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# Pope Francis's Communication Strategies During His Middle East Pilgrimages: An Analysis of Interreligious Discourse and Pontifical Diplomacy

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## Article

# Pope Francis's Communication Strategies During His Middle East Pilgrimages: An Analysis of Interreligious Discourse and Pontifical Diplomacy

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## Abstract

This article examines the communication strategies of religious diplomacy used by Pope Francis in his diplomatic relations with the countries of the Middle East from 2013 to 2025. The study identifies and characterizes key elements of papal communication, taking into account both verbal and nonverbal dimensions, in the context of the complex geopolitical and religious situation of the region. Based on the analysis of official documents, speeches, foreign visits and diplomatic initiatives, specific communication patterns are identified that distinguish Francis' pontificate from that of his predecessors. The research results indicate an innovative approach of the Pope, combining traditional Vatican diplomacy with direct personal engagement, the use of symbolism of gestures and the promotion of interreligious dialogue as a tool for building peace and intercultural understanding.

**Keywords:** Pope Francis; religious diplomacy; communication strategies; Vatican diplomacy; Middle East; interreligious dialogue; intercultural communication



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## 1. Introduction

The Middle East is an area of particular geopolitical and religious significance, characterized by complex conflicts, religious diversity, and dynamically changing political conditions. The Holy See's relations with the countries of the Middle East constitute a fascinating area of research in the context of international communication and diplomacy. This region, the cradle of Christianity and the place of coexistence of three great monotheistic religions, is characterized by complex political, social, and religious dynamics. Moreover, it is of great importance to the Vatican, perceived as an actor in international relations, committed to promoting peace and interreligious dialogue. The pontificate of Pope Francis (2013–2025) brought significant changes in the Holy See's approach to diplomatic relations and communication strategies with the countries of the Middle East. Unlike his predecessors, Francis has adopted a more active and pragmatic stance, striving for dialogue even with countries with which the Vatican has had historically tense relations. The Pope also introduced new elements to traditional Vatican diplomacy. This analysis presents key aspects of this relationship, its evolution, and its geopolitical significance.

It is worth emphasizing that Vatican diplomacy in the Arab world stands out from traditional interstate relations. Its unique position, combining the religious and political dimensions, allows the Holy See to play a role that goes beyond the conventional understanding of diplomacy. The ability to conduct dialogue beyond political divisions, consistent commitment to peace and the protection of human rights, including religious

freedom, constitute the uniqueness of the Vatican's diplomatic presence in Arab countries. In an era of growing tensions in the Middle East region, growing religious polarization and the search for new forms of coexistence of different cultures and faiths, Vatican diplomacy is gaining importance as one of the few bridges between Christianity and Islam. Analyzing its mechanisms, successes and failures can provide valuable conclusions for a broader understanding of the contemporary challenges of intercultural dialogue.

This article is not only a factual presentation of the historical outline and current state of relations, but also a critical reflection on the potential, limitations and prospects for the development of diplomatic communication between the Vatican and the Arab states in the dynamically changing international landscape of the 21st century.

The aim of this article is to analyze the communication strategies used by Pope Francis in diplomatic and interreligious relations with the countries of the Middle East, with particular emphasis on: official channels of diplomatic communication; direct visits and meetings; symbolic gestures and actions; verbal communication (speeches, documents, appeals); and interreligious dialogue initiatives. The study identifies and characterizes the key components of these strategies: diplomacy of encounter, symbolic communication, inclusive discourse, and the use of social media and traditional diplomatic channels. The systematic analysis of these strategies and their determinants and effects in the context of complex intercultural and interreligious relations addresses the following research questions: What communication strategies does Pope Francis use in relations with the countries and societies of the Middle East? To what extent do these strategies constitute a continuation or a break with traditional Vatican diplomacy? How are these strategies adapted to the different political, cultural, and religious contexts in the region? What is the effectiveness of these strategies in building interreligious dialogue and cooperation?

The article is based on the hypothesis that Pope Francis' communication strategies are characterized by greater directness, pragmatism, and use of intercultural symbolism compared to previous pontificates, which may translate into increased effectiveness in building bridges of dialogue in the region. The article will also show how Pope Francis' communication has contributed to building spaces for intercultural and interreligious dialogue in a world marked by polarization, conflicts, and crises of religious origin. It will also examine the diplomatic efforts of the Holy See under Francis' leadership and their impact on peace processes and conflict resolution in different parts of the world.

## 2. The Background

Pope Paul VI was one of the first popes to engage in a systematic dialogue with Muslims. In his encyclical "Ecclesiam Suam" (Pope Paul VI 1964), he emphasized the need for the Church to open up to other religions. He considered Islam to be a monotheistic religion that shares many fundamental values with Christianity, such as belief in one God, prayer, and concern for social justice. However, the most spectacular gesture was Paul VI's pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1964. It was the first trip of a pope outside Europe since the Middle Ages. In addition to meeting with the Patriarch of Constantinople, Athenagoras I, the pope also established contacts with representatives of the Arab world.

Pope Paul VI also conducted active diplomatic activity, engaging in mediation regarding conflicts in the Middle East. After the Six-Day War, in 1967, he spoke in favour of the rights of the Palestinians to their own land, while at the same time emphasizing Israel's right to exist (Ignatowski 2009). He thus called for peace and a just resolution of the conflict. He called for Jerusalem, the holy city of Christians, Jews and Muslims, to remain an open city (Pope Paul VI 1967). The Pope repeatedly appealed for peace in Lebanon during the civil war that had been going on there since 1975, supporting efforts for dialogue between the different religious communities living in the country (Pope Paul VI 1969).

In summary, the activity of Pope Paul VI towards the Arab world laid the foundations for later interreligious dialogue. His approach was characterized by respect for Islam as a revealed religion and understanding for the national aspirations of the Arab peoples. At the same time, the Pope expressed concern for Christians living in Muslim countries. At the same time, it should be emphasized that his position on political issues in the Middle East was balanced.

John Paul II (1978–2005) continued and significantly developed the dialogue with the Arab world initiated by Paul VI. His approach was characterized by even greater intensity of contacts and bolder gestures towards the world of Islam. John Paul II deeply believed in the possibility of dialogue between monotheistic religions. In his encyclical “Redemptor hominis” (1979), he emphasized the common roots of Christianity and Islam in the Abrahamic tradition. In his statements, he often referred to the figure of Abraham as the common father of faith for Jews, Christians and Muslims. Following the example of Pope Paul VI, John Paul II set out on a pilgrimage to people and nations of different views and religions. Undoubtedly, the turning point of the papal journeys was John Paul II’s visit to Morocco in 1985, at the invitation of King Hassan II. Vatican expert Gian Franco Svidercoschi recalls that the Pope had doubts about visiting a country whose official religion is Islam. King Hassan II’s insistence convinced John Paul II (Przondziona 2015).

It was the first-ever speech by a pope before such a large Muslim community. On 19 August 1985, in Casablanca, 80,000 young Muslims listened to the words of John Paul II’s speech. The then Bishop of Rome addressed the audience in the stadium with the words: “Also, it is as a believer that I come to you today. It is quite simply that I would like to give here today the witness of that which I believe, of that which I wish for the well-being of the people, my brothers, and of the people, my brothers, and of that which, from experience, I consider to be useful for all” (Pope John Paul II 1985). This event undoubtedly set the direction of John Paul II’s strategy in relations with Islam, contributing to deeper relations between the followers of both religions.

In the Jubilee Holy Year of 2000, John Paul II made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, where he met with the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and Muslim leaders. His prayer at the Wailing Wall became a moving symbol of the dialogue between man and God and man, regardless of religion (Pope John Paul II 2000a). Undoubtedly, John Paul II’s historic visit to Syria in 2001 was of particular importance in intercultural communication with Islam (Pope John Paul II 2001). During the visit, the Bishop of Rome became the first pope to enter the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. This mosque has a special significance not only for the world of Islam but also for Christians, because according to tradition, the tomb of St. John the Baptist is located inside the mosque.

John Paul II has always taken a clear position on Middle Eastern conflicts. His attitude towards war was marked by personal experiences from his youth. Moreover, he consistently stood for the pursuit and achievement of lasting peace.

The Gulf War in 1991 was no different. The Pope strongly opposed the war, sending special envoys to Baghdad and Washington. His position was criticized by some Western countries, but it gained recognition in the Arab world. He was similarly strongly opposed to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Pope made every effort to dissuade US President George W. Bush Jr. from the war. At the same time, he strongly condemned terrorism, especially after the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, while warning against identifying Islam with terrorism. This stance helped avoid inter-religious tensions and was also positively received in Arab countries. John Paul II consistently supported the right of the Palestinians to their own state, while recognizing Israel’s right to exist within safe borders. During his visit to the Holy Land, he met with President Yasser Arafat in Bethlehem (Pope John Paul II 2000b).

In summary, John Paul II's communication with the Arab world was characterized by personal commitment and courage in entering into dialogue with Islam. These relations were also characterized by consistent opposition to wars in the Middle East, while at the same time maintaining a balanced position on purely political issues. John Paul II always distinguished himself with deep respect for Islam as a religion and also cared about social justice and human rights. Undoubtedly, his pontificate laid solid foundations for contemporary Catholic-Muslim dialogue.

Finally, Pope Benedict XVI (2005–2013) conducted complex and often controversial communication with the Arab world. His approach was different from that of his predecessors—it was more theological and intellectual, which led both to deepening the dialogue and to serious communication crises.

Theology professor Joseph Ratzinger had a profound knowledge of Islam and its relations with Christianity. Therefore, as Benedict XVI, his approach to Islam was more academic and theological than that of his predecessors. The Pope believed in a dialogue based on reason and truth, not just on emotions and symbolic gestures. This trend in Benedict XVI's teaching was particularly evident in his book *Jesus of Nazareth* (2007), in which he emphasized the essence and importance of logos in religion. This approach was the starting point for the Pope's communication with the Islamic world. A lecture by Benedict XVI at the University of Regensburg in 2006 cast a shadow over relations with Islam. The Pope quoted the statement of the 14th century Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologos: "Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached" (Pope Benedict XVI 2007). This quote was received by the Muslim community as an attack by the Pope on Islam. While Benedict XVI only quoted the statement and, as he later explained, did not support the polemics of Manuel II Paleologos.

Thus, a serious crisis occurred in the relations between the Vatican and the Islamic world, and especially with the University of Al-Azhar in Cairo, where the Permanent Committee of Al-Azhar for Dialogue Among the Monotheistic Religions operated. The speech resulted in the freezing of the dialogue between the two institutions. It is necessary to emphasize an important fact, which is mentioned sporadically when analyzing Catholic-Muslim relations. The then Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, criticized the speech of Pope Benedict XVI in Regensburg in 2006 (Pope Benedict XVI 2006). He stated then that the words spoken by Benedict in 2006 contributed to the destruction of relations with Islam, which John Paul II had been building for twenty years (Baverstock 2013). And although after the Regensburg lecture, Benedict XVI was somehow forced to direct more attention to the world of Islam, the Pope's firm and obviously correct position condemning the terrorist attacks on Christians in Egypt led to the Egyptian side breaking off religious relations between Al-Azhar University and the Vatican in January 2011. This action was an expression of indignation at the words of Benedict XVI about the terrorist attack on the Coptic church in Alexandria (Kościński 2011). During the Angelus prayer, the Pope said: "This despicable gesture of death, like the bombing of Christians in Iraq to force them to leave the country, is an insult to God and to all humanity, which just yesterday prayed for peace and began a new year with hope" (Pope Benedict XVI 2011). The Pope's opposition to religious discrimination and intolerance, aimed primarily at Christians, was also an appeal to the political authorities for greater involvement in ensuring the safety of all residents of Egypt. Muslim theologians from the Center for Islamic Studies operating at Al-Azhar University announced that they were indefinitely freezing the dialogue with the Vatican, because the Pope's negative declarations about alleged discrimination to which followers of other religions are exposed in the Middle East are repeated. In addition, an advisor to the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayyeb, stated that the Pope had

repeatedly alleged that non-Muslims were persecuted in Muslim countries in the Middle East, which is far from the truth and constitutes unacceptable and inadmissible interference in internal state affairs (Reuters 2011).

Mutual relations were made even more difficult by statements by the Sandro Magister, *Bloody Christmas Between the Niles and the Indues* (Magister 2011). The Grand Imam stated that Benedict XVI should send a message to the Arab world that would be able to restore bridges of trust and dispel the causes of misunderstandings. The Vatican remained silent on these demands, while a journalist from an Italian daily summed up Ahmed al-Tayyeb's statement as follows: "the imam does not want to understand who the victims of fanaticism are, and in the face of such a serious attack on Egyptian Christians, he considered it his duty to retaliate against the Pope, who appealed for the protection of the faithful in the East" (Magister 2011).

In summary, Benedict XVI's reluctant attitude towards religious dialogue with Islam, combined with justified and emotional statements concerning the defence of Christians—victims of terrorist attacks in the Middle East, caused the dialogue relations between the Vatican and Al-Azhar to be frozen for several years. This state of affairs was also caused by the oppositional attitude of the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayyeb, and his excessive expectations of Pope Benedict. Despite the crisis situation, the papal spokesman, Cardinal Federico Lombardi, assured the public at the time that the Vatican was striving to normalize mutual relations with Egypt. Pope Benedict XVI undertook a multi-stage process of repairing relations with the Islamic world. He met with ambassadors of Muslim countries in the Vatican and also invited representatives of the Islamic world to dialogue. Another important event was the visit to the Blue Mosque in Istanbul during the papal trip to Turkey in 2006. Undoubtedly, the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI in the area of relations with Islam revealed new perspectives, in which dialogue was based on intellectual honesty along with a deeper understanding of theological differences. In this way, the foundations for a more conscious dialogue were developed. Benedict XVI's form of communication with the Arab world revealed the possibilities and limitations of an intellectual approach to interreligious dialogue. Despite the crises, his pontificate contributed to a deepening of mutual understanding at the theological and academic level.

Undoubtedly, Benedict XVI's experiences in relations with Islam clearly influenced the style of communication of Pope Francis with the Arab world. Francis adopted a much more emotional and symbolic approach to dialogue, avoiding controversial theological formulations.

### 3. Literature Review

The analysis of the existing literature reveals a research gap concerning the systematic analysis of Pope Francis' communication strategies in the context of relations with the countries of the Middle East. Existing studies focus mainly on individual initiatives: visits to the United Arab Emirates, Iraq and Bahrain (Piwko and Sawicka 2024) or selected aspects of interreligious dialogue (Catalano 2022; Yucel and Tahir 2021), but there is no comprehensive approach to communication strategies in the regional dimension. The literature directly concerning Pope Francis' intercultural communication with the countries of the Middle East is relatively modest. Research in this area is conducted by Anna Solarz and Joanna Kulska (Kulska and Solarz 2021; Solarz and Kulska 2025). Important studies in this area were presented by those analyzing the role of the papacy in the Middle Eastern conflicts (Impagliazzo 2019) and examining the Christian-Muslim dialogue during Francis' pontificate (Siddiqui 2018).

The existing literature on intercultural communication in papal diplomacy (Salomon 1984) indicates an evolution of the Holy See's approach to dialogue with Islam (Pratt

2021), starting with the groundbreaking initiatives of the Second Vatican Council (Pratt 2010), through the actions of John Paul II (Weigel 2020; Olizar 2021), and ending with the pontificate of Benedict XVI (Massmann 2023).

Studies on intercultural communication in a religious context emphasize the importance of differences in systems of values, symbols, and practices (Neuliep 2018). Interreligious dialogue as a form of intercultural communication requires particular sensitivity to the cultural and historical context (Abu-Nimer and Alabbadi 2017). Intercultural communication in the context of religious diplomacy is an area of interdisciplinary research that combines elements of communication science, international relations, religious studies, and cultural studies. Previous research on Vatican diplomacy has focused mainly on its historical aspects (Coppa 2008) and the analysis of the relations of the Holy See with individual states (Troy 2018). Intercultural communication in the religious dimension has been widely described by Hammer (2012) and Neuliep (2018), who emphasize the importance of the cultural and religious context in communication processes. The concept of the “culture of encounter” (cultura del encuentro), discussed by Spadaro (2019) and Ivereigh (2019), is crucial for understanding the specificity of Pope Francis’ intercultural communication.

Diplomatic communication is a special type of international communication, characterized by formalization, protocol, and multi-layered messages (Berridge 2015). Studies on Vatican diplomacy emphasize its unique character, combining elements of traditional state diplomacy with a religious and moral mission (Troy 2018). A special feature of the diplomatic communication of the Holy See is its dual function, being both a subject of international law and the institutional centre of the Catholic Church. This duality affects communication strategies, which must take into account both the political and religious dimensions (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2014).

In the rich mosaic of contemporary international relations, relations between the Holy See and the Arab world constitute a fascinating, if often under-researched, area of diplomacy. The Vatican’s diplomatic communication with Arab countries is a complex web of formal and informal contacts that have developed over the centuries, and in recent decades have become particularly important in the face of global challenges (Impagliazzo 2019). This work examines the specific nature of Vatican diplomacy in a region where Catholicism remains a minority religion and Islam the dominant faith that shapes culture, society and politics. However, this religious asymmetry does not constitute an obstacle but creates a unique space for interreligious dialogue, which has become one of the pillars of contemporary papal diplomacy.

The article shows the evolution of the diplomatic relations of the Holy See with Arab countries—from historical tensions to contemporary cooperation initiatives. This study focuses on the pontificate of Pope Francis, who, through numerous non-standard actions towards Muslims, Islam and the Middle East, made his reign in the See of Peter a breakthrough in Church-Islam relations (Aguilar 2021). Of course, such intercultural activity was possible thanks to various initiatives initiated by the Second Vatican Council and the foundations laid by previous popes, who through their pilgrimages and declarations opened new channels of communication.

It is worth mentioning here the groundbreaking document of the Second Vatican Council—Declaration on The Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate* proclaimed by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on 28 October 1965 (Second Vatican Council 1965). This declaration, for the first time in the history of the Church, positively referred to Islam, recognizing common elements of faith and calling for mutual understanding. The third point was devoted entirely to Islam. It indicated that the foundation of mutual relations is the One God, the Creator of heaven and earth (Second Vatican Council 1965,

p. 3). The resolutions of the Second Vatican Council contributed significantly to a new opening in the conduct of dialogue activity between the two religions.

#### 4. Methods

The methodology is based on the analysis of the content of the Pope's official documents, speeches and gestures and their reception in the region. The results indicate the effectiveness of the adopted communication strategies in building new spaces for dialogue despite the complex geopolitical conditions of the region. The research material includes: the corpus of official documents and speeches of Pope Francis concerning the Middle East (2013–2025), including encyclicals, apostolic exhortations, homilies, speeches during apostolic journeys and occasional messages; documentation of symbolic gestures and diplomatic meetings, including photographs, recordings and official Vatican reports, including official communiqués of the Press Office of the Holy See; secondary analysis of the reception of papal communiqués in the Middle East media, including selected publications in Arabic, Hebrew and Farsi, as well as analyses by experts on Vatican diplomacy and representatives of the Eastern Churches.

Of particular importance for a full, in-depth analysis of this type of communication are the joint documents signed with representatives of other religions. The 2019 Document on Human Fraternity, signed by Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad al-Tayyeb, is undoubtedly groundbreaking. The joint appeal of Francis and King Mohammed VI of Morocco regarding Jerusalem/Al-Qods Acharif, the Holy City and the place of meeting, was also significant. The article makes a significant contribution to research on the role of communication in religious diplomacy and on the evolution of the foreign policy of the Holy See.

The study uses a mixed methodological approach, corresponding to the interdisciplinary nature of the analysis. The use of qualitative content analysis (Zhang and Wildemuth 2009) enabled a thematic analysis of speeches and documents in order to identify the main communication motifs. This analytical tool, often used for content analysis, enables defining subjective interpretations of content (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, p. 1278) and also facilitates an empirical approach to the analysis of texts in the context of communication (Allen and Reser 1990). The study of linguistic structures, as well as metaphors and interpretive frames used in papal communication, required the use of discourse analysis (Taylor 2013). In contrast, the comparison of Pope Francis' communication strategies with the actions of his predecessors towards the Middle East was supported by comparative analysis. It was also necessary to discuss case studies, in the sense of in-depth analyses of selected communication initiatives: visits to the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Iraq and Bahrain.

#### 5. Analysis, Results, and Discussion

##### 5.1. Pope Francis's Intercultural Communication

At the intersection of diplomacy and religion, in the space of intercultural dialogue, the activity of Pope Francis is a phenomenon worthy of special attention. From the beginning of his pontificate in 2013, Jorge Mario Bergoglio has undertaken the mission of building bridges between different cultures and religions, focusing on communication that crosses traditional ideological, theological and political barriers. Francis' papal diplomacy was characterized by an extraordinary openness to dialogue with representatives of other religions and cultures. His actions went beyond the conventional framework of Vatican diplomacy, introducing new elements of intercultural communication that were based on directness, simplicity of message and authentic engagement in global challenges (Troy 2021).

Research on the communication style of Pope Francis points to its characteristic features: directness, simplicity of language, the use of metaphors taken from everyday life, and the ability to adapt the message to different recipients (Spadaro 2019; Pope Francis and Ivereigh 2020).

However, the analysis of Francis' communication strategies requires reference to several theoretical frameworks from the areas of intercultural communication, public diplomacy and studies of religion in international relations. In order to present this complex picture, this study uses Deardorff's (2009) model of intercultural communication competence, which emphasizes the importance of cultural awareness, knowledge, skills and attitudes in effective communication between representatives of different cultures. This model is particularly useful in analyzing the adaptation of the papal message to the different cultural contexts of the Middle East. Darla Deardorff points to the process of individual acquisition of intercultural competences, which are: attitudes, knowledge and skills. On this basis, it is possible to achieve an interactive level, i.e., internal and external results. By proper attitudes, we should understand respect, i.e., appreciation of another culture, openness expressed in refraining from judgments, and curiosity and discovery, which will result in tolerance. The next stages of gaining competence are knowledge and understanding. Cultural self-awareness and in-depth knowledge of culture are important at this stage. On this basis, skills are developed, such as listening, observing and evaluating, which enable analysis, interpretation and reference. These elements allow to achieve, desired internal results can be achieved, which are: adaptability, flexibility, ethnorelativistic perspective and empathy. Finally, desired external results are effective and appropriate communication and behaviour in intercultural situations (Deardorff 2011; Deardorff and Arasaratnam-Smith 2017). Shaping intercultural competences is a duty of the present day, due to demographic, technological, economic, peaceful and finally interpersonal changes (Lustig and Koester 2010, p. 3).

Analyzing the attitudes, gestures and statements of Pope Francis, there is no doubt that he has achieved the fullness of these competences. With his characteristic simplicity and directness, he engaged in various intercultural initiatives, often disregarding the criticism of the environment or ultra-Catholic circles. The Pope knew perfectly well that only through the acquisition and development of intercultural competences is it possible to conduct effective diplomacy and religious communication with communities with other religious and cultural values.

## 5.2. Pope Francis's Communication Strategies in Relations with the Arab Middle East

Francis's pontificate was marked by the intensification of the Holy See's diplomatic activity in the Arab Middle East, which was reflected in the Pope's strategically focused communication activities. In the context of the complex geopolitical situation of the region, marked by armed conflicts, a humanitarian crisis and a dramatic deterioration in the situation of Christian communities, papal communication took on a multidimensional character, encompassing both official diplomatic statements and symbolic pastoral gestures. These strategies, a synthesis of traditional methods of Vatican diplomacy with innovative forms of social communication, served to achieve the overarching goals of the pontificate: promoting peace, protecting religious minorities and building bridges of interreligious and intercultural dialogue in one of the most unstable regions of the contemporary world.

### 5.2.1. Culture of Encounter

From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has consistently emphasized inter-faith dialogue as a key communication strategy with the Arab countries of the Middle East. The basis for this action was the culture of encounter as a fundamental strategy, assuming

the crossing of cultural and religious barriers through direct dialogue (Catalano 2022). This concept assumed the primacy of encounter over doctrine. Dialogue precedes and enables theological discussion, not the other way around. Francis consistently prioritized building personal relationships over resolving doctrinal differences. A striking example of interfaith dialogue understood in this way was the friendship between Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyeb. Both men sought agreement, first among themselves, and then by showing the planes of agreement between the followers of two powerful monotheistic religions. The intimacy of the two religious leaders has become a clear symbol of human brotherhood. In the attitude of the Pope and the Grand Imam, what had previously been a common objection to conducting dialogue with Islam has been realized. Until Francis took the throne of Peter, interreligious dialogue consisted of a debate conducted among people interested in otherness and cultural diversity. There was no model of how this dialogue, which is much talked about, should look like (Barbato 2019).

The breakthrough came with the papal apostolic trip to the United Arab Emirates in February 2019. For the first time in the history of the papacy, the Bishop of Rome visited the Arabian Peninsula, which in itself was already a distinct and groundbreaking communicative gesture. The papal visit was also a milestone in the mutual relations between Christians and Muslims, not only on the Arabian Peninsula but throughout the Middle East (Barbato 2020).

Francis travelled to the United Arab Emirates to participate in the International Conference of Human Fraternity in Abu Dhabi, organized on the 800th anniversary of the meeting of St. Francis of Assisi with Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil. During the Fifth Crusade in 1219, Francis of Assisi decided to go on a mission to preach the Gospel among Muslims. Francis went with peaceful intentions and without a desire to engage in disputes, but he set a clear goal for this journey—to bring the followers of Islam closer to Christ, who died on the cross for the salvation of every human being. The latter saint knew that the mission was difficult and that its ending could be tragic, because it ended in death. The path Francis travelled was certainly dominated by many challenges and difficulties. The missionary was imprisoned by the sultan's army, hurled insults and beaten, but he did not let himself be intimidated. Thanks to his perseverance in the undertaken mission, 29 August 1219 can be considered the symbolic date of the beginning of religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims. The exact course of Francis's meeting with Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil is not known because we only have the account of St. Bonaventure, written after the meeting in Damietta, Egypt. It is believed that Francis spent two days with the Sultan, during which he told al-Malik about Christ and his own faith. According to St. Bonaventure's biography of St. Francis, the Sultan noticed the enthusiasm of the newcomer from Assisi and his courage, which is why he listened to him with interest and wanted him to stay longer as a guest of the Sultan. The conclusion from this meeting is still relevant today, namely that no one should be excluded from the bond of brotherhood, even those who are reluctant or even hostile to a specific group of people. St. Francis' meeting with the Sultan is undoubtedly proof that a relationship with the enemy does not always have to mean fighting, but can be a contribution to dialogue.

The Abu Dhabi conference very clearly promoted the idea of the emergence and existence of different religions in order to achieve peace for humanity. The organizers also emphasized the importance of unwavering faith in fundamental religious principles. Only such an attitude, strengthened by sincere intentions and a shared sense of responsibility, can guarantee lasting peace between nations and, consequently, the achievement of human brotherhood.

Pope Francis's journey to the United Arab Emirates was held under the slogan: Make me an instrument of your peace and was provided with a logo depicting a dove with an

olive branch. This symbol refers to the description of the flood, known from the biblical tradition. God, wanting to save humanity from destruction, ordered Noah to enter the ark with his family. Francis referred to this image of religious prehistory during his address to the conference participants, saying: “we too today, in the name of God, to preserve peace, need to enter together, as one family, into an ark that can sail on the stormy sea of the world: the ark of fraternity” (Pope Francis 2019).

The central event of Francis’ stay in the United Arab Emirates was the signing of the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Coexistence in Abu Dhabi on 4 February 2019. The document was signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb. This document is an important testimony in Catholic-Muslim relations, to which the Authors themselves gave special significance among others established recently. Thus, the Abu Dhabi document became a new foundation on which the construction of Catholic-Muslim dialogue 2.0 began. On this basis, Francis began implementing his programme of building bridges, not walls (Pope Francis 2018), with particular emphasis on personal encounters.

The strategy of the culture of encounter as an element of intercultural communication in the religious diplomacy of Pope Francis was also implemented during his other apostolic visits to Arab countries. In 2019, Francis went to Morocco, in 2021 to Iraq, and in 2022 to Bahrain. These visits were aimed at meetings with representatives of state authorities, as well as establishing direct dialogue with religious leaders and local communities. During these visits, Francis emphasized the importance of mutual respect and peaceful coexistence of different religious groups. At this point, it is worth highlighting the special event of Francis’ meeting with the Grand Ayatollah of Iraq, Ali Al-Husayni al-Sistani. It was a historic and unprecedented event in the more than 1200-year history of Christian–Muslim relations. This visit was a courtesy visit, lasted 50 min, and took place behind closed doors, without the participation of the media or television cameras, and after the meeting ended, the men did not issue a joint statement. The intimacy of the event meant that the symbolism of the conversation gained great significance. The photo of the “Pope in white and the Ayatollah in black” (Lefèvre 2021) quickly went around the world, becoming an eloquent commentary on the private dialogue of the two leaders. This meeting has become exceptional and symbolic, giving hope for building a better world. The Grand Ayatollah is a person with a global influence on the Shiite community, and yet he is extremely modest in person. He avoids taking pictures and publishing his activities on the Internet. He is also known for his considerable reserve in contacts with leaders outside the Shiite world. For this reason, preparing a meeting between Pope Francis and the Grand Ayatollah of Iraq seemed impossible. However, despite the difficulties, and above all the commitment of many advocates of dialogue, the meeting was carried out.

The room in which the religious leaders met was minimalist in style, reflecting the ascetic lifestyle of the Ayatollah. The interlocutors sat next to each other, and communication was carried out with the help of interpreters, whose presence did not disturb the direct and friendly atmosphere. It should be emphasized that the modesty of the Grand Ayatollah’s apartment is consistent with the life philosophy of Pope Francis, who was known for his simplicity and rejection of luxury. From the beginning of his pontificate, Francis gave up living in the papal apartments of the Apostolic Palace, choosing a more modest apartment in the Casa Santa Marta. He also used more modest insignia of papal authority and chose simple liturgical vestments. On the other hand, in his speeches he repeatedly emphasized the value of poverty, criticizing excessive consumerism. According to the Pope, excessive luxury can distance leaders from the everyday problems of society (Pope Francis 2013, p. 41; 2015, pp. 7–8). That is why the meeting between Pope Francis and Ayatollah Ali Al-Husayni al-Sistani in his humble home was in line with the idea of dialogue based

on authenticity and humility that is close to Francis. The Pope was impressed by the ascetic lifestyle of the Shiite spiritual and political leader, who, despite the great respect of society, leads a modest life. It should be emphasized that it was this feature—simplicity and modesty of life, which united both powerful leaders, that became the foundation for building understanding between them, despite the theological and cultural differences that divided them.

The meeting with Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani was a model example of religious diplomacy. The organizers of the meeting prepared it using protocol precision, strictly observing Shiite etiquette during the visit to the ayatollah's home. Francis maintained theological caution, avoiding doctrinal declarations, but common social values were particularly emphasized. After the meeting with the pope, Ayatollah Ali Al-Husayni al-Sistani, in a statement issued, expressed his concern about the problems faced by various nations, including poverty, religious persecution, political oppression, lack of social justice and wars. The cleric particularly highlighted the situation of Palestinians in the occupied territories and called on world religious leaders to oppose oppression, injustice and poverty ([The Office of Al-Sayyid Al-Sistani 2021](#)).

### 5.2.2. Strategy for Institutionalizing Dialogue

The papal trip to Bahrain in November 2022 was another stage in the communication strategy expressed through the institutionalization of dialogue. The purpose of Francis' visit to the country of the Two Seas was to participate in the Bahrain Forum for Dialogue, under the slogan "East and West for Human Coexistence". This forum was an international event with a global reach and was also characterized by an academic level, as it was attended by many eminent theologians and experts in interfaith dialogue. In his speech to The Members of the Muslim Council of Elders, Francis delivered the message: "God is the source of peace. (...) We, who believe in him, are called to promote peace with tools of peace, such as encounter, patient negotiations and dialogue, which is the oxygen of peaceful coexistence" ([Pope Francis 2022c](#)). It was also in this context that the pope's political communication strategy was revealed. Islam is the official religion in Bahrain and Sharia law is in force there, but Christians and followers of other religions enjoy freedom of religion and worship. The ruling Al-Khalifa dynasty has long promoted a tolerant religious policy. This context has allowed Francis to conduct an open dialogue on religious freedom in the region.

The use of interfaith dialogue as an instrument of Vatican diplomacy was undoubtedly an innovative element of Pope Francis' communication. The Pope engaged religious leaders as key partners in building peace and stability in the region. This revealed three levels of such engagement. The aforementioned institutional dialogue, initiated in 2017 during the papal visit to Egypt. At that time, there was a new beginning in the Vatican-Muslim dialogue, through the strengthening of relations with Al-Azhar University in Cairo, after a period of cooling of relations during the pontificate of Benedict XVI. In addition, there were numerous consultations on this level with the Royal Institute for Interfaith Relations in Jordan, as well as cooperation with the Interfaith Council of Religious Leaders in Bahrain.

The second level of engagement was intellectual dialogue, which promoted joint theological and ethical research, as well as supporting conferences and scientific publications on Christian-Muslim dialogue. The third level, on the other hand, was social dialogue, promoting joint humanitarian initiatives and supporting educational projects that promoted mutual understanding and knowledge. It should be emphasized here that this strategy has had a tangible effect, implemented. The Higher Committee for Human Fraternity was established, which includes representatives of various religions. In addition,

the General Assembly of the United Nations declared February 4 as the International Day of Human Fraternity.

### 5.2.3. Symbolic Communication Strategy

Pope Francis's symbolic communication strategy in relations with the Middle East is based on several fundamental principles that can be justified pragmatically. The Pope believed that authentic dialogue requires physical presence and direct contact. Only relationships established "face to face" guarantee long-term understanding. This was demonstrated by his visits to Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Egypt, Morocco, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. They were not just ceremonial but were a concretization of the belief that reconciliation requires reaching out to the other side, the person, the society. The symbolism of inclusiveness was helpful in achieving these goals. Francis consciously used gestures with deep symbolic meaning, crossing language and cultural barriers. Francis willingly used "a moment of silence" as a period of silent contemplation, prayer, reflection, or meditation; he used it as a special ritual because it expresses more than a speech full of pathos. Francis used this gesture during a joint prayer for the victims of terrorism during his visit to Mosul, Iraq (Pope Francis 2021b).

The choice of symbolic places was also important in this strategy: prayer at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, as well as at the Israeli separation wall in Bethlehem. This papal gesture was met with applause from Palestinians, who perceive the wall as a symbol of Israeli occupation and apartheid (Beaumont 2014). There, he also prayed for a moment in silence and contemplation. Silence has become a universal ritual that does not require theological justification, and at the same time, creates a space for a shared spiritual experience. The strategy of silence, especially in a world dominated by noise and information noise, takes on a special meaning. A breakthrough event with silence in the main role was the contemplative prayer of Pope John Paul II during his last pilgrimage to Poland in 2002. In the Wawel Cathedral in Kraków, the Pope recited the breviary prayer in absolute silence for half an hour. The event was broadcast live by Polish Television to the whole world. Witnesses to the event who were present inside the church reported that the only sound heard in the huge cathedral was the quiet hum of working television cameras. There was an overwhelming silence all around, which turned out to be the best retreat of their lives (Papież Nadziei 2002; Bąk 2019). The performance of such gestures is a clear sign and a message to the world, proving the equal dignity of all religious traditions. It also justifies the need to break down historical barriers and stereotypes.

Analysis of the research material allows us to distinguish three categories of symbolic communication activities. The first are gestures of respect towards Islam, among which the fundamental one is taking off shoes before entering the mosque, in accordance with Muslim tradition (Letsch 2014). It should be noted here that this gesture of respect was also performed by Francis' predecessors, both John Paul II (Schneider 2001) and Benedict XVI (Popham 2006), so it is not a special event. However, during each papal visit to the mosque, the media pay special attention to the element of removing shoes. In this way, this gesture takes on a special meaning, somehow pushing into the background other, often much more important and groundbreaking events, words and commitments resulting from the papal visit to the mosque.

The second category is gestures of solidarity with victims of conflicts. An example were the papal visits to Lampedusa in Italy in 2013 and to the Moria refugee camp on Lesbos in 2016. While in Lampedusa, Francis bought international phone cards for refugees so that they could contact their families. This simple gesture showed how important it is to be with another person, even if it is to be by telephone (Kazimierczuk 2013). A special dimension of solidarity with all those affected by the activities of the terrorist group The Islamic State

in Iraq was the papal prayer at The Square of Four Churches, also known as Hosh Al Bieaa, in Mosul in 2021. It carried a deep symbolic and religious meaning. There were four Christian churches in the square: a Syriac Catholic church, an Armenian Orthodox church, a Chaldean church, and a Syriac Orthodox church, all of which were destroyed by the Islamic State. The fundamental message of the prayer was the words: “The fraternity is more durable than fratricide” (Pope Francis 2021b). This slogan became the Pope’s manifesto and vision of overcoming religious conflict by returning to fundamental humanitarian values. The prayer amidst the ruins was a lament for suffering and at the same time a proclamation of hope for rebirth. That is why the Pope appealed for the rejection of killing other people, waging war allegedly in the name of God, and hatred. In his prayer, Francis recalled the symbols of the place: The Al-Nouri Mosque with its Al-Hadba minaret and The Church of Our Lady of the Hour, which are signs of the perennial human desire for closeness to you. The church clock reminds passersby that life is short and time is precious. That is why it is so important to realize the divine plan of love, peace and reconciliation in the short time of earthly life (Pope Francis 2021b). The presence of Pope Francis in Mosul and prayer in this special square has become a symbolic act of reconsecration of the place where violence must be overcome by love, and destruction gives hope for rebirth.

The last, third category of symbolic communication is peace initiatives. Francis, as a mediator in the Palestinian issue, organized a prayer meeting for peace in the Vatican Gardens on 8 June 2014. The event was attended by Israeli President Shimon Peres, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, and Patriarch Bartholomew, while the host, Francis, said: “Peacemaking calls for courage, much more so than warfare. It calls for the courage to say yes to encounter and no to conflict: yes to dialogue and no to violence; yes to negotiations and no to hostilities; yes to respect for agreements and no to acts of provocation; yes to sincerity and no to duplicity. All of this takes courage, it takes strength and tenacity (Pope Francis 2014).

An interesting peace initiative was the tree-tending ceremony. During his visit to Bahrain, Francis, together with King Hamad ibn Isa Al-Khalifa and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, watered the Tree of Peace in the royal gardens. This event symbolized their shared concern for the future of Christian–Muslim dialogue. Water is an attribute of life and, in a special way, represents the need for constant nourishment of peace processes. Moreover, water in both religious traditions, Christian and Muslim, shows the blessing of God; thus, watering a tree becomes an act of recognizing God as the source of life and peace. Similarly, the joint action of Francis and King Hamad was an expression of mutual responsibility for the growth and development of the future. The act of watering itself is an eloquent symbol of patience, necessary in striving for change. Just as a tree needs time to grow, so peace requires constant care and time to take deep roots. It should be mentioned here that pro-ecological activities were in line with the teaching of Francis, who emphasized the importance of caring for the natural environment, especially in the encyclical *Laudato Si’* (Pope Francis 2015). Finally, the simple act of watering the tree together broke the rigid framework of diplomatic protocol, becoming a practical implementation of the papal appeal made during his first speech in Bahrain. Francis said then: “Let us work together! Let us work in the service of togetherness and hope! I am here, in this land of the Tree of Life, as a sower of peace” (Pope Francis 2022a). The symbolism of the tree itself is also important, as a long-lived organism, and thus giving hope that the relationships established during the visit will be lasting and will bear good fruit in the future.

The use of universal gestures in the Pope’s symbolic communication strategy is understandable to every person. These acts transcend cultural and religious barriers, and at the same time are an expression of care that does not require explanation or cultural translation.

In particular, the symbolism of the watering of the tree of peace by Pope Francis and King Hamad ibn Isa Al-Khalifa of Bahrain represents a groundbreaking approach to religious diplomacy, combining spiritual, ecological, and interreligious dimensions in one simple gesture of great significance (Pope Francis 2022b).

These strategies have yielded concrete results. The document on human fraternity signed jointly with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, as well as the historic papal visit to Iraq, have demonstrated that symbolic communication can translate into real political and social change. Finally, in the era of social media and global communication, a powerful symbol often speaks much more effectively than long documents. Francis perfectly understood the importance of a single gesture, made sincerely and spontaneously. The groundbreaking gestures reached millions of people around the world and could have a significant impact on changing the narrative of interfaith relations in the Middle East. The symbolism of this type of communication strategy by the head of the Catholic Church became a practical tool for building peace in one of the most conflict-prone regions of the world.

#### 5.2.4. Framing Strategy

Analyzing the discourse of papal documents and speeches, he reveals the conscious use of specific interpretative frames in communication concerning the Middle East. It is a sophisticated rhetorical system that serves to transform the perception of regional conflicts from a confrontational perspective to a dialogical and peaceful one. At its foundation is the frame of the “Common Home” (Casa Comune). Francis has consistently presented the Middle East as a “common home” of all religious traditions, not a battlefield and competition. Dialogue with Muslims in the territory dominated by them shows a strategic redefinition of space, from the territory of the “other”, often the enemy, to a common spiritual homeland (Haszczyński 2019).

Pope Francis was seen as a pilgrim of peace, and by virtue of his function as head of state of the Vatican, also as a diplomat. However, it should be emphasized that the dynamic changes in the Middle East region and the political reshuffles in key countries of the world, in a way, provoked Francis to adopt the attitude of a pilgrim, that is, a spiritual figure, not a political one. This was a conscious avoidance of diplomatic flamingos by the Pope. The role of a diplomat in conflict zones is political mediation and taking on the function of a negotiator. Of course, the Vatican conducts active diplomacy through the Secretary of State and apostolic nuncios, and Francis himself was involved in specific peace initiatives, such as attempts at dialogue mediation with various parties to the conflicts.

The essence of Francis’ pontificate is much better reflected in the pilgrim of peace frame, because his approach to conflicts is deeply spiritual and moral, going beyond pragmatic diplomatic calculations. The tragic diagnosis of the current situation in the world was the famous statement: “The present third world war fought piecemeal” (Pope Francis 2023a). At the same time, these words had a prophetic dimension, and not just an analytical conclusion. The papal mission was to preach the Gospel of peace. That is why his visits to conflict zones, such as Iraq, were pastoral in nature, because he went to the suffering as a shepherd (Płociński 2021).

However, the differences between the pilgrim of peace and diplomat frames are significant. The diplomat seeks a compromise between the parties to the conflict, while the pilgrim of peace represents absolute values: justice, truth, and human dignity. Francis does not seek a “middle way” between the aggressor and the victim but calls for conversion and respect for international law. The pilgrim of peace frame is more appropriate because it better captures the theological foundation of Francis’ work and his belief that lasting peace requires spiritual transformation, not just political arrangements.

The Frame of Abrahamic Brotherhood. The Pope consistently emphasizes the common roots of the three monotheistic religions, calling Muslims and Jews “brothers in the faith of Abraham”. An excellent example was the interfaith meeting in Ur, the birthplace of Abraham (Pope Francis 2021a). It is no coincidence that the Pope delivered his most important speeches in places of special significance for all Abrahamic traditions. The strategic use of the common spiritual genealogy of the three monotheistic religions has further demonstrated the need for the followers to act in unison, especially in the area of universal values and aspirations. They naturally connect with all humanitarian values, essential for every religious and cultural tradition. These are undoubtedly values such as: the dignity of the human person, solidarity with the poor, the pursuit of peace and justice. These values are increasingly evolving in the contemporary world into common global challenges. For this reason, in his communications with the leaders of the Middle East, the Pope often places local problems in the context of global challenges: the ecological crisis, migration, economic inequality, thus building a sense of shared responsibility.

An excellent example of the effective application of the interpretive framework is undoubtedly the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together signed by His Holiness Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyeb (Pope Francis and Ahmad al-Tayyeb 2019). In this document, the idea of “human fraternity” functions as a universal moral category, acceptable in both Christian and Muslim traditions.

### 5.3. Language, Gestures and Symbols

Pope Francis’ communication is an interesting subject of research from the perspective of linguistic pragmatics, especially the speech act theory of John Langshaw Austin (1975) and John Rogers Searle (1969). Papal statements are not only a transmission of information, but performative acts that “make” reality—they bless, call for peace, establish diplomatic relations. In the context of the Middle East, each word carries an additional historical and political weight. The Pope, while implementing intercultural communication and religious diplomacy in the Middle East, was aware of Edward Hall’s (1990) research on high- and low-context communication. In the Middle East, meaning often lies in nonverbal elements of communication. For this reason, Francis willingly used gestures and symbols as a universal language of understanding in a region marked by numerous conflicts. According to Charles Sanders Peirce’s (1994) theory of signs, papal communication operated on three levels: iconic, indexical, and symbolic. The Pope’s gestures, such as kissing the feet of followers of different religions during the Holy Thursday Liturgy or praying at the West Wall, have emerged as powerful symbols that transcend linguistic and religious boundaries.

#### 5.3.1. Papal Verbal Communication

Pope Francis initiated a new trend in the language of communication, namely the pursuit of simplicity and directness. The official statements of the Pope were devoid of many formal elements and the ecclesiastical, teaching style of speech. Francis used simple metaphors and examples that were understandable to the average recipient. When speaking to the Arab-Muslim world, he willingly reached for examples from local, regional culture. A model image in this respect is the figure of the “Tree of Life—Shajarat-al-Hayat” (Pope Francis 2022b), used in the welcome speech in Bahrain. Achieving the intended communication goal was also facilitated by avoiding specialist terminology and formulating short, memorable phrases instead of complex rhetorical structures. It should be noted that Francis had a special linguistic sensitivity in interreligious communication, which he used perfectly, taking into account the cultural context in international communication.

Pope Francis has developed a distinctive model of crisis communication, responding to crises in the Middle East: wars, acts of terrorism, and religious persecution. An analysis

of the Holy See's communiqués shows that the average response time to serious incidents in the region is less than 24 h, compared to 2–3 days during previous pontificates. Francis makes every effort to ensure that the language of the communiqués is balanced. An examination of the content of statements in conflict situations: the war in Syria, Israeli–Palestinian tensions, reveals the systematic use of balanced language, avoiding unequivocal siding with any of the sides, while at the same time unequivocally and firmly condemning violence against civilians. The day after the outbreak of the conflict between Hamas and Israel, during Angelus on 8 October 2023, Francis prayed: “I am following apprehensively and sorrowfully what is happening in Israel, where violence has exploded yet more ferociously, causing hundreds of deaths and injuries. I express my closeness to the families of the victims. I am praying for them and for all who are living hours of terror and anguish. May the attacks and weapons stop. Please! And may it be understood that terrorism and war “do not lead to any resolutions, but only to the death and suffering of many innocent people. Every war is a defeat. Let us pray that there be peace in Israel and in Palestine” (Pope Francis 2023b).

In contrast to general appeals for peace, Francis's communications often include specific proposals for solutions, such as ceasefires, humanitarian corridors, and international mediation. A characteristic element of the papal communications is the personalization of the message. Francis regularly refers to specific people and situations, mentioning the victims of violence by name, which gives his appeals a personal and emotional dimension: “One thing that Doha said moved me deeply. She said that forgiveness is needed on the part of those who survived the terrorist attacks. Forgiveness; that is a key word. Forgiveness is necessary to remain in love” (Pope Francis 2021c).

The Pope avoided complicated theological rhetoric, speaking in simple and understandable language. His communication was often personal and empathetic, which significantly helped to break down barriers. At the same time, in situations of particular emotional tension, he was able to firmly call for an end to destructive actions. This was the case during Angelus on 5 November 2023, when he repeated “Basta” three times, referring to the escalation of the conflict and the tragic situation of the inhabitants of Gaza (Pope Francis 2023c).

According to Pope Francis, the fundamental communication strategy with the countries of the Middle East was to build long-term relations. This strategy went beyond one-off meetings, because according to the Pope, dialogue should be based on a meeting. Only then is it possible to build lasting intercultural bonds. Francis, like his predecessors, was criticized for conducting an open dialogue and establishing close relations with authoritarian Arab states. An example was his apostolic journey to Bahrain, where the death penalty is in force. It is ruled by the courts for the following crimes: treason, terrorism, apostasy and drug trafficking (Almuhafdha 2024). At the same time, the law of the Kingdom does not have a precise definition of terrorism, and this lack allows the abuse of the legal system to criminalize acts of opposition, freedom of speech and assembly. For this reason, courts impose the death penalty on political activists, as well as on people who only work on social media to improve human rights in Bahrain. Thus, the death penalty is sometimes imposed for political views that are contrary to the interests of state power (European Parliament 2021). Speaking to The Authorities, Civil Society and The Diplomatic Corps, Francis, in his characteristic manner, demanded basic human rights and combating all discrimination. He also pointed to the right to life, including for people who have been punished with the highest possible penalty, i.e., deprivation of life (Pope Francis 2022b).

### 5.3.2. Symbolic Communication

Symbolic communication is a fundamental element of human discourse, going beyond the boundaries of verbal communication. In the context of contemporary religious and international diplomacy, symbolic gestures take on special significance as tools capable of crossing linguistic, cultural and confessional barriers. The pontificate of Pope Francis was characterized by a particularly conscious and strategic use of symbolic communication as a key element of the papal communication strategy (Jabur and Al-Hilu 2022). Jorge Mario Bergoglio, upon assuming the office of Bishop of Rome in 2013, introduced a new quality to papal communication, in which symbolic gestures acquired an important function, often equal to or even dominant in relation to verbal communication. Undoubtedly, symbolic communication is particularly predestined to cross traditional communication barriers.

Symbolic communication is defined as the process of conveying meanings through the use of signs, gestures, objects and actions that go beyond their literal meaning, taking on metaphorical, cultural and ideological dimensions (Gudauskas and Žiugždaitė 2015). Unlike verbal communication, which is mainly based on linguistic codes, symbolic communication uses universal archetypes and cultural patterns, which makes it particularly effective in intercultural communication. In his theory of ritual symbols, anthropologist Victor Turner points out three basic properties of symbols: condensation, or the ability to concentrate many meanings in one sign; unification, which is the combination of diverse elements into a coherent whole; and polarization, or oscillation between sensory and ideological meanings. These properties make symbolic communication particularly effective in the religious context, where a rich arsenal of symbols and ritual gestures is traditionally used (Turner 1996).

### 5.3.3. Physical Gestures as Carriers of Meanings

Pope Francis has made special use of physical gestures as carriers of profound theological and social meanings. Washing the feet of women and people of other faiths during the Holy Thursday liturgy, kissing the sick and disabled, and spontaneously hugging children during audiences—all of these gestures go far beyond their literal function, becoming powerful symbols of the pope's vision of the Church (Catalano 2022). The gesture of washing the feet of prisoners, including women and Muslims, during the Holy Thursday liturgy is particularly telling. This gesture, traditionally reserved for men, became, in Francis's performance, a manifestation of the inclusiveness and universality of the Gospel message. The symbolism of this gesture resonated far beyond the boundaries of Christian communities, becoming a universal message about the dignity of every human being.

Francis has developed a particular form of "gestural diplomacy". His meetings with political and religious leaders have been characterized by a particular attention to the symbolic dimension, in which each gesture, place of meeting and the surrounding circumstances were carefully considered to be consistent with the message being conveyed. An example of the effectiveness of this strategy was the historic meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Najaf. At that time, symbolic communication, through the very place of the meeting, the way it was organized and the accompanying gestures, conveyed more content than official communiqués. Francis, sitting on an equal footing with the Ayatollah, listening to him with respect and accepting his hospitality, constructed a strong message about the possibility of dialogue between Catholics and Shiites.

### 5.3.4. Crossing Cultural Barriers

One of the most important features of Francis' symbolic communication was its ability to transcend cultural and religious barriers. The papal gestures, based on universal patterns of human behaviour, including hugging, touching, and kneeling, are understandable

regardless of the cultural and religious context of the recipient. This was particularly evident during the papal international trips, where Francis consistently used symbolic gestures as tools for building bridges between different cultures and religions. His prayer at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem and at the wall separating the Palestinian Authority from Israel, the touch of the hand of the grand imam in Abu Dhabi, all of these gestures construct universal messages of peace, respect, and mutual understanding.

The positive results of Francis' communication strategies were possible to achieve by emphasizing the common, contemporary challenges facing humanity, regardless of religion. Undoubtedly, such supracultural challenges are the global problems of ongoing climate change, which are the root causes of poverty and migration (Pope Francis 2024). Symbolic communication, despite its universality, carries the risk of misinterpretation, especially in an intercultural context. Gestures that may be interpreted as an expression of respect and closeness in one culture may be perceived as tactless or inappropriate in another. Francis, conducting intensive symbolic communication in the international arena, had to take into account these cultural differences in planning his gestures.

### 5.3.5. Multi-Channel Media Strategy

The development of new media and digital technologies creates new possibilities for symbolic communication in the Church. Social media, live streaming, and other forms of digital communication allow for a wider dissemination of symbolic gestures, while also creating new challenges related to controlling the interpretation and context of these gestures. Francis actively used social media, showing how symbolic communication can be effectively adapted to new forms of media. His photos and videos distributed through social media often focused on symbolic gestures, which became viral content, reaching millions of recipients around the world (Narbona 2016).

Pope Francis' communication with Middle Eastern audiences was characterized by the use of diverse media channels, combining traditional diplomacy with new media. An example is social media, where the Pope's official account in Arabic operated: the Twitter platform (now: X.com) @Pontifex266\_ar (Novak and Vilveanu 2021). The official Vatican News website has an Arabic version. In addition, papal documents and messages were translated into Arabic and posted on the official website of the Holy See. Hashtags were used to promote initiatives aimed at the Arab world. Regional media, such as Qatari Al-Jazeera and the Egyptian daily Al-Ahram, also made it possible to disseminate the Pope's activities in the Middle East.

Francis' symbolic communication will certainly have a lasting impact on future pontificates. His successors will have to define their own communication strategy in relation to the model created by Francis. It will be difficult to return completely to traditional, more formal papal communication, but at the same time, each successive pope will have to develop his own, authentic style of symbolic communication.

## 6. Conclusions

The pontificate of Pope Francis marked a breakthrough in the way religious diplomacy was conducted in the Middle East. For the first time in the history of the papacy, such a comprehensive and multidimensional communication strategy was introduced, which went beyond the traditional framework of Vatican diplomacy. A key element of this revolution was the shift from doctrinal communication to relational communication, based on direct encounters and building personal bonds with religious and political leaders in the region.

The study confirms the thesis that Pope Francis fully implemented Deardorff's (2009) model of intercultural communication competence. His actions were characterized by all the elements of effective intercultural communication: cultural awareness, knowledge of the

regional context, skills in adapting the message, and attitudes of openness and respect for other religious traditions. The achieved internal results: adaptability, flexibility, empathy, and external: effective intercultural communication, confirm the practical usefulness of this theoretical model. The study also confirms that symbolic communication can be equally effective, and sometimes more effective than verbal communication in crossing cultural and religious barriers. The pope's "gestural diplomacy" is an innovative contribution to the theory and practice of intercultural communication.

The Pope's openness to the Arab world has been met with many critical voices. However, Francis has not abandoned his chosen path, consistently remaining convinced that dialogue is a better alternative than confrontation. This communication strategy reflects a modern approach to cultural diplomacy, where dialogue and mutual understanding are treated as the basis for peaceful coexistence in a multicultural world. Pope Francis' cultural communication with Arab states is an innovative model of religious diplomacy in the 21st century. Based on the principles of respect, dialogue and cooperation, it contributes to building bridges between civilizations and religious traditions. Despite its limitations and criticisms, this strategy has set new standards in interreligious relations and can serve as a model for future initiatives of intercultural dialogue. The key to the success of this strategy was the combination of deep theological knowledge with practical skills in intercultural communication, which allowed for the building of authentic relationships based on mutual respect and understanding of common humanitarian values.

Francis's cross-cultural communication with the Arab world was effective because of its authenticity. The audience, regardless of their cultural and religious background, intuitively recognized the difference between authentic gestures and those that were merely performative. Francis consistently built credibility, and all gestures were in keeping with the Pope's private and public life. The gestures were a natural expression of Francis' personality and his vision of pastoral care.

From the beginning of his pontificate in 2013, Pope Francis undertook a systematic strategy of communication with Islam and the Arab states, which was a breakthrough in Christian–Muslim relations. His approach was based on the principles of modern intercultural communication, religious dialogue and cultural diplomacy. Francis remained faithful to these strategies until the end. Until 21 April 2025. Undoubtedly, his funeral became tangible proof of the relevance of the efforts made for dialogue with the Arab-Muslim world. The ceremony in the Vatican was attended by numerous representatives of many Arab states, including: King Abdullah II of Jordan with Queen Rania, heir to the throne of the United Arab Emirates Khaled bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, Prime Ministers: Mohamed Mustafa of Palestine, Aziz Akhannouch of Morocco, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman of Qatar bin Jassim Al-Thani. The King of Bahrain was represented by the ministers: Abdulla bin Ahmed Al Khalifa and Nawaf bin Mohammed Al Maawda, while the President of Egypt was represented by the Minister of Religious Affairs, Osama al-Azhari. Iraq was represented by the President of the Kurdistan Region, Nechirvan Barzani. On behalf of King Salman of Saudi Arabia, Secretary of State Abdel Al-Jubeir (Lucente 2025) arrived at the Vatican. The presence of the envoy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at Francis' funeral was of particular importance, as the Vatican does not maintain full diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Mutual relations are limited to informal relations. The Vatican participated as an observer country in the establishment of the International Dialogue Centre—KAICIID King Abdullah (KAICIID 2025).

The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, in his condolences sent to the Vatican, paid a heartfelt tribute, referring to Pope Francis as a "brother in humanity" and a noble figure of compassion. He commended the pope's tireless efforts to foster interfaith dialogue, including the historic 2019 signing of the Document on Human Fraternity. Al-

Tayeb emphasized Pope Francis' firm stand against Islamophobia and his support for justice in Gaza (Lawand 2025).

The conducted analysis allows for the identification of characteristic features of Pope Francis' communication strategies in relations with Middle Eastern countries. Diplomacy was personalized, i.e., a shift from institutional communication to direct, personal contacts, using the Pope's charisma and communication style. Evidence of this was the strong brotherly bond between Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb. A strong emphasis was placed on specific and pragmatic solutions, i.e., abstract speculations about the future were put aside, and specific initiatives and actions showing concrete effects were highlighted. The Higher Committee of the Human Brotherhood (HCHB 2025) was established. Educational initiatives promoting interfaith dialogue were implemented, an example of which is the scholarship programme of the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID 2025).

This study opens up interesting perspectives for further research in the areas of international relations, intercultural communication, and religious dialogue and diplomacy. Comparative studies of the communication strategies of various pontificates in relations with the Middle East seem to be fundamental. With the end of Pope Francis' pontificate, there is a need to analyze the long-term effects of the undertaken interreligious dialogue initiatives on Christian–Muslim relations. It is also important to examine the reception of papal messages in various cultural and social contexts. Fundamental in this respect will be the analysis of the impact of new media and communication technologies on Vatican diplomacy in the Middle East. Finally, in-depth studies on the role of religious communication in resolving international conflicts should be undertaken.

Pope Francis' communication strategies in relations with the Arab countries of the Middle East constitute a phenomenon worthy of special attention from both a theoretical and practical perspective. Their analysis provides valuable conclusions for researchers of intercultural communication, public diplomacy and studies of religion in international relations. Francis has proven that authentic interreligious dialogue is possible even in the most conflict-prone regions of the world, provided that an appropriate communication strategy is adopted based on respect, openness and readiness for a real encounter with the "other". His pontificate has left a permanent mark on the history of Christian–Muslim relations, creating new possibilities for peaceful coexistence in the Middle East region. Francis' communication model can serve as a model for other religious and political leaders striving to build bridges in a divided world. His greatest achievement was proving that the culture of encounter can prevail over the culture of confrontation, and that dialogue can be more effective than diplomacy in the traditional sense.

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