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Tomasz Kopiczko
Uniwersytet Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego w Warszawie
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8000-6714

The Family as a Moral Agent of Communication Ethics in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: A Personalist Reading of Leo XIV's *Magnifica humanitas*

Rodzina jako podmiot etyki komunikacji w dobie sztucznej inteligencji. Personalistyczna lektura encykliki *Magnifica humanitas* Leona XIV

Abstract

The aim of the article is to show that, in the light of Leo XIV's encyclical *Magnifica humanitas* (2026), the family should be understood not as an object of protection and regulation within an environment shaped by artificial intelligence, but as the primary moral agent of communication ethics. This aim is pursued in three steps. First, the categories of the encyclical relevant to communication ethics (truth as a common good, the ecology of communication, the educational alliance) are reconstructed and situated within the continuity of the Church's teaching on media and artificial intelligence. Second, drawing on Karol Wojtyła's personalism (participation, gift, the personalistic norm), the subjectivity of the family is specified as the analogical agency of a community of persons, and a model of its communicative subjectivity is proposed in three dimensions: originative, normative and testimonial. Third, obligations and limits for the family's communicative practice in relation to conversational and generative artificial intelligence are derived from this model. The method combines a hermeneutic analysis of a magisterial document with systematic analysis and reference to current research on family communication. It is concluded that the ethics proposed by the encyclical is relational in character and that its fundamental subject remains the family, in which a person „learns the earliest forms of truth and goodness".

Keywords

family communication, communication ethics, artificial intelligence, moral agency, Catholic social teaching, Karol Wojtyła, Magnifica humanitas

Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest wykazanie, że w świetle encykliki Leona XIV *Magnifica humanitas* (2026) rodzina powinna być rozumiana nie jako przedmiot ochrony i regulacji w środowisku kształtowanym przez sztuczną inteligencję, lecz jako pierwotny podmiot etyki komunikacji. Cel ten został osiągnięty w trzech krokach. Najpierw zrekonstruowano kategorie encykliki istotne dla etyki komunikacji (prawda jako dobro wspólne, ekologia komunikacji, przymierze wychowawcze) i osadzono je w ciągłości nauczania Kościoła o mediach i sztucznej inteligencji. Następnie, odwołując się do personalizmu Karola Wojtyły (uczestnictwo, dar, norma personalistyczna), określono podmiotowość rodziny jako analogiczną podmiotowość wspólnoty osób i zaproponowano model jej podmiotowości komunikacyjnej w trzech wymiarach: źródłowym, normatywnym i wymiarze świadectwa. Wreszcie wyprowadzono z tego modelu zobowiązania i granice dla praktyki komunikacyjnej rodziny wobec konwersacyjnych i generatywnych systemów sztucznej inteligencji. Zastosowano metodę hermeneutycznej analizy dokumentu magisterialnego połączoną z analizą systematyczną oraz odniesieniem do aktualnych badań nad komunikacją rodzinną. Należy stwierdzić, że etyka proponowana przez encyklikę ma charakter relacyjny, a jej podstawowym podmiotem pozostaje rodzina, w której człowiek „uczy się pierwszych form prawdy i dobra".

Słowa kluczowe

komunikacja rodzinna, etyka komunikacji, sztuczna inteligencja, podmiotowość moralna, katolicka nauka społeczna, Karol Wojtyła, Magnifica humanitas

Introduction

The spread of artificial intelligence is significantly altering the reality in which the family functions. Communication between parents and children, the transmission of values and faith, and everyday relationships at home increasingly take place through digital tools whose operation lies beyond the family's control. In this context, particular importance attaches to Leo XIV's encyclical *Magnifica humanitas* on safeguarding the human person in the time of artificial intelligence, promulgated on 15 May 2026. It is the first papal document of this rank devoted entirely to the problem of algorithmic technologies. Its fourth chapter, entitled „Safeguarding Humanity at a Time of Transformation. Truth, Work, Freedom", introduces categories that have not yet been the object of systematic reflection in family studies: truth as a common good, the ecology of communication and the educational alliance for the digital era (Leo XIV, 2026, nos. 131–147). All three directly concern the family, even though the family as such is not a separate theme of the encyclical, apart from a short passage on the social conditions of hope (nos. 165–169).

In the discussion of communication ethics in the algorithmic environment the family is treated almost exclusively as an object. It appears there as the recipient of regulation, the beneficiary of media education programmes, or a group at risk from disinformation, „AI companions" and technoference. This approach prevails in the empirical literature on the impact of technology on family interactions (Chamam et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2026), and also in part of the pedagogical and media studies literature, which defines the family by its exposure to threats and its educational needs (Kloch & Przybysz, 2025; Szczepańska, 2024). What seems to be missing is a perspective in which the family appears as a subject of communication ethics, that is, as a community of persons which does not so much submit to communicative norms as generate, practise and transmit them first.

The aim of this article is to show that a reading of the encyclical *Magnifica humanitas* through the lens of Karol Wojtyła's personalism, to which Leo XIV repeatedly refers, makes it possible to recognise the family as the primordial source of communication ethics and as an irreplaceable moral agent within the communicative space shaped by artificial intelligence.

This aim will be pursued in three sections. The first reconstructs those categories of the encyclical which make it possible to treat the family as a subject of communication, and indicates their place in the continuity of the Church's teaching on media and artificial intelligence. The second proposes a personalist model of the family as a subject of communication ethics, in which the categories of the encyclical are linked with Wojtyła's concepts of participation, gift and the personalistic norm. The third identifies the obligations and limits that follow from this model for the family's communicative practice in relation to artificial intelligence.

The article is theoretical and analytical in character, and its method comprises three steps: a hermeneutic analysis of the magisterial text in the context of the Church's social teaching, a systematic analysis within the framework of Wojtyła's personalism, which orders the reconstructed categories into a model, and a normative derivation of obligations from that model. Selected studies on family communication serve to illustrate the conclusions, not to prove them. The analysis concerns above all conversational and generative systems, because these are the applications the encyclical discusses most directly in relation to the family (nos. 100, 140–142). The formal object is the family as a community of persons considered under the aspect of its communicative subjectivity; the material object is the text of the encyclical and the documents to which it refers. Other applications of artificial intelligence, the empirical analysis of family practices and regulatory and legal questions remain outside the scope of the study.

1. Communication Ethics in the Encyclical Magnifica humanitas

Magnifica humanitas is not the first voice of the Magisterium on artificial intelligence, but it is the first to give this problem the rank of a social encyclical. Already *Inter mirifica* (1963) and *Communio et progressio* (1971) treated the means of social communication as a reality that shapes the human community, and placed responsibility for their proper use first of all on their recipients, including parents and educators (Second Vatican Council, 1963, no. 10; Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 1971, no. 8). The encyclical transfers this conviction to an environment in which the mediator of communication is an algorithmic system. It stands in the line of the Rome Call for AI Ethics of 2020 (Pegoraro & Curzel, 2023), *Towards Full Presence* (Dicastery for Communication, 2023) and *Antiqua et nova* (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith & Dicastery for Culture and Education, 2025). As A. Wuwer emphasises, its proper interpretation requires continuity with *Rerum novarum*, the teaching on the dignity of the person, and the distinction between human and artificial intelligence (Wuwer, 2026, pp. 143–146). A. Domaszk notes that *Antiqua et nova* already treated education as a field in which the relational presence of the educator cannot be reproduced by artificial intelligence (Domaszk, 2026, p. 22).

The novelty of the encyclical lies in the shift of emphasis from the ethics of using digital tools to the ethics of the environment in which those tools operate. Leo XIV describes technological power as taking on „an unprecedented, predominantly ‚private' aspect", concentrated in transnational actors „endowed with resources and the capacity to intervene that surpass those of many Governments" (Leo XIV, 2026, no. 5). If the most important decisions about the architecture of communication are taken beyond the reach of states, they are all the more taken beyond the reach of families: „It is difficult for parents by themselves to resist the influence of business models that monetize attention and time" (no. 142; cf. Wuwer, 2026, p. 149). This

raises a question which the encyclical does not pose directly: in such an environment, is the family still a subject, or already merely an object of protection?

The fourth chapter of the encyclical opens with the statement that the digital transformation „invites us to rediscover truth as a common good, to protect the dignity of work and to safeguard freedom against all forms of dependence and commercialization" (no. 131). From the perspective of communication ethics, three categories developed in this chapter are of key importance.

The first is truth as a common good. The truth of facts „requires verification, cross-checking of sources and responsible argumentation", but „moreover" it is „deeply relational, built through bonds of trust and shared practices, as well as an honest exchange with others and with the world" (no. 132). This sentence is the axis of the whole conception, and its structure must be read precisely. The relational dimension does not replace the factual one but presupposes it. Trust does not make information true, and the quality of a relationship cannot compensate for the falsity of what is communicated. The relationship is, however, the condition under which truth is communicated, received and recognised as a good owed to the person. In this sense truth in communication is not only a property of content, but also a quality of the relationship between persons. The Pope adds that those who command powerful technical resources can influence people „concerning the truth about humanity, the world, the meaning of existence, the family and even God" (no. 133). The family thus appears among the first realities about which the truth can be modelled algorithmically.

The second category is the ecology of communication. Communication „is not only the transmission of information, but it is also the creation of a culture" (no. 135). The programme of an ecology of communication is multi-level and includes, at the level of schools and families, „a growing need for new educational awareness and for formation concerning the proper and critical use of digital tools" (no. 137). The family is thus named as co-responsible for the communicative environment, not merely as its user. The term draws on the tradition of media ecology, in which media are treated as an environment that shapes perception and relationships rather than as neutral channels (Płonkowski, 2025, pp. 270–271).

The third category is the educational alliance for the digital era. The encyclical formulates a principle with far-reaching consequences: „every technology shapes those who use it", and therefore „educating people about the use of AI, then, involves teaching them to decide when and for what purpose it ought not to be used" (no. 140). It calls for „an alliance among policy-makers, educational institutions and families that is capable of concretely supporting adults in this task", with regulations holding „service providers accountable rather than shifting the whole burden of control onto families" (no. 142). In no. 147 the Church's social doctrine „invites

families, schools, Christian communities and public institutions to form a renewed educational alliance".

All three categories share one feature: they presuppose a subject capable of relationship. Truth as a common good requires a community that shares it, the ecology of communication requires subjects who take responsibility for the environment, and the alliance requires parties who enter into it. When the encyclical speaks of communication, it asks about the family, even when it does not name it.

The debate on the ethics of artificial intelligence oscillates between code-based ethics, that is, catalogues of principles to be built into the design of systems (Pegoraro & Curzel, 2023), and structural critique, which unmasks mechanisms of domination but does not always formulate positive norms. *Magnifica humanitas* draws on both registers (nos. 137, 142, 172), but its proper type of ethics is revealed in the third chapter: „the quality of a civilization is measured not by the power of its means, but by the care it is able to offer" (no. 114). The ability to care „is learned and mastered through lived experience", in „simple gestures often rooted in family life", such as „reading stories to a child, offering company to an elderly person and arranging a home so that it is welcoming" (no. 114).

The ethics of *Magnifica humanitas* is thus an ethics of relational responsibility. Its norms arise from the experience of care for a concrete person and only secondarily translate into rules and institutions, „translating charity into structures of justice" (no. 186). Its ultimate criterion is the irreplaceability of humanity, whose essence is „the capacity for relationship and love" (no. 126). Such an ethics calls for a subject in which care is practised first, and it is no accident that all the examples of care cited in no. 114 come from the family environment (cf. Okeke, 2025; Amo Usanos & Farrugia, 2026).

2. The Family as a Moral Agent of Communication Ethics: A Personalist Model

Recent studies describe what digital technologies do to the family: parental distraction lowers sensitivity to the child's signals (Chamam et al., 2024), „AI companions" may displace face-to-face contact (Sun et al., 2026; Malfacini, 2025), and parents and children know little about how artificial intelligence works (Kloch & Przybysz, 2025, pp. 103–106, 117–121). In these approaches, however, the family appears as a place where something happens under the influence of technology, or as the addressee of protective measures; even its educational potential is described as something to be supported from outside (Wojtanowicz, 2025, p. 39). They do not explain where the family draws the communicative norms it transmits, nor why its practices should have normative weight for an environment that exceeds it.

The encyclical provides a premise that makes it possible to cross this limit. In the chapter devoted to work, Leo XIV writes that the family „is the first environment

in which all persons develop their potential, become aware of their dignity and learn the earliest forms of truth and goodness, internalizing the habits that prepare them for life in society", and that „as the first natural society, endowed with foundational rights", it is „the fundamental and irreplaceable cell of every community organization" (Leo XIV, 2026, no. 165). If it is in the family that a person learns „the earliest forms of truth", then the family is the first place in which truth is practised as a common good, and hence the first subject of the communication ethics that the encyclical proposes in its fourth chapter. To develop this premise into a model, a conceptual apparatus is needed which the encyclical itself does not expound but to which it clearly refers. That apparatus is the personalism of Karol Wojtyła.

Three concepts from Wojtyła's anthropology make it possible to translate the categories of the encyclical into the language of the family's subjectivity. The first is participation, a property of the person by virtue of which, acting „together with others", the person fulfils himself or herself in the act (Wojtyła, 2000). It is expressed in the authentic attitudes of solidarity and opposition, as distinct from conformism and avoidance (Szymczak, 2025, pp. 263–268), and its first place is the family, which „constitutes the place of the true realisation of the person" (Zgórecki, 2024, p. 121). The educational alliance, in which the family is a party rather than a beneficiary, is a form of participation in precisely this sense.

The second concept is gift. Wojtyła describes the community of persons as mutual self-giving, in which the person is affirmed for his or her own sake (Wojtyła, 2001). The structure of gift is at the same time the structure of communication. The ecology of communication, which the encyclical opposes to an attention economy in which „platforms and services are often designed to capture users' time and attention" (Leo XIV, 2026, no. 170), is a call for communication that retains the structure of gift rather than exchange. Truth itself is „a gift to be shared, not a possession to be monopolized" (no. 25).

The third concept is the personalistic norm, according to which the only proper attitude towards the person is love, and never use (Wojtyła, 2001). The encyclical formulates the same norm without naming it when it states that in business models that thrive on human weakness „the person is treated as a means rather than as an end" (no. 170). Truth as a common good is the communicative form of the personalistic norm: one may not use another person through untruth, because truth is owed to that person as a person.

This yields a correspondence: the educational alliance corresponds to participation, the ecology of communication to the structure of gift, and truth as a common good to the personalistic norm. All three concepts have their primary place in the family, because the family is the first community in which the person participates, the first environment of gift, and the first place in which the person experiences

affirmation for his or her own sake. The categories of the encyclical thus not only concern the family but are founded in the family.

This conclusion requires specifying in what sense subjectivity can be attributed to the family at all. The family is neither a substantial subject existing alongside its members nor a collective person whose acts would replace the acts of individual persons. In Wojtyła's terms only the person is a subject in the proper sense, while a community of persons is a quasi-subject: it exists and acts through the acts of persons who act „together with others", and it is a subject to the extent that these persons realise their own subjectivity in common action (Wojtyła, 2000). The subjectivity of the family is thus analogical and derivative with respect to the subjectivity of its members, yet it is not reducible to their sum, because marriage and kinship constitute a lasting *communio personarum* with its own common good. The Church's teaching expresses this by recognising rights proper to the family as such, and not only to its individual members (John Paul II, 1981, no. 46). In what follows, the communicative subjectivity of the family, or its moral agency in communication, means the capacity of the family as a community of persons to generate, practise and transmit norms of communication for which its members are jointly responsible. Responsibility remains personal, but it is exercised and learned in common.

On this basis a model can be proposed in which the communicative subjectivity of the family has three dimensions, corresponding to the three relations in which the family can stand towards a communicative norm: it can be its source, it can practise it, and it can transmit it outwards. The originative dimension is rooted in the personalistic norm, because the affirmation of the person for his or her own sake constitutes the first experience of truth as a good. The normative dimension grows out of participation, because the rules of communication are established in acting together with others. The testimonial dimension corresponds to the structure of gift, which by its nature is directed beyond those who give. The model does not claim to describe all the communicative functions of the family.

The originative dimension means that the family is the source, not the addressee, of communication ethics. It is in the family that a person learns language, presence, trust and the first rules of truthfulness, „the earliest forms of truth and goodness" (no. 165). No regulation and no media education programme can replace this dimension; they can only support or weaken it. Hence the encyclical stipulates that regulations should not shift „the whole burden of control onto families" (no. 142), and that institutions are to protect „without taking over" (no. 181).

The normative dimension means that the family itself establishes and practises rules of communication (presence, listening, truthfulness, forgiveness, the protection of intimacy) before it encounters external regulation. These rules do not take the form of a code; the family establishes when, how and about what one speaks not by decree but by example. Since „every technology shapes those who use it" (no.

140), the way parents use digital tools is itself a communicative norm which the child reads before it is ever spoken.

The testimonial dimension means that the family communicates truth outwards, in intergenerational transmission, including religious transmission, and in the vision of the person which it represents to its social environment. Those who control platforms have the ability „to present a particular vision of reality as desirable" (no. 136). The family competes with this power not in terms of resources but in terms of credibility. Its testimony is not recommended content but presence, and therefore it is not subject to the logic of reach (cf. John Paul II, 1981; Francis, 2016). The family thus remains one of the last places in which truth is experienced relationally rather than algorithmically.

The three dimensions are interconnected, yet each is threatened in a different way: the originative dimension by technoference and absence, the normative dimension by the delegation of communicative decisions to systems, and the testimonial dimension by the replacement of presence with content. In the next section these threats will be developed as fields of obligation.

3. Obligations and Limits of the Family in Relation to Artificial Intelligence

The first field of obligation follows from the normative dimension. A norm-generating community cannot delegate this function to a system, even one that offers faster and seemingly more objective answers. The encyclical names three features that make such delegation tempting: „the ease with which results are obtained, the impression of objectivity and the simulation of human communication" (Leo XIV, 2026, no. 100), which „can also encourage excessive reliance and the search for ready-made answers, and weaken personal creativity and judgment" (no. 100). This applies both to the child's communication with systems and to parents using conversational assistants as parenting advisers.

Generative tools can enrich resources in parenting education, but they cannot replace direct interpersonal relationships or make educational decisions in sensitive matters (Zellma & Kostorz, 2025, pp. 16, 24–25), and the family must learn to recognise that the system merely simulates human thinking (Kloch & Przybysz, 2025, p. 118). In the language of the model, artificial intelligence can be an instrument of participation, but it cannot be a party to the alliance, because it is not a subject capable of responsibility. Responsibility for a word addressed to a child remains with the person even when that word has been generated.

The obligation is twofold. Towards the child, the family is to discern „when and for what purpose" artificial intelligence „ought not to be used" (no. 140), that is, to practise a competence of restraint. Towards the school, the ecclesial community and public institutions, it is to participate rather than to conform or to avoid,

articulating its own communicative norms, since „parents have the primary and inalienable right to choose the kind of education and formation for their children" and schools are „valuable partners" (no. 143; cf. Domaszk, 2026, p. 31).

The second field of obligation follows from the originative dimension: the family is to protect what constitutes the source of communication ethics, namely presence. Parental distraction lowers sensitivity and impoverishes communication with the child, with no significant difference between digital and non-digital distraction (Chamam et al., 2024). This shifts the problem from the tool to the person. It is not the screen but absence that violates the ecology of communication in the home.

The attention economy, which exploits users' „vulnerabilities" and weakens „their inner freedom" (no. 170), is structurally directed against presence, because presence is time that cannot be converted into engagement. The family is therefore obliged not to a set of rules but to practices that protect the structure of gift: to time that is not measured, to conversation that has no purpose beyond itself, and to „silence, in-depth study, reading and judicious analysis" (no. 146). The call to „exercise restraint in the use of AI" (no. 140) is thus not technophobia but an ascetic practice that reveals whether a family can still communicate without mediation.

The limit here concerns responsibility. Those who design systems based on human weakness „bear a moral responsibility that cannot be ignored" (no. 170). The family is one of the subjects of the shared responsibility spoken of in no. 181, and its responsibility is originary, not total. It will not change the architecture of platforms, but without the family there is no one for whom that architecture should be changed.

The third field of obligation concerns the boundary between support and the substitution of relationships, and is linked to the testimonial dimension. The encyclical states: „When words are simulated, they do not build genuine relationships, but only their appearance", and where „real relationships and emotional bonds are lacking", a person „may gradually lose the very desire to form genuine human connections" (no. 100).

Two consequences follow. First, the criterion for distinguishing support from substitution is not technological but relational: the question is whether the word that reaches the person is the word of a subject. Representations of artificial intelligence as a substitute for relationships start from loneliness and relational deficit (Woińska, 2026, pp. 66, 73). A community of real relationships is therefore an environment in which substitution finds no place, not because it is forbidden, but because it is not needed.

Second, isolated or anxious adolescents may become more dependent on „AI companions" than socially confident ones (Sun et al., 2026). The family can recognise when a child begins to treat a tool as a subject. This competence cannot be algorithmised, because it requires knowledge of the person, not data about the person.

A family in which a word is always someone's word is a living point of reference against which simulation is recognisable as simulation.

The fourth field of obligation concerns truth. Traditional media are losing their function as „gatekeepers" to algorithms that optimise content for engagement, and credibility is shifting to the human being who performs verifying functions (Łuczuk, 2026, pp. 37, 44–46). The family thus often becomes, unknowingly, the final point of verification in the child's life. The temptation is twofold: to reduce communication ethics to parental control, or to entrust the choice of content to recommendation algorithms.

The encyclical points to a third way: truth „is not a territory to be defended, but a good to be shared" (no. 25), „built through bonds of trust and shared practices" (no. 132). The family is neither the guardian of a territory nor a consumer of content, but a community in which truth is shared. This does not release it from verifying content; verification serves the relationship, and the relationship gives verification its purpose. Parental control and critical formation (nos. 141–142) are instruments of this community, not its essence (cf. Przygoda, 2024, pp. 62–65; Przybyłowski, 2025, pp. 15–17).

For religious transmission this has a further consequence. Where religious content is available, recommended and generated algorithmically, which can be useful in religious education (Corpuz, 2025), the family does not compete with systems in the availability of content. Its advantage lies in the fact that the truth of faith is communicated there by a person who vouches for it with his or her own life, which is the good that „the digital sphere by itself cannot provide" (no. 147).

Conclusion

The encyclical *Magnifica humanitas* does not call the family a subject of communication ethics, yet its key categories (truth as a common good, the ecology of communication and the educational alliance) require it. Interpreted through Wojtyła's personalism, these categories correspond to participation, the structure of gift and the personalistic norm. This made it possible to construct a model of the family's communicative subjectivity, understood as the analogical moral agency of a community of persons, in three dimensions: originative, normative and testimonial. The model leads to four fields of obligation and limits. The family cannot delegate its norm-generating function to a system. It is obliged to protect presence, yet it does not bear the whole responsibility for an environment that exceeds it. It is a place in which the substitution of relationships finds no ground, and a subject capable of recognising it. Finally, it is a community in which truth is shared, neither its guardian nor its consumer.

The analysis is theoretical, limited to conversational and generative systems, and its model requires operationalisation and empirical verification. Three research questions follow. Which practices of presence do families recognise as their own

communicative norms (the normative dimension)? On the basis of which signals do parents recognise the substitution of relationships in children (the testimonial dimension)? Does the level of technoference differentiate the transmission of the first rules of truthfulness and trust (the originative dimension)? The model would also require confrontation with regulatory approaches and with the ethics of system design.

For family studies, reflection on artificial intelligence should shift from the question of what technology does to the family towards the question of what the family, as a subject, contributes to communication ethics. This should happen before the family is defined by those who, as the encyclical warns, possess the power to influence people „concerning the truth (…) about the family" (no. 133).

I declare that AI tools were used in the work on the text solely for the purpose of linguistic and stylistic correction of the English language. The development of the concept and the preparation of the content are the result of the author's independent work.

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