



This initiative honours the legacy of Saint John Paul II, whose profound connection to both the PASS and the FASS serves as a cornerstone of this partnership. An *alumnus* of the Angelicum, home of the FASS, having completed his doctorate there in the 1940s, John Paul II later founded the PASS in 1994.

In his person these two institutions and this programme are linked in their efforts to strengthen and deepen the social sciences and Catholic social teaching/thought, so that together they can spread the light of the Gospel message and help us resolve real social problems more effectively.

The John Paul II Post-Doctoral Fellowship Programme

Faculty of Social Sciences (FASS)
in collaboration with the
Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences (PASS)

The 2026 JPPII Cohort Theme
Building a response to Agentic AI and the Virtual World
using
Relational Social Science

We are offering **five John Paul II Post-doc Scholarships** from **October 2026 to June 2027** managed by the Faculty of Social Sciences (FASS) at the Angelicum and supported by the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences (PASS), **that will involve three intensive visits to Rome and a last visit, after the end of the fellowship, to present its results.** This is the second cohort to be recruited as part of the JPPII Post-Doctoral Fellowship Programme. This cohort will work on developing a deeper understanding, inspired by CST, of Agentic AI and the hybrid and virtual worlds using the resources of the relational approaches that have been developing within the social sciences over the past 50 years, and, in particular, with the relational sociology of Pierpaolo Donati and the civil economy promoted by Stefano Zamagni, both of whom are members of the PASS.

Members of this cohort of post-doc scholars will have the chance to work with Donati and Zamagni, and other leading scholars of the PASS and the FASS, on complementary lines of research that they will propose and that make use of the relational research paradigm as summarised in Donati (2024 and 2025) and/or the research programme of the civil economy (see the papers of Prof Zamagni available [here](#)).

Possible Lines of Research

The following are examples of the areas in which potential post-docs could propose projects, but do not represent an exhaustive list. *The important element is that any proposed project shows some acquaintance with the relational paradigm in sociology and/or economics as presented by Donati and Zamagni:*

- We must recognize that all forms of humanism, both religious and secular, that consider the human as a yardstick of society are marginalized by a digital technological matrix that dominates the human, minimizes its role, and transforms it, to the point of dissolving its boundaries with the nonhuman. Does speaking of essence and human dignity still make sense? A new relational anthropology may be the way to answer these questions, indicating how to define and manage the distinction between human and nonhuman.
- Transhumanism as a fundamental philosophical, ethical and political break with the humanistic tradition, requiring an adequate analysis, understanding and response from a CST-inspired vision;
- Donati (2025) argues that “current systems excel at simulating first-person experience and signalling sociality, but lack second-person relational reflexivity (mutual respect, responsibility, shared normativity). This absence, combined with the capitalist incentives of platforms, generates asymmetrical ‘companionship’ relationships ... It is necessary to clarify the process ... through which digital rationalities replace analogue and embodied relationships”. Projects that work on these questions are welcome.
- AI “agents” are coming, whether we are ready or not. While there is much uncertainty about when AI models will be able to interact autonomously with digital platforms, other AI tools, and even humans, there can be little doubt that this development will be transformative – for better or worse. Yet despite all the commentary (and hype) around agentic AI, many big questions remain unaddressed, the biggest being which type of AI agent is the tech industry seeking to develop? Different models will have vastly different implications. With an “AI as adviser” approach, AI agents would offer individually calibrated recommendations to human decision-makers, leaving the human being always in the driver’s seat. But with an “autonomous AI” model, agents will take the wheel on behalf of human beings. Organoid intelligence presents a particular form of the latter, using human neurons without preserving human agentivity. This distinction has profound and far-reaching implications that demand serious consideration.

Depending on their prior formation, postdoctoral researchers will have the opportunity to participate in up to four classes offered by the Faculty of Social Sciences (FASS) in the fields of Catholic Social Teaching (CST), the History of Christian Social Thought and Applied Ethics of various types. Additional courses may also be assigned, depending on each applicant’s academic background and their specific project.

Why This Programme?

The Church's rich tradition of Catholic Social Teaching offers profound solutions to today's global challenges. It can most effectively do this in dialogue with other human and social sciences. Mainstream sociology and economic thought is heavily influenced by the modern worldview and its individualistic/collectivist mindset (two sides of the same coin), but there are traditions of thought within these two fields that relate better to the anthropology of CST, among which the work of Donati on relational sociology and of Zamagni on the civil economy represent two important examples. Given the kinds of problems that the Church and the world must now face with the rise of agentic AI, it is time to bring a relational anthropology into the mainstream of the social sciences, and the work of the 2026 JPPII cohort will make an important contribution to this.

The John Paul II Post-Doctoral Programme is designed for scholars who are not only academically accomplished but also committed to using their research to advance the Church's social mission. Through their participation in this cohort scholars will contribute to a larger body of knowledge aimed at improving the Church's effectiveness in responding to the challenges of agentic AI and of the hybrid and digital worlds, on the basis of an anthropology and worldview that align better with the Church's tradition than existing mainstream alternatives.

References

Donati, P. 2024. *Being Human in a Virtual Society. A Relational Approach*, Peter Lang, Berlin

Donati, P. 2025. "The Relational Quiddity of Virtual/Digital Reality." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 55: 4, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.70018>.

Zamagni, S, papers available [here](#) (two are translations of papers already published in Italian and two are forthcoming in English).

DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION OF APPLICATIONS: APRIL 19, 2026

Who Can Apply?

- ▶ Applicants must hold a Doctorate in fields such as Sociology, Economics, Psychology, Ethics, Theology (with demonstrated interest in CST), Political Science, or a related discipline.
- ▶ Applicants should demonstrate interest in CST and practical social action.
- ▶ English proficiency (B1 minimum) is required.

Scholarship Benefits

- **Travel:** a budget of €2000 will be provided to each fellow to cover four round-trip airfares to Rome
- **Contribution to research and living expenses:** €3600 in two instalments: 50% in Oct 2026 and 50% in June 2027
- **Academic fees covered for one academic year**
- **Research publication** costs (if required)
- Attendance at **PASS** academic events that take place during the intensive visits to Rome (efforts will be made to allow fellowship holders to participate in as many activities of the PASS as possible).

Application Requirements

Candidates interested in applying for the John Paul II Post-Doctoral Programme are required to submit the following documents:

1. Postdoctoral Application Form

Complete the official Angelicum **Postdoctoral Application Form**, which includes basic details such as personal, academic, and ecclesiastical information, as well as agreement to work under a supervising professor at FASS and PASS.

2. Personal Statement of Motivation

Write a **Personal Statement of Motivation** explaining why you are applying for this programme. This statement should highlight your sense of vocation – how this post-doctoral opportunity aligns with your academic, professional, and personal calling – and why this particular programme and collaboration between PASS and FASS will help you fulfill that vocation.

3. Curriculum Vitae

Provide an updated **Curriculum Vitae** (maximum 4 pages) detailing your academic background and research experience, especially in the fields of relational sociology, the civil economy and their relation to agentic AI and hybrid and virtual worlds, publications, and any relevant professional or ecclesial engagements.

4. Research Proposal

Submit a **Research Proposal** for the project you intend to pursue during this post-doc scholarship (1000-1500 words, 1.5 spacing, 12-point font) that includes:

- **Area of specialization and context analysis:** A brief description of your research focus within the fields of agentic AI and/or the hybrid and virtual worlds, and its incorporation of a relational sociological (Donati) and/or civil economy (Zamagni) approach
- **Proposed contribution:** Outline how your research will contribute to the development of our understanding of agentic AI and the digital and hybrid worlds, and, if possible, how your research contributes to positive responses and directions from a CST-inspired point of view.

- **Research activities:** Detail the methodology, key activities, and timeline for your research.
- **Project goals and expected outcomes:** Explain what you aim to achieve through your research, including expected outputs such as publications or practical applications.

5. **Original Transcripts and Diplomas of Academic formation so far**

6. **Identification**

Copy of Passport or ID-card

7. **Academic Letter of Recommendation**

Provide an **Academic Letter of Recommendation** from a professor or academic mentor who can assess your commitment to research, academic strengths, and potential contribution to the programme.

* In case of successful acceptance, the selected applicants will be required to provide a letter of presentation from a religious organization for enrolment in the university.

Timeline

- **April 19, 2026:** Deadline for submission of applications
- **May 18, 2026:** Notification of selected candidates
- **May 25, 2026:** Deadline for the acceptance of the scholarship by candidates
- **June 30 2026:** Completion of registration on Angelicum Students' Portal, and of admin activities
- **Oct 2026 - June 2027:** Regular online meetings with other fellows and the experts of the FASS and the PASS who are supporting the JPII fellows, and four intensive visits to Rome. The first visit is **tentatively** planned for **October 18-22 2026** (the dates of these visits will be fixed as soon as possible, but cannot be fixed at the time of the publication of the Call for Applications because they need to be coordinated with the PASS meetings. The 2027 programme of PASS activities will only be fixed in September 2026)

For any inquiries or further details, please contact: fass@pust.it

Prof. Helen Alford, O.P.

Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas
 President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences
 Director of John Paul II Post-Doctoral Fellowship Programme

Rome, February 20, 2026 - Prot. N. 020/26 FASS

Short videos with members of the 2025 JPII cohort, who worked on the topic of “The Church’s Contribution to Integral Human Development” are available [here](#)