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SELFIE WITH THE POPE: HOW RECENT POPES
EMBRACED THE SMARTPHONE PRACTICE TO CONNECT
WITH PEOPLE IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

INTRODUCTION

In an era where every moment is captured and shared, selfies have evolved into more than just smartphone snapshots; they have become powerful instruments of connection and identity. This transformation is particularly significant within the context of the papacy, where selfies with the Pope transcend mere photographs. As pontiffs in the digital age: Benedict XVI, Francis and Leo XIV embrace this modern practice of posing to selfie and taking self-portraits with people to be posted online, the traditional imagery of the Pope is reshaped. Unlike the formal portraits of the past, which once depicted the Pope in solemnity and distance, today's selfies reflect a dynamic relationship between the Pope and the people. These casual snapshots carry profound significance. As individuals proudly share their encounters with the Pope on social media, they not only document personal moments, but also create a shared experience, showing how the Head of the Church is willing to be present with the people in a digital world.

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1. CULTURAL MOMENT AND SMARTPHONE PRACTICE

Selfie is a self-portrait taken by oneself using a digital camera or a smartphone for posting on social media [Qiu, Lu, Yang, et al. 2015, 443]. Selfie is a “performance of self, oriented towards an audience situated elsewhere” [Levin 2014, 406], as Adam Levin put it. “When taking a selfie, individuals can view how they look like in the picture and decide what they want to show in the picture” [Senft and Baym 2015, 1589].

Media scholars were interested in selfies as cultural artifact and social practice. As Theresa M. Senft and Nancy K. Baym stated, “a selfie is a way of speaking and an object to which actors (both human and nonhuman) respond” [ibid.]. In 2014, Instagram recorded approximately 79 million photos tagged with the hashtag *#selfie*. By March 2015, the number of such photos had risen to 223 million [Stinson 2014]. Since 2015, it has been repeatedly reported that around 93 million digital self-portraits are published worldwide every day [Broz 2025].

While selfies may seem like a “trivial cultural phenomenon,” they somehow “define our cultural moment,” as Nicholas White wrote in 2014 [White 2014]. That year, Google reported that people took approximately 93 million selfies per day on just Android smartphone and tablet models alone [Senft and Baym 2015, 1589]. Selfies rapidly transformed from a new photographic trend into a global phenomenon that allows users to create their own digital identity, shape daily cultural practices, and forms of participation and interactions in social media [Demartin 2017].

The earliest documented use of the term *selfie* comes from an Australian internet forum ABC Online, where on September 13, 2002, a user captioned their photo with: “Sorry about the focus, it was a selfie.”¹ The first images tagged *#selfie* began to appear on the Flickr platform as early as 2004. However, it was the advent of smartphones that ignited widespread interest in selfies, turning it into a mass and viral phenomenon.

In December 2012, *Time* magazine included the word *selfie* among the ten trendiest words of the year. Less than a year later, in November 2013, the Oxford Dictionaries declared it the word of the year. The editorial team considered that *selfie* had transcended the boundaries of Instagram and

¹ See: selfie, Oxford English Dictionary (2002), https://www.oed.com/dictionary/selfie_n?tab=meaning_and_use#302967200 [accessed: 3.10.2025].

Twitter, becoming a common synonym for any digital self-portrait [Steinmetz 2012].

The phenomenon of selfie popularity can be interpreted as the result of the interaction between technological innovations and the processes of visual culture transformation in the last two decades. On one hand, a pivotal moment occurred in 2010 when the iPhone 4, equipped with a front camera, revolutionized the technique of self-portraits [Chartier 2010]. On the other hand, the rapid development of social media created a platform for posting selfies, which quickly became tools for expression, self-promotion, and, at times, sharing self-love [Chamorro-Premuzic 2014; Hodalska 2017, 407].

According to research there are three main reasons motivating people to take selfies: self-approval, belonging, and documentation [Shir and Amichai-Hamburger 2017]. Undoubtedly, selfies have become a tool for self-creation and working on one's identity, enabling individuals to construct and present their image on social media. However, this function is overshadowed by the fact that the portrayed image often undergoes such extensive editing and retouching that it loses much of its authenticity, becoming an idealized, and sometimes even distorted, representation of the person. Consequently, while selfies have the potential to express identity, they also blur the boundaries between reality and its digital interpretation, creating space for digital narcissism, a topic widely discussed by scientists a decade ago.²

For many individuals selfies fulfill a sense of belonging; they become narrative acts that allow them to signal participation in certain communities and build relationships with others. Posting self-portraits enables individuals to both manifest their presence and receive reactions from the community, which reinforces their sense of belonging and recognition. In this sense, selfies function not only as a form of self-presentation but also as a medium of social interaction, where visuality becomes a tool for communication, and strengthening social bonds. Selfies are a way to share experiences with others, to initiate and maintain social relationships.

The third function of selfies is documentation. Selfies allow individuals to record their daily lives, capture moments, and create a digital narrative about their existence, which can then be publicized online. As a result, selfies become a personal visual diary and a performative act: the published

² For more on digital narcissism, see: Gnambs and Appel 2018, 200-12; Buffardi and Campbell 2008, 1303-314; Hodalska 2017, 405-23.

images enter social circulation, where they are commented on and interpreted by others. A unique reward and motivating factor is achieving the perfect photo for social media – one that stands out and garners positive feedback in the “virtual currency of recognition,” which includes likes, followers, and shares. Studies confirm that social gratifications and the desire for acceptance are among the key motivations driving selfie creators’ activities [Dhir, Pallesen, Pallesen, Torsheim, et al. 2016].

Authors analyzing digital culture point to the ambivalent, and often negative, nature of the selfie phenomenon. Sherry Turkle notes that selfies are part of a broader process of the impoverishment of conversation, where authentic dialogue is replaced by self-exposure and image building in digital spaces [Turkle 2015, 13]. Jean Twenge, describing iGen, i.e. the generation growing up in the smartphone era, emphasizes that the obsession with self-presentation through images contributes to deepening issues with self-esteem and an increasing dependence on external validation of one’s worth [Twenge 2019].

The phenomenon of selfies has also been criticized for the amateur nature of photography, where presentation becomes more important than the experience itself, and for the trivialization of memory, leading to a situation where documenting everyday life takes precedence over living the life. The critical discourse was further amplified by media reports about accidents and fatalities caused by risky attempts to take ultimate selfies [Sumuel and Wealth of Geeks 2024] to impress the audience. It is important to note that just a decade ago, the practice of taking selfies faced significant criticism across many contexts: psychological, sociological, cultural. The public and scholarly debate highlighted the superficiality of selfies, the banalization of communication, and its cultural and social consequences. Regardless of the criticism, self-portraits have become an integral part of contemporary visual communication.

The public recognition of selfies is largely attributed to the famous *Oscar selfie* from the night of March 3, 2014. During the Academy Awards ceremony, a photo was taken that was dubbed “the most famous selfie in the world” [Wallop 2014]. It was initiated by host Ellen DeGeneres, who approached Meryl Streep to take a picture with her. Other Hollywood stars quickly joined in. In the photograph taken by Bradley Cooper, prominent figures such as Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, Julia Roberts, Kevin Spacey, can

be seen. After being shared on social media, *Ellen's selfie* rapidly gained immense popularity, being reposted by millions of users worldwide.³

Nowadays selfies are taken and posted by public figures, including politicians, and heads of state. Politicians, by posing for selfies and publishing their own, have begun to use this format of expression to warm up their social image [Farci and Orefice 2015]. This type of self-presentation (especially during campaigns) allows them to connect with the voters on a different level, creating an impression of personal, direct contact. One of the first politicians who posted a selfie was Hillary Clinton. On the 15th of June 2013 she published her first self-portrait with her daughter Chelsea on Twitter; the selfie was taken with a smartphone at arm's length [Harrison 2013]. Such communication practices aim at younger generations, for whom selfies are a natural way of building relationships in virtual space.

Taking selfies has indeed become a form of visual communication that we have grown accustomed to. It is a cultural phenomenon but, above all, it is a smartphone practice. It was the smartphone's front-facing camera that made it so easy to take a picture of oneself, seeing the image and controlling who is in the frame

2. WHEN THE POPE ENTERS THE FRAME: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

The phenomenon of selfies has rapidly evolved from a simple digital self-portrait to a form of communication, a smartphone and cultural practice. What forms and shapes does it take in the Vatican, when the Pope enters the frame?

Popes elected by the conclave do not need to seek self-promotion. The Pope is neither a celebrity nor a politician compelled to seek support, which is why it is not surprising that none of the popes actively promotes their own selfies. However, they do pose for self-portraits with the people who then post their selfies online.

How do the media report on this? What changes have occurred over the years during the four papacies of the digital era, across the pontificates of

³ See <https://tvn24.pl/ciekawostki/oscary-najslynniejsze-selfie-w-historii-skonczylo-10-lat-byly-na-nim-najwieksze-gwiazdy-hollywood-st7803761> [accessed: 24.01.2026].

John Paul II, Benedict XVI, Francis, and Leo XIV? These questions are what this research aims to address.

There is a lack of literature examining how advancements in technology have been gradually incorporated into both unofficial and official communication of the Holy See, transforming selfies with the Pope into an expected part of the papal experience.

This progression we cover in this article shows that the Pope is not just “close to people” in person but also engages with them in the digital world, moving from offline to online spaces where many engage in *digital religion* [Buksa 2024a; Idem 2024] practices. Internet users are familiar with digital practices of snapping photos and sharing experiences and taking a selfie with the Pope becomes part of that shared journey. These selfies allow individuals to feel connected to him, creating a sense of community and participation in their faith. By appearing in these pictures, the Pope is not only visible in the lives of the faithful but also embraces the way people express joy and spirituality online. The aim of this article is to study the evolution of attitudes of contemporary popes toward selfies, drawing on media reports that have covered these shifts in visual communication.

Desk research was particularly focused on online articles discussing the significance of self-portraits with the Pope. The analysis covered informational materials related to the pontificates of popes from the social media era: John Paul II, Benedict XVI, Francis, and Leo XIV. The data sources included reports from magazines and online news portals, including press archives from the Vatican (e.g., *L'Osservatore Romano*), the Catholic News Agency, as well as Polish Catholic media (e.g. *Gość Niedzielny*) and international media like Reuters, Associated Press, and CNN. The selection of materials was based on specific criteria: (1) the date of the portraits taken within the respective pontificates; (2) the presence of descriptions of interactions between the Pope and the faithful, related to the self-portrait; (3) geographical and linguistic diversity of sources, including English (CNN, Reuters, and Associated Press), Italian (Vatican News), Spanish, and Polish online news portals.

3. COMMEMORATIVE PORTRAITS WITH JOHN PAUL II – THE FIRST POPE OF THE DIGITAL ERA

Pope John Paul II was the first pope of the digital era (pontificate: 1978-2005). The first pope who shortened the distance to the faithful. Photogenic, media-friendly, his 27 years of pontificate produced millions of photographs. The touching circumstances surrounding the creation of many of them are described in the memories of papal photographer Arturo Mari [Mari 2005; see: Hodalska 2010]. Thousands of faithfuls posed for photos with John Paul II, often during private audiences. These were not selfies, but photographs documenting the encounter with the Pope.

Commemorative photos with John Paul II still hang on the walls of many Polish homes to this day. These were not snapshots taken quickly to catch a moment, but posed photographs capturing solemn occasions, where the shortened distance was filled with reverence.

John Paul II opened the Vatican to the internet and modern digital technologies, closely related to selfie culture. In November 2001, he sent his first email, which was also the first official document of the Catholic Church sent to the world via the internet. In 2002, the Polish Pope suggested that the Church address the topic of the internet as a new opportunity for proclaiming the Gospel [Oroń and Stojowska 2024]. In his message “The Mission of the Church in the Computer Age” for the 24th World Day of Social Communications in 1990, John Paul II stated that with the advent of computer communication techniques, the Church received new tools to fulfill its mission, allowing for faster communication of its teachings and clarification of its positions on various issues.⁴ John Paul II’s teachings regarding computers and information networks were exceptionally cautious and prudent. His views on technological development in this area of social life were articulated in his message for the 17th World Congress of the International Union of Catholic Press (UCIP) in Graz, where he warned that “these means can lead to the depersonalization of communication methods,” while also emphasizing that new media represent “an opportunity for contemporary man.”⁵

⁴ See https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WP/jan_pawel_ii/przemowienia/oredzie_ssp_1990.html [accessed: 24.01.2026].

⁵ See https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WP/jan_pawel_ii/przemowienia/prasal_06122002.html [accessed: 24.01.2026].

4. @PONTIFEX – BENEDICT XVI ON TWITTER AND THE FIRST SELFIE OF #PAPAEMERITUS

Pope Benedict XVI (pontificate: 2005-2013) appeared in a selfie only as Pope Emeritus. According to reports from news agencies, this photograph was taken on September 11, 2014, and published on the account @GianlucaBarile1 on Twitter (now X) [Ragona 2014]. Many media outlets wrote about Benedict XVI posing for a selfie.⁶

The initiative to take a *selfie* together with Pope Emeritus came from Italian seminarian Giuseppe Ricciardi from Aversa during his visit to the Mater Ecclesiae Monastery in the Vatican Gardens.⁷ The seminarian from the Jesuit seminary described the photo as “the most beautiful selfie in the world.”⁸

Ricciardi was accompanied by Father Sebastiano Sequino from Caserta, who also took a selfie with Benedict XVI on the same day.⁹ Media reports noted that the cheerful expressions of Pope Benedict XVI and the young Italian reflect the warm, direct atmosphere of the meeting, during which Pope Emeritus agreed for the first time to pose for this smartphone self-portrait. This unique selfie with Benedict XVI was shared online on the day it was taken by Vaticanists Fabio M. Ragona and Gianluca Barile, with Barile captioning it: “Here is the first in history #selfie #PapaEmeritus #BenedettoXVI, together with Giuseppe Ricciardi from Aversa.” A few hours later, a second selfie featuring Benedict XVI was published, this time with Italian priest Father Sebastiano Sequino.¹⁰

On December 12, 2012, during the general audience in the Paul VI Hall, Pope Benedict XVI sent the first message from his tablet to his @Pontifex_ Twitter account.¹¹ He wrote: “Dear friends, I am pleased to get in touch with you through Twitter. Thank you for your generous response. I bless all of

⁶ See <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/pierwsze-selfie-benedykta-xvi/17jvf> [accessed: 24.01.2026].

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See <https://www.fakt.pl/wydarzenia/swiat/emerytowany-papiez-zrobil-sobie-samost-rzal/e9505qd> [accessed: 24.01.2026].

⁹ See <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/pierwsze-selfie-benedykta-xvi/17jvf>

¹⁰ See <https://www.acidigital.com> [accessed: 06.10.2025].

¹¹ See <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/artykuly/668281,pierwszy-wpis-benedykta-xvi-na-twitterze.html> [accessed: 08.10.2025].

you from my heart.”¹² Unfortunately, the presence of the papal account on social media, where anyone can post any content without restrictions, resulted in a wave of offensive comments.¹³

5. SELFIE POPE, ROCK STAR POPE: PAPA FRANCESCO

In their article “Catholic Church’s Communication in the Era of Bergoglio: Balancing Tradition and a New Leadership” Alessandra Vitullo and Fabrizio Mastrofini wrote about Pope Francis: “His media visibility contributed to transforming Bergoglio into a real religious celebrity [Kim and Chen 2020; Lanuza 2017] and made him gain many different nicknames – «selfie Pope» [Campbell and Vitullo 2019], «criollo Pope» [Napolitano 2019], «rock star Pope» [Lanuza 2017], «the Pope is a social network» [Sawicki 2016] – which stress his extraordinary communicative power” [Vitullo and Mastrofini 2023]¹⁴. As Vitullo and Mastrofini noted, Pope Francis’s first official stance on social media dates back to 2014, when he referred to the Internet as “a gift of God,” precisely “for its ability to create a culture of encounter” [ibid., 5].

Pope Francis (pontificate: 2013-2025) became the embodiment of the selfie culture. The first-ever *selfie* with Pope Francis was described by news agencies six months after the inauguration of his pontificate, on August 28, 2013 – during the same period when the term *selfie* was added to the online edition of the Oxford English Dictionary. The photograph, taken with a smartphone belonging to one of the teenagers and initially published by *L’Osservatore Romano* through Reuters, showed Francis with young people during a meeting with the Diocese of Piacenza at St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican [Arnott 2013]. This image sparked a flurry of media commentary. NBC News compared the Pope’s demeanor to that of pop culture celebrities such as Rihanna, Madonna, and Justin Bieber [ibid.].

¹² See <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-12/twitter-pontifex-10th-anniversary.html> [accessed: 06.10.2025].

¹³ See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/12/pope-tweets> [accessed: 06.10.2025].

¹⁴ See also: Kim and Chen 2020, 1-14; Campbell and Vitullo 2019, 19-42; Napolitano 2019, 63-80; Lanuza 2017, 1-45.

Similar images appeared soon after. From the first year of his pontificate, children and youth,¹⁵ the elderly and disabled,¹⁶ newlyweds [Cháidez 2014], priests [Fahy, Ruberg, and Deb 2025], including the well-known papal missionary James (Jim) Sichko [ibid.] and migrants,¹⁷ could count on selfies with Pope Francis. Youth participating in World Youth Day could relatively easily obtain selfies with the pope, as demonstrated by a group of Brazilians spotted in the crowd during Palm Sunday in 2014 [Felícia 2014].

A moving testimony to Pope Francis's understanding of the free and empathetic nature of selfies as a tool for close contact with the faithful is a photograph from February 19, 2017. The Associated Press published an image by Alessandra Tarantino, capturing a boy taking a selfie with Francis during a visit to the parish of Santa Maria Josefa del Cuore di Gesù in Rome.¹⁸ The boy leans over the back of the seated Pope, embracing him with one arm while capturing the moment with his outstretched right hand. His head is positioned just above Francis's head, giving the scene an almost familial, warm, and spontaneous character. This selfie fits within the broader context of Francis's papacy, where the Pope, known for his empathetic approach, often relaxed strict etiquette to promote authentic encounters.

Another touching moment was the selfie Francis took with migrants from a regional center in Bologna, Italy, on October 1, 2017, published by Reuters.¹⁹ Pope Francis willingly posed for selfies with groups and individuals particularly close to him, such as children, youth, and migrants. However, he presented a noticeably more neutral expression in selfies taken in a playful context, as illustrated by the photograph with singer J Balvin, captioned by the artist as "Latino Gang." The Colombian artist, known for breaking cultural barriers, embraced the Pope in this shot with a humorous pose, which gave the photo an informal, relaxed character that contrasted with Francis's more serious demeanor as he looked directly at the camera. According to Vatican News, Balvin's visit to the Vatican was part of a two-day summit organized by the Vitae Global Foundation from August 31 to

¹⁵ See <https://newsroom.ap.org/editorial-photos-videos/search?query=selfie%20papa&mediaType=photo&st=keyword&vs=true> [accessed: 24.01.2026].

¹⁶ See <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/pope-francis-takes-a-selfie-with-disabled-people-during-the-news-photo/634250152?adppopup=true> [accessed: 24.01.2026].

¹⁷ See <https://newsroom.ap.org/editorial-photos-videos/search?query=selfie%20papa&mediaType=photo&st=keyword&vs=true> [accessed: 24.01.2026].

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

September 1, 2022.²⁰ J Balvin was one of 22 artists invited to reflect on how to use art, media, and entertainment to initiate cultural transformations that promote the common good, universal values, and human encounters.

Some of the selfies with Pope Francis were merely photographs, while others were meaningful encounters. One viral image featured a young Pakistani Christian, 26-year-old doctor Daniel Bashir from Karachi, who, during a visit to the Vatican, expressed concerns to Francis about the treatment of minorities in Pakistan and received assurances from the Pope that he would pray for peace in his country. He presented Pope Francis with a traditional patterned shawl from the Pakistani province of Sindh, and then both posed for a photo in which the smiling Pope is seen wearing the shawl around his neck.²¹

Pope Francis used selfies as a communication tool during his apostolic journey to Ecuador in 2015. While in Guayaquil, he posed for a selfie with Jesuits at Javier School, which quickly gained popularity on social media. Similarly, to provide personal support, he allowed an Argentine journalist to record him on the plane as he offered personal blessings to a 25-year-old Argentine, Lisandro Zeno, who was suffering from leukemia. He said, “Lichu, I have been told about your illness. I pray for you. I ask Jesus to accompany you, to give you strength, and to restore your health. Let yourself be guided by the hand of God; may the Virgin protect you greatly. And I ask you to pray for me. I bless you with all my heart.”²²

Selfies with the Pope represent a subtle breach of the Vatican’s regulations, which state that visitors can take photos “for personal and household use only.”²³ In reality, such selfies quickly made their way to social media, attracting the interest of news agencies and fueling public curiosity. Jenn Lindsay recalled that when she asked the pope for a selfie, he “respectfully looked to his official photographer for permission,” which can be interpreted

²⁰ See <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2022-08/vitae-summit-art-hope-unity-pope-francis.html> [accessed: 10.10.2025].

²¹ See <https://www.elheraldo.hn/mundo/selfie-de-paquistani-con-el-papa-francisco-se-vuelve-viral-HBEH1167033> [accessed: 09.10.2025].

²² In the original: “Lichu, me contaron de tu enfermedad, rezo por vos, pido a Jesús que te acompañe, que te dé fuerzas, que te devuelva la salud. Vos dejáte conducir por la mano de Dios, que la Virgen te proteja mucho. Y te pido que reces por mí. Te bendigo de todo corazón.” See González 2015.

²³ See <https://www.thevaticantickets.com/pl/rules-regulations> [accessed: 14.10.2025].

as evidence of a compromise between Vatican rules and the Pope's willingness to agree to pose to self-portraits with people he met [Lindsay 2015].

News agencies displayed surprising carelessness in verifying content related to papal selfies when, on December 14, 2015, they fell for a false photo, interpreting it as Pope Francis's first personal selfie. The image, published on the unauthorized Instagram account @vatican_, depicted the pope in what appeared to be a spontaneous smartphone shot, accompanied by the caption "first #selfie." This quickly gained popularity (9,000 likes within a few hours) and caught the attention of media such as CNN, New York Daily News, and Yahoo News [Zdanowicz 2015]. This sensation was debunked by the Vatican Press Office, which explained that the pope does not have an Instagram account and that the photo was taken from a video conference he held with young people from around the world in September 2014 using Google Hangouts. CNN was forced to clarify: "It wasn't his first selfie – or even a selfie at all."²⁴ As reported by ABC News, the photo was captured spontaneously during a virtual meeting, so the Pope's charming smile in that *screenshot* can be considered entirely genuine [ibid.].

In 2024, for the first time in history, a selfie appeared in an official papal text – specifically in Pope Francis's message for the XXXIX World Youth Day: "Those who hope in the Lord will run and not be weary (cf. Is 40:31)."²⁵ In this text, the pope discusses the differences between superficial approaches to life and profound searches for meaning. The selfie symbolizes a culture of instant gratification and superficiality, typical of social media, which focuses on "capturing the moment" rather than engaging in authentic experiences.²⁶

The phenomenon of selfies has taught contemporary individuals to shorten distances – both in interpersonal relationships and towards authorities or situations that require particular contemplation and seriousness. This was evident during the scenes that unfolded around the coffin of Pope Francis, which was displayed for public viewing in St. Peter's Basilica. While the faithful were expected to pray and remain focused, many pulled

²⁴ Ibid. CNN later clarified that the image widely reported as Pope Francis's "first selfie" was not actually a selfie at all – it was a screenshot from a video chat, and previous claims to the contrary were erroneous.

²⁵ See https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/youth/documents/papa-francesco_20240829_messaggio-giovani_2024.html [accessed: 24.01.2026].

²⁶ For more see Buksa 2023, 69.

out their mobile phones, taking pictures, videos, and selfies [Buxsa and Hodalska 2025]. Although the coffin was separated by barriers and positioned in such a way that the pope's body was barely visible, pilgrims raised their hands high, attempting to capture the face of the deceased. Hands with phones hovered over the coffin, at a moment that was supposed to be a time of silence and prayer. The spiritual dimension of farewell yielded to the need to be "here and now" in the digital space [Mazurkiewicz 2025].

6. PONTIFEX ON X: POPE LEO XIV

Pope Leo XIV (pontificate: 2025-) continues the understanding of selfies initiated by Pope Francis but maintains a greater distance from the faithful, appearing less frequently in private individuals' photos. The first selfie with Leo XIV was taken on May 8, 2025, when, after being elected pope, he returned to his residence at Palazzo Sant'Uffizio, Rome, where he had lived as a cardinal.²⁷ In a photograph published on the platform X by Sister Nathalie Becquart, Undersecretary of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, Leo XIV is captured taking a selfie with her and other individuals. At that time, he blessed the neighbors, officials, and priests living in the building, and as a farewell, he added with a smile, "Good, thank you! All the best!"²⁸

Pope Leo XIV distinguished himself from Pope Francis by sharing a selfie on his Pontifex profile on Instagram. In a photo dated June 25, 2025, he appeared alongside actor Jonathan Roumie, who portrays Jesus in the series *The Chosen*, created by Dallas Jenkins [Roumie 2025]. In his comment, the Pope wrote: "Every time we perform an act of faith addressed to Jesus, we grow in our connection with Him, and His grace is bestowed immediately. At times we are unaware of it, but in a secret and real way, His grace reaches us and gradually transforms our life from within."²⁹

²⁷ See <https://zenit.org/2025/05/08/which-is-the-first-document-signed-by-leo-xiv-her-e-is-the-video-and-first-selfie-with-women/> [accessed: 10.10.2025].

²⁸ See <https://deon.pl/kosciol/pierwsze-selfie-papieza-leona-xiv-uradowani-sasiedzi-otrzymali-blogoslawienstwo,3149468> [accessed: 24.01.2026].

²⁹ See <https://www.instagram.com/p/DLU3Gi7Ce3w/?hl=en> [accessed: 24.01.2026].

7. FROM OFFICIAL PORTRAITS TO SMARTPHONE SNAPS

This research explores the evolution of papal imagery, showing the transition from official portraits, which have long represented the Pope in a formal capacity, to the more casual and spontaneous smartphone snaps taken by the faithful. This shift signifies a transformation in the relationship between the Pope and the people, reflecting a more personal and immediate connection. The way recent popes communicate with the faithful and the crowds has undergone a fundamental change, particularly evident in the last three pontificates, as digital technology and social media have reshaped the communication of the Church.

The evolution of papal communication has transitioned from a ceremonial and distant model to the charismatic openness of Pope John Paul II, the technological innovation of Pope Benedict XVI, and the revolutionary authenticity of Pope Francis, along with the modernity of Pope Leo XIV. Contemporary popes have moved away from ceremonial elements (such as the *sedes gestatoria*, papal tiara, and coronation) in favor of direct and personal contact with the faithful.

Pope John Paul II initiated the era of popes who are close to the faithful. A poignant symbol of his style became the papamobile, often referred to as a “symbol of pastoral closeness.” With the specially designed vehicle, he gained the ability to physically approach the faithful, touring sections of St. Peter’s Square while maintaining direct contact with them. This was not possible until the 1970s – before Pope John Paul II, Pope John Paul I was carried onto the square in the so-called *sedes gestatoria*, or papal litter.

Pope Benedict XVI was a pioneer of new technologies, being the first Pope to send SMS messages (to youth at World Youth Day in Sydney), engage in dialogue with astronauts on the space station, and respond to questions on television. He was also the first pope to establish the @Pontifex account on Twitter on December 12, 2012. He coined the term *digital continent* for social media, viewing it as a new space for evangelization.

Pope Francis embodied the culture of selfies and revolutionized papal communication by deciding that he should communicate directly through his gestures, words, and interviews rather than through a spokesperson. His spontaneous gestures, such as riding the bus, hugging the sick, and making personal phone calls, were powerful acts of authenticity rather than

mere PR³⁰. Pope Francis articulated this clearly in a speech to reporters, stating, “Communicating, for us, is not a tactic. It is not a technique.”³¹ He emphasized that communication should be understood as “an act of love,” because only with love we can connect to people and build meaningful relationships. He also added: “Instead of being seduced by the sterile sirens of self-promotion and the celebration of our own initiatives, let us consider how we can build together a tale of hope” [ibid.].

According to Antonio Spadaro, the editor-in-chief of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, Pope Francis agreed to taking selfies because of his openness and pastoral sensitivity [Sawicki 2016]. Francis was aware that selfies diminish the distance between the photographer and the subject, building a sense of connection. Spadaro interpreted this behavior as a manifestation of Pope Francis’s characteristic approach to people, his kindness of heart, and his desire for closeness. He pointed out that Pope Francis’s lack of hesitation to pose for selfies signified that he has turned the code of authority upside down, consciously reducing the distance to the faithful and allowing them to become participants in the encounter. As Spadaro emphasized, this gesture of Pope Francis allowed people to feel truly close to him. In this regard, he was spiritually close to St. Francis of Assisi, whose name he took as Pope.³²

Pope Leo XIV continues along this path, shortening the distance to the faithful and allowing them to become co-participants in the encounter.

8. SELFIE WITH THE POPE

Taking selfies with the Pope at the Vatican can be seen as both a form of documentation and a way to establish a digital presence for those in the frame. This act not only captures a significant personal moment but also transforms it into an event that can be shared publicly.

In our digital age, sharing such images on social media can elicit admiration and validation from followers, thus enhancing one’s status in the online community. By sharing a selfie with the Pope, individuals participate

³⁰ For more on Francis’ style of communication, see: Hodalska and Buksa 2025, 79-92.

³¹ See

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2025/january/documents/20250127-vescovi-comunicazione.html> [accessed: 24.01.2026].

³² We developed on that in: Hodalska and Buksa 2025, 79-92.

in a form of expression where the image serves as both a documentation of their encounter and a means to present themselves within a very attractive context, thanks to the Pope's presence in the frame.

Selfies with the Pope challenge traditional notions of reverence, suggesting a shift in how the image of the Pope is shared in the digital world. This shift makes sense given how many offline religious practices now take their online form. The visibility of the Pope in the digital world, where the faithful engage in similar smartphone practices, signifies that the Church truly walks with its people and follows them online. It learns to speak their language and uses the same means to share important messages in ways that resonate with contemporary social practices.

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Selfie with the Pope: How Recent Popes Embraced the Smartphone Practice to Connect with People in the Digital World

Abstract

In the digital age, selfies have transformed from mere self-portraits into powerful tools for connection. This article discusses the phenomenon of taking selfies with the Pope, exploring how pontiffs of the digital era – Benedict XVI, Francis, and Leo XIV – have embraced this smartphone practice to engage with the faithful. This research examines the evolution of papal imagery, highlighting the shift from formal portraits to casual smartphone snapshots taken by the public. Commemorative photos with John Paul II still adorn many Polish homes, as cherished memories. Unlike selfies, these posed photographs captured encounters with the Pope, whose presence bridged the distance, while media portraits of Polish Pope maintained an air of reverence. It has changed since the advent of smartphones. This article traces how selfies with the Pope moved from novelty to expected practice and shows how the Pope's closeness to people extend into digital spaces. Desk research of online news media reveals how outlets reported on self-portraits featuring the Pope and how the Pope's image is shared in the digital realm. As many offline religious practices find expression online, the Pope's visibility in digital spaces aligns with the Church's commitment to walking alongside its people.

Keywords: selfie; self-portrait; Pope; smartphone; papal imagery; John Paul II; Benedict XVI; Francis; Leo XIV.

Selfie z papieżem: jak ostatni papież przyjęli zwyczaj używania smartfonów, by nawiązywać kontakt z wiernymi w cyfrowym świecie**Abstrakt**

W erze cyfrowej *sweetfocie* (ang. *selfie*) robione smartfonami przekształciły się z prostych autoportretów w narzędzia służące budowaniu relacji. Zacieśnianie relacji jest szczególnie istotne i ciekawe poznawczo w kontekście selfie z papieżem, które są przedmiotem tego artykułu. Autorzy artykułu pokazują jak papieże ery cyfrowej – Benedykt XVI, Franciszek i Leon XIV – stopniowo włączali do swej komunikacji smartfonową praktykę spontanicznego robienia telefonem wspólnych autoportretów, aby nawiązać kontakt i zbudować relację z wiernymi. Omawiane w tekście fotografie pokazują ewolucję wizerunku papieża: od formalnych portretów do swobodnych zdjęć robionych smartfonami przez wiernych. Pamiątkowe zdjęcia z Janem Pawłem II nadal zdobią wiele polskich domów. W przeciwieństwie do selfie, te pozowane zdjęcia zachowały w kadrze pełne rewerencji spotkania z Papieżem, którego obecność zmniejszała dystans, ale szacunek i atmosfera powagi odróżnia te zdjęcia od omawianych w artykule *sweetfoci* robionych smartfonem. Analiza medialnych relacji dotyczących autoportretów z papieżem pozwala zobaczyć, jak z nowinki, relacjonowanej jako ciekawostka zasługująca na newsa, selfie z Ojcem Świętym stały się oczekiwaną praktyką, która już nie zaskakuje, podobnie jak obecność papieża w przestrzeni cyfrowej. Ponieważ wiele praktyk religijnych znajduje dziś swoją formę cyfrową (*digital religion*) w Internecie, widoczność papieża w przestrzeni cyfrowej jest wyrazem tego, jak Kościół towarzyszy swoim wiernym tam, gdzie Ci wierni są i zapisuje tam swą obecność za pomocą form, które są wiernym znane.

Słowa kluczowe: selfie; autoportret; papież; smartfon; cyfrowa religia; wizerunki papieży; Jan Paweł II; Benedykt XVI; Franciszek; Leon XIV.

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