

Pastoral Communication in Papal Catechesis: A Content Analysis of Pope Francis' General Audience Reflections

Noel Asiones, Eulalia Tome, Ulysses John Parado, Concepción Corotan, Orlando Cantillon, Ma. Louella Calderon and Jasper Suquila

Abstract: This study focuses on Pope Francis' 2022-2024 General Audiences, delving into his 122 reflections to identify significant themes and communication patterns. Using thematic and conceptual content analysis, we identify the 10 most prevalent themes and pastoral strategies aimed at communicating the essential elements of religious faith more effectively and meaningfully to new and diverse audiences. We suggest that adapting content, tone, and delivery—using stories, authoritative references, and multimedia—can deepen understanding and broaden reception of the intended message. The study contributes to the perennial discourse on how religious communication can maintain fidelity to its tradition while responding creatively to the pastoral challenges and cultural realities of contemporary society.

Keywords: Catechesis • Catholic Church • Content Analysis • General Audience • Pastoral Magisterium • Pope Francis

Introduction

In a postmodern world where any truth claim can be contested and where religion is one worldview among many, religious leaders face the challenge of engaging with diverse audiences while remaining rooted in the core tenets of their faith. Moreover, given the challenges posed by religious fundamentalism and moral relativism, Joseph Ratzinger (1927-2022) once argued that one of the most urgent tasks for the Catholic Church (church, hereafter) and evangelization was to develop a modern catechumenate, a process of Christian initiation and instruction, which could more effectively and meaningfully convey the essential elements of faith to new and

diverse audiences.¹ Like his last two predecessors, John Paul II (1920-2005) and Benedict XVI (1927-2022), Pope Francis (1936-2025) had endeavored to address this demanding and delicate challenge through papal discourse, including apostolic constitutions, encyclicals, letters, interviews, and even social media.²

Scholarly focus on papal teachings has traditionally centered on major magisterial documents such as encyclicals, apostolic exhortations, and conciliar texts.³ According to Gaillardetz, papal homilies, Angelus messages, and Wednesday General Audience (GA) catecheses constitute informal exercises of the papal teaching office that possess genuine, although limited, magisterial authority because they are pastoral and catechetical rather than doctrinally definitive.⁴

Although previous research has examined similar documents, it is also important to continue exploring how the catechetical reflections given during his weekly GA communicate the essential elements of faith and why they remain significant in an increasingly secular and

¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 27.

² Daniela Kollárová & Magdaléna Ungerová. “Media Image of Pope Francis,” *European Journal of Science and Theology* 15, no. 2 (2019): 1-8; Heidi A. Campbell & Alessandra Vitullo, “Popes in the Digital Era: Reflecting on the Rise of the Digital Papacy,” *Problemi dell’informazione* 44, no. 3 (2019): 419-442; Juan Narbona, “Digital Leadership, Twitter and Pope Francis,” *Church, Communication and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2016): 90-109.

³ Tracey Rowland, “Magisterial Teaching of John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis,” *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology* (2025), 1-2; Paulo Fragomeni & Christopher Chan, “Considerations for Remuneration in Papal Social Encyclicals,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 26, no. 2 (2023): 211–229; Rafael Repiso et al., “The Presence of the Encyclicals in Web of Science: A Bibliometric Approach,” *Scientometrics* 115, no. 1 (2018): 435–449.

⁴ Richard R. Gaillardetz, *By What Authority? Foundations for Understanding Authority in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), 135-145.

diverse society.⁵ Furthermore, they are among the most frequent and accessible ways popes reach a global, culturally diverse audience, offering relatively short yet consistent pastoral guidance that connects catechetical insights with the everyday experiences of their listeners.⁶ Still, research tends to overlook their overarching themes and underlying communication patterns that can typify or distinguish Francis' pontificate from that of his predecessors.⁷

Likewise, the majority of existing literature has focused on Francis' communication in specific contemporary social issues, such as interreligious dialogue, migration discourse, diplomacy, and digital media, leaving his GA catecheses as a coherent body of pastoral teaching underexplored.⁸ Recent studies have high-

⁵ Noel Asiones et al., "Understanding Pope Francis' World Communications Day Messages for Intercultural Communication Competencies in a Digital, Globalized World: A Quantitative Study," *MST Review* 27, no. 1 (2025): 141-182.

⁶ To clarify, we categorize three levels of evangelization: Kerygma presents Jesus and the Gospels to individuals and groups who have not yet heard of and accepted him and his ways. Catechesis is directed to baptized members regarding the Christian life and mission, as well as the content of its faith and morals. Theology is directed to those who are more mature or advanced in faith and discipleship, helping and guiding them to understand the deeper reasons for and implications of the faith.

⁷ Aldona Maria Piwko, "Pope Francis's Communication Strategies During His Middle East Pilgrimages: An Analysis of Interreligious Discourse and Pontifical Diplomacy," *Religions* 16, no. 7 (2025): 917. See also Noel Asiones, "Two Hands of the Church," *Thought Leaders, Rappler*, January 9, 2023, <https://www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/opinion-benedict-francis-hands-church>

⁸ Piwko, "Pope Francis' Communication Strategies During His Middle East Pilgrimages, 917; Campbell & Vitullo, "Popes in the Digital Era, 419-442; Joanna Kulska, "Pope Francis' "Culture of Encounter" and "Fraternity": Enhancing the Post secular Discourse in IR," *Annals of the Ovidius University of Constanta-Political Science Series* 10, no. 1 (2021): 25-47; Guy J. Golan et al., "The Catholic Church as a Public Diplomacy Actor: An Analysis of the Pope's

lighted the need for more nuanced exploration of aspects of pastoral ministry, such as sermon language and rhetoric, and of how religious communications are planned and executed within parishes and dioceses.⁹ This study aims to fill that gap by identifying the most prevalent themes in Francis' GA reflections and by shedding light on how he engaged with contemporary audiences shaped by a secular, pluralistic, and digital culture. Since he is frequently misconstrued because of his distinctive style and innovative approach as a religious leader, his communications warrant a more nuanced reading.¹⁰

Research Questions

The study centers on a key question: How does Francis use pastoral communication in his weekly GA reflections? It is systematically organized around three specific questions:

- What are the main themes and pastoral focuses in Francis' GA catecheses?
- What communicative and teaching strategies did he use in these catecheses to deliver doctrinal and pastoral messages?
- How do these catecheses serve as expressions of pastoral communication within his ordinary magisterium?

Strategic Narrative and International Engagement,” *The Journal of International Communication* 25, no. 1 (2019): 95-115.

⁹ Justine John Dyikuk, “Pastoral Communication in the Local Church in Nigeria: From Planning to Execution,” *African Social Science and Humanities Journal* 3, no. 2 (2022): 97-105.

¹⁰ John L. Allen, *The Francis Miracle: Inside the Transformation of the Pope and the Church* (New York: Time Home Entertainment, 2015).

Based on these questions, this study can provide theoretical and practical significance. On one hand, it can contribute theoretically by developing a more integrated understanding of religious communication within Pastoral Theology and Catechetics. Delving into his GA reflections may help bridge the gap between catechumenal reflection and communication theory, thereby showing that catechesis is not just the transmission of doctrine but a relational and dialogical act of pastoral magisterium.¹¹ In doing so, it can also enhance the understanding of the church's ordinary magisterium as a dynamic, communicative, and pastorally oriented exercise of authoritative teaching.

On the other hand, in practice, it can offer valuable insights into the formation of priests, catechists, and pastoral workers by identifying effective communication and pedagogical strategies that can improve faith formation and catechetical instruction. It can provide concrete models for more engaging, accessible, and context-sensitive catechesis, which are especially relevant in current pastoral settings such as the Philippines. Ultimately, the findings can help them develop church communication practices that are more participatory, transformative, and responsive to their diverse audience.

Method

Research Design

The present study employs content analysis to systematically code, categorize, and interpret the most prevalent themes in Francis' GA teachings. Content analysis is a research tool for identifying the occurrence

¹¹ Richard R. Gaillardetz, "A More Pastoral Magisterium," *Commonweal* 144, no. 2 (2017): 18.

of specific words, concepts, or themes within a designated corpus of qualitative data.¹² This methodological approach facilitates a dual-process analysis, in which textual data is examined qualitatively and quantified concurrently.¹³ In other words, the aim of the study is not to assess or critique his pontificate but to examine recurring catechetical themes and pastoral strategies in the selected corpus of qualitative data.¹⁴

This analytical tool is essential in research domains where studies addressing the phenomenon are lacking, thus necessitating the derivation of coded categories directly from the textual data, a process underscored by Hsieh et al.¹⁵ In preliminary research in areas with scant information, content analysis is a valuable tool for identifying prominent themes in the dataset.¹⁶ Furthermore, this study prioritizes conceptual content over relational analysis. A specific concept is examined in a conceptual analysis, and its presence is quantified. The instrumental end is to assess the frequency of words or concepts in the dataset, as they may serve as a proxy for significance or a starting point that highlights emerging

¹² Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002), 4.

¹³ Carol Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction* (London: Sage Publications, 2007).

¹⁴ Satu Elo & Helvi Kyngäs, "The Qualitative Content Analysis Process," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 62, no. 1 (2008): 107–115

¹⁵ Hsiu-Fang Hsieh & Sarah E. Shannon, "Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis," *Qualitative Health Research* 15, no. 9 (2005): 1277–1288.

¹⁶ Christine Holmberg, Review of *Qualitative Methods for Health Research*, by Judith Green and Nicki Thorogood, *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 7, no. 2 (March 2006), <https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/101/212>

themes and patterns—rather than a definitive measure of significance.¹⁷

This approach allows researchers to identify key themes and patterns that indicate the degree of emphasis on specific concepts in the text. Consequently, the analysis provides an empirical basis for understanding which concepts seemed most significant in the overall discourse. It highlights the ideas that attract more attention and may shape the text's overall meaning and direction. When applied to Francis' GA reflections, this method helps identify how often specific catechumenal and pastoral themes appear. Recognizing these frequency patterns can shed light on his doctrinal and pastoral priorities that define his ordinary and pastoral magisterium. Ultimately, this enables the researchers to see how recurring concepts help build a coherent catechetical theme and pastoral practices in his papal teachings.

Unit of Analysis

The total sample of 112 was purposively selected from catechetical reflections delivered during Francis' weekly GA reflections, including 44 (2022), 41 (2023), and 27 (2024) transcripts. It was posted online in its entirety, in multiple languages, by the Vatican's Dicastery for Communications.¹⁸ The selected time frame (January 2022–June 2024) is intentional. It encompasses a period marked by major global challenges, including the aftermath of the pandemic, ongoing conflicts, and ecological concerns. During this time, Francis repeatedly

¹⁷ Mojtaba Vaismoradi et al., "Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis: Implications for Conducting a Qualitative Descriptive Study," *Nursing & Health Sciences* 15, no. 3 (2013): 404–411.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, *General Audiences*, Vatican website. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2023.html>

highlighted themes of solidarity, hope, and human fraternity to both pilgrims and visitors. Analyzing the GA reflections during this time enables the research to examine how papal communication addresses current global issues through a catechetical and pastoral approach. During these three years, Francis had addressed the urgent task of communicating the essentials of his faith beliefs to contemporary believers while bringing attention to the social challenges and issues besetting the world. The selected reflections met the following inclusion criteria: they should be dated between January 2022 and June 2024, translated into English by the Vatican's official sources, sourced from the Vatican's official website, and delivered during the GA in St. Peter's Square or Vatican City. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the GA reflections.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the selected GA Reflections (N=112)

Year of Publication	Main Themes	Number of Reflections	Page count	Word Count
2024	Virtues	27 (0.024%)	93	33,561
2023	Apostolic Zeal	41 (0.37%)	115	62,157
2022	Discernment	44 (0.39 %)	137	76,771
TOTAL		112 (0.100%)	339	169,894

Search Method Used

To conduct a comprehensive content analysis, we employed multiple search methods to gather online texts of the 112 catechetical reflections delivered during Francis' weekly GA. This information was then carefully organized into a database, facilitating review and analysis. We also recorded the date of each reflection to establish clear reference points for our study. This struc-

tured approach enabled us to identify recurring themes and patterns across the reflections; furthermore, the organized dataset helped maintain consistency and transparency throughout the analysis process. It also facilitated a systematic comparison of how particular concepts appeared and developed throughout the corpus of texts. In addition, it ensured that the data interpretation remained grounded in clearly documented analytical procedures. Moreover, it provided a reliable basis for tracing the prominence of key theological and pastoral themes throughout the dataset.

Data Analysis

To analyze word trends, patterns, frequency, relationships, and communication structures in the dataset, we used a four-step process based on the work of Elo and Kyngäs.¹⁹ This makes our approach systematic, transparent, and replicable. First, during the preparation phase, we carefully selected GA reflections delivered by Francis from January 2022 to June 2024. We immersed ourselves in the dataset to gain a deeper understanding of its content, style, and context. Then, we adopted an inductive, data-driven approach to discover themes and patterns without imposing preconceived notions, thereby grounding emerging themes in the data. Next, we performed open coding and took initial notes as we read, labeling concepts to describe various aspects of the content. We then developed general descriptions of the research topic through the identified categories or themes. Finally, during the discussion phase, we outlined the characteristics of the GA reflections and the structure of our analysis, with a focus on content and communication style. We then critically evaluated the findings in

¹⁹ Elo & Kyngäs, 110.

light of the research questions and current literature, which helped us draw insights and suggest three ways to address areas for improvement.

Ethics Statement

The study adhered to the Ethical Guidelines outlined by the Association of Internet Researchers.²⁰ It involved collecting publicly available documents from the Internet that were explicitly designated for public use. Researchers analyzed without any economic or political affiliations to the individual under study. No personally identifiable information was gathered or retained during the process. As a result, publishing this study poses minimal risk to the individual being observed.

Results

This study employed a content analysis design to explore the content and communication styles in Francis' GA reflections from January 2022 to June 2024. We identified the most prevalent themes and developed a unitized, descriptive framework that accurately captures the content and style of these reflections. At a methodological level, this draws on the assumption that repetition signals salience or that what is frequently mentioned is more likely to be cognitively or emotionally important to the speaker or writer. For example, if many reflections repeatedly refer to "God," "Jesus Christ," or "Holy Spirit," this suggests these ideas are not incidental but central to how Francis interprets human experiences. By allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data,

²⁰ Aline Shakti Franzke, Anja Bechmann, Charles M. Ess, and Michael Zimmer, eds., *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0* (Association of Internet Researchers [AoIR], 2020), xx, <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>

we gained insights into the breadth and depth of his GA's contents and strategies, enhancing the relevance, reliability, and applicability of the results. This methodological approach also ensured a rigorous, transparent, and replicable analysis process. Consequently, the study provides a systematic foundation for understanding how prominent catechumenal and pastoral themes are conveyed in the GA reflections.

Francis' GA Catecheses

Every Wednesday in Rome, usually at 10:00 a.m. after the Angelus, Francis delivers catechetical reflections in various languages, based on the day's readings, to pilgrims and visitors from around the world who attend these audiences to witness and pray with him. Considered a time for communal prayers and catechesis, his reflections serve as a form of speech intended to convey their relevance and significance to Christian beliefs and practices. After the audience, he leads the attendees in reciting the "Our Father" in Latin and imparts his apostolic blessing upon them and their sick and suffering loved ones. He also blesses any religious items that pilgrims bring, such as rosaries and images of saints. In terms of length, each reflection can range from 1,500 to 2,000 words (single-spaced, page) and take 35 to 40 minutes to read.

The GA reflections usually begin with a warm greeting, "Dear brothers and sisters," creating an inclusive and community-oriented atmosphere. Directed at a diverse audience while emphasizing universal Christian beliefs and values, they usually revolve around a central theme or teaching, often based on the frequent use of Scripture, Tradition, and citations from the Catechism, Church Fathers, Encyclicals, and, often-times, using images, stories, and analogies from ordinary

life to illustrate their points. Francis also draws on the lives of saints such as Augustine of Hippo, Ignatius of Loyola, and Francis de Sales, as well as other notable Christian figures, as exemplary witnesses to faith and life. Accessibility, personal anecdotes, and an emphasis on compassion, mercy, and the joy of the Gospel characterize the reflections. The language is relatively formal yet accessible, designed to resonate with its diverse audience, rich in symbolism, and addresses current concerns.

To be sure, Francis communicated his magisterial discourse through various media outlets, each carrying its magisterial weight and limited authority within the church.²¹ The GA reflections possess authority but are seen as less formal and carrying less doctrinal weight than his other papal discourses.²² Nonetheless, they are revered as forms of preaching in the Christian tradition, as rhetorical exercises, and as enacted forms of public theology.²³ Interestingly, he chose not to use these events as a stage or podium for addressing more hot-button issues facing the church, such as allowing divorced couples to receive communion, clerical sexual abuse, blessings of same-sex marriage, and women's ordination, which tend to polarize members from all sides. While Catholic conservatives prefer speaking more about morality than social issues, in this instance, Francis chose to address specific social, global, and pastoral issues like wars, climate change, migration, drug addiction, pornography, human trafficking, and the like

²¹ Francis, *A Stranger and You Welcomed Me: A Call to Mercy and Solidarity with Migrants and Refugees* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018).

²² Gaillardetz, *By What Authority?*, 138. See also Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching authority in the Catholic Church* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 1-20.

²³ Edward Foley, *Handbook for Catholic Preaching* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016).

because of their immediate adverse impact on individuals and communities.

The GA reflections serve varied purposes for two main audiences. On the one hand, they offer catechetical and pastoral guidance to Catholic pilgrims, inspired by Ignatian spirituality, with Francis often urging them to reflect and pray to deepen their relationship with God and foster growth. On the other hand, they introduce the most essential elements of Catholic faith and morals to members of other religions, emphasizing solidarity, peace, dialogue, and reconciliation to promote understanding across different faiths and cultures. In both contexts, Francis highlights key social issues like inequality, environmental stewardship, and human dignity, encouraging actions aligned with the Gospel, church teachings, and shared human values. The reflections frequently conclude with a call to action, urging both audiences to incorporate these insights into their daily lives and to pray for guidance, courage, and hope. Ultimately, he invites everyone to let prayer inspire tangible commitments for personal transformation and societal change, rooted in the Gospel.

Ten Most Prevalent Themes in Francis' GA Catecheses

We conducted word-frequency counts in the dataset using Microsoft Word as the frequency counter. This analysis revealed three tiers of word frequency, enabling identification of the ten key themes. Employing a tiered system provided a structured approach, allowing us to understand the emphasis Francis placed on the essentials of the faith throughout the study. Additionally, it facilitated grouping the dataset, treating units with the same frequency as coherent “units” for analysis. The themes were then sorted by frequency and percentage.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the most prevalent themes, showing both absolute frequencies and percentages.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the most prevalent themes

Themes	Frequency	Percentage	Themes	Frequency	Percentage
God the Father	1177	22.98	Heart/Conscience	337	6.58
Jesus Christ	1103	21.53	Sin	334	6.52
Holy Spirit	499	9.74	Bible	284	5.55
Charity	495	9.66	Hope	241	4.71
Faith	417	8.14	Church	235	4.59
Total	5, 122	72.05		1431	27.95

Out of some 30 words or concepts, the descriptive statistics reveal ten most prevalent themes in the dataset, namely, “God the Father” (22.98), “Jesus Christ” (21.53), “Holy Spirit” (9.74), “Charity/Love” (9.66), “Faith” (8.14), “Heart/Conscience” (6.58), “Sin” (6.52), “Bible” (5.55), “Hope” (4.71), and “Church” (4.59). Frequency is used as an indicator of significance because repeated words or themes reflect what Francis may have consistently considered relevant and significant in his reflections. However, it remains only a representative, since some less frequent words or themes may still carry deeper significance and require qualitative interpretation. Furthermore, the “keyness” of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures, but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question.²⁴ We will now analyze each prevalent theme.

²⁴ Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006):

First and foremost, Francis teaches that God the Father is a compassionate Creator worthy of trust, gratitude, and obedience.²⁵ He described God's personal engagement with human life and history, and encouraged a moral response grounded in understanding God as both immanent and transcendent. Seeing God as a Father inspires a sense of trust, security, and filial responsibility.²⁶ He encouraged his audiences to nurture a personal and relational spirituality that fosters faith, gratitude, and compassion for others. Based on the belief in God's fatherhood and universality, he urged that pastoral work should support interreligious dialogue and moral responsibility.

Secondly, Francis also highlights that Jesus Christ is the heart of the Christian faith, representing God's universal desire to save all humankind.²⁷ This Christ-centered belief is not merely devotional but also essential, anchoring Christianity in a personal and historical context.²⁸ The Christian faith is centered in Christ because divine revelation is mediated primarily through him. The church is urged to consistently renew its commitment to a Christ-focused catechesis that highlights personal relation and provides recipients the opportunity to encounter. It aims to nurture discipleship in a healing and transformative relationship. This

²⁵ Francis, GA. January 5, 2022; January 19, 2022; February 22, 2022; August 10, 2022; November 30, 2022. Vatican Website.

²⁶ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978); Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 2007); Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

²⁷ Francis, GA. January 11, 2023; February 15, 2023. Vatican Website.

²⁸ Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978); Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979).

catechesis integrated doctrine, morality, and spirituality to help them cope with cultural shifts and challenges to their faith.

Third, Francis attributes the Holy Spirit as the church's guiding, inspiring, and sustaining force, vital for its authentic discernment, ongoing renewal, and evangelizing mission.²⁹ Although a well-structured human organization, the church relies on divine initiative, with the Spirit mediating God's presence and enabling genuine reform beyond human effort. True ecclesial renewal depends on openness to the Spirit, whereas overly dependence on human structures can lead to decay and stagnation. The Spirit's role is both doctrinally confirmed and observable, requiring prayer, discernment, and recognition and acceptance of diverse but complementary charisms.³⁰ Pastoral practices should foster a Spirit-led energy, refraining from bureaucratic constraints, to support mission, renewal, and authentic witness in a fragmented world.

Fourth, like those before him, Francis pinpoints charity as the highest Christian virtue, shown through concrete actions towards God, others, and even one's adversaries.³¹ It represents the peak of Christian ethical life, rooted in relational love that reflects God's nature. Because of this, love unites and informs all virtues, shaping the moral life of a Christian disciple. This claim is supported both historically and by experience: communities founded on love show greater unity and respect for human dignity. Christianity gains credibility

²⁹ Francis. GA. June 5, 2024; August 31, 2022; September 7, 2022.Vatican Website.

³⁰ Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. 2 (New York: Crossroad, 1997); Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Crossroad, 1997).

³¹ Francis, GA. May 15, 2024; April 2024; February-April 2024.Vatican website.

when love is actively demonstrated, without strings attached. The church should focus on forming and transforming love into habitual witness, institutionalizing charity through social ministries, strengthening initiatives that promote social mercy and justice, and forming the faithful in practical expressions of love, especially for the marginalized and vulnerable members of society.

Fifth, for Francis, faith means trusting in God and remaining committed to Him, especially amid suffering and persecution.³² Faith is essential because, despite the “terrors of life,” humans need an ultimate purpose in seeking and creating meaning, where faith anchors their existence to God’s goodness and providence. Such is reflected in real life, where faith helps people through crises and builds courage and moral integrity.³³ Thus, it is important to foster an intelligent and mature faith: formation programs should address both the intellect and heart, create space for critical thinking and listening, and guide the believers to live faith, not just an intellectual or emotional assent to God’s call, but as a committed healing and transforming way of life.

Sixth, the “heart” represents the interior life, especially conscience, as the place where individuals personally discern God’s will.³⁴ Francis highlighted that moral choices are not solely based on external laws but stem from a conscientious person who is attentive, reflective, and docile. Experience supports this: a poorly developed conscience often leads to confusion and

³² Francis, GA. April 17, 2024; April 24, 2024; February 21, 2024.Vatican website.

³³ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006); Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

³⁴ Francis, GA. September 7, 2022, October 5, 2022; October 19, 2022.Vatican website.

inconsistency, whereas a well-formed, well-informed interior life promotes genuine ethical behavior.³⁵ Therefore, it is vital to nurture a conscience, teach discernment practices such as spiritual exercises, and foster habits of self-reflection and intentionality. These efforts help believers act with integrity in the private and public spheres of life.

Seventh, Francis holds that sin is a moral breach that necessitates repentance, humility, and continuous conversion through God's grace and mercy.³⁶ This understanding is rooted in the delicate exercise of human freedom, which involves recognizing failure, embracing personal growth, and opening oneself to God's grace. The widespread nature of moral struggles and the healing power of forgiveness support this view.³⁷ Therefore, the church should encourage practices such as examination of conscience, foster reconciliation through both sacramental and communal efforts, and focus on the journey of conversion, emphasizing gradual renewal and conversion over perfection and unattainable ideals.

Eight, Francis maintains that Sacred Scriptures are God's living Word, guiding personal and ecclesial life and mission through liturgy and prayer.³⁸ This is because God interacts in human life and history, and Scripture serves as the medium for the ongoing dialogue between God and

³⁵ Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ: Moral Theology for Priests and Laity*, vol. 1 (New York: Seabury Press, 1978); Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

³⁶ Francis, GA. January 31, 2024; February 07, 2024; January 18, 2023. Vatican website.

³⁷ Nancy T. Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); John Swinton & Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2016).

³⁸ Francis, GA. January 25, 2023; February 01, 2023; December 21, 2022. Vatican Website.

believers. Evidence of this is seen in ecclesial communities where living by Scripture promotes mutual charity, discernment, solidarity, and a purposeful life.³⁹ Thus, promoting practices such as *lectio divina* and personal and communal Bible reading that link God's Word to lived experience are essential.

Ninth, Francis asserts hope as a future-oriented trust rooted in Christ's resurrection, which helps believers endure the trials and inherent uncertainty of the future.⁴⁰ It is vital because humans are naturally oriented toward the future, and hope gives meaning and guidance even during suffering. Experience shows that hope sustains perseverance and motivates moral and spiritual growth.⁴¹ Therefore, the church must actively proclaim hope, particularly in despairing situations, create resilient and supportive communities, and promote an eschatological awareness that keeps believers focused on God's eschatological promise.

Tenth, and finally, Francis depicts the church as a community of disciples united through life and mission, participation, and shared responsibility. This communal view stems from the nature of faith itself, which is inherently social, relational, and communitarian. Evidence suggests that faith develops and matures within a community, whereas isolation diminishes Christian identity and commitment.⁴² Thus, the church, as an organized hierarchical community, must promote synodality, active participation, and the meaningful empowerment of the laity, and cultivate inclusive,

³⁹ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (Vatican City, 2010): §73.

⁴⁰ Francis, GA. December 18, 2024; May 29, 2024; May 22, 2024. Vatican Website.

⁴¹ Swinton & Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*.

⁴² Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

mission-driven communities that reflect both a sense of belonging and collective responsibility in the church's life and mission.

In sum, Francis' GA reflections on the essentials of faith and morals present a clear, transformative vision of the Christian life rooted in the Trinity. They provide an experience-based framework with God the Father as Creator, Jesus Christ as the revealer of salvation, and the Holy Spirit as the source of the church's life and virtues, such as charity, faith, and hope, along with conscience, conversion, Scripture, and the church as an organized community. This vision is seen as a shift of focus from doctrinal rigidity (often championed by traditionalists) and a careless disregard for doctrine (often associated with progressives like himself) to pastoral mercy, inclusivity, and core Gospel values. They are doctrinally grounded and validated in the church's life, but they also call for vigilance against a selective or "pick and choose" approach to the Gospel.⁴³ The catecheses emphasize concrete actions: forming consciences, embodying social charity, evangelization, and openness to the Holy Spirit, fostering hope, and building community. They encourage ongoing conversion to help believers live more attentively, reasonably, and responsibly in communion with God and the church.

Francis' Pastoral Strategies in GA Catecheses

The data show that Francis' GA reflections emphasize a notably catechetical, Christ-centered approach to his religious communication.⁴⁴ He teaches doctrine not as an abstract concept but through personal encounters with

⁴³ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* (EG) § 94. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013).

⁴⁴ Francis, GA. April 06, 2023; September 11, 2022; June 6, 2023. Vatican Website.

Jesus in the Gospels. In his reflections on the Parables of the Good Samaritan, the Lost Sheep, and the Prodigal Son, he presents the catechumenate as a genuine, transformative, and healing encounter with the person of Christ. His approach is firmly rooted in Scripture, using biblical stories to help interpret and find their meaning in everyday human experiences. Simultaneously, his pastoral tone consistently highlights mercy, friendship, and accompaniment. This is further illustrated by gradual, thematic development across catechetical cycles and by the use of concrete emotional situations, such as sadness, confusion, or feeling lost, to connect the message to real-life joys and struggles.

This approach stems from a catechetical and pastoral view of evangelization, where the Gospel is seen primarily as God's merciful heart revealed.⁴⁵ Francis prioritizes personal encounter over deduction to make doctrine accessible and meaningful on an existential level. His reliance on Scripture, especially parables, reflects a belief that divine revelation is best understood through narratives that critique and interpret human experience. The structured, repetitive format of his catecheses fosters a deeper yet relatable understanding of core faith principles. His references to everyday life also bridge the gap between catechetical teachings and his audience's actual experiences. A detailed analysis of the GA will confirm the consistency of this pedagogical approach. Throughout a three-year catechetical cycle—covering virtues, apostolic zeal, and discernment—there's clear evidence of a cohesive method that combines doctrinal clarity with pastoral sensitivity. His respectful use of Scripture, ongoing emphasis on mercy and journeying with the people, and incorporation of experiential examples support the idea that his

⁴⁵ Francis, GA. January 11, 2023; April 19, 2023; May 10, 2023. Vatican Website.

catechism is both doctrinally sound and pastorally effective.

In this view, kerygma, catechesis, and theology are encouraged to adopt a similar approach: one that blends doctrine with lived experience, emphasizes encounter with the Jesus of the Gospels, and remains rooted in Scripture. They should be formative, fostering conversion, mature discipleship, and active witness. This requires a pastoral magisterium marked by mercy, accompaniment, and teaching strategies that are gradual, thematic, and attentive to the “signs of the times.” Such an approach ultimately aims to form mature disciples who can discern God’s presence in everyday life and give credible, effective witness to the Gospel.

The GA Catecheses within Francis’ Ordinary Magisterium

The GA catecheses of Francis function as a significant expression of his pastoral communication within the ordinary magisterium of the church. This “ordinary” magisterium refers to the habitual and continuous teaching activity of the church’s pastors, woven into the daily life of the faithful and oriented toward formation rather than mere information.⁴⁶ Although these catecheses do not constitute solemn doctrinal definitions, they form part of his regular teaching ministry and a new way of being and doing church.⁴⁷ In them, Francis explicitly presents catechesis as a process of formation and walking with the people, aimed at fostering encounter with Christ and growth in faith. His use of accessible language, scriptural grounding, and concrete pastoral examples connects abstract doctrine to lived experience. Moreover, his catechetical cycles on virtues, discernment, and

⁴⁶ Gaillardetz, “A More Pastoral Magisterium,” 18.

⁴⁷ Francis, EG §169 & *Amoris laetitia* (AL) §§291-321.

apostolic zeal demonstrate a structured pedagogical method that integrates theological teaching with daily Christian practice.

This form of teaching arises from a pastoral vision in which the papal magisterium is not limited to formal definitions but extends to the ongoing formation of believers. By emphasizing encounter and accompaniment, Francis understands catechesis as life-changing rather than merely instructional. His structured yet accessible approach reflects a desire to bridge the gap between belief and practice, ensuring that the essentials of faith are not merely abstract but embodied in Christian practice. This also corresponds to his broader ecclesial vision of a missionary and synodal church, where communication is dialogical, formative, and oriented toward participation in the life of faith.⁴⁸

A more careful reading of his GA catecheses confirms this pattern. Across the three catechetical cycles, there is a consistent integration of doctrinal content with pastoral application. His repeated insistence on encounter, mercy, hope, and accompaniment, along with his pedagogically structured presentations, demonstrates that these catecheses are not incidental but coherent expressions of his ordinary magisterium. They effectively function as a unified teaching and formative ministry within the life and mission of the church.

In response, theological and pastoral praxis should recognize and appropriate the formative significance of the ordinary magisterium. Catechesis today is called to move beyond the mere transmission of content toward a process of walking with the people that fosters encounters with Christ and the integration of faith into daily life. This implies adopting pedagogical methods

⁴⁸ Noel Asiones et al., "The Synodal Process in the Dock: A Thematic Analysis of Grey Literature," *Scientia—The International Journal on the Liberal Arts* 13, no. 1 (2024): 85-101.

that are accessible, structured, and rooted in lived experience, while remaining faithful to doctrinal integrity. In doing so, the church can more effectively embody a missionary and synodal identity in which information and formation are inseparably united.

Discussion

This study conceptually analyzes the content of Francis' weekly GA catechetical reflections, published from January 2022 to June 2024, to identify their most prevalent themes and pastoral approach as they relate to the church's life and mission. It situates these reflections within his view of the world as a "common home" in serious disrepair due to environmental and social crises.⁴⁹ Using David Myers' communication theory as the main framework—highlighting three key factors that influence how messages are understood and received: content, the sender, and the delivery method—it examines the communication and teaching strategies Francis used in these catecheses to convey doctrinal and pastoral messages.⁵⁰

On this point, the content refers to GA reflections; the sender is Francis; and the intended recipients or audience are the pilgrims and visitors in Vatican City. The weekly GA functions as the communication platform, providing a public space for sharing his catechetical reflections. By considering these elements together, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of how the reflections are shared and their potential impact on Francis' pastoral message. This holistic approach allows for a systematic evaluation of the communication process

⁴⁹ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §§ 1–2, §§ 48–49.

⁵⁰ David Myers. *Exploring Social Psychology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 152–158; David Myers et al. *Social Psychology*. 3rd ed. (London: McGraw-Hill, 2020).

and its catechumenal significance. It also underscores that effective communication results from the interaction of these factors. Additionally, the study aims to demonstrate that these catecheses serve as expressions of pastoral communication within Francis' ordinary magisterium, deepening the understanding of his broader papal office.⁵¹

What is said: The catechetical content

In this study, content refers to the core principles of the Christian faith, centered on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as the salvation and redemption offered through faith in Him. A clear, organized message will likely be understood, received, and remembered. The clarity, accuracy, and fidelity to the contents of traditional (*tradita*, that which is handed down) teachings are crucial to effectively communicating the “heart of the Gospel” message.⁵² His GA reflections can be more persuasive, especially when they resonate with the audience's experience. Rational arguments and factual information can also enhance persuasion for audiences that prefer cognitive engagement. However, contextualized messages that fit the audience's needs and interests are more likely to capture attention and be persuasive. Francis often employs storytelling and narrative techniques, such as biblical stories and the references the lives of saints, to make his messages relatable and engaging to his audience. Stories are also easier to remember.⁵³

⁵¹ Gaillardetz, “A More Pastoral Magisterium,” 18.

⁵² T. Howland Sanks, “A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Dynamics of Tradition,” *Theological Studies* 76, no. 2 (2015): 298–300.

⁵³ Francis, GA, December 21, 2022; November 23, 2022. Vatican website.

Who says: the communicator

The messenger plays a crucial role in the influence process, beyond simply conveying messages.⁵⁴ This is known as the messenger effect, a cognitive bias in which people judge information based on its source rather than its content. There are two types of effective messengers: hard and soft. Hard messengers are persuasive because they are perceived as authoritative. Soft messengers, however, are influential because people relate to them. Francis fits both categories. He is a highly influential messenger—the Vicar of Christ and head of the Roman Catholic Church—wielding immense authority and power within the church's ecclesiastical hierarchy. His pronouncements on faith and morals, rooted in papal authority, can and have had a profound influence on the church's life and mission.

For Roman Catholics, his position automatically gives credibility and authority to speak on God's and Jesus Christ's behalf as His Vicar on earth. Nonetheless, he also acts as a gentle messenger, drawing on sincere relationships rather than relying solely on his authority or power. His humility, simple lifestyle, joyful manner, and commitment to Gospel values make him relatable to many. Most significantly, he aligns his teachings with the life and words of Jesus and Gospel principles, exemplifying genuine Christian witness. In this way, he communicates not only through official statements but also by living a life that embodies compassion, mercy, and solidarity with the poor and marginalized, mirroring Christ's own approach. This unity between message and life strengthens the moral authority of his pastoral role

⁵⁴ Alena Wabitsch, *The Messenger Matters* (SSRN Working Paper, October 15, 2024), SSRN, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5238987> 5238987 (2024).

and inspires both believers and nonbelievers to value his words.

Many Roman Catholics view Francis positively, recognizing his pastoral credibility, theological competence, and moral authority.⁵⁵ At the same time, a vocal, media-amplified minority has raised significant concerns across global contexts.⁵⁶ Discussions surrounding his pontificate have become increasingly polarized, with some critics, ranging from theologians to journalists and church leaders, even accusing him of doctrinal ambiguity or deviation.⁵⁷ Debates have emerged over issues such as Vatican financial reform, the pastoral approach to the divorced and remarried, responses to the clergy abuse crisis, same-sex marriage, episcopal accountability, and the role of women in the church.⁵⁸ While critics argue that these positions risk confusion or undermine tradition,

⁵⁵ Patricia Tevington et al., "Majority of U.S. Catholics Express Favorable View of Pope Francis," Pew Research Center, April 12, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/04/12/majority-of-u-s-catholics-express-favorable-view-of-pope-francis/>

⁵⁶ Massimo Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis: Moving Toward Global Catholicity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020).

⁵⁷ See, for example, George Weigel, "The Synodality Masquerade," November 13, 2019, *The Tablet*; Christopher Lamb, "The German Synodal Path had become a proxy battle over Francis' papacy," *The Tablet*, April 22, 2022. Massimo Faggioli, "From Collegiality to Synodality: Promise and Limits of Francis' Listening Primacy," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85, no. 4 2020: 352-369; Raymond Leo Burke, interview by *Catholic Herald*, "Church under Pope Francis is Like 'a Ship Without a Rudder,'" *Catholic Herald*, November 2017; Thomas Reese, "Synod on Synodality had its Doubters, but it is Proving to be a Balm for Enduring Wounds," *National Catholic Reporter*, October 3, 2022; Larry Chapp, "The Quintessentially Modern Approach to Synodality is Empty and Artificial," *The Catholic World Report*, April 28, 2022.

⁵⁸ Christopher R. Altieri, "Synodality Means Whatever Pope Francis Wit to Mean," *The Catholic World Report*, June 16, 2022; Bill Uren, "Does Synodality Dilute the Apostolic Tradition?" *La Croix*, February 20, 2022; Felix Wilfred, "Synodal Talks Meaningless without Fundamental Changes," *UCA News*, April 26, 2022.

others interpret them as legitimate developments within the church's evangelizing mission.

Controversy or not, Francis remained steadfast, concentrating on core issues rather than disputes. He addresses them with inclusiveness and compassion, avoiding unnecessary conflicts with critics. His steady stance reflects a desire to shift the church's focus from power and tradition toward more active engagement with the world, exemplifying God's love and compassion. In doing so, he urged the church to rediscover its missionary purpose by highlighting the needs of the poor, the migrants, and the marginalized in its pastoral efforts. His leadership represents a vision of the church not as a fortress defending itself from the world, but as "a field hospital after battle" that heals, accompanies, and bears witness to God's mercy to the poorest and the weakest.⁵⁹ By promoting encounter, dialogue, and pastoral sensitivity, he encouraged the faithful to adopt a more compassionate and attentive attitude, moving away from doctrinal rigidity. His approach emphasizes that true ecclesial authority is rooted in service, not dominance, and is grounded in the Gospel.

In line with Francis' tendency to avoid controversy, Franz-Joseph Eilers' social communication theory offers a useful framework for understanding this approach to ordinary magisterium.⁶⁰ Eilers describes communication as a process that fosters communion within the faith community and beyond, encourages dialogue that involves participation rather than top-down instruction, and promotes catechesis attuned to the audience's lived

⁵⁹ Francis, GA. June 19, 2019. Vatican Website.

⁶⁰ Franz-Josef Eilers, *Communicating in Community: An Introduction to Social Communication* (Manila: Logos Publications, 2002).

experiences.⁶¹ It also highlights the need to enculturate the message of faith, making it relevant to local cultures and pastoral contexts. Thus, communication becomes a dynamic encounter that helps communities bond, better understand, and live out the Gospel. Seen in this light, Francis' communicative style reflects a pastoral strategy or magisterium that prioritizes relationship, participation, and contextualized proclamation of the faith. In this way, his GA reflections and communications can be seen as an effort to evangelize through encounter, dialogue, and communion rather than through confrontation, as Jürgen Habermas called it, communicative action seeking mutual understanding and consensus.⁶²

How is it said? The channel of communication

This factor refers to the medium through which the message is delivered. Different channels, such as face-to-face and written communication, as well as mainstream and social media, can affect how the message is received. Francis regularly delivers his GA reflections in person except when he is away from Rome or ill. Recorded audiovisuals of the GAs show that he reads his reflections for the most part, which allows for direct, though limited, interactions with the audience due to security concerns. Moreover, they are broadcast live across various media outlets, thereby extending their global reach. To cater to his international audience, the reflections are often translated into multiple languages, transcribed, and made available for download for further dissemination.

⁶¹ Franz-Josef Eilers, *Communicating in Ministry and Mission: A Handbook for Pastoral Work* (Manila: Logos Publications, 2009).

⁶² James Bohman & William Reh, "Jürgen Habermas," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2014 ed. Edward N. Zalta, last modified August 4, 2014, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/habermas>.

This ensures that his message is accessible to his non-Italian and non-Catholic audience.

Occasionally, Francis engages with his audience through questions, asking for their prayers for himself and the world, making the reflections more interactive and participatory. Sometimes, he cracks jokes to lighten the mood and make the audience relax. He sure knows how to captivate his audience with humor; for instance, he once said, "I do not hear anything! Louder!!" [together] Faith, hope, and charity! Good job!"⁶³ He sometimes speaks off the cuff, adding a bit to his pieces at the last minute. However, he employs rhetorical devices such as metaphors, analogies, anecdotes, rhetorical questions, repetition, and parallelism to deliver his reflections engagingly.⁶⁴

Scholars and commentators observed that Francis' communicative approach is pastoral, relational, inclusive, and centered on mercy rather than mere doctrine. His biographer, Austen Ivereigh, notes that Francis has developed a "God's style" of communication, rooted in accompaniment and embodying the Good Shepherd's heart, encouraging the church to walk with people, create space, listen, and ask questions rather than judge.⁶⁵ Ivereigh sees this approach as one of his innovative contributions to evangelization. He also views Francis' Jubilee of Mercy as a deliberate effort to shift the church's message toward God's gentle mercy, showing that the manner of sharing truth—with kindness and mercy—is just as important as the message itself.⁶⁶

⁶³ Francis, GA, 2024 April 24. Vatican website.

⁶⁴ Francis, GA, 2022; GA, November 19; GA, 2023, December 13. Vatican website.

⁶⁵ Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014).

⁶⁶ Austen Ivereigh, "Offering a Precious Stone: The Communication of Pope Francis' Jubilee of Mercy," *Church, Communication and Culture* 2, no. 3 (2017): 322–343.

In the same way, Gerard O’Connell highlights Francis’ simple, humble, and relational style, observing that his words and gestures—such as spontaneous interactions with reporters, humor, and impromptu reflections—are genuine, rooted in personal encounter and Gospel proclamation.⁶⁷ O’Connell notes that this authenticity aligns with Francis’ broader pastoral vision, where communication aims to build bridges rather than walls. He further states that Francis’ straightforward language and gestures help make the Gospel more accessible, especially to those distant from the church. Likewise, Cardinal Sean Patrick O’Malley observes that Francis was a pope who transcended traditional categories, blending Jesuit and Franciscan qualities into a single person. He describes Francis as the ultimate Ignatian Jesuit, an essential understanding for understanding him, depicting him as a unique “hybrid” pastor whose deeply Ignatian spirituality informed his discernment, missionary approach, and synodal style. The name “Francis” signifies a performative, almost sacramental style of pastoral care, marked by simplicity, closeness to the poor, and symbolic gestures that embody the Gospel. This mix results in an inclusive ecclesiology—illustrated by his “todos, todos, todos”—in which the church functions as a field hospital, communicating not only through doctrine but also through lived, relational, and culturally meaningful practices. Overall, O’Malley emphasizes that Francis’ communication style is central to his vision of a church that embodies missionary discipleship, reaches the peripheries, and is guided by mercy and dialogue in its evangelization.

Theologian Victor Manuel Fernández, a close collaborator, states that Francis’ proclamation of faith combines doctrinal clarity with pastoral sensitivity,

⁶⁷ Gerard O’Connell, *The Francis I Know* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017), 45.

tailoring his message to his audience, considering its impact on spiritual growth, and prioritizing the core Gospel—God’s love and closeness—over less important issues.⁶⁸ The goal is to make the Gospel’s core message accessible by focusing on God’s saving love rather than on controversial issues. Fernández explains that this approach aims to present Christian teaching simply and concretely, helping people encounter Christ personally without unnecessary complications. His style is relational, context-aware, and focused on transforming lives rather than just conveying correct doctrine. In his book, “The Pope Francis Agenda,” Donal Dorr characterizes Francis’ communication style as a dialogical, participatory, and action-driven process rooted in authentic human interactions rather than top-down instruction.⁶⁹ He highlights that communication goes beyond merely sharing doctrine, emphasizing listening, mutual exchange, and engagement with lived experiences—especially those of people with low incomes—so that truth emerges through dialogue and results in practical change. This approach is inclusive, symbolic, and verbal, ethically grounded in justice, mercy, and the common good, and aims to foster consensus and motivate social change rather than to transmit information. Dorr notes that Francis’ communication explicitly links faith with social action and ethical concerns, asserting that evangelization must include poverty, ecology, and human dignity as central aspects of Christian witness—themes

⁶⁸ Víctor Manuel Fernández, “A Tribute to Pope Francis: ‘In the Footsteps of a Father,’” Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, June 11, 2025, Vatican. Retrieved March 17, 2026 @https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/fernandez/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20250611_fernandez-omaggio-a-papa-francesco_en.html

⁶⁹ Donal Dorr, *The Pope Francis Agenda* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2018).

present in Francis’ encyclicals *Fratelli tutti* and *Laudato Si.*’

Overall, these writers describe Francis’ communication as simple yet profound, rooted in mercy and encounter, designed to energize the Gospel message in human situations. They stress that, for Francis, evangelization is inseparable from practical engagement with the world, with care for the poor, ecological responsibility, and the defense of human dignity as vital expressions of faith. In his approach, proclamation and action continually intertwine, presenting the Gospel as a dynamic force that transforms individual lives and societal realities. These perspectives portray Francis’ communication as a harmonious blend of simplicity and depth, grounded in mercy, encounter, and lived witness. They emphasize that for him, proclamation and action are inseparable, allowing the Gospel to function as a transformative force that renews both persons and society.

Table 3. Characterization of Francis’ GA Reflections

The Content	The Communicator	The Medium
Catechetical	Compassionate	Informal Tone
Practical	Humble	Narrative
Pastoral Relational	Approachable Persuasive	Repetitive Pastoral
Sometimes Abstract	Pastor not Teacher	Simple
Catechetical	Compassionate	Informal Tone

In summary, this section illustrates how Francis’ GA reflections were influenced by three main factors that affect how the audience engages with and receives his message: content, communicator, and method. Regularly adjusting these elements allows religious communicators like Francis to persuade and catechize their audiences more effectively about desired outcomes. His GA could be

improved by making the content more accessible through short, relatable stories or everyday analogies that clarify the catechetical points; by strengthening his role as a messenger with occasional authoritative language or references to church teachings to balance his warm, informal tone; and by refining the delivery method with simple visual aids, infographics, or digital summaries that help diverse audiences—especially younger or international ones—engage with and remember the message more effectively and for a longer period. Ultimately, these changes cannot only enhance understanding and reception but also foster a deeper emotional and spiritual connection between the audience and the message. By addressing these factors, Francis' GA and religious communicators like him can achieve greater clarity, impact, and lasting influence on their listeners' faith formation.

Implications of the Study

The study indicates that tailoring the content, tone, and delivery of Francis' GA reflections improves the audience's understanding, openness, and reception of the Gospel teachings. It also offers practical advice for religious communicators, demonstrating that using relatable stories, authoritative references, and multimedia tools can better engage diverse audiences. Finally, the findings highlight the importance of audience-centered evangelization, emphasizing that adjusting messages to cultural, linguistic, and demographic contexts deepens spiritual connections and encourages active participation. Overall, these insights show that effective religious communication depends on both doctrinal accuracy and strategic attention to how messages are perceived and experienced by the audience.

Limitations of the Study

Notwithstanding, it remains essential to acknowledge the inherent constraints of this study, particularly our self-imposed restrictions on the corpus of reflections subject to our content analysis due to time and resource constraints. The potential for our subjective interpretations to have swayed the analysis cannot be overlooked; this concern was mitigated through the member-checking process and the critical friend methodology. Additionally, the reflections we analyzed were shaped by the contemporaneous events and issues prevailing at the time of their delivery. Efforts were made to contextualize each homily within its broader socio-political and cultural context to decipher the situational determinants that influenced its intent and content. Finally, it must be admitted that while various critical perspectives on the pontificate of Francis exist, this exploratory study focuses specifically on analyzing the pastoral themes and styles in the selected GA reflections.

Despite the limitations outlined above, this study systematically examined the relevance and applicability of Francis' reflections to individuals navigating their quest for direction, purpose, and meaning in an increasingly secular and pluralistic global milieu. This exploration revealed the doctrinal, pastoral, and spiritual needs these reflections addressed, as well as the communal and existential dilemmas of the faithful amid rapid change.

Conclusion

Our study shows that Francis' GA reflections offer a rich model of pastoral communication that maintains fidelity to its *tradita* while actively engaging with contemporary audiences within their changing and

diverse contexts. By using simple, listener-friendly language, relatable stories, authoritative references, and evocative metaphors, his catecheses can bridge the gap between doctrinal integrity and everyday experience. At the same time, the analysis underscores the need to strengthen content clarity, messenger authority, and pedagogical methods to enhance the message's effectiveness and the audience's receptiveness to the messenger. In continuity with the vision of Francis' immediate predecessor, Benedict XVI, the results and findings highlight the perennial urgency of crafting a renewed and relevant catechumenate that engages and forms believers without diluting the message's fidelity to tradition. Ultimately, this study affirms that effective evangelization today, at all three levels—kerygmatic, catechetical, and theological—depends on a dynamic integration of doctrinal fidelity, pastoral empathy, and audience-friendly communication.

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Credit authorship contribution statement

Noel G. Asiones: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Data analysis, Discussions, and Revisions.

Eulalia M. Tome & Orlando B. Cantillon: Data-Gathering, Validation, & Revisions.

Ulysses John O. Parado, Concepción V. Corotan, Louella I. Calderon, & Jasper T. Suquila: Data-Gathering, Discussion, & Revisions.

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About the Authors

Noel G. Asiones worked as an academic researcher at the University of Santo Tomas, where he earned a Ph.D. in Theology, and served as Full Professor III at its Institute of Religion. His research interests include church and society, and religion and youth. Contact: ngasiones@gmail.com.

Eulalia M. Tome is a licensed professional teacher and researcher with a Ph.D. in Religious Studies (Psychology of Religion) from Sogang University, South Korea. Her research integrates theology, anthropology, and psychology, focusing on faith, ritual, and Filipino identity. Contact: tomeeula@gmail.com.

Ulysses John R. Parado is a faculty member of the UST Institute of Religion. He holds a Ph.D. in Theology and conducts research in empirical theology, philosophy, and the sociology of religion. Contact: urparado@ust.edu.ph.

Concepcion Corotan is a Professor of Theology at the UST Institute of Religion. She earned her Ph.D. in Theology from the University of Santo Tomas. Her research focuses on marriage and family, religious education, and spirituality. Contact: cvcorotan@ust.edu.ph.

Maria Lowella Calderon is a Theology faculty member at Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines. She holds degrees in Religious Education, Education, and Theology, and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Systematic Theology at the Loyola School of Theology. Contact: mcalderon@ateneo.edu.

Orlando Cantillon is the Parish Priest of the Archdiocesan Shrine of St. Anne in Sta. Ana, Taguig. A former missionary in East Timor and Indonesia, he now also serves as manager of a church-based cooperative. Contact: cantillonobart123@gmail.com.

Jasper T. Suquila is a theology and social science educator and Assistant Professor at the National University of Manila. He is pursuing a Ph.D. in Theology (Ecumenical Theology) at Manila Theological College. His academic interests include theology and ecumenism. Contact: jtsuquila@national-u.edu.ph.

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