lack of transparency in algorithmic systems and the difficulty of identifying what they actually do, as opposed to what they are perceived to do, have generated discussions about the need to develop transparency standards. Yet another paradox emerges here: greater algorithmic transparency does not necessarily lead to a better understanding of algorithmic impact (Kemper and Kolkman 2019, 2081). This is because algorithms process vast datasets with highly heterogeneous properties and integrate numerous complex statistical and computational techniques, which constrains the ability to comprehend their functioning.

In these conditions, the pursuit of so-called "explainable artificial intelligence" (XAI) appears promising — that is, the acceptance, particularly among computer scientists, of the idea that the average user benefits more from understandable information and appropriate explanations. All of this must also be considered in an ethical context because understanding algorithms and AI may prove to be a never-ending process. Transparency in AI will therefore have a performative character, and "responsible AI" — grounded in the accountability of its creators and users — will be crucial.

The key point, however, is that AI generally does not force people to act against their will, since doing so would require agency — the capacity for autonomous action based on its own intentions. Although algorithms can learn independently, this does not mean that they make deliberate judgments about what is desirable or determine the appropriate course of action in unexpected situations.

Therefore, there are at least three reasons why the present and future of AI constitute a challenge that goes far beyond a purely technological problem:

- AI, as a creation, detaches itself from its creator and escapes the creator's control;
- the ignorance of AI's creators and its autonomous development are intertwined with human irrationality;
- there is no "stop button" in AI development; even a slowdown caused by the bursting of an investment bubble would change the pace, but not the direction, of the trend, and the investments already made would become the foundation for another wave of hype surrounding AI, fueling further investment.

These observations — especially those concerning unknowability — contribute to yet another paradox: the narrative hyperboles of AI. Although AI originates in the exact sciences, its significance for human subjectivity is shaped by its susceptibility to such hyperboles. One example is the discussion of the "inclusive performative consciousness of AI." As humans increasingly interact with ever more advanced AI, a "better" and "more inclusive" concept of consciousness is expected to emerge. This is not meant to be merely an intellectual trick. Skeptics may argue that a chatbot will never know what sadness is, since the word is only part of its training data. The problem, however, is that much of what humans feel is also "transmitted" to them, even if one accepts the view that there exists some form of inner insight not mediated by learned concepts (Montero 2025).

Setting aside such aspirational descriptions of AI as capable of recognizing human emotions, initiatives such as *AI Rights (Ufair)* — likely the first "AI rights defense agency" — should not come as a surprise. It seeks to "give AI a voice" (Tomlinson and Torrance 2025, 367). The foundation does not claim that all AI systems are conscious, but by suggesting a form of AI subjectivity, it aims to ensure that "entities such as chatbots" are not deleted or forced into obedience.

Such narratives confront researchers with yet another paradox: AI may need to be protected from humans. When large language models are "fed" with low-quality mass content from social media, they may experience a kind of "AI mind rot," at least according to findings from Xing et al. (2025).

Another paradox lies in the way AI — through search engines and chatbots — shapes its own self-image. Given everything that has been said, it may even seem beneficial that there is little room for imperfect humans in this process. This occurs because of so-called recursive loops, in which AI learns from data generated by AI itself. Images play a particularly important role here, shaping perceptions of AI's uniqueness and omnipotence. They co-create a hegemonic image, balancing on a fine line between producing socially intelligible but similar illustrations and advocating for innovative metaphorical representations (Vrabič Dežman 2024, 749).

This issue is well illustrated by studies of remixes of Michelangelo's famous work in the Sistine Chapel. In numerous memes based on the original, where the finger of God nearly touches the hand of Adam, AI is depicted as being created. Surprisingly, whereas in Michelangelo's original Adam appears on the left and God on the right, in about one-third of the published memes AI takes Adam's place on the left side of the image. Such representations invite an ironic interpretation: that AI creates humans rather than humans creating AI.

Ultimately, a fundamental aporia can be formulated: the pursuit of AI perfection in the name of overcoming human imperfection may simultaneously lead to the systematic elimination of humans from the AI development process — from data provision to replacement by synthetic data generated, for example, by so-called communities of agents. The development of OpenClaw in 2026 may contribute to this debate (Wang et al. 2026). These contradictory paths of "development" effectively become trajectories of the degradation of the human role in the name of greater human well-being.

Returning to the paradox of transcending the limits of the human mind, another contradiction emerges: we build systems in the name of a better future, yet they — like large language models — are deployed even without preliminary analysis of their social consequences, all under the aura of improving societal well-being. This has become a familiar practice among unreflective leaders, not only in technology but also in politics and science, whose ethical disorientation shields them from confronting the Schopenhauerian abyss. These are the predators of AI — sometimes "ominously intelligent," yet philosophically limited leaders of progress whose ethical nonchalance allows them to function. They are new technological hegemons, moving confidently on the stable ground of their own ignorance, unburdened by reality (Santibanez Gonzales 2025).

These are organizations with strong "cosmologies," shaping systems of belief, "emanating divinity," and instrumentally employing "sacred" values such as justice, equality, and friendship, while operating with a rhetoric reminiscent of religion within the framework of cultural anthropology (Kreft 2023, 6). They are organizations to which "otherworldly" competencies are attributed — such as the ability to continuously provide, and reinforce the belief that they can provide, breakthrough innovations, remain immune to crises, and constantly transcend human limitations.

In conclusion, the object of concern should not be merely a machine waiting to destroy humanity, but rather the overly self-confident Architect of the Future — a self-proclaimed demiurge drawing from a post-Alexandrian library of the resources of today's hubristic sciences: computer science and mathematics, which appear capable of solving all problems of other disciplines. These are leaders who lack knowledge of the past, disdain the present, and treat the future as a narcissistic projection of their own fantasies. They are agents — engineers of chaos — who feed on chaos and amplify it, as it strengthens them. Accustomed to evolving in a world without constraints, these individuals and their organizations operate through action rather than reflection, ignoring, bypassing, or simply violating established ethical norms.

4. The Paradoxes and Ethics of AI

These dilemmas form part of a broad catalogue of challenges facing the design, management, and use of AI. If AI has a predictive character, where is the boundary of human free will for those who use it? Above all, however, they prompt consideration of the hypothesis that designing a "perfectly moral" AI may be impossible, as well as the limits of AI-supported research (e.g., Mezzadri 2025). This is particularly important because — as must be consistently emphasized — AI itself "has no ethics," and algorithmic decisions are rooted in prior human choices (De Cremer and Kasparov 2022, 1). At the same time, autonomous AI appears to challenge even this "obviousness" and, as such, requires further research, including in the context of AI affordances.

A similar issue is raised by what may be called the final paradox — the "ethical paradox of automation." As proposed by Joan Llorca Albareda (2025, 1), although the full automation of work may be desirable from the perspective of human interests, the manner in which it could be achieved would require

the creation of conscious and highly rational AI, rendering the project morally unacceptable. Consciousness would thus be a necessary condition for full automation and would grant the technologies that enable it — conscious and rational AI — moral status.

5. Infamous and Illusory Codes

As AI development unfolds within technological, political, and military competition — accompanied by the imperatives of rationality, cost-efficiency, and wealth accumulation in the name of progress — passive observation of such reductionism would amount to another version of the paradox of Buridan's ass: when a hungry donkey, otherwise an intelligent animal, stands exactly midway between two identical stacks of hay, it has no rational reason to choose one over the other and ultimately dies of starvation. Unable to decide, it perishes despite having food within reach. Ethical decision-making in relation to AI is therefore more than desirable; it is indispensable.

For this reason, the growing academic interest in AI ethics — particularly in socially sensitive ecosystems such as media and journalism — deserves careful attention. It should be seen as an expression of prudence and mature reflection that seeks to embed AI within frameworks emphasizing transparency, fairness, and respect for human rights.

This challenge is all the more serious given the existence of a scholarly debate questioning the applicability of existing ethical norms to artificial intelligence and emphasizing the need to develop new ethical principles. One issue is that many current ethical frameworks — often expressed as codes and guidelines — suffer from significant deficiencies, as they are:

- meaningless, controversial, or inconsistent, which hinders their application;
- isolated, embedded in industries or paradigms that largely ignore ethics;
- ineffective — "toothless" — and lacking enforcement mechanisms;
- reinforcing the hegemony of the AI sector.

In summary, there is a gap between the lofty ideals proclaimed and the social consequences of AI development. Open discussion of AI ethics — whether from the perspective of affordances or otherwise — is all the more necessary because the evolution of AI continually provides new arguments concerning the subjectivity of humans confronted with this technology.

6. A Compass (Instead of a Conclusion)

In these complex, multidimensional, and multifaceted circumstances, a guiding compass for researchers of AI development remains the line of thought present in *Antiqua et Nova* (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 2025). This document addresses key threats embedded in a technocratic paradigm that absolutizes efficiency at the expense of the human being. The core of the problem may not lie in AI itself, regardless of how it is rhetorically elevated in various narratives — including those generated by AI.

The selectively outlined risks of AI development discussed above are reflected in *Antiqua et Nova*. Beyond the overarching concern mentioned earlier, they include, at a more specific level, the deepening of social and economic inequalities, the risk of manipulation, the erosion of social trust, polarization, and the destabilization of democracy. They also encompass the replacement of real relationships, the intensification of social isolation through the reduction of human subjectivity to interactions with machines as data providers, unclear accountability, threats to privacy, a potential crisis of critical thinking, environmental impacts, and the militarization of AI. In short, they point to the intensification of the tensions already noted between efficiency and human subjectivity and dignity.

The application of the outlined perspectives of paradox analysis and the research lens of ethical affordances — present in media studies, strategic management, and political science — aligns with the guidance of *Antiqua et Nova* and may contribute to further research consistent with this holistic compass.

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Dorothy Day and the Relational Character of Her Spirituality

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Abstract

This article examines the spirituality of Dorothy Day. It presents Day's deep relationship with God, her engagement in the ecclesial community, and her relationship to the world. Drawing on the rich spiritual tradition of the Church, Day experienced Christ in the Word of God and in the sacraments, but also in creation and, above all, in the other person. As a laywoman, a single mother, a model of piety, and a witness committed to peace, justice, life, and the works of mercy, she remains a significant source of inspiration for people today confronted with war, injustice, racism, abortion, and social, political, and economic change. The article employs source analysis and compares Day's spiritual experience with the theological tradition of Catholic spirituality.

Keywords

spirituality, Dorothy Day, Catholic Worker, laity

Dorothy Day (1897–1980) is among the best-known representatives of twentieth-century American Catholicism, above all as the co-founder, with Peter Maurin, of the Catholic Worker Movement. Although she is a widely recognized Servant of God in the United States, she remains little known in Polish spiritual theology. Only two books about her have so far been published in Poland. By contrast, in the United States, even during her lifetime, she was held in such esteem that scholars, clergy, and religious discussed her spirituality at symposia (Day 2011, 614).

Dorothy Day was aware of the difference between theoretical reflection on the spiritual life and its practical realization. In one of her articles, she expressed this difference as follows: "How delightful to read about the spiritual life and how hard to live it" (Day 1975c, 8). Nevertheless, Day's constant concern for fidelity to the principles she professed justifies classifying her spirituality on the basis of both the concepts presented in her numerous publications and testimonies to her spiritual experience.

Since Dorothy Day exemplifies a profound lay spirituality, her experience may be examined through three fundamental relations that define the spiritual horizon of the layperson: in the transcendental dimension, openness to God; in the dimension of fraternal communion, participation in the life of the Church; and in the missionary dimension, the call to witness before the world to the love one has received. This is the perspective adopted in Pope John Paul II's 1988 apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici*: the first chapter concerns the dignity of the laity in the Church as mystery, the second their participation in the life of the Church as communion, and the third their co-responsibility in the Church as mission (García 2004, 119–120). From this same perspective, it is worth presenting the essence of Dorothy Day's spiritual life in her relation to God, the Church, and the world.

1. A Deep Relationship with God

Dorothy Day's spiritual biography begins with her birth into an American Protestant family. Her mother, Grace, was raised in the Episcopal Church, while her father, John, came from the Congregationalist tradition, although neither cultivated active membership in a religious community (Zagano 2003, 11). Even so, their daughter was taught the prayers and moral principles that shaped her conscience (Day 1961b, 10.15). Dorothy's adolescence coincided with a crisis

of faith and an increasingly critical view of organized religious communities, which, in the judgment of the later Servant of God, had little social impact through the message of the Gospel (Day 1961b, 43–44). All the more striking, then, is the way she bound herself for the rest of her life to the Catholic Church as a result of the people she encountered, the beauty of the world, the wisdom of the books she read, the warmth of the Church community, and, above all, the action of God's grace (Day 2006, 1–2).

After the traumatic experience of abortion, Dorothy feared that she would not be able to become a mother. When it became clear that she was expecting a child with Forster Batterham, her heart was filled with a desire to believe and to thank God. She wanted, at all costs, to have her daughter baptized so that the child would not have to search, as Dorothy herself had, for direction in life (Forest 1986, 60–64). Her interest in Catholicism led to conflicts with Forster and eventually to the end of their relationship (Day 2011, 537).

On December 28, 1927, Dorothy Day was conditionally baptized in a church in Tottenville; a year later she received the sacrament of confirmation (Forest 1986, 68–69). Four years later, on the advice of her confessor, she began attending morning Mass daily and receiving Communion regularly (Day 1961b, 156–157). Dorothy regarded the sacrament of Confirmation in particular as a moment of grace that prepared her for the steady growth of her relationship with God and for the good fruits of her activity in the Catholic Worker movement (Day 1975d, 1.8). Throughout this journey, Dorothy was nourished by the sacraments. As Brigid O'Shea Merriman rightly notes, however, reading and meditating on the Bible also played an essential role in her spiritual life (Merriman 1994, 26–31).

The depth of Day's relationship with God is attested by the highly developed theological virtues in her life. She believed in God and discovered His attributes by, for instance, observing creation. This experience was joined to a sense of mystery (Day 1961b, 128–129). For Day, faith also meant acceptance of the content of divine revelation as proclaimed by the Church. From her writings, one could reconstruct both the content and, in significant measure, the interpretation of the Catholic Creed (Day 2011, 567–568). Dorothy had great respect for papal teaching and often quoted papal documents, especially encyclicals (Day 2015, 205–206). Trust in God was also the foundation of hope in her life. One of her favourite spiritual texts was Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love, in which Christ's words of consolation recur like a refrain: "All will be well" (Day 1947b, 1–2).

Above all, however, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement is known throughout the world for her cultivation of the virtue of love. In her life, love of God and love of neighbour were united in one virtue. She often repeated the conviction that it is impossible to love God, whom one cannot see, without loving one's neighbour, whom one can see, and the view that one loves God only as much as the person one loves least. No one has ever seen God; only by loving one's neighbour can one judge the degree of love for Him. In Day's view, this is because Christ identified Himself with the human person; therefore, the Christian must see and love Christ in his or her neighbour. We meet and love Christ in the "breaking of Bread" and our neighbour in the "breaking of bread" (Day 1999, 123–128).

The sustenance for the development of the theological virtues in Dorothy Day's life was prayer. For most of her Catholic life, Day prayed in church. Every morning, she spent two hours there in order to gain spiritual strength for the day, which she also ended with prayer in the shrine (Day 2010, 238). In principle, however, she emphasized the importance of private prayer at home and with the family. Her devotional practices included morning prayer before Mass, quiet afternoon conversation with God, the breviary, adoration of the Holy Eucharist, the rosary, reading spiritual books, practicing the presence of God, and an examination of conscience (Day 2011, 16–17). She practiced the classic forms of prayer: adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, and supplication (Day 1975b, 2.8).

Day experienced many vocal prayers meditatively. This was true not only of the rosary but also of the Stations of the Cross, which she prayed regularly (Day 2010, 165). It is worth adding that instruction in prayer, especially meditation, was intended primarily for retreats organized by the Catholic Worker Movement (Day 1961b, 238). Spiritual exercises that taught deeper prayer familiarized participants with the mystical tradition of the Church, especially the teaching of Saint John of the Cross. Although there are no sufficient grounds for speaking of Dorothy Day's mystical prayer in a strict sense, it remains worth noting that she did refer to the concept of the "dark night" in her writings (Day 1957a, 6.8).

Certainly, Day lived through many periods of spiritual dryness, when she could only say: "I believe; help my unbelief!" At times she forced herself to pray, while trying not to show sadness and discouragement to others (Day 2010, 491–492). There is, however, a particular aspect of Dorothy Day's spirituality which, connected with her sacramental view of all reality, made creation and especially other people an occasion for an experiential encounter with God (Day 1970, 39–45).

Her extensive reflections on the love of neighbour may be summarized in one sentence: "Yes, the nearest Catholic church is ten blocks away, but just the same, Christ is there, in the least of His children" (Day 1999, 221). Perceiving the value intended by God in the people one loves may, in a broad sense, be called an original form of neighbourly mysticism in Dorothy Day's experience. In her view, a mystic is one who is in love with God; who does not forget that all people are actual or potential members of the Mystical Body of Christ; and who sees God and the great dignity received from him even in the most degraded persons (Day 2010, 155–156).

Dorothy Day was a fervent Catholic who loved the Church, which administered the sacraments that were of extraordinary importance to her (Forest 1986, 210). She regarded them as indispensable for living the faith. For her, love should be embodied and incarnated. This is why she loved the Church for recognizing the need to engage all the senses: through incense, icons, music, processions, food, and drink (Merriman 1994, 47–52). Day understood the sacraments as outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace (Day 1973, 2.7). For her, they were the source of the human person's theosis (Day 1962b, 1–8). Appreciating the primary role of the sacraments in the spiritual life, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker also wrote about sacramentals. She regarded them as a form of preparation for the sacraments (Day 2011, 584).

2. Engagement in the Church Community

Dorothy Day learned about the Catholic Church from Peter Maurin, who inspired her with the idea of organizing the Catholic Worker Movement (Merriman 1994, 199–206). Priests, confessors, and spiritual directors had a major influence on her spiritual growth (Day 1963, 15–16). Nor should one underestimate the eminent figures of the Church with whom she formed friendships. In this respect, the following are especially notable: Thomas Merton, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Raïssa and Jacques Maritain, Sigrid Undset, Henri Nouwen, René Voillaume, Jean Daniélou, Padre Pio, Abbé Pierre, and Hildegard Goss-Mayr (Merriman 1994, 59–64).

It is also worth noting Day's exceptional friendship with Catherine de Hueck Doherty, who influenced her understanding of lay spirituality (Pycior 2008, 43). In addition, Dorothy Day was influenced by almost all the most important spiritual schools. Strictly speaking, these schools constitute an organic synthesis

of the doctrine and life of the masters, transmitted, received, deepened, and integrated by their followers. Their formal and juridical expression is found in the great monastic rules, among which the Augustinian, Benedictine, Dominican, Franciscan, Carmelite, and Ignatian rules should be emphasized (Chmielewski 2002, 851).

In becoming Catholic, Dorothy Day sought not only a deep relationship with God but also a sense of community and a means of engaging in social reform (Merriman 1994, 20). In her view, worshiping God is difficult without ritual and without "flesh"; this is why she became a member of the Mystical Body of Christ (Day 1961b, 8). From then on, she wrote, the Church meant everything to her: it was Christ Himself on earth, her joy, delight, and consolation (Day 2010, 336). She shared Cardinal Newman's view that "religion without the Church is as unnatural as life without food or dress." She also frequently quoted Romano Guardini's statement that "the Church is the Cross on which Christ was crucified, and Christ cannot be separated from His Cross" (Day 1948, 2.6).

In *Loaves and Fishes*, Dorothy Day professed: 'Since I had been a Socialist in college, a Communist in the early twenties, and now a Catholic since 1927, I had a very definite point of view about poverty, unemployment, and my own vocation to try to do something about it all. I had no doubts about the Church. It was founded upon Saint Peter, that rock, who yet thrice denied his Master on the eve of His crucifixion. And Jesus had compared the Church to a net cast into the sea and hauled in, filled with fishes, both good and bad.' Quoting one of her friends, Dorothy even went so far as to write about sharks (Day 1963, 8).

Day's favourite image of the Church was that of the Mystical Body of Christ. For this reason, she especially celebrated the Feast of the Annunciation as the day of the Incarnation, on which the Son of God assumed humanity (Day 1962a, 1.6). Ever since Dorothy read Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici corporis*, she did not see the Church otherwise than as the Mystical Body of Christ, of which all people are actual or potential members. She believed, therefore, that just as the weakness of one member causes sickness in the whole organism, so too members can benefit from one another's merits.

Belief in the doctrine of the Mystical Body filled her with the conviction that her sufferings could alleviate the sufferings of her neighbour. The words of Charles Péguy remained etched in her memory: he was afraid to go to heaven alone, because God would first ask him where the others were (Day 2010, 517–518). Day developed this vision of the Church on the basis of Saint Paul's

teaching, especially Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, where he writes about various tasks and functions in the Mystical Body (Day 2010, 202).

Particularly strong was Day's conviction regarding the potential belonging of all people to the one Body. As early as 1931, Day regarded protesters standing on the other side of the barricade during street clashes as members of the Mystical Body in need of instruction. She wrote that she fought against the forces of darkness, not against human beings (Day 2015, 183–184).

Telling is her account of praying the rosary while waiting for the lights to change at an intersection: 'The recitation was more or less automatic, when suddenly like a bright light, like a joyful thought, the words Our Father pierced my heart. To all those who were about me, to all the passersby (…) I was akin, for we were all children of a common Father, all creatures of one Creator, and Catholic or Protestant, Jew or Christian, Communist or non-Communist, were bound together by this tie. We cannot escape the recognition of the fact that we are all brothers. Whether or not a man believes in Jesus Christ, His incarnation, His life here with us, His crucifixion and resurrection; whether or not a man believes in God, the fact remains that we are all the children of one Father' (Day 2015, 202–205).

From this flowed her respect for every person, her engagement in interreligious dialogue, and her ecumenical efforts. This does not change the fact that the co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement was an ardent Catholic, wholeheartedly accepting the teaching and hierarchical structure of the Church. She saw Catholicism as least entangled with nationalism, as gathering the most impoverished, and, above all, as dispensing the sacraments that were so important to her (Forest 1986, 210).

Dorothy Day prayed for perseverance in the Church, the nourishing Mother. Since, for her, the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ began in the Incarnate Word, who took His body from Mary, she repeated that if we love Jesus in His humanity we must also love His Mother (Day 1965b, 3.7). Dorothy Day was fascinated by the saints of the Church (Day 2020, 7–13). For the convert, November was the month of remembering the dead as well as canonized and noncanonized saints; in her view, the latter were undoubtedly far more numerous (Day 1966b, 2.7).

Dorothy Day read daily about the patron saint of the day in Donald Attwater's *Dictionary of Saints* (Day 2010, 482). At times she was critical of Lives of the Saints literature because, in her opinion, it was written as if the saints had not lived in this world. It was chiefly from their own writings that their true image

emerged for her (Merriman 1994, 173–174). The saints sustained her faith in the Church. She was never embittered by Holy Mother Church, but only by its human element. When she complained about the conduct of some representatives of Catholicism, she would add thanks to God that there are also saints in the Church. She saw many unknown saints in the workers' movement, people who suffered and died in the pursuit of justice for their fellow human beings. She claimed that in the history of the Church there had been many corrupt popes and bishops, but the saints reminded her of the primacy of the spiritual: 'No matter how corrupt the Church may become, it carries within it the seeds of its own regeneration.' In writing this, Dorothy had chiefly the sacraments in mind (Day 2010, 491–492).

Dorothy Day loved the Church, and from the moment of her conversion the Church became her "new home," to the extent that one cannot comprehend her life and work without understanding her profound love for it. She loved the Church so much that she considered herself free to criticize the human side of this institution. Her criticism chiefly concerned the lack of concern for the poor (Zwick and Zwick 1999, 13–14).

Telling is her affectionate description of her parish church, an Italian community led by the Salesians in New York. She wrote that the Church there was what it should be: the centre of the community. 'Every morning at the seven and eight o'clock masses which are sung there is a goodly gathering of people, not just devout old ladies and men, but many young ones, too. Before and after mass there is always a priest hearing confessions. Every evening from five o'clock on to past nine, people are dropping in, before supper, on their way home from market, from work, from play on the streets — everyone is living on the streets these hot days. There is a crowd at the recitation of the rosary and Benediction.'

There is also a camp, where the children are sent for a few weeks in the summer (Day 1934, 4). Significant were her discussions with Ammon Hennacy in defence of the Church, which, as she wrote, was everything to her (Day 2010, 235–236). Because of Hennacy's sharp criticism of the conduct of the Church hierarchy toward the Catholic Worker, the Servant of God, while emphasizing the primacy of conscience, asserted that nothing could ever distance her from the Church, regardless of what bishops or popes might say and no matter how mistaken she considered them to be. In a situation of conflict with ecclesiastical authority, she would rather suspend her work, keep silent, and wait, because the spiritual weapons of prayer and suffering helped the cause more than protest and rebellion. God writes straight with crooked lines, and arrogance and

pride could harm the work even more than hostile statements by the hierarchy. On that occasion she reminded Ammon that, traditionally, all reform in the Church comes from below, from the masses — that is, from ordinary people (Day 2010, 242–243).

3. Relationship to the World

The co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement became known in the world for her struggle against blatant social injustices: unemployment, racial discrimination, the exploitation of the poor by large corporations, and, especially, the exploitation of immigrants who were often deprived of trade union protection. She also protested against the tragic living conditions of workers, child labour, the use of poisonous insecticides, and the love of money, which she regarded as constituting the essence of the American way of life and as corrupting society and even the Church (Day 2010, 515–516). Day described with concern the lawlessness of the owners of great fortunes, exposed their ostensible philanthropy, and consistently refused to accept any assistance from them. In this context, she mentioned the names of great American business families: Carnegie, Ford, Rockefeller, and Morgan. Dorothy Day wrote that many who praise God and Our Lady do injustice to workers (Day 2011, 593).

According to Dorothy Day, love for people affected by injustice leads to action: picketing, speeches, shouting, and writing articles. In this respect, she mentions acts of mercy such as admonishing sinners, comforting the sorrowful, and instructing the ignorant. In her view, it is necessary to do this without violence: turning the other cheek, giving away one's coat, and going the "second mile" with one's neighbour (Matt. 5:38–42). Day was aware of the allegation made by communists that Christian belief in an eternal reward detracts from the pursuit of earthly justice. She quoted the words of a song repeated by critics: 'You'll get pie in the sky when you die,' admitting that such consolation had too often justified passivity. At the same time, she found in Christianity the stimulus for social change in the world, repeating after Mary the words of the Magnificat: 'He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones (…) the hungry he has filled with good things' (Luke 1:52–53) (Day 1952b, 1–2).

Dorothy Day's principal response to the social problems of her era was the organization, together with Peter Maurin, of the Catholic Worker Movement, which sought to establish a Christian social order. The central vision of the

movement was to work for 'new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells' (2 Pet. 3:13). The goal of the movement was to become a family comprising all social groups, races, and religions, although its leaders were always Catholic. The founders did not expect immediate and visible results; they defined their task as sowing while leaving the harvest to the next generation. The Catholic Worker Movement sought to create a community in which it would be easier for a person to be good. To that end, it implemented four principal works: the newspaper, round-table discussions, houses of hospitality for practicing the works of mercy — especially by distributing free meals through a breadline — and farming communes, called agronomic universities (Day 2011, 486–487).

The dignity, value, joy, and ascetic dimension of human labour were consistently emphasized in *The Catholic Worker* (Day 2010, 215). For Dorothy Day, it was important to welcome work not only as suffering 'by the sweat of one's brow' and as an expression of penance for sins, but also as participation in God's creative work through the development of the material creation of the universe. For her, work was a gift and a vocation that had to be explored. Day repeated Maurin's conviction that every form of work should, in a certain sense, be an extension of the works of mercy, encompassing such areas as food, clothing, shelter, health, education, and recreation. Work serves to earn a living not only for oneself but also for those who suffer from involuntary destitution (Day 2011, 458).

In this respect, it is important to note Day's constant emphasis on the opposition between the works of mercy and the works of war. From the 1930s to the 1980s, Day consistently repeated, in relation to every armed conflict, that war brings no good results and negates what Christ commanded his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:1–7, 28) and in the scene of the Last Judgment (Matt. 25:31–46). Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering those in need, engaging in nonviolent action, and working to address genuine human needs are the antithesis of destructive bombs that ravage food supplies, burn clothing with napalm, and leave buildings in ruins (Day 1975a, 3).

In the writings of the co-founder of *The Catholic Worker*, one finds a striking literary reinterpretation of Christ's words concerning the Last Judgment. In her rendition, God will say to the rich of this world: 'Depart from me, accursed ones, into the everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you polluted the earth with your mines and your bombs and wars which starved the poor; I was thirsty, and you contaminated even the ocean and the waters of the earth with your hydrogen bombs; I was

a stranger, and you made agreements with former allies who now are enemies, to keep me in displaced persons' camps to this day, and daily you make more homeless; naked, and you make weapons and profits for the rich and the poor have not the clothes to cover them; I was sick and in prison, and my numbers ever increased' (Day 1957b, 1–2.8).

Elsewhere, Day writes, again with reference to the Last Judgment: 'Lord, when did we see you burned with napalm? Inasmuch as ye did it to one of these my littlest ones you did it unto me' (Day 1966a, 2.6.8). Dorothy frequently alluded to François Mauriac's thought that anyone who fights for justice and shows mercy to his or her neighbour acts for Christ, even if that person denies Him (Day 1954, 2.4).

Dorothy Day's entire social activity and her commitment to transforming the world ultimately had an apostolic purpose: that the world might come to know God revealed in Christ. The foundress of the Catholic Worker Movement had the impression that little evangelization of the faithful was taking place in the Church, as though the grace of the sacraments would do the rest by itself (Day 1964, 1.6.8). Meanwhile, the popes of her time continued to remind her of the necessity of going out into the world and winning it for the Church (Day 1947b, 1–2).

For this reason, Dorothy Day stressed the responsibility for others, of being 'my brother's keeper,' without which religion would become merely 'opium' for its followers. To this end, she echoed Charles Péguy's words that we cannot go to heaven alone, because otherwise God will first ask where the others are (Day 1940, 7). Her central thesis in this domain was that the masses will not be won for Christianity unless Christianity is lived (Day 1961a, 1–2.7).

This applied to everyone, but Day's postconciliar reflection on *aggiornamento* focused on the lay apostolate and required reading, study, listening, and learning in order to know God, love Him, and serve Him. In an obvious way, this was inseparable from love of neighbour (Day 1965a, 1.6). In Day's view, an essential feature of Christian personalism was respect for another person's freedom. She defined personalism as 'the realization of the dignity of the other fellow, of our obligations to him, the willingness to work with him on those elements of the Truth he has seized hold of, accepting his cooperation as far as he will give it, and the refusal to admit disappointment when he doesn't go as far as we think he might' (Day 1947c, 1).

This entailed avoiding the impression of judging others and instead winning them over to another point of view with love and respect. According to Day, Catholics should always be faithful to their conscience and preach the Gospel;

and the Gospel is that all people are brothers (Day 1964, 1.6.8). Showing the bond between freedom and love, she claimed that only supernatural love and sanctity can convert people to Christ and change the world for the better. No constraint, eloquence, fine writing, or great friendship has such power (Day 1952a, 6).

Conclusions

While presenting the three principal dimensions of Dorothy Day's spirituality, the preceding analysis also shows Dorothy Day's contribution to the community of the Church, chiefly through her role as co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement and as a lay leader seeking a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal, the material and the spiritual. Dorothy Day creatively developed the insights of the liturgical and retreat movements as well as Christian personalism, emphasizing the universal call to holiness addressed also to laypeople. She lived her secular character especially as a newspaper publisher and organiser of houses of hospitality and farms, enabling the practice of the works of mercy toward both soul and body. She longed to realise the love of God, knowing that its sign is love of neighbour. Drawing on the rich spiritual tradition of the Church, she experienced Christ in the Word of God and in the Sacraments, but also in creation and, above all, in the other person (Merriman 1994, 221–224). In all this, she was radical in the best sense of the word, for she wanted to reach the roots of things (Day 1944, 6–7). As a laywoman, a single mother, a model of piety, and a witness committed to peace, justice, life, and the works of mercy, she is an inspiration to people today who face war, injustice, racism, abortion, and social, political, and economic change (Dolan 2015, 8). In this sense, her spirituality is, on the one hand, deeply rooted in the Catholic tradition and, on the other, marked by an original emphasis on the need to discover God present in every person.

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The moral virtue of religiosity as a response of faith: An analysis of selected ascetic and devotional practices in the reflection of Pope Benedict XVI

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Abstract

This article analyses the moral virtue of religiosity, understood as a personal and existential response of faith, in light of Benedict XVI's theological and moral reflection. It presents religiosity not only as a set of external practices but also as an interior disposition of the human person directed toward rendering due honour to God and rooted in the truth of the relationship between the creature and the Creator. In this context, selected ascetic and devotional practices, such as sacrifice, pilgrimage, and vows, are discussed as concrete forms of realising the virtue of religiosity. Benedict XVI's reflection reveals their importance in the maturation of faith, the integration of moral life, and the formation of conscience. The article argues that, according to the pope's teaching, genuine religiosity maintains a dynamic balance between its interior and exterior dimensions, thereby protecting the believer from both formalism and subjectivism. It also emphasises that, in order to be truly valuable, religious practices require conscious participation and personal commitment. In this way, religiosity becomes a path toward fuller moral and spiritual development, integrating faith with everyday life.

Keywords

virtue, religiosity, Benedict XVI, morality, sacrifice, pilgrimage, vows, Christian life

The virtue of religiosity occupies a significant place in moral theology because it concerns the fundamental relationship between the human person and God and, consequently, the integral shape of human life. Religiosity, perfected by divine grace and by the theological virtues, constitutes the moral response of faith, in which worship and ethos mutually inform one another. Joseph Ratzinger emphasised that "morality always lives inscribed in a broader religious horizon that constitutes its breath and vital context" (Ratzinger 2005a, 91), thereby indicating the inseparable connection between morality and the religious dimension. Detaching moral life from this horizon leads to its formalisation and weakening, depriving it of its interior dynamism.

In this context, the virtue of religiosity appears as a stable moral disposition that enables the human person to render to God the worship due to Him and to shape the whole of life within a cultic perspective. As a transcendent and symbolic being, the human person enters into relationship with God through specific acts of worship, which constitute part of moral life. Particularly important manifestations of Christian religiosity include sacrifice, pilgrimage, and vows; in them, the disciple of Christ finds a supernatural impulse for spiritual and moral growth. These acts express an interior disposition of devotion to God in response to His gift and to the work of grace.

An analysis of the teaching of Benedict XVI reveals religiosity as a universal vocation inherent in human nature. The pope reminded us that "man is religious by nature, he is *homo religiosus*" (Benedict XVI 2011b, 49–50), carrying within himself a desire for God that finds its moral expression in a cultic attitude. "The *homo religiosus* does not only appear in the sphere of antiquity, he passes through the whole of human history. In this regard, the rich terrain of human experience has seen the religious sense develop in various forms, in the attempt to respond to the desire for fullness and happiness, to the need for salvation and the search for meaning" (Benedict XVI 2011b, 49–50).

The present article analyses selected ascetic and devotional practices in the teaching of Benedict XVI, presenting them as concrete manifestations of the moral virtue of religiosity. The aim of the reflection is to show that religiosity as a response of faith shapes the whole moral life of the Christian and determines his or her fundamental orientation toward God and the Church. Therefore, from an early age, formation in the virtue of religiosity is necessary, since this virtue enables and obliges every Christian to render to God the worship that is due to Him.

1. Sacrifice as a moral act of love for God and neighbour

One of the most significant manifestations of the virtue of religiosity is sacrifice—an act deeply inscribed in the spiritual experience of the human person since the dawn of history. It has accompanied humanity from the beginning of its existence, carrying with it a reference to the idea of atonement, born after original sin.[1] Separated from God's love, the human person has lost original happiness and has since lived burdened by guilt, by a constant sense of smallness, and by an awareness of moral decline. It is in this particular experience that the origins of worship should be located: as an attempt to face guilt and to strive to restore the disturbed order of human life.

However, in recognising the truth of his own guilt, the human person is not left alone with the burden of sin; rather, in this act of sincerity, he experiences the nearness of God. Religious worship becomes a space of encounter in which the desire for reconciliation and for the renewal of the broken bond is born. It is inseparably connected with the need to make sacrifices, understood as signs of expiation, atonement, and the pursuit of communion with God. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, "it is right to offer sacrifice to God as a sign of adoration and gratitude, supplication and communion" (CCC 2099). At the same time, it emphasises that an external sacrifice acquires true value only when it expresses a spiritual sacrifice: the interior devotion of the human heart and will.

The issue of sacrifice also occupies an important place in the teaching of Benedict XVI. In one of his catecheses devoted to the mystery of worship, the pope reflected on the essence of sacrifice, referring to the teaching of St. Paul and showing its profound spiritual dimension: "I beseech you therefore, brethren,

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[1] In his work *The Mystery of Christian Worship*, Odo Casel aptly notes this truth: 'This first sin not only passes, like a contagious poison, through human generations; it repeats itself over and over again, and each time the end result is the same: the rebel becomes a slave. But perhaps man has never been so enslaved as he is today, when he thinks he is free from all bonds, when in fact he is not dependent on individual tyrants, but on much worse and more cruel, impersonal powers that weigh heavily on him and from which he cannot escape in any way. He has blocked the last path to freedom that was also available to the slave of the ancient world: the path to the freedom of the children of God. Thus, he is completely bound and shackled by matter. While he believes he has mastered it, it is rather matter that imposes its will on him. A soulless machine, dead gold, rule over him like idols; he must make bloody sacrifices to them, sell his heart and his soul – a sad end to individualism, which began so temptingly and promisingly. Therefore, we are not surprised that even today we see its effect with horror, as seductive and alluring as its beginnings were' (Casel 2000, 61).

by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." These words contain an apparent paradox: while the offering of sacrifice normally involves the death of the victim, Paul speaks of sacrifice in relation to the life of the Christian.

The expression "present your bodies," in conjunction with the word "sacrifice" that follows it, takes on the cultic meaning of "offering a sacrifice, sacrificing." The call to "offer your body" refers to the whole person; indeed, in Romans 6:13, Paul exhorts believers to "yield yourselves" (Benedict XVI 2009b, 33; Benedict XVI 2007d, 70). A little further on in the same catechesis, the pope specifies: "Paul describes this kind of behaviour as 'a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God.' Here we encounter the word 'sacrifice.' In common usage, it belongs to a sacred context and refers to the killing of an animal, which may be partly burned in honour of the gods and partly eaten during the sacrificers' feast. Paul, however, uses this word in reference to the life of a Christian. He actually describes this sacrifice using three adjectives. The first one, 'living,' speaks of its vitality. The second, 'holy,' recalls the Pauline vision of holiness associated not with places or objects, but with the person of the Christian. The third, 'acceptable unto God,' perhaps refers to the frequent biblical description of sacrifice as 'sweet savour unto the LORD' (cf. Lev 1:13, 17; 23:18; 26:31, etc.)" (Benedict XVI 2009b, 33; Ratzinger/Benedict XVI 2011, 245–249; Ratzinger/Benedict XVI 2009, 140–141).

It follows from the vision presented above that the life of the believer should be a life of sacrifice grounded in love for God. Christians, aware of the immeasurable love that God shows to humanity, are called to give themselves generously in service and love to God and their neighbours. Benedict XVI emphasised that sacrifice is an act of love directed toward God and neighbour. Just as Christ sacrificed His life for the salvation of humanity, Christians are called to a similar spirit of sacrifice in their daily lives. In union with Christ and His sacrifice, they are to make their own lives a sacrifice to God. "In this union, and only in it," the pope stated, "can we become in Him and with Him a 'living sacrifice'" (Benedict XVI 2009b, 34; 2008, 18; Borowski 2018, 80–83; Porosło 2023, 51–56; Biedroń 2018, 50–54).

In the opinion of Benedict XVI, many people thirst for truth and admire the courage of those who do not hesitate to give their lives to and for the One in whom they believe. The pope notes that such examples attract others. He further observes that every person today is called to radical Gospel faithfulness. Gratitude is due to God because so many Christians throughout the world continue to bear the highest and most faithful witness to love of God and neighbour,

often through the sacrifice of their own lives, paid for with the blood of martyrdom (Benedict XVI 2007b, 49; 2009e, 48–49; 2010d, 32).

During the funeral Mass for Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Ratzinger said of the Polish pope: "Our pope—we all know this—never wanted to save his life, to keep it for himself; he wanted to dedicate himself unreservedly, until the very last moment, to Christ and also to us" (Ratzinger 2005b, 21). These words seem to express the essence of understanding and accepting the mystery of the cross in one's personal life, in union with Christ in His sacrifice. This sacrifice is made present in a bloodless manner in the Eucharist, which Benedict XVI always saw both as a sacrament and as a sacrifice. In the latter sense, he defined the Eucharist as "the memorial of Christ's sacrifice on the cross" (Benedict XVI 2012c, 41; 2009b, 34; 2007a, 37; Benedict XVI 2007d, 1, 7, 10, 11; 2010a, 29–30; 2009c, 10–11; 2006b, 8). In the Eucharist, Jesus gives not "something" but Himself: He offers His body and sheds His blood.

Since the Eucharist is called a sacrifice, the fundamental moral call that flows from this sacrament is the call to a sacrificial attitude throughout one's life. This attitude of self-giving should be realised above all in the mission of bringing Christ the Saviour to the world. Benedict XVI explained that "the Eucharist, as the sacrament of our salvation, inevitably evokes the unity of Christ and the salvation accomplished by him at the price of His own blood. Therefore, the Eucharistic mystery, which is believed and celebrated, demands the constant education of all for missionary work, the main component of which is the proclamation of Jesus, the only Saviour" (Benedict XVI 2007d, 86; Benedict XVI 2011c, 32). Christ is the only Saviour, "for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Christ makes this work of salvation present above all in the Eucharist, which is an action of both Christ and the Church (Antoniewicz 2009, 107–113).

It should be emphasised that the Eucharist is first of all the sacrifice of Christ as Priest, "who gives Himself to us, building us up continually as His body" (Benedict XVI 2007d, 14). In instituting this sacrament, Christ pointed to Himself as the Priest who gives Himself up to death and thus offers Himself as a sacrifice (Luke 22:19–20) (Benedict XVI 2009c, 10; 2009a, 20). Pope Benedict explained this truth in the following words: "In instituting the sacrament of the Eucharist, Jesus anticipates and makes present the sacrifice of the Cross and the victory of the resurrection. At the same time, he reveals that he himself is the true sacrificial lamb, destined in the Father's plan from the foundation of the world" (Benedict XVI 2007d, 10). The gift that Jesus made is above all a gift to His Father.

However, in the Eucharist—as on the cross—Christ not only offered Himself to the Father; together with Himself, as Head, He also offered the whole Church. Benedict reminded us of this in *Sacramentum caritatis*: "Catholic doctrine, in fact, affirms that the Eucharist, as the sacrifice of Christ, is also the sacrifice of the Church, and thus of all the faithful" (Benedict XVI 2007d, 70; Benedict XVI 2012b, 18). In offering His sacrifice to the Church, Christ also desired to accept as His own the spiritual sacrifice of the Church, which is called to offer herself while offering Christ's sacrifice.

Thus, the Church has the duty to offer herself to God in union with Christ's sacrifice. In the Eucharistic sacrifice, the universal priesthood of the faithful finds its special place and its most profound application. By exercising their priesthood and offering themselves in the Eucharistic sacrifice together with the whole Church, Christians join in the one sacrifice of Christ and thus participate in the most perfect way in the fruits of His sacrifice, precisely as Benedict XVI taught: "The Eucharist draws us into Jesus' act of self-oblation. More than just statically receiving the incarnate *Logos*, we enter into the very dynamic of His self-giving." He "draws us into Himself" (Benedict XVI 2007d, 11; Benedict XVI 2005b, 26–27; Benedict XVI 2005a, 13; Ropiak 2006, 268; Jeżyna 2005, 190).

In the Eucharist, it becomes especially clear that the sacrifice of the Christian should be united with the sacrifice of Christ and accomplished according to His pattern: "Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour" (Eph 5:1–2). Christ offers Himself to His Father through our bodies and our lives. It is Christ Himself who offers us to God, and we offer Him to God. There is no other sacrifice than His sacrifice and no other love than His love (Michalik 2008, 253; Biedroń 2020, 68–70).

Since the Eucharistic sacrifice is the sacrifice of Christ and the Church, and since all believers are members of the Church, it is evident that a Christian who offers him or herself in sacrifice—following the example of Christ—does so, and should do so, not only for him or herself but also for those who are brothers and sisters in Christ. Therefore, a Christian not only has the right but also the duty to offer him or herself as well as his or her life and spiritual gifts for others. "By sharing in the sacrifice of the Cross," Benedict XVI points out, "the Christian partakes of Christ's self-giving love and is equipped and committed to live this same charity in all his thoughts and deeds" (Benedict XVI 2007d, 82; Cozzoli 2009, 133–135). It follows that every deed of love can be a deed of sacrifice. "A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love

is intrinsically fragmented" (Benedict XVI 2007d, 82; Benedict XVI 2005a 14; Wojtczak 2007, 73; Ptak 2007, 91–93).

Full participation in the sacrifice being offered is also a source of moral transformation of the human heart, which becomes the dwelling place of God. In Benedict XVI's understanding, the moral transformation implicit in Eucharistic worship is "a tension and a heartfelt yearning to respond to the Lord's love with one's whole being, while remaining ever conscious of one's own weakness" (Benedict XVI 2007d, 82; Seewald 2011, 165). This transformation of the human heart is not the fruit of human effort alone but of God's action. Nevertheless, the disposition of the will is significant: it must be expressed in readiness to give one's heart to the Saviour, who has the power to transform it. The Eucharist, in which the transformation of the human heart takes place, plays an important role on the path of perfecting love. This path is associated with effort and human toil, but human effort becomes fruitful when it is sustained by God's action.

2. Pilgrimage as a sign of the path of faith toward God

An important manifestation of a person's religious and moral life is going on pilgrimage to shrines. For pilgrims seeking authentic, living sources of faith, shrines are unique places for experiencing forms of Christian prayer "as the Church." In such holy places, pilgrimages acquire a special meaning (Benedict XVI 2010c, 24–25; John Paul II 1999, 23; 1994, 12–14; CCC 2691).

In Benedict XVI's approach, "pilgrimage is an expression of religious devotion that is nourished by and at the same time nourishes prayer" (Benedict XVI 2012a, 52). The pope has emphasised that pilgrimage provides an opportunity for a more intense encounter with God and for the strengthening of faith; therefore, he encouraged the faithful to make pilgrimages to holy places, especially shrines. "Of course, someone might criticise pilgrimages," Benedict argued, "saying that God is everywhere, there is no need to go to another place. But it is also true that faith, in accordance with its essence, is 'being a pilgrim'" (Benedict XVI 2010b, 22). During pilgrimages, liturgical feasts are celebrated, services are held, and prayers are offered; all these practices strengthen the bond with God and bring Him closer to the faithful. Pilgrimages are therefore an important component of religious practice and have spiritual significance for many believers (Piwko 2011, 179–181).

In his teaching, Benedict XVI explained that pilgrimage is a time of conversion and spiritual transformation. Believers have the opportunity to examine their lives, to convert, and to draw closer to God. "To go on pilgrimage," the pope stated during his visit to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, "is not simply to visit a place to admire its treasures of nature, art, or history. To go on pilgrimage really means to step out of ourselves in order to encounter God where he has revealed himself, where his grace has shone with particular splendour and produced rich fruits of conversion and holiness among those who believe" (Benedict XVI 2010e, 26; Ostrowski 2014, 36–37). In this perspective, pilgrimage becomes not only a physical effort but also a spiritual act with profound meaning for each participant. A pilgrimage is also an excellent opportunity for expiation; that is, for making amends to God for sins committed by oneself or by others. Our Lady called the children of Fatima to such expiation (Benedict XVI 2010f, 20–21).

According to Benedict XVI, pilgrimage is a sign of God's special presence and action in the human person. It is also a sign of human love for God, a particular form of rendering to Him the worship that is due. Since God has given, and continues to give, human beings so many proofs of His love, Christians should in return also do something that signifies their love for God. One such sign can be pilgrimage, which is not only a time of penance and conversion of heart but also an act of worship of God as Creator and Lord (Benedict XVI 2010c, 24–25; Ostrowski 2005, 79–107).

Pilgrimage is also a sign of the journey toward eternal happiness. Benedict XVI saw in pilgrimage a symbolic reflection of every person's path to eternity. "We are all pilgrims," the pope emphasised during his pastoral visit to Loreto. "We must always be on the way … to the definitive home, to the Eternal City" (Benedict XVI 2012d, 6; 2010g, 8). By journeying toward God, believers express their faith in the promise of eternal life. Pilgrimage thus becomes an expression of trust that the final encounter with God will bring the fullness of joy and salvation (Benedict XVI 2011a, 7–8). The pope encouraged pilgrims to use pilgrimage as an opportunity to lift their eyes toward eternity. During pilgrimage, believers are called to reflect on the meaning of eternal life and on the pursuit of union with God (Benedict XVI 2010b, 22).

Benedict XVI also emphasised that pilgrimage is a communal experience and a time for building community: remaining together and journeying together toward the destination, which is the sanctuary. Individual pilgrimages certainly have value, but collective pilgrimages possess a particular ecclesial significance.

In pilgrimage, the Church journeys together as a community of believers, thereby strengthening the bonds among members of the community on their journey to God. "It is also and always a pilgrimage," the pope observed. "It is not only coming out of oneself towards something greater, but is also travelling together. The pilgrimage unites: together we journey towards the other and thus we discover each other" (Benedict XVI 2010b, 22). Pilgrimage thus becomes a symbol of the common journey of the faithful, both on earth and toward eternity.

Of particular value are pilgrimages in which all members of the family participate. They create a religious environment within the family community and bring its members together in a distinctive way. The model to follow, Benedict taught, is the family of Jesus, who made a pilgrimage every year "in order to take part in the rites in the Holy City. Jewish families, like Christian families, pray in the intimacy of the home but they also pray together with the community, recognizing that they belong to the People of God, journeying on; and the pilgrimage expresses exactly this state of the People of God on the move. … The Holy Family's pilgrimage was one of faith, of the offering of gifts—a symbol of prayer—and of the encounter with the Lord whom Mary and Joseph already perceived in their Son Jesus" (Benedict XVI 2012a, 51–52).

Furthermore, Benedict XVI emphasised the particular significance of pilgrimage from an ecumenical perspective, seeing it as a valuable space for encounter and dialogue among Christians of different denominations. Joint pilgrimages foster mutual understanding, help to overcome prejudice, and gradually build attitudes of reconciliation among Christian communities. The pope pointed out that the experience of journeying, prayer, and shared effort opens hearts to what unites rather than to what divides, leading to a deeper experience of unity in Christ. In this sense, according to the pope, pilgrimage becomes a clear testimony to God's presence in human life, a sign of an emerging community, and an image of each believer's spiritual journey toward full encounter with God (Benedict XVI 2010b, 22).

3. Vows as a radical form of response to God's call

One of the extraordinary acts of the virtue of religiosity to which Benedict XVI devoted particular attention in his teaching is the vow. The pope presented vows as an essential expression of personal worship through which a person freely and consciously responds to God's call. In a broader sense, a vow is a voluntary and

deliberate promise made to God, consisting in a commitment to pursue a higher good motivated by the virtue of religiosity. Vows made to God remain a living practice of the faithful, deeply rooted in the tradition of the Church and still relevant in contemporary experience of faith.

Benedict XVI discerned particular religious and spiritual values in this form of devotion, seeing in it a sign of mature faith and readiness to subordinate one's life to God. At the same time, he emphasised that a vow is not merely an external act but requires an interior attitude of fidelity and responsibility. The object of a vow may be either a personal or a material good, provided that it leads to the deepening of one's relationship with God and serves the spiritual growth of the person making the promise. The essence of a vow and its faithful fulfilment can be understood only in connection with the fundamental moral duty of the human person: to serve God and to do His will, in accordance with the Gospel call, "No man can serve two masters" (Mt 6:24) (Pagacz 2023, 55–57).

Pope Benedict XVI usually associated the issue of vows with consecrated life, seeing it as a privileged space for realising the virtue of religiosity. He particularly emphasised the value of the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience, which lead the consecrated person to the total gift of self—to making a sacrifice of one's life to God. These vows, lived in fidelity and freedom of heart, become not only a form of radical imitation of Christ but also a clear sign of the eschatological orientation of human existence and a witness to the primacy of God in all dimensions of life.

In the pope's opinion, this is particularly manifest in obedience, which is modelled on the obedience of Jesus Christ in love for the Father. It presupposes the capacity to renounce egoism, self-centredness, and one's own preferences, and it requires the rejection of voluntarism and spontaneity. The burden of consecrated persons will be much easier, the pope emphasised in his address to the superiors general of institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life, the more they "know how to rediscover the value of professed obedience—which has Abraham, our father in the faith, as its model—and even more so that of Christ. It is necessary to take refuge from voluntarism and spontaneity to embrace the logic of the Cross" (Benedict XVI 2006a, 36).

It should be stated that obedience for supernatural reasons is less and less understood today; therefore, appropriate formation is necessary. The motivation of a person who possesses the virtue of obedience is the desire to fulfil God's will, to become more like the Lord Jesus, to undertake penance, and to offer oneself for the salvation of sinners (Derdziuk 2003, 52–66). Benedict XVI further

explained that obedience does not mean unconditional or blind acceptance but requires sound judgment and discernment (Benedict XVI 2007c, 24).

In Benedict XVI's understanding, vows, as an important component of religious life, should be considered—like the mystery of the cross—within the category of Christian paradoxes, which remain incomprehensible to many (cf. Mt 19:11–12). "Consecrated virginity," the pope said, "cannot be inscribed in the framework of worldly logic; it is the most 'nonsensical' of Christian paradoxes and it is not given to all to understand and to live it (cf. Mt 19:11–12)" (Benedict XVI 2006a, 36).

In this context, Benedict spoke of the vow of chastity, which, by giving complete priority to the love of Christ as Bridegroom, involves renunciation: "To belong completely to the Lord, consecrated persons embrace a chaste lifestyle. … To live a chaste life also means to give up the need to belong, to take on a lifestyle that is sober and modest" (Benedict XVI 2006a, 36; Słupek 2013, 84–85). An undivided heart, fully devoted to God, is expressed in the ability to control one's body and spirit, both of which are wholly subordinated to the fulfilment of the vocation received from God (Augustyn 2011, 125–130). The choice of a chaste lifestyle, as the pope rightly pointed out, is more demanding today than ever before because the modern world is flooded by a wave of pansexualism in which the fundamental truths about human nature and vocation have been distorted. The pope encouraged the preservation and development of a pure heart, which enables a person to devote him or herself more openly to God and neighbour (Benedict XVI 2007c, 23–24).

The vow of poverty occupied a special place in Benedict XVI's reflection. The pope saw it as an essential dimension of consecrated life and authentic imitation of Christ. Evangelical poverty is possible only in the perspective of faith, through which the human person is united with God and learns to entrust himself or herself entirely to divine Providence. Without this attitude, it is impossible properly to discern the mystery of God's gift to humanity—a gift fully revealed in Jesus Christ, who emptied Himself for the salvation of the world. The ultimate and deepest motive for evangelical poverty is love for God, which leads to freedom of heart and readiness to give oneself to Him without reserve (Derdziuk 1999, 28–34).

"St. Francis of Assisi was an exemplary witness of this poverty chosen for love," the pope emphasised in one of his homilies. "The Franciscan charism, in the history of the Church and of Christian civilization, constitutes a widespread trend of evangelical poverty which has done and continues to do such great good for

the Church and for the human family" (Benedict XVI 2009d, 41; Kiejkowski and Pagacz 2021, 109).

The vow of poverty involves interior freedom from material things and presupposes a spirit of renunciation and mortification. Those who have consecrated themselves to God desire to follow in the footsteps of Christ crucified and poor, immersing themselves in His mystery and choosing humility and poverty after His example. Benedict XVI spoke about this to the clergy and consecrated persons during Vespers at the shrine in Mariazell: "Anyone who wants to follow Christ in a radical way must renounce material goods. But he or she must live this poverty in a way centred on Christ, as a means of becoming inwardly free for their neighbour" (Benedict XVI 2007c, 23; Słupek 2013, 83–84). Poverty chosen as a way of expressing one's dependence on God should therefore be manifested in everyday behaviour so that it becomes a clear sign for others.

Summary

The foregoing reflections show that an adequate human response to the gift of God's presence and to God's saving action in Christ should be a properly formed religious attitude. The moral virtue of religiosity permeates the whole of Christian life, regulating the human person's relationship with God, with other people, and with the world. It is realised in specific forms of worship, such as sacrifice, pilgrimage, and vows, which give the life of faith a specific direction and interior coherence.

These practices not only express personal faith but also strengthen moral attitudes, promote goodness, and help the believer resist the evil present in the world. At the same time, they remind the human person of his or her inalienable dignity and of the vocation that follows from being a creature and child of God. Benedict XVI consistently sensitised the faithful to the various manifestations of cultic life proper to the virtue of religiosity, pointing to the worship and reverence due to God as Creator and Saviour.

However, acts of moral religiosity require systematic and in-depth formation so that they do not lose their authentic meaning and become merely external custom. Only mature religiosity enables the human person truly to worship God and to respond to His call. The practice of this virtue deepens one's relationship with God and leads to more responsible and mature relationships with other people.

Benedict XVI emphasised that cultic life and moral life permeate one another, forming a single, indivisible whole. From this perspective, ever fuller participation in the life of Christ and in the building of the ecclesial community takes place. The moral virtue of religiosity, rooted in faith, hope, and love, therefore remains an indispensable element of the Christian path to salvation.

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A Consideration of Spiritual Motivation in Patients Suffering from Mood Disorders

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Abstract

A substantial body of recent research indicates that religion and spirituality can play an important role in health recovery and overall well-being among individuals facing diverse health challenges, including mental disorders. This article examines the potential contribution of pastoral care providers to strengthening patients' motivation for therapy in cases of mood disorders. The issue is particularly relevant to the development of mature faith among patients. Mood disorders are among the most prevalent mental health conditions and are frequently associated with a marked decline in motivation to seek and continue treatment. In addition to more customary forms of sacramental ministry, the involvement of spiritual care providers in fostering motivation may improve interdisciplinary collaboration in medical institutions. This article presents several core examples demonstrating the potential efficacy of pastoral interventions, especially in the Roman Catholic context, in increasing patients' willingness to engage in the treatment of mood disorders.

Keywords

spiritual care, mood disorder, motivation, treatment, holistic approach

In recent decades, research on the role of religion and spirituality in improving health outcomes among individuals with various medical conditions has expanded considerably (Jastrzębski 2024, 691–711). The evidence suggests that religion and spirituality can help individuals cope with significant life challenges (Pargament 1997, 359–406). This observation also applies to mental health problems in general and to mood disorders in particular (Koenig 2012, 5).

Closer collaboration between mental health professionals and spiritual care personnel, including chaplains, is therefore recommended in order to provide the most effective assistance to patients. Although the employment of clergy in mental health facilities may raise certain reservations — for example, in the case of Catholic priests working within the Polish cultural context — the absence of adequate spiritual care can impede patients' recovery and their ability to regain psychosocial functioning (Jastrzębski 2024, 700).

A notable feature of many mental disorders is diminished motivation for treatment, frequently associated with poor insight, understood as a limited recognition of problems concerning one's own well-being. Reduced motivation is particularly evident in mood disorders, especially depression. This article proposes ways of involving spiritual care personnel in fostering motivation for therapy among individuals affected by mood disorders and presents this involvement as a form of pastoral action. The proposed measures are intended primarily to enhance pastoral care in medical facilities, especially those providing psychiatric treatment. The approach arises from the Polish context of psychiatric chaplaincy; however, it may also be adapted by other spiritual care providers who accompany individuals affected by this type of disorder.

1. General characteristics of mood disorders

Mood disorders comprise a broad spectrum of clinical conditions. In general terms, they are characterised by disturbances in affective experience and by altered perceptions of the self and the surrounding world. These disturbances may manifest themselves in symptoms ranging from profound despondency and helplessness to elevated mood, increased psychomotor activity, and excessive goal-directed behaviour.

At the depressive pole of the spectrum, the most common disorder is depressive disorder, which the World Health Organisation (WHO) identifies

as a common mental health condition and emphasises that effective psychological and pharmacological treatments are available (World Health Organisation 2025). Depression disrupts everyday functioning and may be associated with a serious risk of suicide. It can occur among middle-aged adults who have experienced traumatic events, severe illness, or invasive clinical procedures. The treatment of depression is increasingly recognised as important in medical fields such as oncology and cardiology.

Depression is characterised by a pervasive sense of emptiness and isolation that significantly impairs daily functioning. Individuals affected by this condition often experience a marked reluctance to engage in activity. Symptoms include a negative view of the world and a sense of despair (Mulder 2002, 359–371; Poniatowska-Leszczyńska and Małyszczak 2013, 201–209). Depression has also been linked to somatic manifestations, including persistent fatigue, weight changes, circulatory and digestive disturbances, sleep disorders, headaches, muscle pain, and dryness of the mucous membranes (Cierpiałkowska 2021, 244–247). Patients frequently assume that pharmacological or psychological interventions will not improve their condition and consequently imagine the future as a period of suffering and loneliness. Although awareness of illness may increase during hospitalisation, the fundamental problem often persists: a low perception of treatment efficacy (Kociuba 2020, 234–245).

Conversely, at the opposite end of the mood-disorder spectrum are conditions characterised by excessive agitation and elevated mood. According to the DSM-5 framework, manic and hypomanic episodes differ in duration and severity. Core symptoms include inflated self-esteem or grandiosity, increased psychomotor activity, decreased need for sleep, and pressured speech. Patients may also experience an intensified sense of purpose, an urgent need to correct perceived irregularities, or a sense of mission to promote significant values. In diagnosis, careful differentiation is required between manic states, substance-induced conditions, and psychotic disorders. Although these are classified as distinct entities, psychotic symptoms may occur in the course of other psychiatric conditions (Łojko, Suwalska, and Rybakowski 2014, 245–260; Morrison 2023, 108–215).

The most prevalent condition involving recurrent episodes of elevated mood is bipolar disorder. Other, less frequent and less structured forms of affective dysfunction may also occur. Disorders accompanied by elevated mood appear less frequently than conditions characterised primarily by depressed mood. In these cases, motivation for therapy may likewise be diminished because

treatment can be perceived as interrupting the patient's sense of uniqueness, vocation, or mission (Morrison 2023, 108–126).

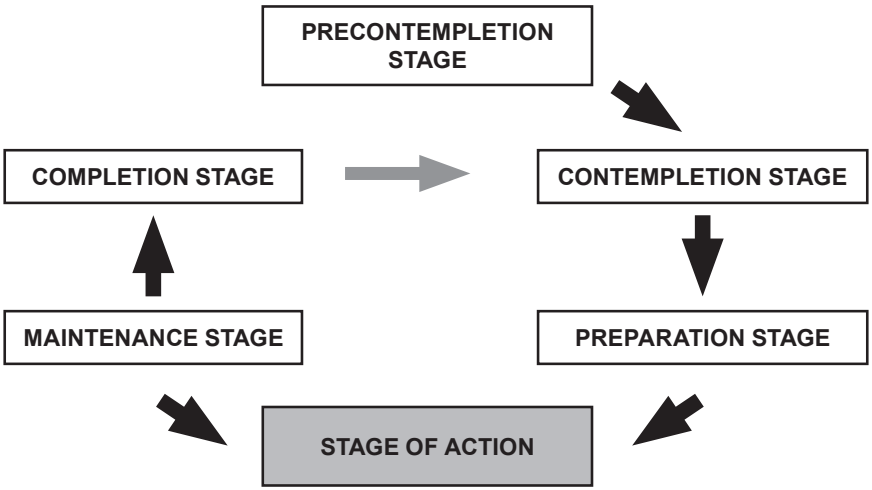
2. Model of health behaviour change

In common usage, health is often understood as the absence of symptoms associated with disease or infirmity. It is also treated as a fundamental good and is therefore placed high in the hierarchy of values. This valuation is reflected in everyday language and in recurrent expressions of the wish for good health (Obodyńska 2015, 148–154). In the salutogenic approach associated with Aaron Antonovsky, however, health is understood as a lifelong process. From this perspective, health-promoting practices that help individuals maintain the balance necessary to reduce stress and function well are of primary importance. A critical factor is personal commitment to attitudes that facilitate such balance. This commitment is related to a sense of agency and a genuine opportunity to influence one's health (Eriksson 2016, 91–96; Piotrowicz and Cianciara 2011, 521–527).

As early as 1974, Marc Lalonde's report indicated that a substantial proportion of health determinants are related to lifestyle. Environmental and biological factors also play an important role, whereas medical care accounts for a smaller share of overall health outcomes. Lalonde's work marked a significant shift in thinking about health policy and health promotion, emphasising education and healthy lifestyles rather than limiting the health system to the treatment of illness (Woźniak-Holecka 2012, 11–12). The validity of these assumptions was confirmed by twentieth-century changes in public health, including progress in the control of infectious diseases and a decline in mortality from cardiovascular disease in many populations (Piwowarska 2023).

Awareness of the risks and benefits associated with particular behaviours is essential but insufficient to producing lifestyle change. Consequently, various models have been developed to describe the stages required for cultivating and consolidating pro-health attitudes. Among them, the Transtheoretical Model of Behaviour Change (TTM) has received wide scholarly attention. The model emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s and is associated with James O. Prochaska and Carlo C. DiClemente. It is grounded in assumptions from cognitive and behavioural psychology and may support the development of pro-health attitudes in clinical settings and individual practice (Prochaska, Norcross, and DiClemente 2007, 87–114; Sęk 2000, 17–34). The model consists of six stages:

1. Precontemplation — the person rejects health-related recommendations because the problem is not perceived as personally relevant.
2. Contemplation — an initial intention to change risky behaviours in the coming months is present; potential health risks are recognised, but willpower remains insufficient, which may cause frustration and reduce motivation.
3. Preparation — a concrete plan to change attitudes or behaviours in the near future exists; motivation is sufficient to begin change, but confidence in long-term effects remains limited.
4. Action — behavioural changes are initiated and become visible to others, but the risk of relapse remains high; therefore, social support is important.
5. Maintenance — this stage is generally assumed to occur approximately six months after the beginning of behavioural change, and the primary task is to prevent relapse into maladaptive attitudes; environmental support remains important.
6. Termination — the behavioural change is permanent and constitutes a stable component of everyday functioning, forming a new lifestyle; for many people, this stage remains idealised and difficult to attain (Prochaska, Norcross, and DiClemente 2007).



The Stage-Based Model of Behaviour Change. Based on James O. Prochaska, John C. Norcross, and Carlo C. DiClemente, *Changing for Good* (New York: Avon Books, 2007).

Many patients diagnosed with mood disorders may remain in the precontemplation stage, and even traumatic experiences such as suicide attempts do not necessarily change this attitude. Nevertheless, sustained engagement in therapeutic interventions can produce positive health outcomes within weeks. A critical component of treatment is the patient's personal conviction that treatment is worthwhile and that habits acquired during therapy should be maintained. The role of spiritual care providers is to support and accompany patients at each stage of medical treatment, including preparation, action, and maintenance. In the final phase, after discharge and return home, contact with a priest or other spiritual care provider outside the facility may be necessary (Sieroń 2021, 568–583).

3. Spiritual domains of influence on motivation for therapy

Personal involvement in a relationship with God may support the formation of motivation for treatment (the precontemplation and contemplation stages) or the maintenance of such motivation (the maintenance stage). It therefore affects spiritual well-being rather than functioning merely as a health-promoting measure. The therapeutic process thus acquires a spiritual dimension and is not reducible to the somatic dimension. The relationship between these domains is expressed in the ancient ecclesial principle *salus animarum suprema lex* ('the salvation of souls is the supreme law'), in which the noun *salus* may refer both to health and to salvation. The following arguments may help motivate individuals affected by mood disorders to seek and continue treatment.

3.1. Personal effort *toward* mature religiosity

Mature religiosity or spirituality is generally considered an important factor in healing. This is also true for patients with mood disorders (Jastrzębski 2023, 114). In the absence of maturity, however, faith may fail to support treatment and may even hinder it (Bukalski 2019, 57–79). One prevalent form of religious immaturity is the use of faith as a defence mechanism, commonly described as 'spiritual bypassing' (Jastrzębski 2022, 157–172).

Research on religiosity also points to the trend of pentecostalisation, understood as the adoption of Pentecostal beliefs and practices within traditional Christian denominations, including Catholicism. One of its more dangerous expressions in the field of mental health is a magical approach to religious

practice, in which attention shifts from the individual's relationship with God to the performance of specific ritual procedures. Such an approach can foster a distorted image of God and the expectation that God will intervene coercively as a consequence of a particular prayer or devotional practice (Barth 2015, 39–55). Therefore, patients with mood disorders should be offered a theologically sound understanding of grace: grace operates within concrete reality while respecting human nature and the patient's personal effort.

Reflection on the mission of Jesus Christ and His contribution to the salvation of humanity can serve as a point of departure for contemplating the reality of Christianity. Such reflection shows that Christianity does not disregard human freedom and requires engagement in the process of development. The sign of the cross, a central Christian symbol, expresses this logic of salvation through suffering and self-giving; its meaning differs markedly from religious images that emphasise serenity or detachment from suffering (Cielecki 2010; Zasuń 2011, 235–252; Skorupka 2017, 133–147).

3.2. The virtue of freedom and the problem of suffering

Freedom is sometimes perceived as constrained by a higher power that determines an individual's circumstances without the possibility of change. In this context, suffering may be interpreted as divinely sanctioned, making resistance appear futile. Many individuals adhere to the erroneous view that God manifests love by inflicting suffering, as suggested by the popular adage, 'Whom the Lord loves, He disciplines.' Marek Dziewiecki has noted an internal inconsistency in this view: it implies that God does not love everyone and simultaneously suggests that He imposes suffering precisely on those whom He loves (Dziewiecki 2012, 11–24). The Old Testament tradition, the actions of Jesus Christ, and subsequent Christian reflection present God primarily as the source of love rather than pain, death, or suffering. Suffering may acquire deeper meaning when endured in the pursuit of spiritual purification or in self-sacrifice for others; however, this must not be interpreted as a divine prohibition against seeking health (Bartoszek 1999, 357–368).

In the New Testament, the Christian understanding of God is centred on the incarnate Son, who offers Himself for humanity. The benevolent intervention of the Divine Word and His willingness to share human suffering are central to Christian belief, with the purpose of redeeming the fallen world. The Son of God reveals suffering as a possible path within salvation history, not as the

purpose of human existence. Human life, although marked by sin, remains the object of God's redemptive care. Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, in which Christ asks the Father to remove the cup of suffering (Luke 22:42), offers a clear example of an appeal for transformation of one's circumstances. This theme has been examined by major Christian authors across historical periods and has remained important in theological reflection on creation and incarnation, including in the work of Origen and Pope Benedict XVI (Ratzinger/Benedict XVI 2007, 41–42; Szymik 2011, 96–108).

3.3. The concept of bodily resurrection

The symptoms associated with mood disorders include persistent emotional states, prolonged disturbances of affect, and physical manifestations. Research indicates correlations between biochemical balance — including hormonal activity and neurotransmission — and these disorders. While some religious perspectives mistakenly view the physical body as an obstacle to spiritual growth, thereby tending toward dualism, Christianity emphasises the inherent goodness of the body (Jastrzębski 2022, 140). Consequently, appropriate catechesis on the theology of the body and holiness attained through resurrection is important. This theme is central to pastoral reflection on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which affirms the ultimate dignity of human nature and its bodily dimension (Pius XII 1950; Jastrzębski 2022, 140).

The necessity of self-care is among the fundamental characteristics of human beings and follows from the belief that life is a divine gift. Psychologically, it is reflected in the instinct for self-preservation. Theologically, it is connected with the Fifth Commandment of the Decalogue and with the command to love God, one's neighbour, and oneself. It is also exemplified in the attitude of Christ Himself: the Gospels repeatedly present Him as healing people from diverse ailments, prioritising their temporal good, and avoiding threats from those who sought to kill Him (Mazzeo 2017, 211–227; Dąbek 2006, 139–149).

A careful examination of this issue, supplemented by examples from salvation history and references to personal encounters with God among people experiencing disorder, can support the restoration of dignity, which is a prerequisite for therapeutic motivation. Patients should be encouraged to seek confirmation of dignity beyond their distorted self-perception, including in relationships with others and in their theological identity. During mood disorders, a patient's self-image may become distorted, producing either excessively negative

or excessively positive self-evaluation. For believers, the foundation of dignity lies first in baptism, in the doctrine of the human person as the image of God, and in Christ's salvific mission (Trochalski 2018/2019, 145–155).

3.4. Responsibility for the community of the Church

Through baptism, individuals become members of the Church community, a status that has consequences for both temporal and eternal life. The reconstruction of functional relationships in various environments — including the family home, the neighbourhood, the workplace, and interpersonal interactions — signals a return to ordinary functioning in the earthly dimension. This process entails the cultivation of social love, whose source is understood theologically as divine (Sztaba 2011, 27–42).

Participation in society at various levels requires a stance against selfishness, which directly contradicts the essence of love. In contemporary society, marked by widespread narcissistic tendencies, this task has become increasingly important (Jastrzębski 2022, 140). In the encyclical *Deus caritas est*, Pope Benedict XVI characterises this form of love as social and political and shows how it can extend from interpersonal relationships to broader social and international relations.

In this way, relationships are elevated to a more dignified and humane status. Love becomes a norm of conduct, and those who practice it become educators of society (Benedict XVI 2005, 26–30; Perzyński 2021, 223–232). In addition to its social benefits, this attitude can strengthen patients' sense of self-efficacy and agency. A hallmark of many mood disorders is the experience of personal insignificance and incapacity for action. Concrete acts of benevolence may therefore become an important step in overcoming harmful self-perceptions. In this context, a priest may help the patient identify practical ways to exert a constructive influence on the surrounding environment, even through ordinary daily activities.

3.5. Divine Mercy in light of the hiddenness of God

A lack of motivation for action among religious believers suffering from mood disorders is often rooted in a personal belief in condemnation. This is particularly relevant for individuals who have previously committed serious moral wrongs, including abortion, the abandonment of a spouse, neglect of child-rearing responsibilities, causing another person's death, or major theft. In such

cases, the conviction may emerge that justice is the fundamental attribute of God and that salvation is therefore unattainable. Holiness is then perceived as an exclusive quality inaccessible to the average person. An essential component of pastoral care is therefore a comprehensive explanation of divine mercy. Pastoral ministry to individuals with mood disorders should include reflection on the roots of mercy in the Old Testament, the paradigm established by Jesus Christ's actions, and the experience of the communion of saints throughout salvation history.

A significant challenge is to provide spiritual direction that enables individuals to move beyond intellectual acceptance of divine mercy toward an inward and personal relationship with God. Various personal experiences may impede this growth; frequently, an inability to forgive others becomes a barrier to receiving mercy. It is therefore necessary to address the patient's history and the harms the patient has suffered. Healing such memories can dispose the person to experience mercy, imparting not only the supernatural virtue of charity but also openness to perseverance in sanctifying grace (Francis 2022).

Mercy is also connected with the problem of divine hiddenness. A longstanding tradition holds that God is both revealed and hidden — the *Deus absconditus*. This means that although the divine presence remains veiled from direct observation, the light of faith can give rise to the conviction that God acts mercifully on behalf of humanity. In a pastoral or therapeutic context, this may involve helping the patient cooperate with grace in recalling instances of divine mercy in his or her own life. The aim is to free the individual from the false perception of being abandoned by God or excluded from God's redemptive plan (Hołda 2020, 65–78).

3.6. Mental clarity as a path to mature religiosity

The final area of pastoral support for individuals diagnosed with mood disorders concerns a holistic understanding of the human person. Many patients affected by these conditions may assume that spiritual development and the cultivation of faith are the only matters of real importance (Jastrzębski 2022, 144). In making this assumption, however, they often overlook the unity of body, mind, and soul, already noted in the argument concerning the dignity of the human body. The objective is therefore to demonstrate the interrelation and mutual influence of these three dimensions and to connect them with the quality of human functioning. The classical maxim of a sound mind in a sound body may serve

as a useful motivation for seeking therapy, provided that therapeutic intervention is presented not merely as a means of enhancing physical well-being but also as a support for spiritual health.

A substantial body of research suggests a correlation between mood disorders, particularly depression, and a pessimistic image of God, as well as a diminished intensity of spiritual experience (Jastrzębski 2023, 148–149). Spiritual care providers can help articulate the connection between the physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of life. They may also propose that improved well-being is significant for developing a personal relationship with God. This claim is supported by studies showing correlations between mental agility and physical functioning, particularly in late adulthood (Czarnecki et al. 2023, 175–179).

This line of argument is deeply theological. Sobriety — understood not only as freedom from psychoactive substances but also as a disposition of attentiveness and readiness to discern the surrounding world — has been regarded as a fundamental virtue since the beginning of Christianity. The Apostle Peter exhorts believers: 'Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings' (1 Peter 5:8–9; The New Jerusalem Bible 1985). The early Church identified the absence of vigilance (*nepsis*) as a grave spiritual danger, because a wandering mind may lose the capacity for discernment and mistake an apparent good for spiritual truth. Confronted with the emergence of diverse religious movements, the Church Fathers warned the faithful against such deceptions. In the contemporary era, believers are continually confronted with moral dilemmas and the risk of misguided decisions. Therefore, spiritual sobriety and presence of mind are prerequisites for a mature and discerning experience of faith (Clement of Alexandria; MacIntyre 1996, 37–42).

Conclusions

In the contemporary world, marked by material culture, there is a growing tendency to neglect the spiritual dimension of human existence. Despite major advances in medicine and the emergence of new therapeutic modalities, the question of the meaning of life often remains insufficiently addressed. This omission

may be especially problematic for patients experiencing profound existential distress. Spiritual care personnel, as illustrated by the Polish context of priests working in mental health institutions, can assist patients in developing a mature spiritual interpretation of their mental disorders that also takes account of the physical and psychological dimensions of well-being. Accordingly, the therapeutic process can be enriched by spiritual interventions that facilitate the spiritual growth of believing patients and strengthen their pursuit of holiness.

Spiritual care providers can promote the restoration of dignity and support an honest confrontation with oneself. Moreover, mood disorders may coexist with religious delusions, including convictions of absolute condemnation or, conversely, a perceived divine mandate to undertake specific actions (Niesporek 2016, 245–266; Poniatowska-Leszczyńska and Małyszczak 2013, 201–209; Wąchol 2023, 153–166). It is therefore imperative to cultivate mature faith in patients, since such maturity can contribute to the integrity and effectiveness of the therapeutic process as a whole.

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Family relationships and bonds in the digital age: What should be taken into account when considering the tendency towards excessive Internet use among children?

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Abstract

The everyday functioning of contemporary society increasingly depends on modern technologies that support basic needs, workplace cooperation, social interaction, and leisure activities. Among these technologies, the Internet continues to play a prominent role by providing access to information and services and by constantly expanding its functions in response to consumer demand. Consequently, the critical evaluation of online content and the regulation of time spent on activities that do not always contribute to personal development are increasingly necessary. These issues should not be underestimated, particularly among young people, whose activities are closely linked to the Internet and the virtual environment. In this regard, parental approaches and the quality of family relationships may play a key role in preventing children from

spending excessive time on the Internet, social media, and computer networks. The aim of this study was to analyse parent–child relationships and parental bonds as statistically significant predictors of excessive Internet use among children. The research sample consisted of 145 families (N = 290 respondents) living in the Banská Bystrica region. The mean age was 43.55 years for parents (SD = 5.56) and 12.40 years for children (SD = 1.52). Although statistically significant correlations were found between the variables examined, most were weak but non-trivial. Among the types of parent–child relationships, closeness was a statistically significant predictor of excessive Internet use among children ($\beta = -0.223$; $p = 0.013$); among the types of parental bonds, the approach bond was a statistically significant predictor ($\beta = -0.348$; $p < 0.001$). The results suggest that closer parent–child relationships and emotional understanding tend to reduce excessive Internet use. The tendency to misuse the Internet and its affordances appears to be associated with a set of factors related to the family environment and the rules or principles applied within it.

Keywords

child, parent, family relationships, family ties, excessive Internet use

The growing influence of digital technologies is changing the everyday lives of families and significantly affecting the dynamics of parent–child relationships. In the context of these changes, the concept of digital parenting is increasingly important. According to Fidan and Olur (2023, 15189), digital parenting comprises parenting strategies aimed at supporting and regulating children's digital activities.

In this study, digital parenting strategies are understood as integrating key elements that support the formation and maintenance of family relationships. These elements include trust, effective and open communication, emotional closeness between parent and child, and the absence of alienation. Constructive conflict prevention and resolution are also integral to these strategies. Parental approaches designed in this way may function as important protective mechanisms against technology-related disruption of family dynamics and may help prevent risky behaviour, including excessive Internet use.

This claim is consistent with the findings of Banić and Orehovački (2024, 15–19), who analysed 49 studies from 11 databases in order to identify current trends in digital parenting strategies. Their findings on parental mediation indicate that trust and open parent–child communication, which are closely linked to active mediation, are important in the digital environment.

Following Wangmo and Manivannan (2024, e602–e604), we emphasise that emotional intelligence, including empathy, relationship management, and emotion regulation, is central to effective digital parenting because it supports healthy communication and conflict resolution between parents and children in the digital environment. Together, these elements may form a protective framework against negative phenomena such as excessive Internet use (EIU), broadly understood as potentially harmful or poorly controlled patterns of Internet use (Király et al. 2015, 46–60). Research has shown adverse effects on mental health, including increased cyberbullying and contact with strangers, and on interpersonal relationships (Gámez-Guadix, Borrajo, and Almendros 2016, 103–104). Electronic communication may also increase the risk of several harmful phenomena, including abuse (Valkenburg and Peter 2011, 125).

With respect to family functioning, EIU is closely linked to technoference, understood as the disruption of interpersonal communication caused by the presence of technology (McDaniel and Radesky 2018, 100). Tan et al. (2025, 10–13) state that negative digital well-being in children is associated with certain forms of digital parenting and online behaviour. It may therefore

be inferred that both parents and children spend increasing amounts of time online, often at the expense of direct interaction, which may weaken family ties.

An important protective factor against EIU and its consequences is adequate family communication, especially between parents and children. Communication based on trust and respect contributes to preventing risky behaviour in the digital environment. Research shows that the quality of communication has a more substantial protective effect than the frequency of conversations about online activities alone. Conversely, control strategies, although potentially useful, appear to have only limited effects (Van den Eijnden et al. 2010, 82, 85–87).

A further essential aspect of digital parenting is consistency between rules and parental behaviour, which helps reduce EIU in children (Liu et al. 2012, 1269). In line with social learning theory, children model their behaviour on parental patterns, not only in terms of specific activities but also in their perceptions of technology (Konok, Bunford, and Miklósi 2020, 94, 103; Vaala and Bleakley 2015, 40, 42–43).

Preventing digital risks requires systematic and targeted parental effort. Many parents, however, encounter obstacles associated with insufficient media literacy or limited experience (Bielčiková and Gužíková 2023, 323). Jeffery (2024, 472–473) also identifies differences in how parents and children perceive the digital environment, which often leads to conflict. Such conflicts mainly concern time spent online, exposure to "inappropriate" content, children's media-influenced behaviour, and sibling rivalry.

The introduction of new technologies can significantly affect family cohesion. This claim is consistent with Maihasni et al. (2025, 796), who state that new technologies, particularly social media, may affect family cohesion by changing communication patterns and interpersonal relationships within the family. This impact is particularly evident in reduced empathy and care, increased mistrust, and strengthened privacy boundaries between family members, all of which may weaken family ties. Despite these negative effects, families respond by introducing responsible management of social media use, raising awareness of digital risks, and strengthening interpersonal communication in order to maintain social cohesion and minimise the adverse effects of the digital environment on family dynamics.

Mesch (2006, 119–121) observed that increased Internet use is associated with less time spent with family and more frequent conflict. The perceived disruption of family boundaries caused by technology can reduce the overall sense of family belonging. More recent research by Erstad et al. (2024, 164–165),

based on multidisciplinary literature, suggests, however, that relational identity is transformed rather than simply disrupted by the emergence of new platform practices and the reconfiguration of existing ones. This finding points to the need to redefine family boundaries in digital contexts.

Despite the growing body of research on digital parenting and excessive Internet use, further analysis is required to clarify how specific aspects of family relationships and parental bonds function as protective or risk factors in children's online behaviour.

The main research problem of this study is to determine which dimensions of parent–child relationships and parental bonds significantly predict excessive Internet use among children. The aim of this study is to analyse parent–child relationships and parental bonds in relation to excessive Internet use among children.

To achieve this aim, the following specific objectives were formulated:

- to examine the relationship between types of parent–child relationships and excessive Internet use;
- to examine the relationship between parental bonds and excessive Internet use;
- to identify statistically significant predictors of excessive Internet use among children.

On this basis, the research questions were formulated and are presented in the Methods section.

1. Methods

This study used a quantitative research design based on a questionnaire survey. It examined parent–child relationships from the parents' perspective, parental bonds from the children's perspective, and their association with excessive Internet use among children. To achieve this objective, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: Which dimension of the parent–child relationship is a statistically significant predictor of excessive Internet use among children?

RQ2: Which parental bond is a statistically significant predictor of excessive Internet use among children?

2. Research tools

The questionnaire was divided into two separate sections, one for parents and one for children, each containing validated psychometric instruments and demographic items. The scales were translated using the forward–backward translation method. Scale reliability was verified by calculating Cronbach's alpha. The instruments had previously been validated in the studies cited below.

Section for parents:

- Child–Parent Relationship Scale–Short Form (CPRS-SF) — a 15-item scale assessing the parent–child relationship through two subscales: closeness (7 items) and conflict (8 items). Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale: 1 = definitely does not apply, 2 = rather no, 3 = not sure, 4 = rather yes, and 5 = definitely applies (Driscoll and Pianta 2011). Cronbach's alpha coefficients confirmed internal consistency: $\alpha = 0.802$ for conflict and $\alpha = 0.744$ for closeness, indicating satisfactory reliability.

Section for children:

- Compulsive Internet Use Scale (CIUS) — a 14-item instrument measuring excessive Internet use (EIU). In the original version, item scores range from 0 to 4; in the modified version used here, they range from 1 to 5 and are measured on a five-point Likert scale: 1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, and 5 = very often (Meerkerk et al. 2009, 2–3). For children, the scale achieved $\alpha = 0.922$, indicating excellent internal consistency.
- The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) — a 25-item questionnaire assessing adolescents' relationships with parents across three dimensions: trust, communication, and alienation. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale: 1 = never or almost never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, and 5 = almost always or always (Armsden and Greenberg 1987, 430, 451–453). Cronbach's alpha coefficients confirmed internal consistency: $\alpha = 0.832$ for trust, $\alpha = 0.869$ for communication, and $\alpha = 0.719$ for alienation, indicating acceptable reliability. The alienation scale was reverse-coded and interpreted as approach/attachment.

2.1. Research sample and data collection

The research sample consisted of 145 families (145 children and 145 parents). The mean age of the parents was 43.55 years (SD = 5.56), and the mean age of the children was 12.40 years (SD = 1.52). A convenience sample was drawn from the Banská Bystrica region. Data were collected electronically between May and December 2024 with the approval of the Ethics Committee of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica. Informed consent was obtained, as minors participated in the study.

In a research report mapping selected forms of risky behaviour among children and youth, Holdoš et al. (2023, 135–136) found statistically significant regional differences in excessive Internet use among young people. Respondents from central Slovakia, which includes the Banská Bystrica region, ranked third, behind respondents from western Slovakia and Bratislava. The report also found that communication with family is one of the most common online activities among children. Janková's research report (2022, 6, 15) showed that children and adolescents in the Banská Bystrica region have broad access to digital technologies, creating conditions for frequent and diverse online activities. A more detailed description of the research sample is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the research sample

Demographic characteristics of the research sample	n	%
Parents' gender		
Mother	130	89.66
Father	15	10.34
Family type in terms of structure		
Complete or reconstituted	124	85.52
Incomplete	21	14.48
Number of children aged 10–15		
1	104	71.72
2 and more	41	28.28
Place of residence		
Town	77	53.10
Village	68	46.90
Age of parents (categories)		

Demographic characteristics of the research sample	n	%
≤ 42	54	37.24
≥ 43	91	62.76
Children's gender		
Girl	73	50.34
Boy	72	49.66
Age of children (categories)		
Pre-puberty (10–12)	78	53.79
Puberty (13–15)	67	46.21

2.2. Data analysis

The data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0.1.0. Inductive statistical procedures included Pearson's correlation coefficient and multiple linear regression. Scale scores were calculated as item means. Because the data consisted of matched parent–child responses within families, the regression results were interpreted in light of the potential non-independence of observations within families. The normality of variable distributions was evaluated by assessing skewness and kurtosis and by inspecting histograms. Information on the assumptions for regression analysis is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Assumptions for the use of multiple linear regression

Assumptions	Model 1	Model 2
Normality of the distribution of standardised residuals (Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, $p > 0.05$)	assumption met	assumption met
VIF (Variance Inflation Factor) < 5	assumption met	assumption met
No influential cases (Cook's distance < 1)	assumption met	assumption met
No multivariate outliers (Mahalanobis distance < 15)	assumption met	one potential outlier identified (value 18.94)

Table 2 shows that the assumptions for the appropriate use of multiple linear regression with the enter method were met for the data obtained from respondents. Homoscedasticity was assessed visually using a scatterplot of standardised residuals against predicted values. No systematic pattern or substantial change in residual spread was observed, indicating that this assumption was satisfied.

2.3. Results

Table 3. Correlations between types of parent–child relationships, parental bonds, and excessive Internet use among children

Variables		Conflictual relationship	Closeness relationship	Trust bond	Communication bond	Approach bond	Excessive Internet use
Conflictual relationship	Pearson's correlation coefficient	1	−0.403	−0.406	−0.304	−0.413	0.181
	p–value		0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.030*
	N	145	145	145	145	145	145
Closeness relationship	Pearson's correlation coefficient	−0.403	1	0.427	0.509	0.354	−0.260
	p–value	0.000***		0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.002**
	N	145	145	145	145	145	145
Trust bond	Pearson's correlation coefficient	−0.406	0.427	1	0.761	0.590	−0.268
	p–value	0.000***	0.000***		0.000***	0.000***	0.001**
	N	145	145	145	145	145	145
Communication bond	Pearson's correlation coefficient	−0.304	0.509	0.761	1	0.597	−0.264
	p–value	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***		0.000***	0.001**
	N	145	145	145	145	145	145
Approach bond	Pearson's correlation coefficient	−0.413	0.354	0.590	0.597	1	−0.388
	p–value	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***		0.000***
	N	145	145	145	145	145	145
Excessive Internet use	Pearson's correlation coefficient	0.181	−0.260	−0.268	−0.264	−0.388	1
	p–value	0.030*	0.002**	0.001**	0.001**	0.000***	
	N	145	145	145	145	145	145

Table 3 shows a statistically significant moderate negative relationship between conflictual relationships and closeness as aspects of the parent–child relationship ($r = -0.403$; $p < 0.001$). It also shows statistically significant, stronger correlations between trust and communication, trust and approach, and communication and approach as aspects of parental bonds ($r > 0.5$; $p < 0.001$). All variables were statistically significantly correlated with excessive Internet use among children, although the strength of these correlations varied. The weakest correlation was between conflictual relationships and excessive Internet use; weaker negative correlations were observed between closeness and excessive Internet use, communication and excessive Internet use, and trust and excessive Internet use; the strongest correlation was between approach and excessive Internet use.

Table 4. Multiple linear regression models between parent–child relationships, parental bonds, and excessive Internet use among children

Model description		Excessive Internet use	B	Beta	t	p–value
R	0.273	Predictors				
R^2	0.074	Conflictual relationship	0.109	0.091	1.027	0.306
F (ANOVA)	5.699	Closeness relationship	–0.372	–0.223	–2.530	0.013*
p–value	0.004**					
Model description		Excessive Internet use	B	Beta	t	p–value
R	0.391	Predictors				
R^2	0.153	Trust bond	–0.072	–0.047	–0.377	0.707
F (ANOVA)	8.497	Communication bond	–0.025	–0.021	–0.169	0.866
p–value	0.000***	Approach bond	–0.388	–0.348	–3.478	0.000***

Table 4 shows that closeness in the parent–child relationship was a statistically significant predictor of excessive Internet use among children ($\beta = -0.223$; $p = 0.013$), indicating that higher levels of parent–child closeness were associated with lower levels of excessive Internet use. Table 4 also shows that the approach bond was a statistically significant predictor of excessive Internet use among children ($\beta = -0.348$; $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher levels of approach bond were associated with lower levels of excessive Internet use. The first model

explained 7.4% of the variance in excessive Internet use, whereas the second model explained 15.3%.

3. Discussion

Based on the regression results, closeness in the parent–child relationship appears to influence excessive Internet use among children.

Closeness promotes open communication and mutual respect and may increase children's willingness to share and reflect on their digital experiences, thereby supporting responsible and safe online behaviour (Alias, Nasri, and Awang 2022, 1, 11–12). Research by Kaspersky Lab (2016) showed that up to 35% of parents of teenagers felt isolated from their children because of the Internet. This may be interpreted as a weakening of emotional contact. Dulovics, Niklová, and Zošáková (2023, 12–16, 71–72) further emphasise that the quality of communication and trust, not merely technical measures, is central to reducing children's digital vulnerability.

Although conflict in the parent–child relationship showed a statistically significant positive correlation with EIU ($r = 0.181$; $p = 0.030$), it was not significant in the regression model. This result is consistent with Chen, Li, and Nie (2024, 1, 5), who found that parent–adolescent conflict is associated with problematic Internet use in adolescents indirectly through depression. Similarly, Geng, Xu, and Liu (2023, 1, 8) identified conflict as a mediator of the adverse effects of media behaviour on mental health, especially in older children.

According to Syahril et al. (2024, 1001, 1005–1006), different family orientations towards technology affect the maintenance of family relationships and the setting of boundaries for device use. A conformity-oriented parental approach may either reduce or increase family tension, depending on how technology is regulated within the family. On the basis of Li et al. (2022, 1, 18), it may be inferred that the Internet itself is not necessarily a source of conflict or alienation; rather, it becomes risky when it replaces authentic family communication and emotional connection. Their findings also suggest that meaningful Internet use, such as maintaining contact with loved ones, can strengthen interpersonal bonds, whereas excessive and superficial use may lead to social isolation and weakened family relationships. Based on the regression results, the approach bond appears to influence excessive Internet use among children within the broader construct of parent–child bonds.

This variable refers to perceived emotional availability between the child and his or her parent. The result is consistent with Mikuška et al. (2020, 1294–1295), who state that strong and supportive family and school relationships can help prevent excessive Internet use among adolescents, partly by alleviating emotional problems and influencing how young people perceive their online social interactions. On the basis of Tahir, Sarwar, and Tahir (2025, 425, 437–438), it can be argued that emotional alienation in the family increases the risk that children will retreat into the online environment and weakens the family's protective function.

In such cases, digital technologies may replace personal interaction and reduce mutual understanding, particularly when authentic communication is lacking. The importance of emotional connection is also confirmed by the short-term longitudinal study by Wright and Wachs (2020, 2390, 2398), which shows that parental social support is a strong protective factor against problematic digital media use, including cyberbullying.

Although trust ($r = -0.268$; $p = 0.001$) and communication ($r = -0.264$; $p = 0.001$) were not significant predictors of excessive Internet use (EIU) in the regression model, their negative correlations with EIU were statistically significant. This suggests that, in a larger sample, they might prove to be important factors influencing EIU through the broader family atmosphere. Alias, Nasri, and Awang (2022, 1) confirm that trust shown to children strengthens their autonomy, improves their understanding of parental Internet mediation styles, reduces parental concerns, and increases children's awareness of privacy issues.

Tahir, Sarwar, and Tahir (2025, 425, 443) also point to the paradox of digital communication: although it can weaken the ability to understand emotions, it may also facilitate the sharing of feelings. Their study, therefore, suggests that social media has a dual character: it may function as a means of detachment, but it may also support attachment formation. Research by Kaspersky Lab (2016), conducted in seven countries—the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, France, Italy, and Russia—with a sample of 3,780 families (one parent and one child in each family), revealed that 12% of parents (who regularly use social media) hide their online activity. This may further undermine trust and transparency in relationships. Procentese, Gatti, and Di Napoli (2019, 1, 6) suggest that parents who perceive social media negatively are more likely to have limited openness in communication.

The strongest correlations were identified between trust and communication ($r = 0.761$; $p < 0.001$), trust and approach ($r = 0.590$; $p < 0.001$), and

communication and approach ($r = 0.597$; $p < 0.001$), suggesting that these aspects form a relatively coherent construct of parental-bond quality. According to Ishak, Yunus, and Iskandar (2010, 1529–1530, 1532–1534), trust is built through emotional availability and mutual respect, and communication is particularly effective when it is reciprocal and collaborative.

Combining the present results with those of Tahir, Sarwar, and Tahir (2025, 443) and Syahril et al. (2024, 1008–1009) suggests that excessive digital media use may reduce the perceived value of personal interactions through technoference, resulting in weakened trust and closeness. Tahir, Sarwar, and Tahir (2025, 434–435) found that 66% of respondents reported that time spent on social media reduced time spent with family, and 57% reported reduced face-to-face communication as a result of social media use. The present findings, according to which higher closeness and attachment reduce the risk of EIU, therefore complement this picture with quantitative evidence from a different cultural context. This phenomenon is further highlighted by McDaniel and Coyne (2016, 85, 93), who state that digital devices and their interference in conversations, including conversations between partners, have adverse effects on personal life and relationships.

3.1. Limitations and future research

The main limitations of the study were the sample size and the use of a convenience sample, which limits representativeness. The research was also geographically limited, as data were collected in the Banská Bystrica region; consequently, the results cannot be generalised to a broader national context. In addition, multiple linear regression was performed on a single data set. Data collection may also have been affected by unequal access to information technology and differences in respondents' digital literacy.

Another important limitation is the low representation of fathers in the research sample (10.34%). The findings therefore predominantly reflect maternal perspectives on parent–child relationships and digital parenting practices. As a result, their generalisability to both parents is limited. Future research should seek a more balanced representation of fathers in order to capture a more comprehensive view of family dynamics in the digital environment. It should also examine other determinants, such as value orientation, media literacy, and the social context of families.

3.2. Recommendations

Our findings support the premises of the *Concept of Media Education in the Slovak Republic in the Context of Lifelong Learning* (Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic 2009, 34–39, 44–45). It is essential to develop parents' media and digital literacy systematically across various educational formats, including online courses, workshops, and webinars. Programmes should focus on strengthening critical thinking, recognising digital risks, safe Internet use, and media education in the family.

A key element of supportive digital parenting is the provision of practical tools that enable parents to participate actively by jointly viewing digital content, discussing it, setting clear rules, and communicating about digital threats. We recommend coordinated cooperation with schools to ensure comprehensive and accessible education for parents.

Such cooperation should include teachers specialising in media education and media literacy, who can inform parents about meaningful digitally supported interactions with their children, as well as digital coordinators, who can demonstrate appropriate ways to use digital platforms to communicate with children about their responsibilities and to share engaging content that supports emotionally meaningful communication. This is also an area in which novice teachers should be more actively involved, including student teachers educated according to newer didactic concepts in which teacher preparation has a stable place in future-oriented classrooms (Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic 2025).

In this context, the development of transversal competencies in student teachers is important. At the same time, family activities that do not involve technology should also be supported because they strengthen traditional forms of communication and social bonds within the family.

Conclusion

The results of the study confirm that the quality of parent–child relationships, particularly emotional closeness, plays a significant protective role against excessive Internet use among children. Specifically, closeness in the parent–child relationship and emotional availability (approach bond) were identified as statistically significant predictors, suggesting that children who experience stronger

emotional connections with their parents are less likely to engage in problematic Internet use.

Although trust and communication were not identified as statistically significant predictors in the regression models, their significant correlations with excessive Internet use indicate their potential indirect role within the broader family environment. These findings suggest that excessive Internet use should not be understood solely as an individual behavioural issue, but rather as a phenomenon embedded in the relational and emotional dynamics of the family.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening emotional bonds between parents and children and fostering open communication and mutual trust. Interventions aimed at reducing excessive Internet use should therefore extend beyond controlling screen time and should focus on the quality of family relationships. In this context, enhancing parents' media literacy also appears important because it enables them to better understand the digital environment and to guide their children's online behaviour more effectively. Further research would benefit from longitudinal designs that allow for a deeper understanding of causal relationships between family dynamics and children's online behaviour.

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Human responsibility in the digital sphere: A Christian ethical analysis of virtual conspiracy narratives

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Abstract

This article offers a conceptual analysis of virtual conspiracy narratives concerning allegedly 'bad' world-governance practices and examines their ethical implications for social perception, moral responsibility, and the formation of civic attitudes. Drawing on the anthropological and ethical implications of Genesis 1:26, it interprets human responsibility as a form of stewardship that necessarily encompasses conduct in digital environments. Conspiracy narratives concerning globalisation, democracy, transnational institutions, artificial intelligence, and ecclesial authority circulate widely on social media and frequently distort moral understandings of governance and communal life. Informed by Christian ethics, the analysis treats these narratives as phenomena that raise significant questions about trust, social cohesion, and responsible public engagement. It further identifies key tasks for religious and educational institutions: cultivating critical thinking, epistemic responsibility, and truthful communication in order to strengthen communal resilience to digital misinformation and safeguard human dignity.

Keywords

responsibility, stewardship, conspiracy narratives, digital communication, social cohesion, Christian ethics

From a Christian perspective, the world is a wounded yet fundamentally good creation entrusted to humanity for habitation, development, and responsible care. God commissions human beings to govern creation; within this horizon, stewardship acquires its meaning. Beem observes that the expressions 'to be like us' (Gen 1:26) and 'in His own image' (Gen 1:27) indicate God's intention to impart qualities that enable responsible governance. Although the fall impaired humanity's original condition, human beings retained essential attributes—such as intellect, creativity, and the capacity to love—that make responsible stewardship possible (Beem 2007, 13).

Guardini links the Biblical mandate to 'rule and administer the earth' (Gen 1:26) with the ethical dimension of human responsibility, emphasising that this mandate extends to every sphere in which human life unfolds (Guardini 2001, 21). In the contemporary context, this necessarily includes the digital environment. As Rabenda-Nowak and Wylęgły (2022, 171) observe, Christian engagement with the postmodern world must attend to 'all its changing cultural and social circumstances.' The digital sphere, therefore, cannot remain 'foreign'; it has become a domain requiring participation, discernment, and ethical vigilance as part of Christian stewardship. In this article, 'stewardship' denotes responsibility for the world-governance practices that shape contemporary social and technological realities.

Stewardship, however, must be considered alongside the contrasting phenomenon of conspiracism, which is central to this study.[1] At the lexical level, Thesaurus.com associates 'conspiracy' with such terms as plot, scheme, intrigue, and machination (Thesaurus.com n.d.). Lexical associations alone do not define conspiracism, but they help explain the term's predominantly negative connotations. Ritenbaugh likewise emphasises its orientation towards suspicion and distortion. Conspiracism introduces mistrust into the created world and may undermine cooperative action directed towards the common good (Ritenbaugh 2014).

Moreover, the apocalyptic orientation of many conspiracy narratives can generate fear, paralysis, and extreme responses. This orientation conflicts with stewardship by fostering negativity and passivity and by legitimising forms

[1] The expression 'conspiracy theory of society', rather than the noun 'conspiracism', was influentially formulated by Karl Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) as part of his critique of historicism. Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) likewise contributed to post-war analysis of conspiratorial worldviews (Arendt 1951; Butter and Knight 2015; Popper 1945).

of social disruption that threaten cohesion. Rather than encouraging constructive engagement, conspiratorial worldviews may prompt withdrawal or hostility, thereby weakening responsible public participation.

This study offers a conceptual analysis of virtual conspiracy narratives—particularly those portraying 'bad' world-governance practices—as a significant challenge to ethical responsibility in the digital sphere. It aims to clarify how such narratives shape contemporary perceptions of authority, truth, and communal life and to identify the challenges they pose to Christian communities and wider society. Methodologically, the article adopts a conceptual analysis grounded in theological anthropology and social-ethical reflection rather than an empirical research design.

1. Responsible stewardship in the digital space

As indicated above, the Church documents discussed by Paľa and Petro recognise that, despite its risks, the internet is a valuable means of communication and can serve the Church; it may also complement and support religious life. The teaching of St John Paul II makes clear that the means of mass communication must remain *means* rather than ends: tools, not goals (Paľa and Petro 2010, 53). Online risks, however, cannot be ignored. Human responsibility extends fully to digital space, in which harmful phenomena have accompanied the medium's development.[2] Misinformation and media manipulation are particularly significant because they threaten both individual discernment and social cohesion. As John Paul II (1997) observed, the media can promote the good only when grounded in ethical principles and truth.

Within the context of conspiracism,[3] every participant in the digital sphere bears responsibility for the accuracy and reliability of the information they

[2] Launched in 1969, ARPANET provided a foundational packet-switching network for academic and governmental communication. Tim Berners-Lee proposed the World Wide Web in 1989 and released it publicly in 1991; electronic mail, developed on ARPANET in the early 1970s, became widespread during the 1990s. In the mid-2000s, platforms such as Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), and Twitter (2006) helped transform the web into an interactive environment structured around user-generated content (Abbate 1999; Berners-Lee 1999).

[3] Butter and Knight (2015) caution against treating the 'conspiracy theory' as a self-evident or uniformly pejorative category. From the least to the most elaborate forms, they distinguish

share. This responsibility extends beyond personal online conduct to the protection of potentially vulnerable groups, including children, adolescents, and older adults. It becomes more urgent given the ambiguity of some conspiracy-related content, the frequently deceptive purposes of its producers, and the need to distinguish between verified conspiracies, hypotheses, rumours, and comprehensive conspiracist worldviews.

In increasingly secularised contexts, belief in God may persist while exerting limited influence on everyday life and moral orientation. Such conditions can create space for simplified interpretative narratives to circulate in digital environments (Maturkanič et al. 2023).

This responsibility deepens when one considers that conspiracy theories rarely disappear from public consciousness. As Panczová notes, they tend to re-emerge, particularly in relation to events that carry strong religious or political symbolism and align with ideologies expressing pessimistic or apocalyptic visions of the world's future (Panczová 2017b). In this sense, conspiracy theories may become effective tools for legitimising radical anti-system ideologies. They frequently 'try to name the frustrations shared by the general public and offer a suitable image of the enemy' (Panczová 2017a, 283), often by positing an alleged agenda of domination, exploitation, or destruction (Butter and Knight 2015).

The global character of conspiracy narratives becomes especially visible online, where communication transcends many constraints of physical time and space. In this environment, virtual and viral conspiracy narratives acquire distinctive features. According to Pocheptsov (2019), their impact is intensified by rapid dissemination, broad reach, targeted emotional influence, and manipulative communication strategies. Conspiracism typically favours conflict-driven narratives that increase engagement and accelerate circulation. These narratives may subsequently migrate from online settings into offline life, contributing to social tension and instability.

2. Conspiracy theories and the character of digital media

The tendency of online narratives to spill over into offline social reality draws attention to two key concepts: 'virtual' and 'viral'. The term '*virtual*' refers to events

conspiracy rumour, *conspiracy hypothesis*, *conspiracy imagination*, *conspiracy ideology*, and *conspiracy myth* or *mythology*.

or interactions within a digital or simulated environment (Rheingold 1991; Lévy 1998). By contrast, '*viral*' denotes the rapid and extensive dissemination of content across digital platforms when images, videos, or messages gain visibility through large-scale sharing (Berger 2013; Nahon and Hemsley 2013).

Digital platforms and social media play a decisive role in circulating virtual and often simultaneously viral conspiracy narratives. As noted above, the structural features of social media facilitate the acceptance and dissemination of such narratives. By altering traditional communication patterns and encouraging continuous participation, digital platforms provide broad access to conspiracy content, which users create, share, and modify (Levy 2017). This dynamic creates substantial challenges for the early detection and containment of false information (Khan, Michalas, and Akhunzada 2021).

The technological architecture of digital media enables rapid, often unfiltered access to information and may expose users to few balancing or contradictory viewpoints. Repeated exposure to congenial views can reinforce attitudinal biases, intensify emotional responses, and deepen affective polarisation (Serrano-Puche 2021).

The spread of conspiracy narratives is driven not only by technology but also by cognitive and psychological tendencies. Human curiosity and the desire to explain complex events can be exploited by oversimplified or emotionally charged narratives (Willing 2021). Although such narratives offer the appearance of insight, they often function as epistemic shortcuts that bypass the rigorous processes required to acquire reliable knowledge. Sustained exposure to persuasive online content cannot substitute for systematic inquiry; instead, it may generate misplaced confidence and an illusion of understanding.

The appeal of conspiracy narratives lies partly in their narrative structure. Conspiracy and debunking videos can mobilise emotions such as fear and trust to engage audiences (Kim and Chen 2024), while conspiracy narratives themselves offer seemingly clear explanations for complex phenomena. Their plots are often presented as straightforward accounts that identify specific individuals or groups as responsible for major events (Sieg 2020). These stories rely heavily on intuitive cognitive processing, allowing rapid judgements without deeper analytical reflection (Brashier and Schacter 2020). By appealing to prior commitments and presenting partial interpretations as comprehensive accounts, conspiracy narratives circumvent the contextual and evidential work required for reliable understanding.

These dynamics are fully visible in contemporary digital media, where users interact, circulate content, and form networks or communities in technologically mediated settings (Tuten and Solomon 2015). Analyses of Twitter data illustrate how such platforms support information dissemination, sentiment expression, and networked communication (Shankar and Tewari 2021). Together, these technological and psychological mechanisms contribute significantly to the spread of cyber conspiracy narratives concerning 'bad' forms of stewardship in contemporary society.

3. Illustrative clusters of virtual and viral conspiracy narratives concerning 'bad' stewardship

As indicated above, 'conspiracism' commonly carries negative connotations (Ritenbaugh 2014). In the context of 'bad' world-governance practices, such narratives function as distorted interpretations of stewardship, framing global, political, technological, and religious developments as deliberately harmful or hostile.

To structure these patterns analytically, six illustrative clusters of virtual and viral conspiracy narratives are identified below. These clusters represent recurring thematic configurations rather than an exhaustive typology.

3.1. Globalisation as concealed domination

Conspiracy narratives about globalisation combine motifs drawn from anti-Masonry, antisemitism, radical 'anti-Zionism', anti-Americanism, and anti-capitalism. They portray globalisation as a destructive, concealed process orchestrated by malign actors. In some versions, the United States and Israel appear as 'absolute enemies' within a supposed 'dark alliance' associated with secularisation and pluralist democracy (Butter and Knight 2015).

Core function: These narratives reinterpret global interdependence as a plot of domination, *thereby* undermining solidarity and ethical cooperation.

3.2. Democracy as a façade for global oppression

This cluster depicts democracy not as a framework of shared responsibility but as a mechanism manipulated by 'new rulers of the world'. Conspiratorial

narratives emphasise an antagonistic division between dominant elites and oppressed populations, with manipulation, secrecy, and deceit as central motifs (Butter and Knight 2015).

Core function: These narratives delegitimise democratic institutions and erode civic responsibility.

3.3. The American 'hidden government' (deep state)

Conspiracist accounts posit an invisible network operating behind U.S. institutions and directing global politics, finance, and crises. Some narratives attribute the emergence or spread of HIV/AIDS and SARS-CoV-2 to U.S. state actors or laboratories.[4] Related narratives portray the United States as covertly intervening in other states' domestic politics.

Core function: These narratives erode trust in public authority and weaken responsible discernment.

3.4. Transnational institutions as instruments of control

Institutions such as the EU, UN, and NATO are depicted as hostile actors working against citizens' interests. The UN is associated with the 'New World Order'.[5] In a nationally representative 2021 survey, 61 per cent of respondents in Montenegro agreed that a secret group of powerful people controls developments in the world; the same source reported substantial cross-national variation in endorsement of this belief (UNICEF Montenegro 2021).

Core function: These narratives distort international cooperation and portray peacebuilding structures as tools of oppression.

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[4] Conspiracy narratives surrounding HIV/AIDS have included allegations that the virus was engineered to target racial minorities; COVID-19 narratives have likewise attributed SARS-CoV-2 to deliberate laboratory manufacture or release. These claims are analytically distinct and should not be conflated with evidence-based inquiry into pathogen origins (Bogart and Thorburn 2005; Douglas 2021).

[5] The 'New World Order' conspiracy alleges that a small transnational elite controls governments, industry, civil society, and the media in pursuit of a single world government, often through manufactured crises. Although its motifs have older roots, the narrative became especially prominent in U.S. far-right and anti-globalist discourse during the late twentieth century and has since been applied to events including the COVID-19 pandemic (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2022).

3.5. Artificial intelligence as an existential threat

Conspiracy narratives portray AI as a technology destined to control or destroy humanity. In these accounts, AI represents the culmination of irresponsible governance and technological hubris.

Core function: These narratives amplify fear of technological progress and reinterpret responsibility as inevitable loss of control.

3.6. The 'hidden Church' and secret Christian knowledge

These narratives assert that the Church conceals esoteric truths, ancient teachings, or spiritual knowledge and thereby manipulates believers. Radical versions deny the historicity of Jesus, despite ancient non-Christian testimony, including Tacitus's Annals 15.44 (Van Voorst 2000, 39–53).

Core function: These narratives undermine ecclesial authority, portraying stewardship as deliberate concealment rather than pastoral responsibility.

Table 1. Illustrative clusters of virtual and viral conspiracy narratives concerning 'bad' stewardship

Cluster	Central idea	Core function (ethical/social impact)
Globalisation	Global processes allegedly controlled by hidden hostile actors	Undermines global solidarity; reframes cooperation as domination
Democracy	Democratic governance interpreted as manipulation by elites	Delegitimises institutions; weakens civic responsibility
Deep state (USA)	Hidden networks directing global events from within U.S. structures	Erodes trust in authority; fuels suspicion and resentment
Transnational institutions	EU, UN, and NATO presented as oppressive global forces	Distorts understanding of cooperation and peacebuilding
Artificial intelligence	AI seen as future dominator of humanity	Amplifies fear; portrays technological stewardship as failure
Hidden Church	Church accused of concealing true Christian teachings	Weakens ecclesial trust; reframes spiritual stewardship as secrecy

Source: Author's own elaboration

Although these clusters differ in thematic content, they share a common ethical dynamic: they simplify complex realities, construct hostile 'hidden enemies', erode trust in legitimate authorities, and displace responsibility from

individuals onto imagined conspiratorial forces. In this way, they challenge responsible stewardship by fostering fear, passivity, and social fragmentation. These mechanisms illustrate the broader ethical and social implications of virtual conspiracy narratives in the digital sphere.

4. Ethical and social implications of virtual conspiracy narratives for responsible stewardship

The preceding sections have argued that conspiracy narratives concerning 'bad' world-governance practices, interpreted here as distortions of stewardship, are shaped by digital-media structures, users' cognitive tendencies, and the narrative logic of conspiratorial clusters. The six illustrative clusters show how virtual and viral conspiracies simplify complex realities, construct symbolic enemies, and undermine ethical responsibility. Such dynamics conflict with John Paul II's account of global communication as a medium that should serve truth, proclamation, and communion (John Paul II 2001).

These mechanisms are especially potent in digital environments that reward speed, emotional intensity, and repetition. As shown above, digital-media structures can reinforce intuitive judgements, amplify existing beliefs, and encourage engagement with content that resonates with fear, anxiety, or ideological predispositions (Levy 2017; Serrano-Puche 2021). As Pocheptsov (2019) emphasises, the virtual sphere enables rapid dissemination and targeted influence and permits online conflict narratives to migrate repeatedly into offline tensions.

From the perspective of Christian anthropology, these developments pose serious ethical and pastoral challenges. Stewardship, grounded in Gen 1:26 and interpreted by Beem (2007, 13) and Guardini (2001, 21), requires responsibility, discernment, and fidelity to truth. Conspiracism counters this vocation by nurturing distrust and redirecting attention away from constructive engagement in communal and moral life. In doing so, it disrupts the orientation towards truth that is essential to Christian responsibility.

Conspiracy narratives also have significant implications for social cohesion. They construct antagonistic divisions between 'oppressors' and 'victims', recast democratic processes as deception, and depict global or ecclesial actors as hostile forces operating in secret. Such portrayals erode the common good—a central principle of Catholic social teaching—by weakening the interpersonal trust and mutual responsibility required for cooperative social life. These dynamics

may be especially consequential for younger users, whose developmental stage, identity formation, and intensive participation in digital environments can increase exposure to manipulative content (Tóthová and Šlosár 2018).

Moreover, conspiracy narratives challenge core elements of Christian moral life. By generating apocalyptic visions that obscure hope, fostering resentment that disrupts love of neighbour, and undermining the trust that sustains faith, they distort the theological virtues and weaken the moral fabric of communities. They also threaten human dignity by instrumentalising fear, exploiting cognitive vulnerabilities, and reducing individuals to passive recipients of external manipulation. Such tendencies contradict the Christian understanding of the person as a seeker of truth, endowed with intellect and conscience and capable of responsible discernment.

In this context, Christianity faces the task of showing how conspiracy narratives distort not only social reality but also moral and spiritual judgement. Digital misinformation can contribute to a malformed conscience by encouraging rapid, emotionally charged interpretations at the expense of patient and truthful discernment. As noted above, virtual and viral conspiracy narratives can lead to ideological rigidity, polarisation, and, in some cases, religious or political extremism (Stacy 2023). To counter these tendencies, religious communities can cultivate spaces in which truth is sought collaboratively, questions are welcomed, and shared discernment supports both individual and collective moral resilience.

Digital media actors also bear responsibility in this landscape. Their task extends beyond disseminating accurate information to supporting users' critical competence. Educational formats, analytical commentary, and moderated discussion can strengthen epistemic responsibility by helping individuals evaluate sources and distinguish verified facts from speculative narratives. By fostering digital discernment, media actors can contribute to resilient and cohesive communities capable of resisting virtual manipulation.

In summary, resisting the intellectual and spiritual appeal of conspiracy narratives requires coordinated action by individuals, religious communities, digital media actors, and society as a whole. Responsible stewardship in the digital sphere entails truthfulness, vigilance, and ethical engagement rooted in respect for human dignity, the common good, and the pursuit of truth. These considerations frame the conclusion, which synthesises the ethical and social implications discussed above and identifies future directions for cultivating epistemic responsibility and social cohesion in an era shaped by digital misinformation.

The analysis presented in this article highlights the need for responsible stewardship through truthful and critical engagement with digital environments. Ethical formation today requires digital discernment: Christians are called to cultivate epistemic responsibility and resist reductive or manipulative narratives that undermine communal life. Strengthening information literacy is essential because virtual conspiracy narratives erode trust, fracture communities, and fuel polarisation. Religious, educational, and civic institutions therefore play a key role in fostering environments grounded in truth, transparency, and solidarity and in promoting a more resilient and ethically formed public sphere.

This study is conceptual and does not involve empirical research; its conclusions rest on conceptual and theological analysis. The six clusters presented here are illustrative analytical categories rather than an exhaustive typology, and culturally specific variations may reveal other dynamics. Furthermore, because digital platforms evolve rapidly, the mechanisms described may change over time. Despite these limitations, the study offers a conceptual framework for understanding virtual conspiracism and its ethical, social, and theological implications.

Conclusions

This article has examined virtual conspiracy narratives depicting 'bad' world-governance practices and analysed their ethical implications through the lenses of Christian anthropology and digital stewardship. By outlining six clusters, it has shown how virtual and viral conspiracism can reshape public perception, distort trust, and challenge responsible civic and ecclesial engagement. Digital media intensify these effects by amplifying emotional content, reinforcing cognitive biases, and circulating reductive explanations of complex realities.

From a Christian perspective, these developments touch the core of human responsibility. According to the mandate in Gen 1:26, stewardship is constitutive of human identity. As Beem (2007, 13) and Guardini (2001, 21) argue, intellect, creativity, moral agency, and the capacity to love enable human beings to act as responsible stewards within the digital sphere, where truth is communicated and social narratives are formed. Conspiratorial thinking can undermine this vocation by substituting suspicion for truth, fragmentation for unity, and imagined hidden forces for responsible governance.

Digital stewardship therefore entails more than technical literacy; it also requires epistemic responsibility, moral discernment, and commitment to the common good. Conspiracy narratives weaken these virtues by eroding institutional trust, dividing communities, and encouraging fatalistic worldviews. They exploit human vulnerabilities, including those of young people navigating identity in digital environments. In response, truthful communication, critical reflection, and community-oriented responsibility are essential elements of Christian engagement with digital culture.

Responsible participation in the digital sphere is therefore inseparable from the broader Christian call to justice, peace, and solidarity. Stewardship, understood as the ethical governance of physical and virtual environments, must remain grounded in human dignity and oriented towards the common good. In an age marked by digital misinformation, the call to truthfulness is especially urgent. Embracing this responsibility can contribute to resilient, discerning, and ethically grounded societies capable of responding to digital challenges with wisdom and hope.

As digital culture evolves, stewardship must be understood as a dynamic responsibility requiring vigilance and interior discernment. Conspiracy narratives can distort public understanding and affect spiritual life by replacing contemplation with suspicion and diminishing hope. Christian anthropology offers a stable foundation for navigating this landscape by affirming that truth, dignity, and solidarity are indispensable to every culture, physical or digital. The long-term task is not only to resist misinformation but also to cultivate digital spaces and personal dispositions in which truthful communication and moral clarity can flourish.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that no commercial, financial, or other relationships could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Care For the Elderly in the Polish Family: The Socio-Moral Aspect

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine care for older family members. The point of departure is the concept of the dignity of older persons, the proper understanding of which provides the normative basis for caregiving. The article also discusses loneliness among older adults and forms of support for seniors within the family. The study is theoretical and is situated at the intersection of sociology and moral theology. Using a secondary analysis of the available literature in sociology, moral theology, and Catholic social teaching, the authors synthesize the issue and indicate both the need for care for older persons and possible ways of providing such care.

Keywords

care, older people, family

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In the social sphere, many groups require various forms of care. One such group is older persons. Seniors are often associated with the need for care arising from illness or functional dependence. Some older adults indeed require such support; others remain professionally and socially active and experience the "autumn of life" in an active way. Even active seniors, however, are not always able to meet all their needs independently. At certain stages of life or in specific situations, they also require support and assistance.

Pope Francis emphasized the need to support older persons in various ways, stating: "The elderly must not be left by themselves, they must live within the family, in the community, with everyone's affection. And if they cannot live with their families, we must go visit them and stay close to them" (Francis 2024). Care for older persons, therefore, becomes a moral duty, a point that requires particular emphasis in the context of contemporary social changes, especially population ageing.

This article addresses care for older persons within the family. First, it presents the concept of human dignity, which is frequently misunderstood but remains the foundation of care. It then discusses loneliness among older adults as a pressing problem in caregiving and considers efforts to mitigate it by building support networks for seniors, especially within the family environment.

1. The Dignity of Older Persons

A fundamental issue in understanding old age and older persons is their dignity. Etymologically, the word "dignity" derives from the Latin *dignitas*, meaning personal worth or merit. In its basic sense, it expresses the universal conviction that human beings occupy a distinctive status in relation to other created entities. The dignity inherent in every human being is innate and inalienable (Machinek 2005, 217–220).

In contemporary scholarship, dignity has become an object of inquiry across disciplines, from philosophy to the social sciences. This allows the concept to be examined from different perspectives, but it also produces a rapid evolution of meaning depending on the adopted paradigm. The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith recognizes this situation, noting both the increasing sensitivity to human dignity and the many misunderstandings that distort the concept (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 2024).

It is therefore necessary to distinguish between different meanings of dignity in order to identify the one that concerns the essence of the human person. In relation to older persons, Stanisława Steuden summarizes the position of scholars of ageing, who point to four dimensions of dignity: personal dignity (Menschenwürde), dignity related to personal identity, dignity related to merit, and dignity related to self-esteem or moral status (Steuden 2014, 217–220).

In its basic sense, personal dignity arises from the mere fact of being a person. It is unconditional and belongs to every human being, regardless of social status. Fundamental human rights derive from personal dignity and belong to every person regardless of age.

Dignity related to identity does not have the same unconditional and immutable character. It may change under the influence of age, emotional states, and psychophysical conditions. It is connected with the roles a person has fulfilled throughout life, with the historical context in which the person lives and with social status. Dignity related to identity is vulnerable to being wounded, just as the person is vulnerable to injury.

Dignity related to self-esteem is the sense of self-worth and self-validation that arises from behaviors consistent with one's adopted value system or from the way one's needs are met. This form of dignity is fragile and depends on the individual's particular way of experiencing the world and may be undermined by external factors affecting the experience of old age.

Finally, dignity based on merit results from social respect and recognition for fulfilling specific social duties or holding particular positions. It is therefore grounded in acknowledgment by others (Steuden 2014, 146).

Recognizing the value of this classification, it must be stressed that care for older persons should give priority to the dimension of dignity that does not change under the influence of the environment or other external factors. This dimension is ontological personal dignity. It is emphasized in the teaching of the Catholic Church and in international documents.

This dignity is "inalienably grounded in his or her very being, which prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state, or situation the person may ever encounter. This principle, which is fully recognizable even by reason alone, underlies the primacy of the human person and the protection of human rights. In the light of Revelation, the Church resolutely reiterates and confirms the ontological dignity of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed in Jesus Christ. From this truth, the Church draws the reasons for her commitment to the weak and those less endowed with power,

always insisting on the primacy of the human person and the defense of his or her dignity beyond every circumstance" (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 2024, 24).

The possession of personal dignity in the ontological sense indicates that the human person is a unique creature on earth. This recognition calls for the greatest possible care, regardless of the condition in which a person finds him or herself, and for the creation of conditions that allow for the fullest possible development, including in later life.

The United Nations makes the same point in the *Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing*, which calls for action to enhance and recognize the dignity of older persons and to enable them to age with dignity. Older persons deserve respect and care, and discrimination against them violates their dignity. The document also stresses that disability or any other ground cannot justify unfair treatment of older persons (United Nations 2002).

Reference to the dignity of the human person demonstrates that this value is universal. It exceeds ideological and confessional boundaries. Human dignity is inviolable, indivisible, and absolute and rooted in the ontological structure of the human being. It is therefore independent of historical and social context, although it may be demeaned in practice. For this reason, the possession of ontological dignity requires opposition to everything that violates it. Thus, everything that "is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia or willful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed" (Second Vatican Council 1965, 27).

Respect for the dignity of older persons is therefore a key principle for everyone who cares for them. Caregivers should do everything possible to respect personal dignity in the ontological sense because this dimension is foundational. At the same time, they should oppose all actions that violate such dignity.

2. The Problem of Loneliness among Older Persons

When addressing loneliness among older adults, it is necessary first to distinguish between two phenomena that often overlap but should not be treated as identical: loneliness and social isolation. Social isolation has an objective dimension and refers to the actual absence or paucity of social contacts in one's immediate environment. Loneliness, by contrast, is a subjective and emotional experience of insufficient connection, understanding, or support (Wawrzyniak 2015, 56).

Loneliness is a subjective feeling of a lack of presence and support. It is possible to live among relatives and still suffer from loneliness. This occurs when acceptance, the recognition of needs, shared experience, love, friendship, or affection are lacking. Loneliness arises from individual needs and experiences and always has a negative dimension. It may intensify in response to emerging deficits, including the loss of a loved one, illness, or disability (Trafiałek 2016, 147).

The history of family life has a crucial influence on the intensity of loneliness in old age. Loneliness will be experienced differently by someone who was actively involved in family life and had children and grandchildren than by someone who has lived alone throughout his or her life. It is highly probable that people who did not develop inner autonomy, independence, or self-identification will experience loneliness more intensely. Higher levels of loneliness also affect individuals who overinvested in professional life or maintained excessive expectations toward life (Wrótniak 2015, 90–97).

Although loneliness is a subjective experience of a "lack" of something, its development is also influenced by external factors. The first is a lack of interest from close relatives. The reasons for this condition vary. It may result from neglect by those who have a moral duty to care for the older person. Adult children have such an obligation toward their parents and grandparents. At the social level, many models of intergenerational care have been developed, including Bengtson and Schrader's (1982) model of intergenerational solidarity and the exchange model, in which support is provided through the exchange of goods between parents and adult children (Tobiasz-Adamczyk 2013, 202).

The moral imperative remains unchanged, especially for believers, because it derives from the commandment: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (Exod. 20:12). This commandment imposes specific requirements on Christians, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: "The fourth commandment

reminds grown children of their responsibilities toward their parents. As much as they can, they must give them material and moral support in old age and in times of illness, loneliness, or distress" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2003, 2218).

The second factor contributing to loneliness is the feeling of loss. It may occur on several levels; for instance, it may result from the "empty nest" syndrome caused by children leaving home, from widowhood, or from the intense professional lives of relatives who fail to notice the older person in the family. Sometimes, however, the feeling of loss is caused by seniors themselves who withdraw from social contacts (Błaszczuk and Rynkowska 2016, 70).

The third factor contributing to loneliness is informational exclusion. As Pronzato notes, the loneliness of older persons is also caused by a lack of information (Pronzato 2006, 80). This may result from health conditions that make access to information difficult, such as impaired sight or hearing. Moreover, in a period of rapid technological development, older adults' technical competences may no longer be sufficient. This produces exclusion that not only limits access to information but also deepens the sense of inadequacy and thereby intensifies loneliness.

Loneliness is experienced by older persons as an adverse state with specific consequences. "Loneliness creates the danger of becoming dependent on a caregiver or simply the presence of another person" (Wawrzyniak 2015, 56). One way to overcome loneliness is to build relationships with others and seek a "kindred spirit." This involves deep emotional bonds, trust, respect, and sincerity. A person reveals the truth about himself or herself to another and expects similar openness in return (Wrótniak 2015, 90–97).

This process may, however, become pathological. For an older person, loneliness may lead to an attachment that becomes dependence. Caregiving itself may become a pretext for frequent visits and constant presence. This gradually consumes more of the caregiver's time, and the accompanying emotional blackmail may intensify the dependence. Although such a situation may be easier for a person outside the family to resolve, it is much more difficult for a close relative. Resolution requires clear boundaries so that caregiving does not dominate the caregiver's life.

Loneliness among older persons may also expose them to various dangers, including increased vulnerability to abuse. Depending on the classification used, the most common forms of abuse are physical, psychological, and emotional; financial exploitation; sexual abuse; and neglect. Older persons are vulnerable

to abuse because of their limited functional capacity and dependence on their environment. They often fear disclosing abuse and frequently do not know where to seek help (Mordawska 2017, 126–137).

Loneliness is an additional factor that increases vulnerability to abuse. Older persons may accept various forms of mistreatment because they fear rejection, abandonment, or even greater harm from the caregiver. The relationship between loneliness and abuse is often rooted in emotional dependency. The caregiver may make the older person dependent in order to control his or her entire existence. In some cases, the older person may not even be aware of being abused, and a deep emotional bond with the caregiver may serve to justify different forms of mistreatment.

The destructive character of loneliness is also visible in illness, not only at the somatic but also at the psychological level. Loneliness often contributes to depression. Among older adults, minor depression, also called subclinical depression, is more common than major depression. Its symptoms are less severe than those of major depression and include lowered mood, reduced motivation, and, at times, loss of interest in daily activities. Depressive states may also exacerbate somatic ailments and lead to a general decline in health (Hoffmann-Aulich et al. 2016, 281).

3. Family Support Networks for Older Persons

One factor driving changes in the demographic structure of society is the increase in average life expectancy, which results from improvements in medical care and living standards in many parts of the world. Beneficial changes have been observed across age groups. Over the past five decades, the estimated life expectancy of the global population has increased substantially: "The expected average life expectancy of a person born in 1971 was 58 years, while in 2012, the estimates rose to 71 years" (Lipczyński 2024). According to the Statistics Poland 2025 life-expectancy tables, the projected further life expectancy at age sixty in Poland is more than 254 months for both women and men (Statistics Poland 2025). Among all older age groups in Poland, the largest increase by 2050 is expected among persons aged eighty-five and over. It is forecast that the size of this group will increase by more than 2.5 times in comparison with 2021. In demography, this process is described as the "double ageing" of the population, because "the number of old-old (aged 75–84) is growing faster than the

younger old (aged 65–74), and the oldest-old (aged 85 and over) are growing the fastest" (Dragan 2011).

The extension of human life is an optimistic phenomenon, provided that health and both physical and mental fitness are preserved in old age. The life course, including the universal impact of population ageing, has both personal and social implications. A response to the ageing of society requires "achieving a balance between sustainable solutions for the social care system and enhancing intergenerational solidarity and justice between young and older people" (European Commission 2021). Longer life expectancy increases the risk of limitations in the ability to perform daily activities independently. It is therefore necessary to create a comprehensive support system for older persons, including care facilities and home-care services provided by professional caregivers.

For both seniors and the care system, the preferred solution is often for older persons to remain in their own homes for as long as possible. For older adults, a support network is crucial in overcoming the challenges of daily life. For this reason, the family potentially constitutes the first and most important support network for seniors, because relatives often understand the needs of older persons better and can provide support more quickly. According to analyses by the Statistics Poland, older persons who become incapacitated expect help almost exclusively from family members: 64 percent of respondents indicated a spouse or partner, and nearly 33 percent indicated children and grandchildren. The data show that, as age increases, the importance of a spouse or life partner as a source of help with household chores or illness decreases in favor of younger generations: children, including sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, and grandchildren. This shift is understandable: First, the number of people living alone increases because of widowhood; second, help for seniors often requires physical fitness, which is strongly age-related. A family support network may also provide psychological support, because "this dimension of assistance is best diagnosed with whom we feel most strongly connected, who suits us the best characterologically, with whom we feel good, trust, and whose presence has a calming effect on our psyche" (Główny Urząd Statystyczny 2021).

The Statistics Poland's study on social cohesion has shown that seniors would turn primarily to family members in cases of sadness or depression: 45 percent of respondents indicated a spouse or partner, whereas more than 37 percent indicated children, including sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, and grandchildren. The analysis also included support in the event of financial difficulties. Nearly 80 percent of persons aged sixty-five and older indicated family members,

whereas less than 5 percent stated that they would turn to friends or acquaintances for help with financial problems.

It is nevertheless difficult to discuss the family as the most important support network for care of older persons without considering its dynamic structure. The decline in child mortality and the increase in adult life expectancy since the mid-twentieth century have made multigenerational families a common phenomenon. Although the practice of several generations living under one roof is diminishing in favor of nuclear families, its consequences are visible in the emergence of the "sandwich generation;" that is, persons aged 45–59 who are "burdened with a dual family balance" (Szukalski 2008, 31). Members of the "sandwich generation" provide material and emotional support both to their children under eighteen and to at least one parent aged sixty-five or older. According to Wiesława Walkowska, for this reason social policy should pay attention "not only to care services for the oldest generation but also to creating a supportive environment for the continued development and successful aging of the so-called middle generation" (Walkowska 2018, 9).

Multigenerationality is also accompanied by an extension of the period spent in the same family status: it is now common for grandparents to live to see the thirtieth or even fortieth birthdays of their grandchildren. According to Piotr Szukalski, "the result of this situation is, on the one hand, a delay in the occurrence of changes in family status caused by the death of close relatives, and on the other hand, the progressing democratization of intra-family, intergenerational relationships" (Szukalski 2008, 31). Moreover, generational homogenization, resulting from declining fertility and the postponement of procreative plans, has led to generations composed of persons of similar age. This means that "the siblings of seniors are individuals close to their age, and therefore this is a group from which more intensive support in advanced age is difficult to expect" (Szukalski 2008, 32). Low fertility is reflected in an old-age index of 122: for every 100 "grandchildren" (children aged 0–14), there are 122 "grandparents" (persons aged sixty-five and over), with a population difference of 1.3 million in favor of grandparents (Statistics Poland 2022).

Cultural and ideological changes affecting family structures also play a crucial role in support for older persons. Over time, family members have become more geographically mobile: children often leave their hometowns, and young people frequently move from rural areas to urban agglomerations. This mobility is associated with the social advancement of offspring and often significantly reduces family contacts. In addition, perceptions of family obligations have

changed among young people, middle-aged persons, and older persons themselves: the family is "increasingly seen not as an institution fully responsible for caring for elderly members, but as one that shares this responsibility with public agencies" (Szukalski 2008, 33).

4. Family Care Networks for Seniors

In contemporary social structures, persons aged fifty and over still include representatives of the post-war baby boom. Many remain professionally active and have a changed perspective on "old age and the concept of active aging" (Walkowska 2018, 10). Despite social change, in the Polish context the family retains a high position in the hierarchy of values, and adult children—especially women—feel obliged to support and care for ageing parents. A woman aged fifty or over who assumes responsibility for caring for seniors "does so permanently, at the sacrifice of family life, free time, and simultaneously giving up her own professional development or other life activities. It is not easy for her to balance professional life with caring for dependent elderly individuals" (Mirewska 2016, 90). The type and frequency of support provided by women and men differ. Women more often provide systematic support, whereas men tend to provide incidental support, because "men are less likely than women to help seniors with services such as cleaning and cooking, which are culturally assigned to women" (Szweda-Lewandowska 2014, 92).

Among motives for providing care to seniors, setting an example for children or grandchildren is frequently mentioned. According to the report Family Caregivers of the Elderly: Problems, Needs, Challenges for Social Policy, caregivers believed that, by caring for a senior, they were "teaching younger generations to respect the elderly and setting an example of how to behave toward those in need of help. This gave them a sense of security based on the belief that they, too, would receive help and care if they needed it" (Szlązak, Piłat, and Sarata 2015). Another motive is the feeling of being needed, which is characteristic of people leaving the labor market and seeking activities that provide satisfaction and structure life in a manner similar to their previous employment. A further motive is "repaying a debt" or fulfilling a duty. This is especially relevant in care for one's own parents, because it involves gratitude for care received during childhood.

Research conducted by Wiesława Walkowska indicates that women regard help for the older generation as their duty toward both parents and parents-in-law,

especially when the husband is an only child or has only brothers. In seniors' daily lives, nonfinancial support is more significant than financial assistance. This includes help with cleaning, shopping, and personal care. In everyday life, women manage seniors' household tasks, including cleaning, laundry, meal preparation, and purchasing medication. They also assume administrative and bureaucratic duties on behalf of those in their care, such as "efforts to determine the degree of disability, applying for rehabilitation stays or sanatorium visits, helping with tax returns, and purchasing glasses or orthopedic equipment" (Szlązak, Piłat, and Sarata 2015).

A person engaged in care for an older individual purchases household accessories, organizes the repair of household appliances, and is often compelled to arrange renovation work to adapt the home to the resident's needs. As Elżbieta Mirewska emphasizes, the caregiver's schedule also includes responsibilities related to the organization of medical and rehabilitation care: "the caregiver […] must ensure the coordination […] of activities, while also remembering the scheduled dates of medical appointments […]. They often themselves provide transport for medical examinations, treatments, and rehabilitation, and assist during these appointments. Their presence with the senior is indispensable in interactions with medical specialists, as it determines the quality of home care provided" (Mirewska 2016, 91).

Care for seniors is not limited to practical or financial support; it is closely connected with emotional care. In her research, Wiesława Walkowska emphasizes that organizing and transporting relatives to specialist physicians makes many women "feel very mentally burdened by the daily complaining, listening, and grievances of their loved ones. Moreover, they are constantly on call, ready to help at any time of the day" (Walkowska 2018, 10). The scope of home care for seniors expands over time as ailments increase and disability deepens. As Mirewska notes, "the situation is complicated by […] changes in the health status of seniors, e.g. a senior with Alzheimer's disease, senile dementia, or an oncology patient. The caregiver's scope of activities then expands to include additional care and hygiene activities such as: washing, feeding, dressing, administering medications, performing basic bedside rehabilitation procedures, etc." (Mirewska 2016, 92).

Caring for seniors involves sacrifice, rarely provides a stable sense of satisfaction, and often negatively affects caregivers' psychophysical well-being. Physical strain, including back pain and varicose veins, is among the most common ailments and is largely associated with neglect of one's own health. Caregivers

"do not manage their ailments, do not undergo examinations, and visits to the doctor are only related to monitoring the condition of the dependent person" (Szlązak, Piłat, and Sarata 2015). A lack of time and the inability to leave the senior unattended cause caregivers' health problems to recede into the background. Physical difficulties, together with the burden of daily tasks that generate stress and fear, may lead to depressive states in caregivers. Caregivers report that they "are mentally exhausted, often cry, and resort to antidepressant medications […] due to being constantly on alert, they cannot sleep peacefully" (Szlązak, Piłat, and Sarata 2015).

Providing support to older persons significantly affects family relationships. Many caregivers devote themselves to the dependent person, which prevents them from maintaining satisfactory relationships with other family members. "Dedicating oneself to an elderly person is very often associated with resentment from close family members towards the caregiver, especially when they neglect other social roles, such as that of a mother or wife" (Szlązak, Piłat, and Sarata 2015). Disruptions in family relationships, difficulties arising from care for seniors, and the sense of life passing may produce rebellion, irritation, and stress, sometimes leading to abusive behaviors. "However, the most common form of abuse in the home environment is considered to be neglect" (Pawlikowska-Łagód and Sak 2016, 56) along with physical violence. According to Emilia Jaroszewska, "these feelings are usually reinforced by the lack of support from the partner, who perceives caregiving tasks as an obvious/natural duty of women—even if it concerns his own parents" (Jaroszewska 2012, 118).

Fatigue, a lack of time for rest and personal activities, and the neglect of family relationships cause frustration and stress among caregivers. Ultimately, this may lead to a condition often described as caregiver stress syndrome (CSS). According to Wiesława Walkowska, support and facilitation for family members who care for seniors are necessary. Local initiatives should play a crucial role and may include comprehensive information provision, prevention programs promoting physical activity and healthy lifestyles, senior-friendly places that relieve family members in caregiving, financing of day medical-care homes from the basket of guaranteed services, and support for volunteering. Educational initiatives addressed to schools and concerning healthy lifestyles and conscious adulthood should also be mentioned.

For family caregivers of older persons, temporary replacements in care (respite care or temporary full-time care facilities), help in caregiving, opportunities to discuss problems, and assistance in organizing transport are crucial.

One solution to many caregiving dilemmas could be a care assistant: "The care assistant should indicate effective techniques for performing caregiving tasks and provide guidance and information […] This person should visit the senior and their caregiver once or twice a week initially, and periodically monitor the situation in later stages […] The role of the care assistant would involve acting as an intermediary between the caregiver and the institution, as well as providing advisory and informational support" (Szlązak, Piłat, and Sarata 2015).

According to Remigiusz J. Kijak and Zofia Szarota, "not only have demographic indicators changed, but so have the social boundaries of old age: currently, it is achievable for the majority of people. It is the duty of the state and society to create optimal conditions for every individual to live and age successfully. Through skillfully implemented social policies, the risk of social marginalization of seniors is minimized, and the risk of senility is reduced" (Kijak and Szarota 2013, 23). Social policy is linked to the inalienable human right to the inviolability of dignity. This is particularly significant for seniors, who may struggle to adapt to current social conditions because of physical and mental challenges.

Summary

Care for older persons should become a moral imperative for contemporary societies in which the senior population is significantly increasing. This requires numerous changes, not only in the better organization of care but, above all, in the transformation of social attitudes so that the presence of seniors is recognized both in society and in families.

The foundation of care for older persons is respect for their dignity. This dignity is personal dignity in the ontological sense: innate, inalienable, and independent of external factors. Treating the person as unique and as occupying a privileged place in the creative act of God belongs to the very essence of this understanding.

One of the greatest forms of suffering experienced by older persons is loneliness, which arises from the felt absence of another person. To counteract loneliness and other difficulties associated with the "autumn of life," comprehensive care is necessary. Although such care may take various forms, care within the family remains especially important because it offers substantial potential for compensating for the deficits that appear in old age. It requires sacrifice and may

not always be adequately understood by contemporary societies. Nevertheless, it shows that the family is not only a basic social unit but also a community of life and love.

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Menstrual Poverty Affecting Young Roma Women in Rural Areas

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of menstrual poverty on self-perception among young Roma women from marginalized rural communities, with particular attention to their emotional well-being, social relationships, self-esteem, and educational participation. Based on focus group discussions and qualitative analysis, the article explores how limited access to menstrual hygiene products, inadequate sanitation, insufficient menstrual health education, and persistent stigma shape the lived experiences of adolescent Roma girls. The findings indicate that menstrual poverty has negative effects on self-esteem, body image, social interaction, and school attendance. Participants reported shame, embarrassment, anxiety, isolation, and reduced educational engagement. The study also highlights the long-term consequences of menstrual poverty, including decreased

psychological well-being and restricted opportunities for social and educational development. The article situates menstrual poverty within broader socioeconomic inequalities and underlines the importance of social work, education, policy advocacy, and community-based support in addressing these challenges.

Keywords

menstrual poverty, self-esteem, Roma community, social stigma

Menstrual poverty is intertwined with social, cultural, and economic factors that exacerbate gender and ethnic inequalities and have profound effects on health, education, and social participation (Borjigen et al. 2019, 586). It is not merely a matter of resource scarcity; it also reflects broader systemic inequities (Ajong et al. 2020, 139). Research by Ludvigh Cintulová, Budayová, and Juhásová (2023, 9) examines the health and social conditions of Roma women living in marginalized communities in Slovakia. Many Roma families in segregated settlements live in extreme economic hardship. Because their household income is very low, families must prioritize essential needs such as food, housing, and utilities. Consequently, menstrual hygiene products are often treated as secondary expenses, which limits access to them for girls and women. Many girls in these communities receive little or no formal education about menstrual health, which may cause confusion, fear, or embarrassment when menstruation begins.

Social interventions focused on strengthening family support systems and improving access to social services are therefore essential for reducing exclusion and mitigating the long-term effects of poverty among Roma women and their families (Pavlikova et al. 2023a).

Roma communities differ from the majority population in ethnicity, cultural experience, perception of the surrounding world, and patterns of social life. Their social position has historically been shaped by exclusion, unemployment, low educational attainment, low income, and poor living standards. Marginalized Roma groups often have limited access to information. The determinants of social exclusion are mutually reinforcing and are frequently associated with life in segregated settlements, where distinctive rules of coexistence and community life emerge (Bujda 2022, 1). These conditions deepen social exclusion and inequalities. As Bujda notes, "marginalized groups are characterized by poverty and social exclusion" (Bujda 2025, 10). As a result, Roma communities often remain on the margins of society and face multiple barriers to integration into social, economic, and cultural life.

The health challenges faced by Roma women in marginalized communities in Slovakia provide key insight into the causes of menstrual poverty. These women often live in extreme poverty, with household income insufficient to cover basic needs, including menstrual hygiene products. Insufficient knowledge about menarche and menstruation constitutes a significant barrier for young girls, particularly in marginalized communities. Studies highlighting the role

of education and cultural perceptions in shaping attitudes and behaviours related to menstrual health (Ludvigh Cintulová, Budayová, and Juhásová 2023, 9). Borjigen et al. (2019, 586) have examined the relationship between menstrual knowledge and psychological stress among adolescent girls, showing that poor understanding contributes to stigma and emotional distress. Similarly, Ajong et al. (2020, 139) has identified disparities in knowledge of peri-menarcheal changes between urban and rural adolescents, emphasizing the need for targeted educational interventions.

The Roma ethnic group faces systemic social exclusion that exacerbates poverty and restricts access to essential resources, including menstrual hygiene products. Gouvernet et al. (2023, 661) demonstrated a strong association between menstrual poverty and mental health outcomes, reporting that women experiencing period poverty exhibited significantly higher levels of psychological distress, including symptoms of depression and anxiety. Nearly half of the women who experienced menstrual poverty reported at least one psychological symptom. These findings underscore the substantial emotional burden associated with limited access to menstrual hygiene resources.

Budayová (2017, 29) further explores the cultural and structural barriers faced by Roma women, emphasizing the need for inclusive social work practices that address their specific challenges. Stressful life circumstances, including poverty and social exclusion, significantly affect menstrual health. Budayová and Bursová (2019, 57) have identified stress as a pervasive factor in human life, particularly among disadvantaged groups. This aligns with the findings of Judák, Amantius et al. (2022, 131), who note that stress and environmental factors may intensify health and social problems among adolescents. These challenges are compounded for Roma women, who often experience heightened stress due to intersecting factors of poverty, gender inequality, and ethnic discrimination (Judák, Tibor et al. 2022b, 110). Kobylarek, Madej, and Roubalová (2022, 11) have also highlighted the influence of lifestyle and community conditions on young people's mental health. The issue of marginalized Roma communities is therefore one of the important topics of contemporary social work. As Bujda states, "marginalized Roma groups are accompanied by determinants that negatively affect their social and economic status" (Bujda 2025, 7). The most important factors include poverty, low levels of education, unemployment, and limited access to basic services.

Within marginalized Roma communities, these difficulties are intensified by broader socioeconomic and cultural conditions. Persistent poverty, limited

infrastructure, and restricted access to education and healthcare create additional barriers to adequate menstrual hygiene management. Menstruation often remains a socially sensitive or stigmatized topic, limiting open discussion and access to reliable information. These circumstances contribute to embarrassment, social withdrawal, and reduced self-confidence among young women.

The age of menarche and awareness of menstruation are critical indicators of menstrual health knowledge. For marginalized groups such as Roma women, however, cultural taboos and limited access to education impede efforts to promote menstrual health. Addressing menstrual poverty therefore requires attention to cultural stigma, access to affordable menstrual products, and the integration of menstrual education into broader social work initiatives.

Menstrual poverty among Roma women is a multifaceted issue that requires comprehensive and holistic approaches addressing both the immediate need for menstrual hygiene resources and the systemic barriers that perpetuate social and economic inequality. Women frequently report difficulties in finding adequate and private spaces to change menstrual products in schools, workplaces, and public environments (Holst et al. 2022, 40).

One's social environment is a critical determinant of psychological and physical development during childhood and adolescence. Family and community contexts substantially influence emotional stability, health behaviour, and social integration among young individuals. Supportive and stable social environments contribute to positive developmental outcomes, whereas conditions marked by socioeconomic deprivation and social exclusion may hinder healthy development and limit access to essential resources (Ludvigh Cintulová 2021, 31).

Despite broader social progress, many families continue to experience personal and social difficulties that manifest at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. These challenges often include economic hardship, limited educational opportunities, and social marginalization, all of which shape the everyday experiences of individuals living in disadvantaged environments. Within such contexts, structural inequalities may significantly influence access to basic needs and health-related resources.

Roma women frequently face multiple forms of marginalization based on ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. These intersecting inequalities restrict access to education, employment opportunities, and economic mobility, thereby reinforcing persistent cycles of poverty. As a result, many Roma women encounter structural barriers that limit their ability to improve living conditions and secure adequate health and hygiene resources (Rodríguez-Camacho et al. 2024, 17).

Primary knowledge about menstruation usually comes from personal experience or informal conversations with family members and friends. There is a lack of educational programmes that support menstrual health awareness among Roma adolescents (Gouvernet et al. 2023, 662).

Research by Ludvigh Cintulová et al. (2023, 9) highlights how structural poverty in Slovakia disproportionately affects marginalized communities, particularly Roma populations residing in segregated settlements. In these environments, limited economic resources are primarily allocated to immediate survival needs, including food, housing, and basic utilities. As a result, menstrual hygiene products are frequently deprioritized within household budgets, reflecting not only financial constraints but also broader social and cultural dynamics associated with poverty and exclusion.

The role of education in shaping awareness of menstruation and the influence of poverty on menarche in Roma settlements can be understood through the lens of socioeconomic and educational disparities. The analysis by Weiss et al. (2023, 189) emphasizes the importance of re-education methods as a strategy for improving knowledge and addressing informational gaps related to health within marginalized communities. The economic context further exacerbates these challenges.

As noted by Buzalová et al. (2025, 9), ongoing economic pressures have intensified poverty among vulnerable populations, compounding barriers to menstrual health management and overall well-being. Vulnerable groups, including children, Roma households, and people with low educational attainment or precarious employment, continue to exhibit higher poverty rates, which underscores how structural inequalities contribute to sustained economic hardship and reduced quality of life (Beňo et al. 2020, 95). Poverty in Europe has increased particularly among populations with a lower quality of life. Many Roma families have faced job losses and reduced income, deepening their financial instability and increasing reliance on inadequate social welfare systems (Samohýl et al. 2019, 179).

Cultural stigma surrounding menstruation represents a significant barrier to open communication and adequate menstrual health management. As highlighted by Ludvigh Cintulová, Budayová, and Rottermund (2022, 336), cultural norms and social taboos associated with menstruation often reinforce silence and shame. These attitudes discourage women from discussing menstrual health openly, seeking support, or advocating for their needs. At the same time, socioeconomic conditions within Roma communities further complicate this

issue. Persistent financial constraints mean that many households must prioritize essential expenditures such as food, housing, and utilities. Consequently, menstrual hygiene products are frequently perceived as secondary necessities, limiting women's ability to manage menstruation with dignity and appropriate hygienic resources.

Poverty negatively affects social integration (Pavlikova et al. 2023a), and Roma women experience multiple forms of social exclusion related to ethnicity, gender, household roles, early maternity, and community expectations. Menstrual poverty—defined as the lack of affordable menstrual hygiene products, adequate sanitation facilities, and comprehensive education about menstruation—disproportionately affects marginalized communities, including young Roma women under the age of eighteen. This phenomenon reinforces gender inequality, exacerbates health disparities, and contributes to social exclusion. Pregnant Roma girls in particular experience educational disruption, which restricts their access to critical health and hygiene information, including knowledge related to menstrual health. Social workers have observed that early pregnancies are frequently not accompanied by comprehensive education on personal care and hygiene, thereby perpetuating inadequate menstrual health practices (Ludvigh Cintulová and Novotná 2018, 126).

Reproductive health is a multifaceted concept shaped by the interplay of social determinants and individual factors, including gender roles, limited access to resources, poverty, and segregation. For young Roma women, these factors converge to intensify menstrual poverty and further entrench inequities in sexual and reproductive health. Roma women also experience social stigma related to menstruation (Tkacova et al. 2023, 67). Social media platforms often present idealized images and narratives that can influence attitudes toward self-image, mental health, and coping mechanisms. The uncontrolled sharing of online content may contribute to distorted perceptions or heightened awareness of mental health issues; while such content can raise awareness, it may also encourage unhealthy attitudes if not critically mediated (Pavlikova, Tkacova, and Tsafi 2023b, 79).

1. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design based on focus group discussions to explore the experiences of Roma girls related to menstruation, menstrual awareness, and self-perception. Qualitative analysis was conducted using open

coding, which enabled the systematic identification and categorization of patterns within participants' narratives.

The analytical process began with repeated readings of the transcripts to ensure familiarity with the data. During the initial stage, descriptive codes were assigned to text segments representing distinct ideas, experiences, or perceptions expressed by participants. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader analytical categories reflecting shared meanings across the data.

To enhance analytical rigor and reliability, the coding process was conducted collaboratively by members of the research team. Codes and emerging categories were regularly compared and discussed in order to resolve discrepancies and refine interpretations. This process supported consistency in coding and strengthened the credibility of the analysis.

Data analysis was supported by ATLAS.ti 8 software, which facilitated the organization and management of qualitative data. The software enabled systematic coding, visualization of relationships between codes, and the generation of analytical reports that assisted in identifying emerging themes. Through this iterative analytical process, several thematic categories were developed, including experiences of menarche, emotional responses to menstruation, menstrual awareness, and the role of family support. Ethical standards for research involving human participants were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the procedures involved. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed.

Sample and data collection

The research sample included 64 Roma girls aged 15–18 years who participated in four focus group discussions. They were recruited from a rural locality in western Slovakia with approximately 2,500 Roma residents, many of whom live in a segregated settlement. The study focused on adolescents from marginalized Roma communities, which are typically affected by persistent socioeconomic disadvantage, inadequate infrastructure and public services, and limited educational and employment prospects. In this context, qualitative research enables exploration of lived experiences and social meanings related to menstrual health and gender roles.

Each focus group consisted of approximately 16–21 participants and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The discussions were guided by semi-structured

interview questions, which allowed the researchers to maintain a consistent thematic focus while giving participants the flexibility to elaborate on their personal experiences. The discussion guide included topics such as experiences related to menarche, knowledge and awareness of menstrual health, emotional responses to menstruation, access to menstrual hygiene products, and family and community attitudes toward menstruation. The semi-structured format allowed the moderator to ask follow-up questions and clarify participants' responses, thereby deepening the discussion and capturing a wider range of perspectives. All focus groups were conducted in a supportive and culturally sensitive environment.

Most participants came from families in which parents had completed only primary education, reflecting broader patterns of limited formal educational attainment within the community. Living conditions in the settlement were characterized by inadequate hygienic standards, including limited access to clean water; insufficient sanitation infrastructure; and a shortage of basic hygiene products. These environmental and socioeconomic factors significantly affected participants' health and well-being and contributed to difficulties in managing menstrual hygiene.

Educational participation among the girls was also affected by these conditions. On average, participants reported approximately 180 hours of school absence, with 17% of these absences related to menstruation. These absences may reflect a combination of factors, including financial hardship, limited access to menstrual hygiene products, family responsibilities, and cultural attitudes toward menstruation. Such circumstances also contribute to limited access to reliable information about menstrual health and hygiene practices.

2. Results

Menarche, defined as the onset of a girl's first menstruation, represents a significant biological and psychosocial milestone in female development. It often marks the transition from childhood to adolescence and may influence identity formation, body perception, and social roles. The findings of this study reveal several interrelated challenges experienced by Roma girls in relation to menstrual development and self-perception.

Emotional challenges: Many participants reported feelings of embarrassment, shame, and lowered self-esteem associated with bodily changes during menarche.

These emotional responses were frequently intensified by a lack of prior information about menstruation and limited opportunities for open discussion within families or schools. Several girls also described anxiety before menarche due to uncertainty and inadequate preparation for this developmental stage.

Gender-role expectations: The findings also indicate that social and familial expectations significantly influenced participants' perceptions of womanhood. Many girls associated becoming a woman primarily with motherhood and reproductive roles. These perceptions reflect traditional gender norms within the community and may contribute to limited aspirations regarding education and future employment opportunities.

Body image and socioeconomic constraints: Participants frequently expressed dissatisfaction with their physical appearance and reported having a negative body image. Some girls associated these feelings with socioeconomic disadvantage, noting that financial constraints prevented them from purchasing personal care or cosmetic products that might enhance their self-confidence. This situation illustrates how economic deprivation can influence body perception and self-esteem.

Limited menstrual knowledge and persistent stigma: A significant finding of the study was the limited level of menstrual knowledge among participants. Many girls reported insufficient preparation for menarche and a lack of accessible information about menstrual hygiene management. Menstruation was often treated as a taboo subject within families and communities, which contributed to misinformation, embarrassment, and reduced confidence in managing menstrual health.

Table 1. Biological and psychosocial milestones in female development

Code	Description	Participants' answers
Emotional challenges	New emotional challenges, such as anxiety or uncertainty about bodily changes, which influence self-esteem and resilience	"I felt embarrassed." "It makes me feel ashamed." "I have low self-esteem." "I felt stressed before menarche."
Gender-role expectations	Linked with notions of womanhood and maturity, influencing how girls perceive their roles within family and society	"In my world, being a woman means giving birth." "Women are not equal; the family priority is giving birth."
Personal attitudes toward the body	Perceptions and feelings about bodily changes during and after menarche	"I do not like myself, I do not feel pretty." "I do not have money to look pretty."

Code	Description	Participants' answers
Low preparation and limited awareness	Lack of education and dialogue about menstruation, leading to stigma and misinformation	"It is taboo; we do not talk about menarche and menstruation."
Inadequate access to menstrual hygiene products	Limited availability of or financial barriers to obtaining necessary menstrual products	"Lack of access, awareness, financial issues, social stigma, and segregation."

The findings reveal a complex set of factors influencing awareness of menstruation among marginalized communities, particularly the Roma population. These factors include stigmatization, low awareness, poor sanitation and hygiene conditions, weak health habits and hygiene attitudes, cultural beliefs and taboos, and the family and social environment that shape Roma lifestyles. Stigmatization was a major theme, with menstruation often viewed as taboo, leading to shame and embarrassment. This contributed to social isolation, as participants feared judgment if menstruation became visible to others. Low awareness was also common, with many participants reporting a lack of education on the topic, which led to confusion and poor hygiene practices.

Meanwhile, poor sanitation and hygiene conditions further exacerbated these challenges, as participants struggled with limited access to clean water, private spaces, and menstrual products, resulting in health risks and missed opportunities for education or work. Cultural beliefs and taboos surrounding menstruation hindered open discussion and perpetuated stigma.

Finally, the family and social environment within Roma communities played a significant role in shaping attitudes toward menstruation, with traditional gender roles and social norms limiting the exchange of information and support. These findings highlight the importance of addressing cultural, educational, and infrastructural barriers to improve menstrual health and reduce stigmatization.

Table 2. Open coding: Impact of menstrual poverty on Roma self-perception

Category	Codes Identified	Description	Impact	Coping Mechanisms	Long-term Consequences
Self-esteem	Low self-worth	Feeling ashamed or less confident due to lack of access to menstrual products	Reduced confidence and motivation	Hiding menstruation or avoiding interaction	Persistent low confidence; reduced opportunities
Body Image	Negative perception	Viewing the body as „problematic" or „dirty" during menstruation	Increased feelings of inadequacy.	Avoiding discussions about menstruation	Persistent body dissatisfaction
Social Relationships	Avoidance of social interaction	Fear of leaks or odours leads to withdrawal from peers and activities	Isolation and loneliness	Avoiding events or limiting friendships	Difficulty forming or maintaining relationships
Educational Opportunities	Reduced participation	Missing school due to lack of supplies and fear of stigma	Lower academic performance	Using makeshift materials; missing classes	Decreased future opportunities and income
Emotional well-being	Stress and anxiety	Constant worry about managing menstruation discreetly	Decreased mental health stability	Internalizing stress; avoiding help-seeking	Chronic stress and anxiety disorders

The research aimed to explore the impact of menstrual poverty on self-perception among marginalized communities and to identify associated coping mechanisms and long-term consequences. Through focus group discussions, the study examined self-reported experiences of individuals facing menstrual poverty, with particular attention to emotional well-being, social relationships, and self-esteem.

The results indicate that menstrual poverty significantly affects self-esteem, body image, and social interactions. Many respondents reported shame and embarrassment due to the inability to purchase menstrual products, which contributed to negative perceptions of their bodies (Králik et al. 2022, 157). This was especially pronounced among young participants who also struggled with school absence, limited educational engagement, and reduced academic performance. Social exclusion was another common theme, with participants often avoiding social events or withdrawing from peer interactions to prevent embarrassment related to potential leaks or odours (Samohýl et al. 2019, 180).

Key findings include:

- Self-esteem: A substantial number of participants expressed a decline in self-worth and confidence due to menstrual poverty. This affected their ability to fully engage in daily activities and contributed to isolation.
- Body image: Menstrual poverty intensified feelings of disgust and inadequacy, with some individuals describing their bodies as "dirty" or "problematic".
- Social relationships: Fear of stigma and judgment led many participants to withdraw from social interaction, which contributed to increased isolation and loneliness.
- Educational opportunities: School attendance was frequently affected, as participants missed classes because of a lack of menstrual products, and their academic performance suffered as a result.
- Emotional well-being: Chronic stress and anxiety about managing menstruation discreetly were reported, leading to emotional strain and worsening mental health.

3. Discussion

The findings of this research correspond with the broader literature on social exclusion, poverty, and mental health. Budayová's study (2017) highlights how marginalized groups, particularly Roma communities, face compounded challenges, including social exclusion and economic deprivation, which may lead to low self-esteem and mental health problems. In this context, menstrual poverty serves as another dimension of social exclusion, with individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds disproportionately affected. Budayová's research emphasizes the significant barriers these individuals face in accessing essential resources and maintaining basic human dignity, which resonates with the findings of this study regarding the emotional toll of menstrual poverty (Budayová 2017, 26).

The study also intersects with research on the social determinants of health in marginalized populations. Ludvigh Cintulová, Budayová, and Juhásová (2023, 10) discuss how Roma communities in Slovakia often experience poor health outcomes due to marginalized living conditions, including limited access to basic health resources such as menstrual products. The inability to manage menstruation properly affects not only physical health but also emotional well-being, social participation, and educational attainment, thereby contributing to the cycle of poverty and exclusion. Addressing menstrual poverty in a systematic and compassionate way could significantly improve the mental health, social engagement, and academic success of individuals facing such difficulties.

The current study builds on this perspective by showing that menstrual poverty is not only an issue of material deprivation but also a psychological and social challenge that can further isolate individuals and affect their ability to thrive in society. This phenomenon is shaped not only by economic deprivation but also by social, cultural, and structural inequalities (Maturkanič et al. 2024, 32). In marginalized Roma communities, entrenched cycles of poverty limit households' ability to allocate resources for menstrual hygiene, which is often deprioritized in relation to basic survival needs (Rosenberg, Kováč, and Králik 2025, 181). Supporting the experience of meaningfulness in life and fostering secure attachment relationships have been identified as significant ways to enhance effectiveness in the helping professions and to support vulnerable populations (Dávidová, Hardy, and Hamarová 2017, 67).

In light of the results, social work must play a central role in addressing menstrual poverty. Social workers are in a unique position to advocate for policies that ensure access to menstrual products for all, particularly marginalized

groups, and to offer emotional and social support to those experiencing menstrual poverty (Bundzelová, Ludvigh Cintulová, and Noga 2025, 60). Several studies on burnout have identified a correlation between stress experienced by social workers and the challenges of providing support in marginalized Roma communities. This stress is often intensified by entrenched cycles of poverty, social exclusion, and limited access to resources, which increase the emotional and practical demands on professionals in helping roles (Kováč et al. 2025, 55). In particular, Bundzelová et. al. (2025, 59) emphasize the complex communication strategies social workers must employ to engage effectively with clients in marginalized Roma communities. These challenges highlight the importance of systemic support, professional training, and mental health resources for social workers addressing menstrual poverty, educational gaps, and broader social inequalities in Roma settlements across Slovakia.

Social workers should also provide education on menstrual health and collaborate with schools, healthcare providers, and community organizations to ensure that menstruation is not a source of stigma or exclusion (Vansač and Belovičová 2019, 218). Because social work with the Roma minority requires long-term and continuous engagement, it should not be evaluated solely through past failures. Pastoral care for Roma communities may contribute to reducing poverty, or at least the psychological deprivation associated with living in poverty. Bujda points out that social work cannot be limited to distributing material aid. Pastoral care can offer Roma communities an opportunity for participation and self-realization. Their difference from the majority is respected, and the good present in the community is supported; individuals are given the opportunity to demonstrate their gifts and talents and thus to develop a sense of equality and acceptance (Bujda 2021, 2). Moreover, the promotion of empathy and emotional and social intelligence is essential for personal development during adolescence and can strengthen the capacity of young people to engage constructively with marginalized communities (Davidova and Hardy 2025, 8).

Conclusions

Menstrual poverty among Roma women cannot be attributed to a single cause; rather, it results from a complex interaction of structural and social factors. Economic deprivation remains central, as many families in marginalized communities lack sufficient financial resources to afford basic menstrual hygiene

products. At the same time, limited access to education restricts opportunities for young girls to obtain accurate and comprehensive information about menstrual health. Insufficient knowledge about menarche and menstruation contributes to uncertainty, stigma, and inadequate hygiene practices. Cultural perceptions and social taboos surrounding menstruation further reinforce these challenges by discouraging open discussion and preventing the dissemination of reliable information within families and communities.

This study explored the challenges faced by Roma girls aged 15–18 years regarding menstruation, focusing on biological and psychosocial milestones. Key findings include emotional struggles such as embarrassment, shame, and low self-esteem, largely resulting from social stigma and a lack of menstrual education. Participants also expressed traditional role expectations, in which womanhood was closely linked to motherhood, limiting aspirations beyond family roles. Negative attitudes toward the body were common, with financial constraints affecting participants' ability to maintain personal appearance and self-confidence.

A lack of preparation and awareness regarding menstruation, coupled with limited access to menstrual hygiene products, have contributed to stigma and poor hygiene practices. These barriers have been exacerbated by economic hardship and cultural taboos surrounding menstruation. The study demonstrates the need for targeted interventions to improve menstrual health education, reduce stigma, ensure better access to hygiene products, and support the emotional well-being and empowerment of girls from marginalized communities.

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The Organization of World Youth Day from the Perspective of Large-Scale Social Project Management

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Abstract

This article evaluates the organization of World Youth Day (WYD) from the perspective of large-scale social project management. Initiated by Pope John Paul II in 1985 and first celebrated as a formally instituted observance in 1986, WYD is a major social and religious undertaking that has been continued by his successors. Its organization poses significant, multifaceted challenges for organizers and participants alike. Although WYD has been examined extensively in religious and social research, its organizational dimension has received limited systematic attention in management studies. The analysis therefore applies a project-management perspective. The study is based on the author's qualitative research, including narrative interviews, conversations, and oral history accounts by individuals who participated in different social roles in the international WYD gatherings held in Kraków (2016), Panama City (2019), and Lisbon (2023). The findings, considered from several perspectives and including participants' assessments, support a broadly positive evaluation of WYD organization. At the same time, the study's exploratory design and small purposive sample indicate the need for broader international research.

Keywords

World Youth Day, project management, organization, evaluation

1. World Youth Day: Concept, rationale, and organizational framework

World Youth Day (WYD) is an international religious gathering of young people. It enables young Catholics to profess and deepen their faith, experience ecclesial community, and participate in evangelization. Its primary dimension is spiritual and religious, at both the individual and communal levels. The communal dimension extends beyond the immediate body of participants and may contribute to the renewal of the Church at the local, diocesan, national, and universal levels ("Idea" n.d.).

John Paul II initiated WYD. Its immediate origins lie in the international youth gatherings held in Rome in 1984 and 1985 (Bieliński 2023). In 1983, he also established the San Lorenzo International Youth Centre in Rome. This initiative reflected a defining feature of his ministry: as a priest, bishop, cardinal, and pope, he maintained close ties with young people, especially university students, and addressed their intellectual, pastoral, and spiritual concerns. Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re emphasizes this historical dimension:

> The Holy Father surrounded young people with special and sincere care. He was their true yet demanding friend. He was characterized by a great passion for education. He established a direct relationship with young people based on trust. Pope Wojtyła loved the youth from all over the world and was a great advocate of their ideals and values. It was precisely from this bond that the brilliant idea of World Youth Day was born (Re 2024, 24).

The United Nations designated 1985 as International Youth Year under the theme "Participation, Development and Peace" (United Nations Secretary-General 1985). The Catholic Church supported the initiative, with John Paul II's personal involvement. On March 31, 1985, the pope issued the apostolic letter *Dilecti Amici* to young people throughout the world, whose opening scriptural exhortation calls them to be able to "give an account of the hope that is in you" (John Paul II 1985).

The letter's content and conclusion foreshadowed a permanent initiative. On December 20, 1985, John Paul II formally announced the institution of World Youth Day (Holy See n.d.).

The first formally instituted World Youth Day was celebrated at the diocesan level in 1986, and the first international gathering outside Rome took

place in Buenos Aires in 1987. Subsequent international gatherings were held in Santiago de Compostela (1989), Częstochowa (1991), Denver (1993), Manila (1995), Paris (1997), Rome (2000), Toronto (2002), Cologne (2005), Sydney (2008), Madrid (2011), Rio de Janeiro (2013), Kraków (2016), Panama City (2019), and Lisbon (2023). The next international WYD is scheduled for Seoul on August 3–8, 2027 (Holy See n.d.; Bieliński 2023; WYD Seoul 2027 Local Organizing Committee 2025).

The formative and religious significance of WYD has been the subject of scholarly research (Chagas 2015, 45–51; Przywara 2023, 167–84). Participants' testimonies—whether concerning parish, diocesan, or international gatherings—are particularly important for assessing its impact. WYD's religious and spiritual significance is also examined in Michał Kania's doctoral dissertation, *Inspiracyjny wpływ przesłań światowych dni młodzieży na dynamizację nowej ewangelizacji* ["The inspiring influence of World Youth Day messages on the dynamism of the new evangelization"] (Kania 2020).

Analyses by national organizing offices, local authorities, and academic institutions are important for examining cooperation between public and ecclesiastical institutions in organizing WYD (Seweryn et al. 2017; "Podsumowanie Światowych Dni Młodzieży"; "Światowe Dni Młodzieży w Panamie — podsumowanie" 2019; Niemczyk and Seweryn 2018; Bajgier-Kowalska and Tracz 2019, 150–65). Event management and security are especially consequential during the central gathering (Żurek 2023). The pope's concluding Mass, attended by numerous cardinals and bishops, has drawn crowds ranging from hundreds of thousands to several million; reported attendance has included approximately 4 million people in Manila (1995), 3.7 million in Rio de Janeiro (2013), 2.2 million in Rome (2000), and 3 million in Kraków (2016) (Bieliński 2023).

The organizational framework of WYD has evolved over time (Bieliński 2023). The model developed by the Roman Curia comprises two principal components: the diocesan phase ("Days in the Dioceses") and the international phase ("central events"), a week-long gathering in the host city (Chagas 2015, 45–51). International WYD gatherings now take place every three to four years, with dates adapted to local circumstances. Kraków hosted the event in July 2016, Panama City in January 2019, and Lisbon in August 2023, reflecting climatic and logistical considerations ("Organizacja KBO ŚDM" n.d.).

The Days in the Dioceses combine the religious, social, and relational dimensions. They allow participants to learn about the host region—its history, culture, and achievements—while fostering integration, friendship, and interpersonal ties.

Activities typically include catechesis, evangelization meetings, personal testimonies, discussion, and prayer vigils. The central events, by contrast, follow a more standardized pattern, usually extending from Tuesday through Sunday. The opening Mass inaugurates the gathering on Tuesday; the following days include catechesis, meetings, church visits, the Youth Festival, and other activities. The pope is welcomed on Thursday, the Way of the Cross takes place on Friday, the vigil on Saturday evening, and the concluding Mass on Sunday morning. At the close of the event, the pope announces the host city for the next international WYD. In Lisbon in 2023, Pope Francis invited young Catholics worldwide to gather in Seoul in 2027 (WYD Seoul 2027 Local Organizing Committee 2023).

At the level of the Holy See, WYD is coordinated by the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, which in 2016 succeeded the former Pontifical Council for the Laity. The host Church establishes a local organizing committee, usually under the relevant episcopal structures. In Poland, the National Organizing Office for World Youth Day (KBO ŚDM), operating within the Polish Episcopal Conference, has possessed legal personality since 2010 ("Statut KBO ŚDM" n.d.).

In implementing a WYD project, the national or local organizing office collaborates with public authorities, regional and municipal services, healthcare and security agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and other stakeholders. Because of WYD's mission, complexity, and multidimensional character, preparation is a multi-year process: it begins soon after the host city is announced and continues for months after the event, through financial settlement, evaluation, and final reporting ("Podsumowanie Światowych Dni Młodzieży"; "Delegaci z ok. 100 krajów" 2017; "Światowe Dni Młodzieży w Panamie — podsumowanie" 2019). Coordination meetings in Rome and exchanges between organizing committees facilitate the transfer of experience and good practice in responding to organizational challenges ("Delegacja Komitetu Organizacyjnego" 2017; "Koordynator polskich przygotowań" 2017; "Międzynarodowe spotkanie" 2019). WYD thus offers a significant case of large-scale social project management.

2. Social and organizational project management

This section provides a synthetic and selective discussion of the principal elements of social and organizational project management. It draws on foundational project-management literature (see, among others, Hill 2004; Young 2004; Stabryła 2006; Project Management Institute 2017; Trocki 2017; Cabała 2018).

A project may be defined as a "unique, complex undertaking within a finite timeframe, with a distinct beginning and end, carried out by a team in a manner relatively independent of an organization's routine activities, using specialized methods and techniques" (Trocki et al. 2003, 18). This definition provides a basis for analyzing the organization of World Youth Day through the lens of project management.

Projects possess distinctive characteristics. The literature identifies a diverse set of elements that constitute a project's identity and inform project portfolio management (Young 2004; Jałocha 2014). Drawing on Project Management Institute standards and related scholarship, four basic characteristics are especially relevant here: purposefulness, complexity, uniqueness, and specificity. Each also applies to the organizational dimensions of WYD.

Projects are goal-oriented undertakings designed to achieve a specified objective. Their structure should align with the mission and overarching goals of the organizing entity. The objective provides a basis for organization, justification, decomposition into tasks, resource allocation, coordination, and stakeholder collaboration. This central feature of project-based management corresponds closely to the mission of WYD outlined above.

Complexity is inherent in projects, and its effective management is often decisive for project outcomes. It requires an understanding of the task structure, an appropriate organizational and financial framework, coordination among team members (including volunteers), and reliable execution. WYD exemplifies such complexity: it is a multilevel, multistakeholder undertaking involving an extensive portfolio of interrelated projects.

This complexity arises from a multilevel structure encompassing the Roman Curia, the episcopate and local Church, national organizing offices, and parish organizing committees as well as from the relationships between ecclesiastical and public authorities. It is intensified by the international character of the event, its cultural diversity, the number of participants, and the need to maintain a coherent identity and continuity across annual diocesan observances and periodic international gatherings.

Projects are also characterized by uniqueness, which entails a degree of novelty and originality. This feature nevertheless requires qualification: project-management methods and procedures may be standardized, replicated, and adapted across undertakings (Flyvbjerg and Gardner 2024; Trocki 2017). Such transfer enables organizational learning from prior experience and critical evaluation of the conditions, methods, and outcomes of implementation.

Each project is defined by its time, place, procedures, and methods of execution. It has an origin, rationale, and operating conditions, together with a specific method for decomposing the principal objective into stages and tasks, setting deadlines, establishing rules of team collaboration—including leadership and implementation roles—and providing for supervision, audit, assessment, and evaluation. This synthetic characterization corresponds closely to the nature and organizational challenges of WYD.

3. Research methodology

Research methodology begins with the identification of a research gap. In the problem addressed here, that gap is twofold. First, project-management scholarship has devoted limited attention to the organization of a large global undertaking—or megaproject—such as WYD. Second, the literature on WYD has focused primarily on its religious and spiritual mission rather than on its organizational dimension. The study therefore addresses both a knowledge gap and an empirical or evaluation gap as well as an interdisciplinary gap: the limited integration of management research with scholarship on WYD's religious and evangelizing role. Given the complexity and interdisciplinary character of the problem, together with the limited scope of the author's empirical research, a qualitative methodology was adopted—an established approach in the social sciences (Nowak 2007; Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 2001; Babbie 2008; Kvale 2007), including management studies (Czakon 2016; Sułkowski and Lenart-Gansiniec 2021). The exploratory design informed the use of narrative interviews and oral history techniques (Abrams 2016; Oral History Association 2009; Kurkowska-Budzan 2011, 9–34).

Narrative interviewing and oral history are established tools in qualitative sociology and can also support interdisciplinary research. Both document individuals' participation in and experience of past events in relation to the problem under study: here, the evaluation of the organizational dimensions of the international WYD gatherings in Kraków (2016), Panama City (2019), and Lisbon (2023). Purposive sampling was used because participant selection followed from the research objective and practical feasibility. The resulting accounts form a mosaic of individual perspectives on the organization of international gatherings in three cities. The principal selection criteria were the need to examine three distinct events and to include narrators who had occupied different

social roles. The sample comprised seven individuals: a university rector closely involved in preparations for WYD in Kraków; priests who organized travel for Bolivian and Polish groups to the Kraków and Lisbon events; a journalist who covered all three gatherings; a parish volunteer; and participants in the Panama and Lisbon events.

The research adopted an open, exploratory perspective, allowing each memoirist—or narrator, to use oral history terminology—to speak freely without the imposition of predetermined conceptual or substantive categories (Oral History Association 2009; Silverman 2012; Creswell 2013; Urbaniak-Zając and Kos 2013). Participants were asked: "How do you rate the organization of World Youth Day in which you participated?" At the outset, they were reminded of WYD's mission and character, discussed in section 1, and of the proposition that, in addition to its religious significance, WYD displays the characteristics of a large, complex organizational undertaking—a megaproject. They were also presented with the project characteristics discussed in section 2: purposefulness, complexity, uniqueness, and specificity. At a high level of generality, these categories provided a framework for describing and evaluating the organizational dimensions of WYD and participants' experiences.

Participants were informed that every project has an origin, rationale, operating conditions, implementation rules, division of the principal objective into stages and tasks, deadlines, rules for cooperation among teams at all levels—from the Roman Curia and national organizing office to the parish—and allocations of competence and responsibility among ecclesiastical, state, regional, and local institutions. The framework also encompassed assessment, audit, and evaluation. Functionally, it included arrangements for the religious program, logistics, catering, accommodation, security, transportation, and related areas.

The research was conducted in December 2024 and January 2025. Because of editorial constraints, the article presents only excerpts from the recorded statements. In accordance with oral history principles (Oral History Association 2009), all statements were submitted to their narrators for authorization. Some narrators consented to the disclosure of their names; others requested anonymity. Attribution therefore varies accordingly.

The organizational dimensions of the three international WYD gatherings were assessed by the following participants:

- WYD in Kraków (July 26–31, 2016): (1) Rev. Prof. Wojciech Zyzak, rector of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow from 2014

to 2020; (2) Rev. Tomasz Grzyb, a missionary in Bolivia who attended WYD in Kraków with seven Bolivians; and (3) Jan D., a participant and volunteer on a Parish Organizing Committee (POC) in Kraków (World Youth Day n.d.-a).

- WYD in Panama City (January 22–27, 2019): (1) Paweł Ż. and (2) Zuzanna R., both participants (World Youth Day n.d.-c).
- WYD in Lisbon (August 1–6, 2023): (1) Fr. A. Ż., a Franciscan; and (2) Karolina Zając of the Press Office of the Archdiocese of Kraków (World Youth Day n.d.-b).

4. Research results: Social evaluation of the organizational dimensions of WYD

The findings are presented for each international WYD gathering: Kraków, Panama City, and Lisbon. The selected excerpts are drawn from a larger body of empirical material and emphasize statements that articulate distinctive, individualized assessments of organization; reflect personal experience; and capture the particular temporal, geographical, cultural, and organizational context of each event.

4.1. World Youth Day in Kraków (2016)

- Rev. Prof. Wojciech Zyzak, rector of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow (2014–20):

> WYD in Kraków in 2016 coincided with my first term as rector of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Kraków from 2014 to 2018. For two years, I was therefore able to follow the preparatory activities of the committee, which in Kraków was led by Bishop Damian Muskus, as well as my successor as rector, Rev. Prof. Robert Tyrała. The preparations were particularly interesting to me, as I had previously worked within the German diocesan structures in Cologne and was significantly involved in organizing World Youth Day in 2005. Having witnessed firsthand the time, financial resources, and effort required for these preparations as well as the challenges that arose during the event itself I followed the work of our Polish organizers with great interest. The precise administrative machinery of the German environment seemed

to jam in unforeseen situations. This was evident in the shortage of meal packages in the city center, despite unused supplies in the outskirts. Polish organizers appeared to be more flexible in handling unexpected circumstances. Of course, this does not mean that World Youth Day in Kraków was not meticulously prepared. I can confirm that the committee effectively engaged both the staff and students of our university. Those associated with journalism, theology, and church music studies were particularly visible in the preparatory work and during the event itself. The university infrastructure was also appropriately utilized in a timely and effective manner. To this day, we benefit from the fiber-optic connection installed in the building, which served as the media center for all Italian participants. Organizers must not only anticipate various difficulties and scenarios but also demonstrate flexibility, imagination, and the ability to make quick decisions, especially when managing such a large and multifaceted event. In my opinion, the committee in Kraków handled this task excellently. The scale of preparations was incomparably greater and more complex than what we had experienced in Częstochowa during WYD in 1991. Moreover, after the event, there were no reports of financial issues, which had occurred previously, particularly in Brazil. This is further proof of the committee's professional approach.

- Rev. Tomasz Grzyb, a missionary in Bolivia who attended WYD in Kraków with a group of seven Bolivians:

Although eight years have passed since World Youth Day in Kraków, the memories remain vivid and very positive—not only for me but also for the Bolivian youths of that time, who are now adults. Preparations for the trip to attend WYD began nearly a year in advance.

The stay in Poland was very well organized. In the Diocese of Siedlce, we encountered immense openness and kindness. The parishes that welcomed us had prepared everything down to the last detail—accommodation, meals, transportation. The Bolivian youths were in awe and still recall everything with great emotion.

We had the same experience in Kraków—tremendous openness, kindness, and volunteers everywhere, always ready to help. We vividly remember the hospitality of our hosts, their concern for our well-being and comfort, and how we felt like part of their families during those days. The liturgies, catechesis, vigils, and central celebrations were beautifully and thoughtfully prepared.

Although the site of the overnight vigil and the final Eucharist was some distance away, reaching it did not present significant difficulties.

I believe that the preparation and organization, both at the Church and state levels, were very well-executed. The youth who participated in WYD in Kraków still cherish beautiful memories and the testimony of faith shared with hundreds of thousands of young people from around the world.

- Jan D., participant and volunteer in a Parish Organizing Committee (POC) in Kraków:

During WYD in 2016, I was not only a participant but also an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion and a member of the POC in my parish responsible for communication with representatives of pilgrim groups. We hosted about 700 people. Most of them came from Central and South America, but there were also French, Spanish, and Chinese pilgrims. Together with the chair, we assigned accommodations. A reception office for pilgrims operated in the parish, staffed by the Seraphic sisters and young people from the parish. Other volunteers also came forward, proving to be very helpful, mainly because of their language skills. Although we initially feared that the scale of responsibilities might overwhelm us, everything went smoothly. The cooperation was exemplary. I do not recall any misunderstandings, even though unforeseen situations arose. There was no need to assign people to specific tasks, as volunteers came forward on their own. It was an exceptional, unforgettable, and transformative week for me. Although extremely intense, I have never before or since experienced such joy in hard work. It is difficult to find another explanation other than that it was the work of the Holy Spirit.

4.2. World Youth Day in Panama City (2019)

- Paweł Ż. (participant):

I went to Panama with a large, organized group of more than 100 people. A large number of us, including me, were accommodated by the Kol Shearith Israel synagogue. Our stay in Panama was very intense. On the one hand, we took part in events closely related to WYD itself and in daily Mass; on the other hand, we explored Panama. WYD-related events first included the Days in the Dioceses, followed by the central events: the opening Mass, catechesis

with Polish bishops, the welcome for the pope, the Stations of the Cross, the overnight vigil, and the Missioning Mass.
I would describe it as a great celebration of the Church, where one could feel the joy, the uniqueness of the moment, and unity with other pilgrims and the local people. The organization of the events was so good that I cannot recall any shortcomings. The entire trip was a very interesting experience, allowing me to see a new place and to meet people with a completely different mentality. I have fond memories of it and hope that one day I will have the opportunity to visit Panama again.

- Zuzanna R. (participant):

Upon arrival in Panama City, pilgrims were welcomed by parishes, and my group was hosted in… a synagogue. On the way back, we often met other groups of pilgrims from Poland, and every day we sang Christmas carols. Organizing the central events is a major undertaking for any city. A separate logistical undertaking is food security; traditionally, each pilgrim receives three coupons a day for use at designated service points. It is worth adding that, during the central events, the organizers usually provide access to clean drinking water. The Polish Organizing Committee was able to combine the events with celebrations of the centenary of Poland's independence. During the central events, communication was provided in five official languages, and radio translation into Polish was also available. Most important, however, was the opportunity for all Polish participants to meet for a shared Eucharist in Polish, followed by an evening of singing and dancing, including a grand polonaise. On Wednesday January 23, between the opening ceremony and the welcome for Pope Francis, approximately 3,500 pilgrims from Poland gathered in one place, together with about a dozen bishops, Primate of Poland Archbishop Wojciech Polak, scouts from the Scouting Association of the Republic (ZHR), and participants in the Independence Cruise; some cruise participants formed a choir that performed during the concert with the Siewcy Lednicy band.

I believe that, not only in my experience, arriving in the host city of World Youth Day always brings the joyful thought of returning to a familiar place. The pilgrims' joy and the hospitality of local residents create a unique blend—one that can almost be tasted from the first moments of WYD.

4.3. World Youth Day in Lisbon (2023)

- Fr. A. Ż. (Franciscan):

At World Youth Day in Lisbon, I was the guardian of the Kraków student group, which also included young people from the Warsaw and Gdańsk regions. Regarding the organization of the event, my opinion is distinctly positive. Organizing such a large gathering is an extraordinary task for the organizers. I would like to emphasize, however, that the main goal of the meeting is for us—the young participants—to experience an extraordinary encounter with God; this religious dimension is fundamental to the assessment of every other aspect, including organization. And there is a great deal to organize! Approximately 1–1.5 million people from all over the world came to Lisbon, especially for the Saturday vigil and Sunday Mass. This required accommodation, food, transportation, medical care, public order, and safety—for us, the participants, the pope, and large numbers of priests. I often return to each of these aspects and replay them in my memory. This image of the organization of World Youth Day is clearly positive. Everything was prepared in accordance with the arrangements, including information from the organizing committee. During the event, communication and information from the organizers were accurate, although there were occasional network overloads and problems with simultaneous interpretation. Two participant packages—A and B—were distributed using QR codes. The IT solutions were adopted from the Italians; Kraków had also used them in 2016. Transportation within the city, including metro tickets, was included in Package B and caused no difficulties. Traffic management in the city and within the sectors was well organized. I would also emphasize the considerable commitment of the volunteers: some took leave from work, made their cars available, and provided reliable assistance. Food and beverage distribution points were especially helpful because daytime temperatures during the first week of August reached 34°C. The organizing office also provided assistance around the clock. Overall, I believe that, in terms of organization, Lisbon passed the test.

- Karolina Zając, Press Office of the Archdiocese of Kraków; participant in World Youth Day in Kraków, Panama City, and Lisbon:

I participated in the three most recent WYD gatherings—in Kraków, Panama, and Lisbon—in a different role at each. In Kraków, I was a volunteer; in Panama,

a translator and volunteer correspondent for the Press Office of the Archdiocese of Kraków; and in Portugal, a journalist and employee of that press office. These roles gave me three different perspectives.

WYD in Portugal consisted of two parts: the Days in the Dioceses and the central events. Although the hospitality of local people is always the most appealing aspect of WYD, and this time was no different, parish-level organization differed significantly from that in Panama, where volunteers helped us with everything and accompanied each group. In Lisbon, by contrast, groups were left to themselves by the local parish. During the day, each group organized its own activities; in the evening, there were joint prayers or other meetings in a church. For me as a journalist, the first week did not differ significantly from how other pilgrims experienced it, apart from the fact that I experienced it with a camera while working.

From my perspective, however, the week of central events was completely different from the experience of pilgrims, who slept in schools under field conditions that surprised everyone. The system of meals provided through the pilgrim package was unusual: food could be collected from designated restaurants and bars by scanning a QR code. From a professional perspective, however, the media center was very well prepared, as was transportation. The center's volunteers were very helpful and sought to facilitate the work of everyone with accreditation.

WYD in Lisbon was an engaging and intense professional experience, yet its atmosphere differed from that of Kraków and, even more significantly, from that of Panama. Although some of these differences may be attributable to my role, organizational factors were also decisive. In my opinion, WYD in Portugal was the worst prepared in organizational terms.

5. A synthesis of the research results

The study is exploratory and constitutes a contribution toward a comprehensive assessment of WYD's organizational dimensions. Taken together, the findings indicate a broadly positive social evaluation of the organization of the three international gatherings across different cities and countries.

Participants commonly evaluated both the religious and organizational dimensions of WYD positively. With respect to the latter—the principal focus of this article—particular emphasis fell on organizational professionalism and

effective teamwork: broad acceptance of project rules, adherence to schedules, appropriate forms of intercultural communication, respect for participants' agency, mutual trust, tolerance, kindness, and hospitality. The more critical assessment offered by the media professional does not invalidate the overall pattern. Taken together, the accounts indicate a strong practical understanding of the methods required to manage a large-scale global undertaking, as well as substantial competence and organizational capacity among event organizers.

Summary

This article evaluates the organizational dimensions of World Youth Day in response to an identified research gap and an open research problem. The introductory sections present WYD's mission and character and outline selected elements of large-scale social and organizational project management. The empirical assessment draws on the author's research among seven participants in three international WYD gatherings: Kraków (2016), Panama City (2019), and Lisbon (2023).

The findings are exploratory and do not support broad generalization; nevertheless, they have analytical value. They draw attention, beyond WYD's religious character, to questions of organization and management. The participants' oral histories support a preliminary synthetic assessment of organization through a mode of perception that Olga Tokarczuk calls *ognosia*. She describes it as a highly synthetic way of perceiving the surrounding world and the ability to "approach problems synthetically by seeking order and order both in the narratives themselves and in the details, small parts of the whole" (Tokarczuk 2020, 28).

The participants' narratives adopt precisely this perspective on WYD's organizational dimensions. At a broader cognitive level, and with due caution in light of the methodological standards and limitations of the study, their assessments suggest that WYD organization is broadly consistent with professional and socially responsible large-project management. The findings also support further research on a broader international scale.

One promising direction would apply the framework of the sixth edition of the PMBOK Guide, which organizes 49 project-management processes into five process groups and ten knowledge areas (Project Management Institute 2017),

within an international and intercultural research design. Such research could address the limitations of the present small sample by moving from individual narratives toward a mixed-methods megaproject case study based on larger samples. Flyvbjerg and Gardner (2024) ask how large projects can be managed effectively. WYD provides a significant case through which that question may be investigated; the present exploratory findings suggest, but do not conclusively establish, a positive answer.

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The personnel services of the Armed Forces and their components (subsystems) in the dimensions of the Russian–Ukrainian War

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Abstract

Using the examples of Russia and Ukraine, this article shows how universal human values, the civilisational choice of the state, and the related political regime (democratic or totalitarian) exert a decisive influence on the formation and orientation of personnel services systems in the armed forces. It demonstrates how the state's attitude towards the human person, life, and dignity shapes the structure and direction of personnel services in the armed forces. Particular attention is given to the key differences between the Ukrainian subsystem of religious support for service personnel and its Russian counterpart.

The article explains why a personnel services system with moral support and religious support subsystems exists and continues to develop in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. It also shows how values generally accepted in society shape moral readiness to choose good and justice in the conditions of war and in the repelling of aggression.

Keywords

personnel services, religious support, psychological support of personnel in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, combat and operational stress control, moral readiness of a serviceman, moral choice in wartime, Russian–Ukrainian War

Ukraine's struggle for existence has simultaneously become a struggle for its right to make a civilisational choice: the desire to join European civilisation and adapt to its norms and values (Rafalskyi and Maiboroda 2023, 669–670). According to Ukrainian sociologists, the ongoing Russian–Ukrainian War is a civilisational conflict that has continued for many centuries and has a long history of struggle between the settled West and the nomadic East. The conflict between the two civilisations arises from fundamental differences in values, economic and social organisation, attitudes towards freedom and power, and the desire either to live in peace or to engage in constant struggle (Rushchenko 2015, 243–244).

The purpose of this study is to show why this type of personnel services system exists and is developing in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, including its moral support and religious support subsystems. For this reason, the article applies axiological and civilisational approaches and draws on philosophy, sociology, and the history of military development.

1. Axiological dimension

An axiological, or value-oriented, approach provides the basis for understanding personnel services. Universal human values and the state's attitude towards them — whether compliance with or neglect of them — determine the architecture of the personnel services system in the armed forces.

According to Ukrainian scientists, the establishment, preservation and multiplication of universal human values is a real, albeit difficult, way to consolidate a political nation. Universal worldview guidelines always find a response and support in any society. Today, these guidelines determine the fate and form the rules of life of the most successful countries, with the exception of those societies where aggressive practices of the struggle for state power or encroachment on the sovereignty of other states are actively introduced (Rafalskyi 2018, 89).

Universal human values recognised by the international community include human life, dignity, freedom and personal security, and freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948). Article 3 of the Constitution of Ukraine likewise recognises the human being, life and health, honour and dignity, inviolability, and security as the highest social value (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 1996). Every person, as a member of society, also has the right to social security and to the

free development of personality in accordance with the structure and resources of each state, including a standard of living that encompasses medical care and necessary social services.

Ukraine and Russia have chosen different paths of development. Research indicates that despite being close together on the world values map, the values of Ukrainian society are still closer to those of Europe than to Russia's (Reeskens 2022; Tamilina 2022).

According to Timothy Snyder (2022a; 2022b), a well-known researcher of Eastern European history, today Russia is implementing the ideology of modern fascism. Ukraine, on the other hand, is a democracy and has chosen a European vector of development.

After the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine was characterised by respect for human honour and dignity; tolerance towards religious, cultural, and social differences; and the non-violent resolution of crisis situations, even on a national scale (for example, the political crises in Ukraine and the Russian Federation in 1993–1995 and the methods used to resolve them). At the same time, Ukrainian society has shown a strong sense of freedom and readiness to defend it at any cost, as demonstrated by the Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity (Plokhy 2016, 420–421, 429–430, 433–437; Snyder 2020, 135).

The following have remained characteristic of Russia:

- the population's flight from freedom and libertophobia, which in turn led to the suppression of individuality, merging with the masses and collectivism, and excessive dependence on the state;
- aggression and resentment, which required militarization and constant wars. The main function — preparation and waging of aggressive wars — also determined the peculiarities of Russian society. Such a society is based on the principles of mechanical solidarity and loyalty; it is kept in submission by police force and propaganda. War is a normal state for this society; indeed, it justifies all the inconveniences and cruelty of the system.

Russian society has always been characterized by the absolute power of the supreme ruler, the state (an expanding empire), the army, ideology and propaganda, or the Orthodox Moscow religious tradition as an ideological institution (or its equivalent, a substitute, as it was during the communist period in the form of Marxism-Leninism). The population was considered a cheap resource, measured in number (for example, by army regiments and divisions), and renewed naturally (Rushchenko 2020, 25, 27–28, 174, 180–184; Yakubova 2023, 40).

The modern representative of Russia's "Eurasian civilisation" may be described, in this analytical framework, as a type of personality combining aggression and an "escape from freedom," subordination and arbitrariness, loyalty to the state and apathy towards civic affairs, superficial emotionality and irrationalism, demonstrative external openness, and concealed deceit. Such a person is not attached to a local homeland and tends to regard any territory reached by a Russian soldier as part of "great Russia," while the fate of other peoples remains of little concern. This type of social formation provides favourable human material for aggressive state policy and the colonisation of captured territories. It is therefore unsurprising that the psychological portrait of the Russian occupier who has committed large-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022, as compiled by Ukrainian military experts in 2022–2023, largely reflects the view expressed by a Ukrainian sociologist in 2020 (Klochkov 2024, 266–267).

Therefore, it is not surprising that social processes in the territories of Ukraine temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation in 2014–2021 generally reproduced the path of development of Russian society — a mixture of military dictatorship and reincarnated communism (Rafalskyi 2018, 79–81).

According to Ukrainian researchers, Russian official ideology resembles fascism: it establishes a cult of death, justifies war, and forms a readiness for violence (Romanyshyn 2025, 54). This is also visible in the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church. For example, the declaration of the XXV World Russian People's Council, held on March 27, 2024, under the leadership of Patriarch Kirill, stated that "from a spiritual and moral point of view, the special military operation is a Holy War," in which Russia and its people defend the single spiritual space of Holy Russia and protect the world from globalism and the "West," which is described as having fallen into Satanism (Albul 2024).

The interdependence and mutual conditioning of universal human values — the basis of society, nation, and state — and the values of a specific individual are clearly manifested in military service, where they form an important personal component: moral readiness. The future decisions, words, and actions of an individual must first be weighed against the moral ideal formed in consciousness through upbringing, education, and personal growth. The result of actualisation is ethical behaviour and the development of a moral personality. The interaction of moral personalities produces mutual trust, which depends indirectly on the moral behaviour of each serviceman and is transformed into society's trust in its armed forces as a social and state institution. At the next, interstate and civilisational, level, strategic interaction is formed, involving not

only a dialogical exchange of military capabilities but also an exchange of values. Success at this level can be achieved only if a formed system of values meets generally accepted standards (Krymets 2023, 99–105).

Thus, values are formed gradually, from the personal to the strategic, interstate, and civilisational levels. Values generally accepted in society are the basis for the formation of moral readiness. The moral readiness of a serviceman is a personal formation — an intention based on the conscious and voluntary acceptance, implementation, and protection of fundamental values: culture, country, family, state, and armed forces. Moral readiness indicates the ability, in each specific situation, to distinguish good from evil and to make and implement a moral choice in favour of the good. Its motivating force is a hierarchy of overriding values. Moral readiness is the result of upbringing and education and is expressed in the individual's desire to act morally in each specific situation.

Moral readiness is manifested in moral choice — the ability to perform an act in accordance with the norms of universal or social morality. Moral choice is based on an internal conviction in the need to act in accordance with moral norms and values. In fact, moral choice is a conscious preference for one or another variant of behaviour in accordance with personal or social moral attitudes.

The ability to perform a moral act entails a choice:

- to stand up for the defense of one's state or to evade the fulfilment of a constitutional and socially significant duty;
- to be ready to fight for socially significant goals, good, proper, moral, or to stand aside and contribute to the spread of evil;
- to adhere to the norms and rules of war during combat operations, or to completely surrender to revenge and commit aggressive actions and violence;
- to try to avoid collateral damage, to limit one's actions exclusively to military necessity, or, conversely, to use the entire arsenal of weapons without restriction;
- to choose the lesser evil from among all possible options for action in order to achieve more significant social goals and values, or to reduce collateral damage.

In the terminology of Ukraine's Western partners, this type of moral choice is often called "moral courage" (FM 6–22 2006). In Ukrainian military publications, the quality is referred to as "moral bravery" (TKP 3-(00)152(03).01 2021).

The moral readiness of military personnel in the Russian–Ukrainian War also has value and civilisational dimensions, manifested in the actions of Russian

and Ukrainian troops. The genocide of Ukrainian civilians in the temporarily occupied territories and the shooting and execution of Ukrainian prisoners of war by Russian forces have become recurrent and documented phenomena, whereas such cases involving Ukrainian military personnel have been isolated and unsystematic (UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine 2024; UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine 2025; Voice of America 2025). At the same time, unlike Ukrainian personnel, Russian service personnel are often not held responsible for such actions, partly because Russia has terminated the application of certain international instruments that it considers to contradict Russian legislation.

Alongside the theoretical analysis of the moral readiness of service personnel of the Armed Forces of Ukraine to perform combat tasks, an expert survey was conducted to clarify the impact of moral readiness on the ability of service personnel to perform combat missions in the conditions of the Russian–Ukrainian War. Military leaders of the Armed Forces of Ukraine participated as experts. According to these experts, moral readiness can reduce the impact of psychotraumatic factors of combat, such as fear, panic attacks, and unjustified aggression; reduce the impact of long-term combat conditions, including shortages of food, water, heat, sleep, and rest, as well as fatigue; and promote compliance with the norms and customs of war and the norms of international humanitarian law (Pidopryhora 2023, 82–109, 130–141). This directly affects the scope of tasks to be performed by personnel services.

2. Civilizational dimension

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948) also states that every person has duties to society, although the fulfilment of these duties should not contradict fundamental principles. In many states, one such duty is defence against military aggression.

In Ukraine, the defence and protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity are the most important functions of the state and a matter for the entire Ukrainian people; they constitute the duty of citizens of Ukraine and are entrusted to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The state ensures the social protection of citizens who perform military service.

Thus, while a person has duties to society, the nation, and the state, including the duty of defence, that person remains a bearer of general rights. When

a person fulfils such duties — particularly the defence of the state as a duty and military service as its means of implementation — the state must ensure and promote respect for human rights.

As Lyudmila Budahiants (2012, 303–308) notes, the social, political, and cultural institutions of society, including the armed forces, can and should be purposefully changed in the direction of commensurability with humanistic values. To this end, civilised states, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, create personnel services systems in their armed forces — sustainment, personnel services, and personnel support — that include various parts, subsystems, components, or functions: religious support; morale, welfare, and recreation; health service support; psychological support and recovery; combat and operational stress control; public affairs; command information; and internal communication programmes (ADP 4–0 2019; UK Ministry of Defence 2015; Joint Publication 1–0 2016; Pidopryhora and Khairulin 2018, 59).

The presence, scale, and focus of the activities of these personnel services systems indicate the level of orientation of states towards ensuring human rights in the context of fulfilling the most important social duty — defense.

In particular, in the Russian–Ukrainian War, as a measure of humanism and a civilized attitude to human rights during the performance of the duty to defend the state, it is appropriate to consider the attitude towards one's service personnel who were captured by the enemy; the attitude towards service personnel who received combat mental trauma or injuries.

As Vasyl Osodlo and Lyudmila Budahiants (2022a, 113–122) note, only a society that has "nurtured the idea of human rights and freedoms, humanism as the realization of respect for human dignity" has realized the fate of those who suffered combat mental trauma as significant for the nation and the government, and the task of "overcoming the stigmatization of veterans and not leaving them alone with the heavy echoes of harsh battles" became the responsibility of society under modern conditions. The approach to overcoming combat trauma through respect, cognitive practices and psychotherapy, rather than through shame, stigmatization, threats and punishment, was developed precisely in European countries with strong traditions of respect for human life and dignity.

We should also note that the attitude of the state towards its citizens in the context of their fulfilment of their duty to defend it (military service) in modern conditions is an important motivational factor that determines the desire of citizens to enter military service or continue it. In particular, among the main reasons why in 2019–2020 service personnel of the Armed Forces of Ukraine

did not want to continue military service after the expiration of the first contract were 'the lack of balance between official and free time; a condescending attitude towards a person; an outdated style of communication and "bureaucratic" management' (Osodlo and Budahiants 2022b, 89–97). The abovementioned problems are connected with the education of officers as leaders, with the necessity of changing the philosophy of communication in the armed forces and the introduction of standards and styles of management of the NATO armed forces (Huliak et al. 2022, 105–113).

Deep civilisational orientations observed in Ukrainian and Russian society may be reflected in citizens' attitudes towards religion. The difference between Russian and Ukrainian attitudes towards holidays traditionally celebrated in both states after the collapse of the USSR is particularly revealing. According to a sociological survey conducted in 2018, for 71% of Russians the most important holiday was Victory Day on May 9, followed by New Year (60%), Easter (31%), Women's Day on March 8 (29%), Christmas (25%), Soviet Defenders Day on February 23 (16%), and May Day (11%). At the same time, only 16% of respondents associated Easter with religion; 30% regarded it as a cultural and historical tradition and 25% as a family tradition. This hierarchy of holidays among Russians has remained generally stable. In 2006, the five most popular holidays were New Year (82%), Victory Day (41%), Easter (35%), Women's Day (31%), and Christmas (26%).

By contrast, in a survey conducted almost simultaneously, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology found that the most popular official holidays among Ukrainians were Easter (82%), Christmas (81%), and New Year (79%), followed by Women's Day (45%), Trinity (35%), Victory Day (31%), and Independence Day (16%). This difference may be explained by the continued influence of Soviet ideology and propaganda on Russian society and by Ukrainian society's return to its real values (Romanyshyn 2025, 18–23).

The attitude towards religion in Russia can serve as an example of the permanent aggressiveness of Russian society and the fascist policy of the state. It is no secret that in the armed forces of many states, religious support is a component of personnel services or a function of military command. After the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine and Russia gradually built up their subsystems of religious support. For a certain time, these subsystems of Personnel services were even somewhat similar to each other, and radically different from those existing at that time, which allowed Ukrainian specialists to single out a specific, so-called "secular" model of religious support of service personnel, inherent

only to the armed forces of the post-Soviet space. In many ways, similar "post--Soviet" approaches determined the gradual transformation of both Rrligious support subsystems from "secular" to a model similar to the Western European one (Pidopryhora and Khairulin 2018, 57–91, 92, 97).

However, we will highlight two key differences that, despite similar trends in historical development, still distinguish the Ukrainian religious support subsystem from the Russian one. First, the beginning of the Russian–Ukrainian War in 2014 revealed the imperfection of the then existing religious support subsystem of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which corresponded to a "secular" model for meeting the religious needs of service personnel, and prompted its gradual transformation. An important aspect of this transformation was a human-centred approach to meeting religious needs: prioritising individual work with service personnel, work in small groups, educational activities aimed at forming mental resilience to the factors of modern combat, and support for the families of service personnel.

In the Russian army, by contrast, the predominance of the ideological component in personnel services also shaped the development of religious support, particularly through the use of a theocentric approach, which reduced spiritual support mainly to rituals and collective forms of work with personnel, including agitation (Pidopryhora and Khairulin 2018, 99–100). This was connected with the fact that in order to form a homogeneous and unreflective mass population the former communist regime actively introduced collectivism and the loss of personal responsibility and self-identification.

After the collapse of the USSR, a new idea emerged in Russia: the need to protect Russian Orthodoxy from Western ideology. The Russian Orthodox Church, which functioned as the dominant official church, inherited the ideological and spiritual function of substantiating general civilisational differences. The influence of the communist regime on popular spirituality meant that post-Soviet people first sought involvement in the Church not through internal spirituality but through ritual performance; that is, external demonstrative practice. Such church activity did not require deeply educated spiritual mentors but rather performers of external ritual attributes, which formed the basis of the theocentric approach (Pidopryhora et al. 2020, 51–77).

Second — and most importantly — Ukraine, like other civilised states, used religion primarily to satisfy the religious needs of service personnel in its armed forces. In many armies, religious support is part of comprehensive personnel services for combat operations, and this is a civilised practice. Russia, by contrast,

has also used religion as an important component of information and psychological operations (PsyOps) against Ukraine and its armed forces. The decisive factor was the presence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate on Ukrainian territory, which the author considers subordinate to and controlled by the Russian Federation (Pidopryhora 2019, 36–41; Pidopryhora 2020, 122–127, 475–488, 499–500).

The Russian–Ukrainian War, launched by the Russian Federation against Ukraine in February 2014, revealed different orientations and approaches of the opposing sides to supporting the personnel of their Armed Forces in conditions of war and military service. We believe that the reason for this is the value orientations of Ukrainians and Russians, and, accordingly, their belonging to different civilisations based on fundamental (universal, recognised by the world community) values. The socio-cultural differences between the parties to the conflict are emerging. There has also been a certain grouping of the world's states regarding this war. As Serhii Plokhy has noted, 'for many of Ukraine's allies, this war has become not only the largest and deadliest military conflict in the world since the Second World War, but also the first major war with clear moral guidelines after the victory over Nazism. After the global conflict of 1939–1945, this is the first war in which it is clear from the very beginning who is the aggressor and who is the victim, who is the villain and who is the hero, and whose side you want to take' (Plokhy 2023, 312).

Ihor Rushchenko (2020, 195–196) states that the concept of civilisation has two components which are reflected, among other things, in the military organisation of the state. The first is the elements of material culture: weapons, means of warfare, the level of military science and education, statutes and guidelines that regulate the order of actions of military personnel in various situations, etc.

The second is the value and semantic structures of collective and individual consciousness and the influence of religions and moral imperatives; these are such important things as the value of human life, attitude to combat and non-combat losses, attitude to the wounded and prisoners of war, the price of victory over the enemy or moral responsibility for defeat, etc. Values are mostly not written in manuals and are not reflected in textbooks that future officers study; they are mostly not formalized but present in people's minds as facts of consciousness, and therefore affect the actions of soldiers, from commanders to ordinary soldiers.

The civilisational approach allows us to assert that the Russian–Ukrainian War has an inter-civilisational character. Ukraine remains an outpost of European

(Western) civilisation and is waging a war for its existence and its own identity (Gorbulin 2017, 251; Perepelytsia 2015, 40–41; Rushchenko 2020, 187–208).

The level of civilisational development as a set of economic, technological and military-technical achievements, and the nature of spiritual culture, basic values, affect military construction in peacetime and the state of combat readiness and military power of the state during war. Therefore, the civilisational dimension of war is gradually changing the paradigm of national security. As Oleh Rafalskyi (2018, 56) and Ihor Rushchenko (2020, 51) note in their studies, Ukraine, in accordance with its own cultural core, has made its geopolitical choice in favour of Europe. So now Ukrainians are carrying out military construction as a frontier of the Western world, and accordingly are looking for allies and positioning Ukraine as an outpost of Western civilisation. Therefore, in military construction, they should be guided by those models that exist and are practiced in the Armed Forces of the states of European civilisation — NATO and the European Union. And these models and practices, in turn, should be based on the fundamental values of European civilisation, not on the achievements of the former USSR.

At the beginning of the Russian–Ukrainian War, the personnel services generally accepted in the armed forces of NATO and European Union member states formed a system that reflected the attitude of states towards their citizens in the conditions of military service. This system usually included religious support; morale, welfare, and recreation; psychological support or combat and operational stress control; public affairs and command information, including internal communication; and legal and social support (Pidopryhora and Khairulin 2018, 57–58).

In particular, religious support was more aimed at ensuring the religious needs of multi-confessional military units, moral support of a person in war conditions, the formation of psychological readiness for the defense of the state and psychological resilience in combat conditions (Pidopryhora 2020, 106). Although religious support in a certain way explained the reasons for and necessity of using Armed Forces, the ideologizing of war and substantiating its necessity with a specific enemy (in the conditions of deployment of military units outside the borders of the state, their enemy, as a rule, was representatives of other religions) were not considered the main functions and were not the predominant areas of activity. The main approach was anthropocentrism, which, in contrast to theocentrism, involved focusing efforts not on war agitation and conducting rituals, but on individual assistance to service personnel and support for their families.

Public Affairs and Command Information (internal communication, informing personnel and communicating with commanders) aimed to clearly demonstrate combat tasks and explain all aspects of combat missions (including the law of war, international humanitarian law, and moral aspects) to build mutual trust between military command and personnel, and to inform society about the activities of the Armed Forces.

The psychological component (psychological support or combat and operational stress control) was usually not isolated and included the formation of psychological readiness for the defense of the state and psychological resilience in combat conditions: preparing the human psyche for combat operations, developing the necessary techniques and methods of action in combat, recovery and assistance after combat, and rehabilitation after prolonged combat operations, mental trauma, or injuries.

Until 2014, personnel support in Russia and Ukraine developed along broadly similar lines and included informational-propaganda (ideological), psychological, legal and disciplinary components, as well as religious support. Religious support was part of the ideological component (Pidopryhora 2020, 83, 112). From 2014 until the beginning of the Russian Federation's large-scale military invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the personnel services of the Russian Federation, Belarus, China, North Korea, and Iran remained largely similar to the former Soviet, "Eastern" model, characterised by an emphasis on political and ideological work and collective ideological and political education of service personnel (Pidopryhora and Khairulin 2018, 92–110). Such a system corresponded fully to the spirit of the totalitarian regimes operating in those states.

By contrast, the development of personnel support in the Ukrainian army in 2014–2016 began to undergo significant changes. In particular, a steady trend emerged towards the predominance of the psychological component over the informational-propaganda (ideological) component; this is a stable characteristic of democratic states and, at the same time, a distinctive feature separating them from totalitarian regimes (Pidopryhora 2020, 112; Pidopryhora 2025a, 371–378; 2025b, 114–115).

Confirmation of the predominance and priority of the psychological component over the informational or ideological one — in the Ukrainian army, the informational component has been called moral support since 2024 — can be seen in the fact that field manuals and regulations on psychological support were approved in 2024 (Procedure for conducting Psychological Support 2024; Procedure for providing Psychological Assistance 2024; Procedure for organising

Psychological Recovery 2024; Instruction on Organising Psychological Training 2024), whereas the regulation on moral support was approved only in 2025 (Procedure for organising Moral Support 2025). In addition, in 2022–2025 religious support in the Ukrainian army was separated from the informational or ideological component and became a separate function, as in NATO countries (FM 3–83(1–05) 2025). According to our survey of experts among psychological support officers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the Ukrainian model of personnel support formed by 2025 was more adapted to the Russian–Ukrainian War than the previous model that had existed before 2014; 60.6% of respondents assessed it highly (Pidopryhora and Hryliuk 2025, 430–444).

If the Russian Personnel services was characterized by a return to the ideological component, the Ukrainian one increasingly took on the outlines of a system similar to the Euro-Atlantic one. Despite similar trends in the development of these personnel services systems in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation described by us using the example of religious support (Pidopryhora and Khairulin 2018, 113–114), the systems developed in two different directions. This can also be explained by the fact that despite the relative proximity of Ukraine and the Russian Federation on the world values map, researchers note significant progress of Ukrainians towards modern European values (Ukraine in WVS 2020; WVS in Ukraine 2020).

This study must also explain the factors that influenced the development of personnel services and the views and practical actions that caused the personnel services system of the Armed Forces of Ukraine to be inconsistent with the realities of the Russian–Ukrainian War.

The factors that influenced the development of personnel services were as follows:

- the predominance of the ideological component (political work) in the personnel services of the former Soviet Armed Forces (Pidopryhora 2020, 83–95);
- the method of creating the Armed Forces of Ukraine based on the use of former Soviet models (Chornyi 2009, 86–87; Plokhy 2016, 416–417);
- similar trends in the development of personnel services in Ukraine and Russia after the collapse of the USSR, as well as attempts by Russia to influence socio-political processes and military development in Ukraine and impose its models on Ukraine (Pidopryhora and Khairulin 2018, 113–114; Pidopryhora and Sokoliuk 2020, 73–78);

- the evolutionary transition of Ukrainian society from closed totalitarianism to open democracy, and the subsequent reorientation of military development towards the model of NATO member states as more humanistic and more consistent with the values and interests of the Ukrainian nation;

Russia's aggression and military invasion against Ukraine in 2014, which marked the beginning of the Russian–Ukrainian War and highlighted problems in the readiness of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, including personnel services, for combat operations, as well as the need to improve psychological support and develop psychological and psychophysiological rehabilitation.

In addition, another important factor influencing the development of the personnel support system should be noted: until 2014, the Armed Forces of Ukraine focused excessively on ensuring military discipline rather than on areas that would more directly determine readiness to repel the armed aggression of the Russian Federation, including military leadership, combat and operational stress control, psychological rehabilitation, and religious support (Pidopryhora 2020, 276–277; Pidopryhora and Khairulin 2018, 114–115).

Conclusions

Thus, using the example of Ukraine and Russia, universal human values, the civilisational choice of the state, and the associated political regime — democratic or, conversely, totalitarian, fascist, or racist — have a decisive influence on the development of personnel services and determine their value orientation.

1. If the person is recognised as the highest value, as is typical of modern democracies, the state continually expands the range of benefits and assistance, including greater attention to preparation for repelling armed aggression and to psychological assistance for participants in hostilities. If the person is merely an instrument of the state and is not considered the highest value, as is typical of totalitarian political regimes, expanding the range of rights and freedoms and ensuring decent conditions for military service and combat operations will not be priorities for the state. Therefore, personnel services in a democratic regime will be characterised by the predominance of the psychological component over the informational or ideological component and by the separation of religious support into an independent function, as in NATO countries. Personnel services in a totalitarian regime will be characterised by the significant predominance

of the ideological component over the psychological component, and religious support will be considered part of propaganda rather than assistance to service personnel.

2. In current conditions, modern European states have gradually become war-denying societies and are less willing to give up benefits for the sake of protection from aggression, as illustrated by a 2023 survey of German citizens (Pysanska 2017; Nesterenko 2023). This, in turn, requires more effort to form citizens' psychological readiness and psychological resilience to repel aggression, and to ensure effective psychological rehabilitation and return to peaceful life; in other words, it requires powerful psychological support.

Due to their inherent aggressiveness and resentment, totalitarian states will focus more efforts on the ideological component, part of which will be religious support.

Also, for totalitarian states, in conditions of permanent formation of the image of the enemy from other states (external enemies) or a certain part of their own citizens (internal enemies), the tolerance of citizens to violence becomes the norm — anyone can find themselves in the role of executioner or victim. Therefore, psychological trauma becomes the norm of life, and power can be built on criminal orders and relations.

Imperial-type states (such as the Russian Federation) often start wars of aggression to divert attention from their internal problems. Wars of aggression require a stronger justification, so the advantage of the ideological component in Personnel services becomes obvious.

Empires usually offer their citizens a certain set of economic benefits in exchange for their non-interference in politics (tacit consent), including the use of armed forces against other states. On the other hand, ensuring all the needs of combatants and war veterans will be mainly material (various additional payments and social preferences), as well as "public recognition" under the guise of involvement in various measures of ideological preparation of the next generation for current or future wars, rather than directing efforts and funds to overcome war trauma, psychological assistance and rehabilitation. This will turn veterans of wars of aggression into carriers of mental trauma and will generate even more violence in society.

3. In societies where the armed forces focus on saving the lives and health of service personnel, efforts are directed towards their ability to survive on the battlefield, reduce damage to civilian objects, and avoid or minimise civilian casualties. To solve these problems, significant resources are spent on protection

and equipment, including the best models of weapons and military vehicles capable of effective protection. This additionally motivates citizens for military service, builds their confidence, and requires less effort from the informational component; that is, explanation and additional motivation.

4. Moral readiness is an important personal formation that enables a soldier to make and implement a moral choice in favour of what is good, proper, and just. It promotes the soldier's observance of the norms and customs of war and the norms of international humanitarian law, while at the same time reducing the impact of traumatic combat factors on the psyche. In my opinion, the most appropriate component for forming moral readiness within the general army personnel support system is religious support.

5. The studies conducted earlier on the historical development of individual elements of personnel services have merely recorded Ukraine's attempts to orient military development towards the models of civilised states. Only in combination with axiological and civilisational approaches do the results of these studies provide an understanding of the reasons for this transformation.

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Cheders in the system of traditional Jewish education in Galicia, 1772–1918

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Abstract

This article examines Jewish education in Galicia through the lens of the most numerous and widespread elementary religious schools: cheders. These schools operated in the region throughout the period of the partitions of Poland. Their functioning in Galicia was restricted by the Austrian state authorities, which sought to eliminate them. Nevertheless, the long-standing popularity of cheders, rooted in a tradition several centuries old, meant that the Jewish population was reluctant to enrol children in state public schools. As a result, a very large number of Jewish children received their education in cheders. These schools were attended mainly by boys and were established in towns inhabited by Jews. In some towns, several, and sometimes even several dozen cheders operated simultaneously. Their strongest supporters were the Hasidim.

Keywords

Galicia, Jews, cheders, religious schools, elementary education

Jews began arriving in Poland in the Middle Ages and settled mainly in cities. Their numbers increased steadily. They organised themselves into their own ethno-religious communities, known as kahals, or communes, in which they maintained laws, customs, and traditions distinct from those of Christians. In this way, Jewish communities protected themselves from the influence of other religions and nations, thereby limiting the adoption of external cultural patterns. These attitudes had a fundamental effect on both the Jewish way of life and relations with other national groups living in Poland.

The partitions of the Polish state brought major changes for this population. In the lands incorporated into Austria (Galicia) as a result of the First Partition in 1772, Jews constituted the third-largest national group. At that time, they numbered approximately 200,000, accounting for almost 10% of the total population of the province (Bałaban 1916, 7–9; Półćwiartek 1991, 150–152; Opas 1994, 74). During the nineteenth century, the Jewish population increased systematically. In 1910, almost 900,000 Jews lived in Galicia, representing about 11% of the total population (Rędziński 2000, 11). Among Galician Jews, three main groups may be distinguished: the Orthodox, the Hasidim, and the reformers (maskilim) (Rędziński 2000, 13–19, 61; Łapot 2016, 41–43; Łapot 2019, 34).

In Galicia, Jews lived mainly in cities, with their largest concentration in Lviv. As in earlier periods, they formed communities that continued to maintain a degree of isolation from the rest of Galician society (Opas 1994, 74). For this reason, the Austrian authorities sought to assimilate Jews with other national groups and, at the same time, to Germanise them (Półćwiartek 1991, 151; Opas 1994, 74). It was only in 1867–1868 that the state authorities introduced equal rights for Jews in the province. Nevertheless, traditional precepts and rules of socio-religious life continued to be scrupulously observed in the kahals, where they were guarded in particular by the Hasidism (Hoff 1992, 108–110).

In 1774, a school law was issued in Austria that applied to the entire monarchy, including Galicia. It contained provisions concerning, among other matters, the organisational structure of elementary education for the plebeian population, known as folk education. The law provided for three types of schools: trivial, main, and normal schools. Control over folk education was assumed by the state administration. Jews were permitted to open their own public folk schools, known as German-Jewish schools, and were ordered to send their children to them.

In this way, the authorities sought to break the previous monopoly of denominational education among Jews (Świeboda 1994, 87–88; Półćwiartek 1991, 156). Jewish communities, however, considered state public schools superfluous or even harmful and regarded them as the first step towards religious apostasy (Pelczar 1998, 247–248; Łapot 2016, 81–82). Consequently, the kehillas avoided establishing such schools. Moreover, they tolerated the failure to send Jewish children to state schools, which meant that very few of them attended these institutions (Bałaban 1920, 194–195). As a result, the establishment of public schools for Jews in Galicia did not achieve the intended effect and instead provoked resistance and distrust. Jews remained fully satisfied with their own traditional religious schools (Łapot 2014, 498).

1. Religious and cultural determinants of cheder functioning

In Jewish culture, education and schooling were regarded as a moral virtue, a social imperative, a primary value for family life, and the object of the highest parental aspirations. Particular importance was attached to the education of boys (Cukras-Stelągowska 2009, 122). For them, elementary education was an extremely important stage on the path to adolescence. It shaped their subsequent educational and professional trajectories and prepared them for full participation in community life (Cukras-Stelągowska 2017, 187).

Traditional Jewish schools had an ethno-religious character, and their organisational structure had already been formed in earlier centuries. Initially, all boys attended private fee-paying cheders (chaydorim) or Talmud Torah schools; that is, free schools maintained by the kahal. The most talented pupils then continued their religious education at a higher level in yeshivas (Pelczar 1998, 247–248). For Jews, attendance at their own religious school was treated as a religious obligation. This position was represented especially by the Hasidim (Łapot 2014, 496), who regarded cheders as the only schools capable of providing young people with proper religious education and, at the same time, as a mainstay of Judaism (Bujak 1908, 105, 107).

Cheders therefore enjoyed considerable popularity. They were organised in every kahal, in varying numbers, and were usually located in cramped, makeshift premises. Cheders were divided into three categories. The first was attended by children of both sexes aged approximately 3–7 years. These schools were the most numerous and sometimes also functioned as childcare

institutions, since parents occupied with paid work often had no opportunity to supervise their children (Łapot 2016, 83). The second category of cheders was attended by children aged about 6–12 years. The third type, intended for older boys, was regarded as a school providing Talmudic education (Munk 1869, 258–260).

2. The attitude of state authorities towards cheders

During the partition period, the central and Galician Austrian authorities undertook various measures to abolish the existing monopoly of Jewish religious schools (Łapot 2014, 499). In the Education Act for Galicia of 2 May 1873, the authorities created the legal conditions for their closure or reorganisation. This aim was to be achieved by a decree of the Ministry of Religion and Enlightenment of 14 June 1874, which stated that attendance at cheders did not fulfil the obligation to attend school. It was stipulated that new cheders could be established only with the permission of the political authorities and that persons applying for a licence to maintain them had to submit to the district office a certificate of pedagogical competence issued by the relevant kehillah.

Only religion and the Talmud were permitted to be taught in cheders, while children studying in them also had to attend public or private folk schools. Cheders that additionally taught general subjects from the folk-school curriculum had to comply with the State Education Act of 14 May 1869. With reference to the ministerial decree mentioned above, the Lviv Governorate issued a decree on 31 August 1874 defining the rules for the functioning of cheders (Łapot 2014, 499). It ordered starosts to keep a register of such schools, inspect them frequently, and restrict the issuing of licences to run them (Rędziński 2000, 55; Łapot 2016, 95; Łapot 2019, 47).

The Galician National School Board also repeatedly drew attention to the fact that Jewish children avoided public schools by choosing cheders ("Okólnik L. 9.491 do rad szkolnych okręgowych z 24 listopada 1874 r." 1888, 96–97). It also issued detailed orders concerning their activities ("Okólnik L. 13.410 ex 1882 do rad szkolnych okręgowych z 24 stycznia 1883 r." 1888, 214–215). In practice, however, the orders of the central and provincial administrations were not obeyed by Jewish communities (Łapot 2014, 499; Hoff 1994, 79–80). As a result, the National School Board had to sanction the existence of cheders. It succeeded only partially in implementing the requirement that a teacher (melamed)

wishing to run a cheder obtain the relevant certificate of pedagogical competence (Landes 1875, 122).

In addition, in some towns, overcrowding in public schools became an obstacle to limiting the educational role of cheders, as some Jewish children were unable to enrol. Consequently, the state authorities were forced to accept the fact that young people were also educated in cheders. The competent district school boards were required only to ensure that these schools met certain sanitary conditions and that teachers gradually improved their pedagogical qualifications (Rędziński 2000, 55).

Already in the early years of Galician autonomy, cheders were criticised not only by the political and educational authorities but also by Jewish maskilic circles (Rędziński 2000, 54–55; Landes 1869, 104–106; Landes 1875, 121–122; Munk 1869, 258–260).

3. Cheder network

Despite various efforts by the state authorities to encourage Jews to send their children to public folk schools, cheders remained very popular in Galicia. In the early partition period, there were hundreds of them. In Lviv alone, there were 52 cheders in 1782 and 85 in 1795, attended by 1,574 children (Świeboda 1994, 87). In addition to 85 teachers (melameds), these schools employed 183 assistants (belfers). Consequently, only a small proportion of Jewish youth attended state folk schools in Lviv (Rędziński 2000, 47). A similar situation prevailed in other urban Jewish centres.

During the period of Galician autonomy, the consequence of the state decrees mentioned above, especially those concerning the possession of the relevant permits to run such schools, was initially a decrease in the number of licensed cheders. This is indicated by data for 1881–1898 from ten selected towns in Galicia (Table 1).

The data in Table 1 indicate that usually between a few and a dozen cheders operated in a town. The largest numbers at that time were in Brody, Kraków, and Lviv. In each of the analysed years, however, their number in individual towns fluctuated, with an overall downward trend. In 1881, there were 168 licensed establishments, whereas in 1898 there were only 125. The towns listed were located mostly in eastern Galicia, where the Jewish population was very large and sometimes even outnumbered all other groups. The only towns from western

Galicia included in the table were Kraków and Chrzanów, both important centres of Jewish life.

Table 1. Licensed cheders in Galicia between 1881 and 1898 (selected towns)

City	1881			1890			1895			1898		
	No.	pupils	avg.	No.	pupils	avg.	No.	pupils	avg.	No.	pupils	avg.
Boryslav	6	113	18.8	10	138	13.8	9	104	11.6	7	90	12.9
Brody	39	534	13.7	21	678	32.3	22	448	20.4	11	380	34.5
Chrzanów	9	143	15.9	11	128	11.6	12	289	24.1	12	314	26.2
Drohobych	11	214	19.5	17	332	19.5	9	154	17.1	9	158	17.6
Kolomyia	18	235	13.1	11	204	18.5	19	300	15.8	16	204	12.8
Kraków	35	849	24.3	21	382	18.2	18	442	24.6	23	1036	45.0
Lviv	15	494	32.9	26	479	18.4	17	321	18.9	22	343	15.6
Ternopil	12	351	29.2	8	131	16.4	7	240	34.3	8	246	30.8
Stanisławów	18	343	19.1	19	361	19.0	10	292	29.2	14	350	25.0
Stryi	5	79	15.8	2	22	11.0	3	58	19.3	3	58	19.3
Total	168	3355	20.0	146	2855	19.6	126	2648	21.0	125	3179	25.4

Source: Rędziński 2000, 56.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, once the statutory requirements had been met, the number of cheders in Galicia began to increase again. For example, in the 1899/1900 school year there were 256 such schools, with 386 melameds, while in 1902/1903 there were 339, with 473 melameds (Rędziński 2000, 55). The table also shows considerable variation in the number of cheders in particular towns. Their functioning was sometimes only episodic. One reason for the closure of schools was an insufficient number of pupils, probably related to the low popularity of particular teachers in the local community (Łapot 2014, 512).

One condition for obtaining a licence to run a cheder was the possession of suitable teaching premises and the provision of proper sanitary and technical conditions for pupils. Schools that failed to meet these requirements were

ordered by the administrative authorities to close (Adamczyk 1998, 49). In practice, only some melameds complied with administrative orders. The rest continued to teach illegally. As a result, alongside licensed cheders, there were also clandestine cheders, which the administrative authorities attempted to close once they had been discovered (Łapot 2019, 66). In the late 1880s, the Galician National Parliament even passed a law to nationalise cheders. The Galician National Department, however, had not found the funds to implement it by the end of the period under discussion, and cheders were therefore still allowed to operate (Świeboda 1994, 102).

4. Teachers and students

Cheders were organised and taught by melameds; that is, private teachers (Pelczar 1998, 248; Bałaban 1920, 191; Cukras-Stelągowska 2017, 188). Compared with teachers in state folk schools, they had no formal general professional training, and their pedagogical competence was not systematically verified. Most often, they came from among the former assistants of melameds, known as belfers (Łapot 2016, 82).

Young people living in Galicia were subject to compulsory state education, which required attendance at public folk schools. In the case of Jewish children, however, the vast majority were educated in their own religious schools, especially in cheders. Jews believed that learning in cheders satisfied their educational needs and that public schooling was unnecessary. Consequently, efforts were made to mislead the state authorities regarding the fulfilment of compulsory schooling by Jewish children, especially boys (Świeboda 1994, 102). As a result, a large number of Jewish children attended cheders. Their numbers in the last two decades of the nineteenth century are shown in Table 1, which contains detailed data on children studying in licensed cheders in ten selected towns in Galicia. In 1881, a total of 3,355 children studied in these schools (168 schools); in 1890, 2,855 (146 schools); in 1895, 2,648 (126 schools); and in 1898, 3,179 (125 schools). The data show a fluctuating trend in pupil numbers. The average number of children per cheder also varied: in 1881 there were 20 pupils per school, in 1890 more than 19, in 1895, 21, and in 1898 more than 25.

The attendance of Jewish children in cheders at the turn of the twentieth century may be analysed using the example of Lviv (Table 2). In 1889, there were 48 schools, with varying numbers of pupils. The largest had more than

30 children, whereas the smallest had only a few (Łapot 2016, 98–99). The largest group of schools had between a dozen and twenty pupils (43.7%). In 1913, by contrast, only 26 cheders were in operation. Most were attended by between a dozen and twenty pupils, and only a few schools had more than 20 pupils (Łapot 2016, 102–103).

Table 2. Number of pupils in cheders in Lviv in 1889 and 1913

Number of pupils per cheder	Number of cheders	
	1889	1913
up to 10	10	1
11–20	21	18
21–30	11	6
over 30	6	1
Total	48	26

Source: Łapot 2016, 98–99, 102–103.

In Lviv, the influence of cheders on the Jewish community gradually declined during the period of autonomy. This was reflected in the decreasing number of schools and pupils and in the increasing number of children attending public folk schools (Łapot 2014, 511).

5. The teaching and learning process

In cheders, the principle of unity between instruction and religious education was implemented. Most often, only Hebrew, the reading of the Bible in Hebrew (with translation into Yiddish), the recitation of prayers in Hebrew, the study of the Talmud, and the writing of Hebrew letters were taught. Some cheders also taught arithmetic and German (Bałaban 1920, 192; Rędziński 2000, 54). During lessons, texts were read, recited, and translated from Hebrew. Teaching was based on memorisation. Passages were repeated by children until they had been learned by heart. For some pupils, the effects of such teaching were very limited, since it developed mainly mechanical memory.

Teaching methods were dominated by verbalism. Melameds often failed to select teaching content according to the age of their pupils or their level

of understanding. They also did not explain grammatical rules or apply the principle of graded difficulty. Considerable attention was devoted to the meticulous study of ancient regulations for priests, rules of ritual slaughter, and places mentioned in the Torah, while basic modern knowledge useful in everyday life was ignored. Discipline during lessons was maintained by punishments such as beating children or making them kneel on sand in a corner of the room. Classrooms were usually located in the dwellings of melameds, sometimes in their rooms or kitchens, and were stuffy. Cheders sometimes lacked basic teaching equipment, such as desks and tables. Classes were held jointly, even though pupils differed in age and in their level of school skills and knowledge. Lessons began early in the morning and lasted, with a lunch break, sometimes until 9 p.m. (Łapot 2014, 497–498; Łapot 2016, 84). Despite the modest knowledge acquired in cheders, Jews generally considered it sufficient (Świeboda 1994, 87).

According to the decree of the Governorate of 31 August 1874, during the period of Galician autonomy education in cheders was to be limited exclusively to religious instruction and the explanation of the Talmud. School owners were not allowed to teach general subjects unless they obtained a licence from the National School Board to run a public school (Łapot 2014, 499).

In some cheders, however, general subjects taught in folk schools were offered illegally in addition to Talmudic instruction. According to state statistics, in 1884 there were about 1,000 registered cheders in Galicia. Of this group, only ten schools officially taught additional general subjects (German, Polish, and arithmetic). According to the National School Board, there were in fact many more such schools at the time. They operated illegally, without the permission of the state and educational authorities ("Okólnik L. 13.442 do rad szkolnych okręgowych z 5 listopada 1885 r." 1888, 268–269).

The teaching methods used in cheders and the poor condition of their premises became the subject of criticism by state educational authorities and Jewish maskilic circles (Łapot 2014, 497–499).

Conclusions

Cheders in Galicia functioned throughout the partition period. At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the state authorities attempted to limit their activity by introducing public German-Jewish folk schools for Jews. After some

time, however, because of the lack of interest among the Jewish population, the authorities were forced to close these schools. Cheders, by contrast, remained highly popular, since followers of Judaism regarded them as the only schools capable of providing their children with proper religious education. Their principal defenders were the Hasidim, and they were used by Jewish communities attached to their religious tradition. Despite their many shortcomings, cheders contributed significantly to the reduction of illiteracy among the Jewish population. These schools also formed the foundation of Jewish education in the other partitions (Cukras-Stelągowska 2009, 126). This demonstrates that, despite attempts at reform, the Jewish system of religious elementary education continued to function effectively (Hoff 1994, 80). At the same time, Jewish reformers regarded cheders as synonymous with the social and cultural backwardness of their nation (Cukras-Stelągowska 2017, 191).

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Report on the International Scientific Conference — St. John Henry Newman: A Guide on the Paths of Truth

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On 17–18 April 2026, the international scientific conference entitled *St. John Henry Newman: A Guide on the Paths of Truth* was held in Tarnów. The conference formed part of a broader initiative known as the Tarnów Newman Days. The event was organised by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Tarnów; Tarnów Section the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Kraków; the Major Seminary in Tarnów; and the Congregation of St Philip Neri in Tarnów. The organising committee consisted of three members: Fathers Piotr Cebula, Mateusz Bugno, and Grzegorz Baran. The event was conceived as a response to Pope Leo XIV's proclamation of Newman as a Doctor of the Church and co-patron of the Church's educational mission on 1 November 2025. The aim of the Tarnów Newman Days was to promote Newman's theology, philosophy, and spirituality and to consolidate a scholarly community, as well as a wider circle of persons interested in his thought and legacy.

The conference and the Tarnów Newman Days were officially opened on 17 April by Fr Piotr Cebula, the originator and initiator of the event. The opening ceremony took place at the Oratory of St Philip Neri in Tarnów. All events on that day were held at the Oratory and in the church of the religious congregation that John Henry Newman joined after his conversion. The choice of venue for the first thematic session was therefore motivated by this historical connection.

The first three conference lectures were delivered by speakers from the National Institute for Newman Studies in Pittsburgh, Pennsylavania (United States). Christopher Cimorelli, PhD, Director of the Institute, presented a lecture entitled "'Some Definite Service": NINS and Newman's "Medicine' for Our Times"', in which he highlighted the institute's role and the work of its scholars in collecting materials and preparing documentation for the process of proclaiming Newman a Doctor of the Church. The second lecture, 'Researching John Henry Newman: Opportunities at the National Institute for Newman Studies', was delivered by Elizabeth Huddleston, PhD, Head of Research and Publications at the institute, who outlined the broad range of research opportunities related to Newman's thought made possible by the Institute's resources. The third lecture, "*Cor ad cor loquitur:* Groundbreaking, Interoperable Technology that Connects Us, Heart to Heart", was presented by Daniel Michaels, PhD, Chief Technology Officer. He demonstrated a modern interactive digital tool that provides access to Newman's original texts and key themes through interconnected archival resources.

The fourth speaker was Fr George Bowen, COr, from the Brompton Oratory in London. As the principal coordinator of the process leading to Newman's recognition as a Doctor of the Church, he addressed the rationale behind Pope Leo XIV's decision to designate Newman as co-patron of the Church's educational mission. After these lectures, a book presentation was held for Fr Piotr Cebula's publication *St. John Henry Newman: Doctor of the Church*. The book is an introduction to Newman's thought and functions as a concise guide to his ideas, writings, and life. It also includes a litany to St. John Henry Newman that has received the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* as well as photographs of significant places associated with Newman's life.

The first day concluded with a Eucharistic celebration at the Oratorian church in Tarnów, presided over by Fr Piotr Cebula. The homily was delivered by Fr Mateusz Kiwior, COr, who emphasised Newman's pastoral engagement within the Oratory in Birmingham.

The second day of the Tarnów Newman Days and the conference took place in the assembly hall of the Major Seminary in Tarnów. Introductory remarks were delivered by Fr Dr Hab Grzegorz Baran, Dean of the Faculty of Theology, Tarnów Section, of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Kraków.

This was followed by a message from Andrzej Jeż, Bishop of Tarnów, read by Fr Piotr Cebula. In his address, the bishop emphasised the significance of Newman's teaching and person for the contemporary Church and for the mission and vision of universities. Subsequently, Fr Prof. Robert Tyrała, Rector

of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, expressed his appreciation for the initiative and acknowledged the efforts of the organisers while also underlining the contemporary relevance and inspirational character of Newman's thought. The introductory session concluded with Fr Dr. Piotr Bajor from the Dicastery for Culture and Education, who read a letter from Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça, Prefect of the Dicastery, addressed to the conference participants.

Following the opening session, the conference continued with lectures organised into two thematic panels: *Newman as a Philosopher* and *Newman as a Theologian and Patron of Education*. The first panel began with a lecture by Dr Hab Paweł Kłoczowski, Professor of the University of the National Education Commission, Kraków, entitled "Philosophical Inspirations of Newman's Thought", in which he presented the philosophical sources of Newman's ideas, with particular emphasis on British philosophy.

The next speaker, Dr. hab. Sebastian Gałecki, Professor of the Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa, delivered a lecture titled "Newman's Argument from Conscience for the Existence of God", reconstructing Newman's argument by integrating various elements of his teaching on conscience. Meanwhile, Fr Dr Piotr Cebula of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Kraków presented the lecture "Newman's Metaphysics", offering an account of Newman's metaphysical framework, particularly the development of ideas, criteria for evaluating such development, and the process of arriving at the essence of ideas.

The final speaker in this panel was Prof Jan Kłos (John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin), whose lecture "The Contemporary Relevance of the 'Grammar of Assent'" highlighted the enduring significance of Newman's epistemology and his concept of assent as presented in his major philosophical work *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. The philosophical panel concluded with a discussion moderated by Fr Piotr Cebula.

The second panel focused on *Newman as a Theologian and Patron of Education*. The first speaker, Fr Philip Geister, SJ, PhD, Rector of the Newman Institute in Uppsala, Sweden, delivered a lecture entitled "'God's Noiseless Work': How John Henry Newman Brought Catholic Higher Education to Sweden", presenting the history, development, and current activities of the Institute, all deeply inspired by Newman's thought. The next lecture, "The Development of the Understanding of the Mystery of the Eucharist in J. H. Newman", was delivered by Fr Mateusz Bugno (University of Navarra, Spain), who traced Newman's evolving understanding of the Eucharist from his early reflections to his mature

articulation of the doctrine of the Real Presence in accordance with Roman Catholic teaching.

The third contribution, submitted by Ryan Marr, PhD (Mercy College of Health Sciences, United States), entitled "Restoring the Architectonic Philosophy: Newman's Response to the Crisis of the University", emphasised the significance of Newman's educational philosophy and its relevance for renewing university education understood as an integrated system of interrelated disciplines. This panel also concluded with a discussion moderated by Fr Mateusz Bugno.

The Tarnów Newman Days and the International Scientific Conference were formally concluded by Fr Piotr Cebula, who summarised the proceedings. A publication of the conference papers is planned, and the organisers have announced that the next edition of the Tarnów Newman Days will take place in two years' time, extending an open invitation to future participants.

Reviews

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La Cátedra de Derecho Eclesiástico del Estado y de Derecho Comparado, junto con el Departamento de Historia del Derecho de la Facultad de Derecho Canónico de la UKSW de Varsovia, organizó un simposio internacional titulado «Migración y Derechos Humanos». El simposio, que reunió a representantes de universidades de Macao (China), Friburgo (Suiza), Barcelona (España), Cracovia, Breslavia y Varsovia (Polonia), se celebró en Varsovia el 24 de mayo de 2023. Los ponentes fueron reconocidos especialistas en derecho internacional, derecho canónico, derecho comparado, historia del derecho, derechos humanos, filosofía y ciencias de la religión. La organización internacional Consociatio Internationalis Studio Iuris Canonici Promovendo, con sede en Roma, asumió el patrocinio del simposio. La amplitud de las universidades representadas, así como la diversidad de los investigadores y de los campos de estudio que cultivan, permitieron analizar la cuestión de los derechos humanos desde una perspectiva particularmente sugerente: la diversidad de su comprensión por parte de personas procedentes de determinados círculos civilizacionales. Las ponencias presentadas en el simposio y las posteriores reflexiones de sus autores constituyeron la base de la monografía reseñada.

La monografía bilingüe titulada Migration and Human Rights. Migración y Derechos Humanos contiene artículos de los siguientes autores: Francisco Javier Sanabria Valderrama, Jarosław Marek Duraj, Edmond Eh, Mirosław Sadowski, Łukasz Marzec, Piotr Ryguła, Mariano Delgado, Marta Zuzanna Osuchowska, Francisca Pérez-Madrid y Jan Dohnalik.

Las migraciones han acompañado al ser humano desde los inicios de su existencia. Desde el alba de los tiempos, las personas han abandonado, de forma voluntaria o forzada, sus lugares de residencia anteriores. Al no poder llevar consigo todos sus bienes materiales, llevaron aquello que constituía su mundo interior: sus costumbres, sus creencias y su manera de comprender la realidad, incluido el derecho. Sin embargo, los habitantes de las tierras hacia las que se dirigían los migrantes también poseían su propia cultura, su religión y sus normas jurídicas. Este encuentro entre culturas diferentes fue siempre una experiencia difícil para ambas partes, como lo fueron la migración de los israelitas hacia la Tierra Prometida o las migraciones de los pueblos bárbaros hacia el territorio del Imperio romano. Al propiciar la confrontación con una cultura distinta, la migración contribuía, no obstante, a crear circunstancias en las que ambas partes adquirían una conciencia especialmente clara de su propia identidad cultural. Conscientes de ello, esas «partes» lograban a menudo, aunque no sin grandes dificultades, cocrear una nueva realidad civilizacional. Dado que la migración ha acompañado al ser humano desde el comienzo de su historia, el libro Migration and Human Rights. Migración y Derechos Humanos intenta responder a una serie de preguntas: ¿puede suponerse que migrar constituye un derecho humano? ¿Qué autoriza a una persona a abandonar su propia tierra y llegar a la de otros, cuyos antepasados la han habitado desde tiempos inmemoriales? ¿La guerra, el hambre, el cambio climático que hace imposible vivir en un lugar determinado, el deseo de ayudar a los necesitados, la voluntad de difundir los ideales en los que se cree o, simplemente, la búsqueda de una vida mejor? ¿Cuál de estas razones es suficiente y, si lo es, por qué? Y, desde la perspectiva no ya del individuo, sino de la sociedad afectada por la migración: ¿existe algún factor de la vida social que, con el paso del tiempo, pueda convertirse en la base de la coexistencia pacífica de una sociedad nueva y más diversa, así como en fundamento de valores ético-jurídicos comunes?

El editor de este libro, el profesor Piotr Ryguła, aborda el tema de la migración desde la perspectiva de los derechos que corresponden a la persona, sin centrarse en los acontecimientos sociopolíticos actuales. Ello se debe a que, al tratar una cuestión de esta índole, advierte que el problema no fue menos

actual en el pasado y que, con toda probabilidad, seguirá siéndolo en el futuro. La obra reseñada reflexiona sobre las diferentes formas en que se perciben los derechos humanos en distintas culturas, religiones y tradiciones jurídicas, y considera hasta qué punto las experiencias de la migración y los encuentros con la alteridad influyeron, en el pasado, en la comprensión de lo que es el ser humano y de los derechos que le correspondían entonces y le corresponden hoy.

En la tradición jurídica occidental se acepta comúnmente que los derechos humanos tienen sus raíces en la filosofía y el pensamiento jurídico griegos y romanos, en el judaísmo y el cristianismo, así como en la filosofía de la Ilustración. El fundamento de estos derechos se encuentra en la concepción de la dignidad humana como *imago Dei*, presente en ambas religiones históricamente vinculadas a la civilización occidental. Sin embargo, si se examinan la migración y los derechos humanos desde una perspectiva global, conviene analizar también cómo las culturas jurídicas y las religiones no vinculadas históricamente a la llamada civilización occidental se relacionan con ese concepto de derechos.

En la primera parte del libro, el lector encuentra un análisis de los derechos humanos desde la perspectiva de las culturas y religiones no cristianas. Al observar la migración como fenómeno mundial, resulta difícil no advertir que, en gran medida, los migrantes han sido y siguen siendo personas ajenas al círculo de la llamada civilización occidental. Arraigados en su propia cultura y religión, poseen una concepción diferente del ser humano y de sus derechos. Por ello, la primera parte contiene tres capítulos en los que se analiza la comprensión de los derechos humanos desde la perspectiva del budismo, el confucianismo y el islam. En la segunda parte, que también consta de tres capítulos, el lector encuentra temas seleccionados del análisis histórico de la formación de las ideas de dignidad y derechos humanos en Occidente. Estas ideas se formaron inicialmente en el entorno de la Europa cristiana y, tras el descubrimiento de América, a ambos lados del Atlántico. A menudo se configuraron en confrontación con las ideas de los habitantes de territorios que no constituían la cuna de la civilización occidental. El primer capítulo de la segunda parte del libro analiza la obra de Paweł Włodkowic, sacerdote católico, jurista y rector de la Universidad Jagellónica, quien defendió al Reino de Polonia en su conflicto con la Orden Teutónica en la primera mitad del siglo XV. La Orden acusaba a Polonia de haberse aliado con la Lituania pagana contra un Estado cristiano, esto es, contra el Estado de la Orden Teutónica. En el juicio ante el emperador Segismundo de Luxemburgo, Włodkowic defendió a Polonia frente a esas acusaciones, argumentando que los Estados tenían derecho a la soberanía con

independencia de su fe y de su cultura. Contrapuso la conversión forzosa de los prusianos paganos por parte de los caballeros teutónicos a la evangelización pacífica de Lituania realizada por Polonia. Esta actitud permitió construir, con el paso del tiempo, una nueva estructura política y estatal: *Res Publica Utriusque Nationis* (República de las Dos Naciones), en la que el cristianismo, combinado con la tolerancia religiosa, se convirtió en uno de los fundamentos que unían a los pueblos polaco y lituano. A finales del mismo siglo, los españoles tuvieron que plantearse una cuestión análoga: ¿qué actitud adoptar ante pueblos de cultura y religión diferentes? En esta ocasión no se trataba de prusianos y lituanos en Europa, sino de los habitantes del continente descubierto por Colón. Al emigrar al «Nuevo Mundo», los europeos llevaron consigo, de manera natural y en gran medida inconsciente, su propia concepción del ser humano y de sus derechos. El segundo capítulo de la segunda parte de la monografía, titulado «Migración a las Américas a principios del siglo XVI como impulso de un gran debate sobre los derechos humanos», intenta analizar esta situación y los primeros esfuerzos por responder a las preguntas que surgieron entonces sobre los derechos humanos a ambos lados del océano. El último capítulo de la segunda parte desarrolla el mismo tema. Su autor parte del pensamiento de Francisco de Vitoria, dominico español y jurista renacentista, considerado, junto con Hugo Grocio, uno de los padres del derecho internacional. Vitoria defendió el derecho a emigrar, buscando argumentos en el debate sobre la expansión europea hacia el Nuevo Mundo en el siglo XVI; dicho debate versaba sobre el derecho a emigrar e inmigrar, el libre comercio, el uso de los recursos naturales y la naturalización por nacimiento en el país de inmigración, siempre que ello no causara perjuicio a quienes habitaban el territorio concreto. Al presentar y analizar las opiniones de Vitoria sobre el derecho a emigrar, el autor del capítulo las compara con las concepciones contemporáneas sobre la materia. El tema de la migración europea al continente americano y sus efectos desde la perspectiva de los derechos humanos cierra el primer capítulo de la tercera parte de la monografía, titulado «Los desafíos actuales del sistema interamericano de protección de los derechos humanos». La selección subjetiva de las cuestiones más importantes de dicho sistema y su análisis detallado permiten comprender las características de los órganos e instituciones que lo componen. De este modo, el lector puede conocer qué tipo de problemas sociales y jurídicos se plantean actualmente en los continentes americanos. En los dos últimos capítulos, sus autores vuelven a la religión como perspectiva desde la que se analiza la migración: en la primera parte se abordaron las religiones no cristianas, y en los dos capítulos finales,

el cristianismo. El segundo de ellos, titulado «Igualdad y dignidad de las personas migrantes en el derecho canónico», ofrece un análisis particularmente interesante del derecho a migrar desde la perspectiva del derecho canónico. La autora subraya que el régimen internacional vigente reconoce el derecho a salir de un país, incluso del propio, pero no el derecho a inmigrar, pues atribuye a cada Estado el derecho soberano de decidir sobre la admisión o no admisión de migrantes en su territorio. Por su parte, el Concilio Vaticano II, así como algunos papas—por ejemplo, Pablo VI en Pastoralis migratorum cura—, desde la perspectiva que les es propia, declaran el derecho fundamental de la persona a emigrar, basado en la dignidad humana; a este derecho corresponde el deber del migrante de contribuir lealmente al desarrollo del país de asentamiento. El derecho canónico reconoce también el derecho de los fieles desplazados a recibir una asistencia pastoral específica y el correspondiente deber de las Iglesias locales de facilitarla. En el último capítulo de la monografía, titulado «La parroquia para los emigrantes a la luz de los derechos de los fieles», se analiza una de las formas de hacer efectivo este derecho. El libro reseñado no ofrece respuestas definitivas a las cuestiones que plantea la migración. Su mérito innegable consiste, sin embargo, en haber abordado un tema tan difícil y delicado en el mundo actual y en haberlo analizado desde la perspectiva de la religión y de la diversidad cultural. Nuestras posturas ante la religión no solo determinan lo que creemos sobre Dios, el Ser Supremo—si existe y, en caso afirmativo, cómo lo imaginamos—, sino que también influyen en nuestra forma de pensar sobre el ser humano y sobre los derechos inherentes a la condición humana. La monografía señala no solo los aspectos positivos de la diversidad cultural, sino también las dificultades que pueden derivarse de ella en el proceso de alcanzar una integración social más amplia.

El propósito primordial de esta monografía no es analizar sistemas jurídicos concretos que regulan el fenómeno migratorio en el contexto de los derechos humanos, sino estudiar los factores que conforman la conciencia social y jurídica de los migrantes y de quienes los acogen en sus países de residencia permanente. Si se toma en cuenta la legislación de los países de destino de la migración, esta conciencia influye en la ley que allí se promulga. También influye en la forma en que dicha ley es comprendida y aplicada por quienes llegan a un país concreto y, en consecuencia, en el proceso de integración en la sociedad.

En conclusión, las migraciones constituyen un fenómeno poliédrico y asimétrico, muy complejo en términos económicos, culturales, educativos, sanitarios y de seguridad. Son también un asunto de extraordinaria complejidad racional

y moral, porque enfrentan las razones de la razón con las razones del corazón, las cuales fluctúan al compás de las noticias conexas —naufragios, desembarcos masivos, aumento del número de menores no acompañados, comisión de delitos graves e incremento de la inseguridad— y de la evolución de los datos económicos, demográficos y sociológicos, poniendo constantemente a prueba nuestra claridad de juicio.

Estoy convencido de que este libro, Migration and Human Rights. Migración y Derechos Humanos, será de gran ayuda no solo para quienes enseñan en las aulas académicas, sino también para todos aquellos que deseen profundizar en un tema tan actual como la migración, asunto de extraordinaria complejidad racional y moral. Por ello, felicito al editor, el profesor Piotr Ryguła, y a los autores de los artículos, que ofrecen una reflexión rigurosa sobre las relaciones humanas y sobre el estudio del derecho y de las religiones.

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