Communicating migration – Pope Francis’ strategy of reframing refugee issues

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ABSTRACT

One of the most frequent topics in Pope Francis’ public interventions, either orally or in writing, regards refugees and migrants. His teachings speak about a humble Church on a mission to assist the poor and those on the peripheries, and refugees and migrants occupy the center: they are the core and trademark of Francis’ pontificate. This reality, however, is not a mere coincidence neither is it caused by improvisation. Since his trip to Lampedusa in 2013—the first of his pontificate—Francis has shown he has a strategy for the refugee and migrant issue. He is consistent and has a well-prepared message. He wants the Catholic Church to be a key player in the international arena, through the Vatican Dicastery for Integral Human Development (created by Pope Francis himself) to raise awareness of this issue and to persuade countries, supranational institutions, and public opinion in general, to contribute to finding and providing solutions. This article aims to describe the communication strategy of Pope Francis on migrants and refugees; to show how his efforts are reframing this issue; and, finally, to illustrate with examples how those working closely with the Pope are implementing it.

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Methodology and content

The article will examine one particular issue that, from the beginning of his pontificate, has been at the heart of Pope Francis’ public agenda—communicating refugee issues. This article aims to examine the three channels that the Holy Father has used so far to set the agenda and focus on immigration matters. His 12 fundamental speeches and written messages on migration issues are analyzed here for the purpose of this study, with the aim of finding keywords that set the stage for reframing refugee issues.

We have studied the following written or spoken interventions: the five annual messages for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees of his pontificate (2014–2018); his message for the World Day of Peace 2018, dedicated to migration; his speeches
delivered during three Apostolic trips: to Lampedusa, Lesbos and Bangladesh; his Lenten message for the year 2015; his homily for Christmas Eve in 2017; and his homily at the Mass on Migrants and Refugees World Day in 2018.

In the first place, the study aims to help bishops and Catholic institutions around the globe, and their communication departments, to better understand this important dimension of this pontificate, so they can align their strategy and initiatives with those of the Pope.

Secondly, this analysis will try to offer an account of the Pope’s rhetoric on this issue to Catholics all over the world. This explanation, we think, is especially relevant in countries (such as Poland, USA as well as a few others) where governments are currently implementing anti-immigration policies.

It is relevant to acknowledge that research on migration communications is not common. Migration studies focus mostly on socio-economic conditions of migration (like multiple research articles presented in Oxford’s Journal of Refugee Studies). Studies aligned with communications methodology as press analysis are mostly presented in reports prepared by NGOs, such as the Transatlantic Council on Migration or UNHCR. Studies can also be found on framing refugee crises or refugee issues, nevertheless there has not been a case study focused on the Catholic Church and its leadership.

This article is structured in three main parts. The first one is introductory. It considers the relevance of migration in the present geopolitical context and recalls a selection of previous interventions of the Church on the issue of migrants and refugees. The second part develops—briefly, for reasons of space—the theoretical framework and approach of this research. The third part constitutes the center of this article, and studies examples of agenda-setting and reframing by Pope Francis regarding migrants and refugees. Finally, we draw some conclusions.

**Part One: Introduction**

**The issue of our time**

The definition of a refugee was forged by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees: a refugee is a person, who ‘owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.’ (United Nations 1951, article 1, A, 2).

UNHCR, the United Nations’ agency dedicated to refugee assistance, describes on its website the present situation with pressing words:

We are now witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record. An unprecedented 65.6 million people around the world have been forced from home. Among them are nearly 22.5 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18 years. There are also 10 million stateless people who have been denied a nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment and freedom of movement.

Recent data show that the average period of refugee displacement is 10 years and that after a person has been a refugee for 5 years, the duration of displacement rises to an average of 21 years (Devictor and Do 2016).
As Figure 1 shows, not a single European country is on the UNHCR list of top hosting countries for refugees. A relevant 17% of the displaced are hosted in Europe, compared to 30% hosted in Africa and 26% hosted in the Middle East and North Africa. As previously mentioned, we are now witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record.

UNHCR is the biggest global agency that takes care of refugees and implements global policies towards them. It is a poignant fact that the current Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr. António Guterres, formerly held the post of UN High Commissioner for Refugees for 10 years before becoming Secretary General in 2015. According to its Global Trends report (UNHCR 2017), migration is ‘concentrated in the poorer parts of the world. Europe, accounting for more than 20% of global income, has 11% of the world’s refugees. The United States of America, with 25% of global income, has 1% of the world’s refugees.’
David Miliband, former head of the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office and now director of the International Rescue Committee, describes the issue in these terms:

The ‘refugee crisis’ has the following components: record numbers of people are fleeing violence; they are displaced for longer than ever before, they are concentrated in a small number of countries outside the wealthy parts of the world; and they make up a growing proportion of the world’s poor. There is one additional factor: climate change is not just a looming danger; it is part of today’s equation (Miliband 2018, 335).

Critical numbers call for a critical response from world leaders. At the moment of writing this article, United Nations has decided to work on a document called ‘Global Compact for Migration’, which ‘will be the first, inter-governmentally negotiated agreement, prepared under the auspices of the United Nations, to cover all dimensions of international migration in a holistic and comprehensive manner.’ (United Nations 2016). The UN started to work on the document in 2016 and is aiming to finish the resolution during UN’s General Assembly in September 2018.

Immigration and the ‘agenda setting’ of the Catholic Church

The Catholic Church is, and has been through the years, an agenda setter for social debates. That trend has been especially visible since the 1980s for two reasons: first, the development of mass media and their transformation into global channels (CNN for example, the first 24-h television news network, created in 1980); and the election of Karol Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II with his international mind-set 2 years earlier, in 1978.

Some authors (González Gaitano 2009) have connected the agenda setting theory with the Catholic Church. As an institution, the Catholic Church intervenes in agenda setting in three main ways:

1. by introducing a particular issue into the general public discourse through a specific public intervention (a speech, a document, an official statement) of the Holy Father or any of his close collaborators at the Roman Curia;
2. by undertaking an Apostolic Journey in which the destination itself is the message, or by merciful actions visible to the media;
3. leading by example.

Why is the Church perceived as an agenda setter? Firstly, as experts state, ‘On the one hand, its religious teachings are universal and stable in time, since they start on the acceptance of a common human nature; on the other hand, its teachings respond to real concerns of individuals and communities: peace, life and death, social justice, etc.’ (Editorial Team 2018, CCC 3, 1).

Secondly, agenda setting derives from the leadership evaluations of the modern papacy. Weigel (2011) has shown that John Paul II revolutionized that stage by his numerous papal trips and by wisely handling global political issues, such as the peaceful fight against communism, mediations between countries (for instance, in the Chile-Argentina conflict regarding the Beagle channel) or his vocal fight and lobbying against an unjust war in the Middle East. Yet, as we will see later, no other pope had as many communications tools as are now in the hands of Francis.
The Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* (Second Vatican Council 1965, 66) clearly paved the way for modern-day thinking regarding refugees and migrants, which is shown by the manner in which all popes have handled the issue in recent years:

The local people, moreover, especially public authorities, should all treat [immigrants] not as mere tools of production but as persons, and must help them to arrange for their families to live with them and to provide themselves with decent living quarters.

Since then, 20th and 21st century popes have repeatedly mentioned the issue of refugees. In his important encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (1967, 67), Blessed Pope Paul VI, whom Pope Francis will canonize in October 2018, made the following appeal:

We shall always insist upon giving a generous welcome to others which is at once a duty of human solidarity and Christian charity. [They should be] welcomed with brotherly love, [with] examples of upright living in which genuine and effective Christian charity and the highest spiritual values are esteemed.

John Paul II, arrived from a country where immigration during communism was counted in the millions, once said: “God clearly and repeatedly recommends hospitality and generosity toward the stranger, reminding Israel of how precarious its own existence had once been.” (1997, 435). Only a year later, the Polish Pope recalled:

This atmosphere of welcoming is increasingly necessary in confronting today’s diverse forms of distancing ourselves from others. This is profoundly evidenced in the problem of millions of refugees and exiles, in the phenomenon of racial intolerance as well as intolerance toward the person whose only ‘fault’ is a search for work and better living conditions outside his own country, and in the fear of all who are different and thus seen as a threat. (John Paul II 1998)

The above quotes are obviously nothing new in the 2000-year-long history of Christianity. All popes were strictly deducing their instructions from clear Gospel teachings, such as ‘For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in’ (Matthew, 25, 35).

The Catholic teachings on this issue are summarized in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church:

A particular category of war victim is formed by refugees, forced by combat to flee the places where they habitually live and to seek refuge in foreign countries. The Church is close to them not only with her pastoral presence and material support, but also with her commitment to defend their human dignity: Concern for refugees must lead us to reaffirm and highlight universally recognized human rights, and to ask that the effective recognition of these rights be guaranteed to refugees. (CSDC 2004, 505)

To answer the refugee crisis is not something that would only fall on 21st century popes. Modern-day papacies since St. John XXIII have been called to respond to the issue that was framed in the idea of social justice by Vatican II, which urged the Church to lead the world by example. The bishops gathered in Rome for the Synod of Catholic Bishops, released this statement, entitled ‘Justice in the Word’:

The Church has the right, indeed the duty, to proclaim justice on the social, national and international level, and to denounce instances of injustice, when the fundamental rights of man and his very salvation demand it. The Church (…) has a proper and
specific responsibility which is identified with her mission of giving witness before the world of the need for love and justice contained in the Gospel message, a witness to be carried out in Church institutions themselves and in the lives of Christians. (Synod of Bishops 1971, 36)

Pope Francis is on a mission to encourage Christians around the world to have a human-oriented and welcoming approach to migrants. He also urges that migrants should be seen as a part of society that brings opportunities, not threats. Thus, the Pope is walking the set out by the Catechism of the Catholic Church that puts a duty of social interchange on every Catholic person:

It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role, in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person. Participation is achieved first of all by taking charge of the areas for which one assumes personal responsibility: by the care taken for the education of his family, by conscientious work, and so forth, man participates in the good of others and of society. (CCC 1992, nn. 1913–1914)

Those words were also visible in the writings of his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI. At the beginning of his papacy, in June 2005, Pope Benedict XVI said at the Angelus:

Recalling this great bishop, (Blessed Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, bishop and patron of immigrants) my thoughts go to those who are far from their homeland and often also from their families; I hope that they will always meet receptive friends and hearts on their path who are capable of supporting them in the difficulties of every day.

Part Two: Theoretical framework

Coordinates of this article

The traditional view of the media as the gatekeepers of public opinion (Shoemaker and Vos 2009), was followed by its natural consequence according to agenda-setting theory (Dearing and Rogers 1997; McCombs 2004; González Gaitano 1999; Sádaba 2001), understood as the ‘ability (of the news media) to influence the importance placed on the topics of the public agenda’ (McCombs and Reynolds 2002, 1). One of the first—and probably clearest—explanations of this phenomenon corresponds to what Bernard Cohen said (1963), when he affirmed that the press ‘may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.’

This theory shows how issues come and go, arise and disappear in the public arena, following certain cycles (Mitroff, Pearson, and Harrington 2012). In addition, being a social science, this theory also attempts to make predictions (Ewing 1987).

Since the theory’s first formulation in the 1960s, and its consolidation in mass media research, many studies analyze how institutions try to influence public opinion as a middle step in promoting change through new legislation and public interventions. From that point of view, this phenomenon is close to issues management, a methodological system used by organizations to influence the social, political and economic environment (De la Cierva 2018).
The arrival of social media has modified the agenda-setting model (Aruguete 2017) but has not eliminated it. In fact, some studies have proved that regarding issues and crises, social media may start the conversation, but as soon as the traditional media weigh in and frame the issue in a more formal way, social media users follow their lead (Schultz, Utz and Göritz 2011).

The same thing happens with so-called ‘citizen journalism’ or—when practiced online—’netizens’: their impact is relevant, especially in incidents and emergencies, but much less so in long-term issues, where its influence is—at least for now—limited (Allan and Thorsen 2009).

The agenda-setting theory contains two basic assumptions: the press and the media do not reflect reality, rather, they filter and shape it; and media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other matters (Dearing and Rogers 1988).

**Pope Francis and social agenda**

What Pope Francis does regarding the issues he cares about, whether consciously or not, is to apply what, in the agenda-setting theory, is called ‘accessibility’: the more intensely the news media cover an issue, the longer that issue remains in their audiences’ memories (Iyengar 1990). Frequency matters more than content: media reports’ influence on readers and viewers depend mostly on the number of impacts rather than on their orientation, which could vary (Dearing and Rogers 1988). That is why—and this is our interpretation—Pope Francis tries not to miss any opportunity to ‘make headlines’ on the issues he wishes to highlight, and one of them is, of course, immigrants and refugees.

In addition, it seems that the Pope is also aware of a process parallel to agenda-setting called ‘agenda-building’: the process in which different organizations and the public in general participate in agenda-setting. In other words, the way in which the public, and not only the news media, act as policymakers (Berkowitz 1992).

With his frequent interventions, Pope Francis wants, in the first place, to raise general awareness of refugees among the general public. Yet, that is not itself his final goal, rather it is a necessary stage on the way to reaching the final goal: a just and stable solution for migrants and refugees worldwide. The Pontiff needs to promote a solid consensus around the need of finding a solution for this humanitarian drama, so citizens and civil society will press their representatives at the different levels of public organizations (local, regional, national and international) to invest people and resources into it. In other words: to put migrants and refugees on the political agenda of each country.

Even if his interventions reach a vast audience, Pope Francis’ leadership on this matter is not practiced independently from the Church. One of the axioms of institutional communications is to differentiate your publics as much as possible, and to reach them one by one, acting in concentric circles and reaching those farther through those closer to you. This recommendation is not only valid for corporations and companies, but also for the Church and her institutions: hospitals, universities and schools, NGOs, etc. (De la Cierva 2014).
Following this approach, Pope Francis tries to reach everyone, but starts his persuasive actions with those closer to us: bishops, clergy, religious, Catholic faithful in general. This approach is more effective than, let us say, preaching only to the decision-makers (the powerful of the earth), because his mobilization of ordinary people could have a longer and deeper impact. It looks like he wants to change the world, yes; but ‘through his people’. All those messages and symbolic actions aim to transform the Church from within, to persuade all Catholics—using his own words—to ‘reach the peripheries’.

This scale of priorities fits quite well not only with the Church’s pastoral approach, but also with the new world in which digitalization and communication technologies are changing our societies. As some studies have shown, interactivity and user-produced content have ‘reversed agenda effects’, meaning that the public agenda could set the media agenda (Kim and Lee 2006; Wallsten 2007).

To be effective in influencing the public agenda, it is very important to understand the value of newsworthiness (Harcup and O’Neill 2017; Clayman and Reisner 1998). As we will see in the second part of this article, Pope Francis combines all the elements of ‘making news’ with his words and his actions: impact, timeliness, proximity, human interest, conflict and celebrity (Redohl 2015).

Finally, the Pope does not just insist once and again on the immigrants and refugees issue (i.e. looking for an impact based on frequency) but also gives a lot of attention to its framing. Framing, also called ‘the second level of agenda-setting’ (McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver 1997; Weaver 2007), is the process of labelling ‘schemata of interpretation’ that allow individuals or groups ‘to locate, perceive, identify, and label’ events and occurrences, thus rendering meaning, organizing experiences, and guiding actions (Goffman 1974, 21; Entman 1993).

For this reason, one of his biographers (Ivereigh 2015, 19) has called Pope Francis ‘the great reframer’, for his ability to understand the issue, the frames that the media uses to explain it, and to change them:

To communicate the Church in contemporary Western culture you can’t just speak and expect to be heard. There are too many filters that prevent it. In communications jargon, these filters are called ‘frames’. To be understood, you first have to learn to step outside the frames imposed by our culture that stop you from being heard. In this, the Pope is ‘the great reframer’. (…). Start by speaking to the moral intention behind that frame, as Francis did, and the effect is disarming. Hearts and minds open. The listening can begin.

Therefore, it seems safe to say that Pope Francis is one of those policymakers who understand the rules of our media culture, and thus is capable of setting their agendas and issue definitions (Berkowitz 1992).

**Immigration, at the core of this pontificate**

Pope Francis seems to have a special task on the issue of migration.

The term forged by pope Francis, one that will be examined in this article—migration as a ‘sign of the times’ is certainly true—this is a special time in history, and Pope Francis is giving it as much attention as a world leader should. The way he
is doing it not only makes headlines but reshapes migration communications on a global level.

The Argentinian pope has also been capable in drawing attention to migration issues by his leadership ratings. Francis is one of the most influential leaders of the world: in the 5 years of his pontificate, he has appeared four times on the cover of TIME magazine and in many other global publications. In addition, according to a recent poll (Gallup International 2017), Pope Francis records the highest level of favorability—56%, rising to 75% of those surveyed in Latin America and 66% of those living in the EU.

He is not only influential in the physical world, but also in the virtual sphere, the new social environment for leadership—as Castells (2012) reminds us, ‘the more the leaders use new technologies, the more they can extend their influence’. This global leadership is especially visible on his Twitter account—the main social medium the Vatican uses on a daily basis. ‘A year after his election as Head of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis was already the world leader with retweets as well as the fourth account in the world in terms of media mentions. In November 2013, he was mentioned in 510,000 tweets (...) His relevance and leadership from the quantitative point of view has continued to grow’ (Narbona 2016, 90).

Certainly, this particular pontiff has, for the first time, unconsciously set the agenda of world news by being elected pope. The shock of a successor of Peter coming from the Americas, and his choice of the name Francis—both historical firsts, as well as his personal openness—something that people had missed since John Paul II passed away—have from the very beginning set the tone of the media towards the new pope.

Fresh and mysterious for the media at the beginning, from his very first days in office he started to show that he would be the humble pope who uses simple, sound-bite-ready language and would often be seen in face-to-face situations with the faithful, referring to himself as ‘Bishop of Rome’ instead of ‘Pope’. Above all, he started to communicate issues that for years were not seen as ‘mainstream’ talking points for the Catholic Church. In that matter he is and has been from the beginning an exceptional example of a ‘media-oriented pope’.

The ‘Francis effect’ is in fact measurable. To show how appealing and intriguing he is for the media world we will give an example of him coming to Kraków for World Youth Day.

Analyzing the week of WYD 2016, one can see that a peak of 1384 mentions happened on 27 July, the day the Holy Father arrived in Kraków. The second most-mentioned day (1172 mentions) was Thursday, 28 July, the day of the welcoming ceremony at Błonia Field. The third most mentioned day (1077 mentions) in the international media was 31 July, the day when the Holy Father closed World Youth Day Kraków 2016 and invited young people to the next WYD in Panama (Guzik, O’Reilly, and Klosowski 2017).

As reporters John Allen and Inés San Martin (2017, 10) put it, ‘no story of 2016 was perhaps more emblematic of the best of Catholicism than World Youth Day in Kraków’. Even if the youth (not the pope) are the core, heart and protagonists of any WYD, without the Pope the attention of journalists would not be as visible. Without the pope, millions of young people would not have gone to Kraków to celebrate their faith in Christ.
Marking 5 years of his pontificate, John Allen, this time in Crux (13 March 2018), wrote: ‘Even when embattled and under fire, Francis remains a magnet for the media’.

As the current scale of the crisis was unfolding Pope Francis was already at the throne of Peter, calling migration a sign of the times before thousands of migrants had stormed EU borders in the summer of 2015, causing global turmoil and bringing media attention to the issue. This article will examine the Vatican’s approach to migration in a detailed way on those pages, yet it is important to give a general overview of what Vatican policy looked like while the migration crisis was unfolding to its current scale.

The Pope set the framework of his pontificate in his apostolic exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, published in November 2013, as a way to wrap up his first year in office and indicate his strategic plan for the future:

I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. (Francis 2013a)

The Church on the peripheries, the Church of those in need, was placed at the center of his mission (Piqué 2014). It could soon be seen that the main meaning of ‘peripheries’ was refugees and migrants. These words were only the prelude to the global policy of the Vatican that is set to answer the staggering numbers of displaced people presented above.

Mentioning the words ‘Migrants, refugees and migration’ over 200 times in 12 speeches analyzed for the purpose of this article (which are the tip of the iceberg of hundreds of papal speeches) is in fact a sign that migration has become one of the pope’s priority communications issues since the beginning of his papacy: what he called ‘a sign of our times’. Like any good leader, the pope decided that migration policy and its framing will come from himself and from his Church. That is why he chose as destination for his first Apostolic Journey the Italian island of Lampedusa—a symbolic gate to the European paradise for many immigrants, and the last stop of their earthly journey for thousands.

With his strategic trip to Lampedusa in July 2013, Pope Francis wanted the people of Europe and other parts of the wealthy world to think of what they have become. He went to that almost unknown island where over 20,000 people from Africa and other parts of the world had lost their lives trying to reach the coasts of Europe. He challenged them saying:

Today too, the question has to be asked: Who is responsible for the blood of these brothers and sisters of ours? Nobody! That is our answer: It isn’t me; I don’t have anything to do with it; it must be someone else, but certainly not me. (Francis 2013b)

Pope Francis also clearly appealed to the world in his ‘Refugee speeches’, aiming to make the situation globally visible and encourage a global response. It is the whole planet that he addressed and challenged in Lampedusa:

The culture of comfort, which makes us think only of ourselves, makes us insensitive to the cries of other people, makes us live in soap bubbles which, however lovely, are
insubstantial; they offer a fleeting and empty illusion which results in indifference to others; indeed, it even leads to the globalization of indifference. (Francis 2013b)

The use of the term ‘globalization of indifference’ (the word ‘indifference’ is used 25 times in the speeches analyzed for this article) for the first time at Lampedusa had a special meaning for the press around the globe. A look at the headlines of some of the world’s most influential media on this particular day of 8 July 2013 says a lot about media attention towards this particular phrase:

- *The Guardian*: “Pope attacks ‘globalisation of indifference’ in Lampedusa visit”;
- *The Telegraph*: “Pope Francis condemns ‘globalisation of indifference’ as he comforts refugees on Italian island”;  
- *The Washington Post*: “Pope Francis decries ‘globalization of indifference’”;
- *Corriere della Sera*: “Pope Francis: ‘No to Globalisation of Indifference’”;
- *The Independent*: “Pope Francis condemns global indifference to suffering on visit to Italy’s migrant island of Lampedusa”;
- *La Nación*: “Pope Francis and the globalization of indifference”;  
- *Le Figaro*: “Pope Francis: We ask for pardon for that huge indifference”.

With his Apostolic Journey to Lampedusa, the Holy Father for the first time in his pontificate drew the attention of the world to the person of the Pope for comments and possible solution to the current migrant crisis. The head of the Catholic Church has put himself in an important position not only as a leader of opinion on this matter but also as a leader with the mindset of searching for solutions to the issue of our time.

Pope Francis in fact is talking about migration so often that now, 5 years into his pontificate, even the slightest mention on the issue makes headlines. An example is the private audience for scientists present at the conference ‘Refugees and migrants in a globalized world - Responsibility and response of universities’ (IMRE 2017). Addressing the Conference’s participants, Francis stressed: ‘Migration is a sign of the times,’ adding: ‘it is important to talk about the negative reactions that appear at first, which the inflow of immigrants generates even in countries with a long Christian tradition, and which may even be discriminatory and xenophobic’ (Francis 2017c).

The audience (and not all private papal audiences get so much attention) received coverage by over 30 media international outlets. Let us mention only three headlines: “Pope condemns xenophobia, calls migration a ‘sign of the times’” (Crux); “Forced migration is a ‘sign of the times’ Pope says” (Catholic World Report); and “Pope taps inner Tom Petty on forced migration, a ‘sign of the times’” (CNS).

**Effective communications need a strategy**

To communicate migration, having this particular pope on the chair of Peter has a very special significance. Pope Francis, with his Italian-Argentine immigrant background, communication abilities, Jesuit missionary formation and communications tools at hand is, without doubt, an agenda setter on refugee issues.
Nevertheless, the reason why this subject was picked up by the media is that Pope Francis and his advisors (his ‘Refugee Team’) have had a strategic mentality from the very beginning, and that is what this article aims to demonstrate.

In addition, since the pope is using ‘events’ such as the above-mentioned trip to Lampedusa, or the recurrence of some commemorations to promote his agenda, we will examine his strategic mindset by comparing it to the mentality of the organizers and communicators of large-scale Church events (Abad 2018, 190).

(A) A vision before acting
Pope Francis has a vision about the issue he would like to put on top of his agenda. The first occasion on which he showed it was his first papal trip. The press (as well as the Catholic bishops around the globe) traditionally see the first journey as very symbolic and meaningful, and therefore the press gave it wide coverage, as the ‘brand-new’ pope was still somewhat of a mystery at that time. Pope Francis made a clearly strategic choice in picking Lampedusa.

Before his writing and releasing any important documents such as exhortations or encyclicals, journalists already saw this trip as a fundamental step in his papacy. Italian church historian Alberto Melloni commented that the pope’s speech on the island was ‘an encyclical on his pontificate’; and then added:

The homily Pope Francis gave at Lampedusa represented a turning point. It resembled Gaudet Mater Ecclesia, the opening speech John XXIII gave at the Second Vatican Council. Not many seemed to have noticed that…. (La Stampa, 15 July 2013)

Indeed, it was the grand opening of his trademark communications style. Thinking ahead helped to set the agenda and put the issue of immigration on the table as Francis had planned—which was nothing less than the framing that the pope would use in the future.

(B) A proactive mentality to take the lead in promoting change
As Abad wrote (2018, 191), the responsibility of communication falls on the boss, meaning the Pope. Nevertheless if proactive mentality means putting projects into operation, Pope Francis is the one doing it. In the symbolic trip to Lampedusa, he made headlines globally when he threw into the sea a wreath in memory of over 20,000 people that lost their lives in those waters. Francis also put another tragedy at the center of the world’s attention when he went to Lesbos and brought migrant families on board the papal plane to the Vatican, and when he offered Vatican apartments to refugee families. Also, he took action when he created a special Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, of which the Migrant and Refugee Section is one of the pope’s favorites.

The following statement was written to tell communicators what they should do in a large church event. Clearly the pope also takes this rule into consideration while planning on migration issues:

If public opinion perceives my institution in a way which is not aligned with reality, I must begin to take the necessary corrective actions to bring that perception into line with the truth. Things don’t change by themselves; it’s up to me to try to change them. (Abad 2018, 191)
Giving maximum attention to content (‘content is king’)

By examining the Vatican’s strategy on communicating refugee issues, we analyzed the content of core speeches, which show the essential aspect of reframing refugee communications. Framing is nothing less than ‘the selection and setting the hierarchy of priorities’ (Entman 1993). Frames are defining the problems, diagnosing the reasons, imposing moral judgments and suggesting remedies (McQuail 2007, 374).

Pope Francis often talks about migration and consequently has tried to reframe immigration issues.

Third part: examples of Pope Francis’ reframing

Keywords for reframing the refugee issue

For Francis, refugees are a synonym for poverty, and the Church, from the beginning of his pontificate, was to be humble, poor and centered on the poor. The Pope’s ‘refugee-policy’ is realized, as mentioned above on three strategic steps of agenda setting: (1) the speeches of the Holy Father and his closest ‘migration team’; (2) apostolic journeys; and (3) virtual leadership which will be interchangeably presented in the analysis below.

Consistency of the message can be seen by the keywords that appear from an analysis of his speeches and written messages. The frequency of keywords is presented in Figure 2, and in this analysis will be broken into three subjects: (1) putting a human face onto migration issues; (2) seeing a migrant as an opportunity, not a threat; and (3) presenting his actions as Gospel-focused, not politics-driven, even though they influence policy on a global scale.

1) Humans, not numbers

Pope Francis started to pay close attention to the immigration crisis long before thousands of migrants stormed European borders in the summer of 2015. However, when the crisis erupted the real gulf between the pope’s persuasive discourse and mainstream press headlines became clear. To give just a few examples of this:

Figure 2. Keywords of the 12 analyzed ‘refugee speeches’ by Pope Francis (source: author).
• **BBC** (18 August 2015): ‘European migrant crisis: Surge in numbers at EU borders’;
• **CNN** (19 August 2015): ‘European migrant crisis: Thousands caught in bottleneck’;
• **Al Jazeera** (18 August 2015): ‘Greek island struggles to cope with migrant crisis’;
• **The Wall Street Journal** (19 August 2015): ‘Migration crisis pits EU’s east against west’.

The headlines are clearly number-oriented, and media pays the most attention to statistics. The framing is therefore focused on numbers: ‘thousands’ (without describing them as ‘migrants’ or even ‘people’) that storm EU borders. The surge-in-numbers frame only suggests that the situation is a threat, and if the EU does not find a way to cope with it, they need to send them back, whatever the reasons were for those people to come. The stories of war which most of the migrants were fleeing from at the time are not present in the media anymore. It is the wave that has come to our land that concerns the media.

The world did not have to wait long for the response of the Holy Father. In his address at the Angelus on 30 August 2015, he said: ‘Sadly, also in recent days many migrants have lost their lives in their dreadful voyages. For all of these brothers and sisters, I pray and invite you to pray too.’

Here we see, for the first time, the terms that will consequently be used by the Pope—that the ‘numbers’ are ‘our brothers and sisters’. He later added that each of the them has a name and a story to tell. Human-oriented migrant rhetoric was new for Europe in 2015.

In his annual address released for World Migrants and Refugees Day, the pope was particularly clear when writing about the culture of acceptance and encounter: ‘Welcoming others means welcoming God in person!’, he wrote (2015).

As the research provided has shown (see Figure 3), words such as ‘humans, brothers, sisters, people’ were used 172 times, which makes it a No.1 issue for the Pope—to see migration through the prism of humanity, not as an issue of numbers or statistics.

The tragic stories of millions of men and women daily confront the international community as a result of the outbreak of unacceptable humanitarian crises in different parts of the world. Indifference and silence lead to complicity whenever we stand by as people are dying of suffocation, starvation, violence and shipwreck. Whether large or small in scale, these are always tragedies, even when a single human life is lost. (Francis 2015a)

This approach has been well explained by Archbishop Konrad Krajewski, a close counsellor to the pope and one his favorite officials from the Roman Curia. This Polish archbishop is the Almoner of the Holy See and distributes the charity money of the Vatican. He commented to the author of this article: ‘People should not get what they deserve, but what they need. When a child has a fever, you give him medicine. (…). If you will not see Jesus in every man you hand a can of tuna at Termini station, it means that you limit yourself to being a social worker who takes money for it.’

Fr. Fabio Baggio, in an interview with TVP (Polish Television, 21 August 2017), framed the problem in the following way: ‘It comes down to the question: are we able to recognize Christ in poor people, defenseless people who knock on our door? (…)}
what would happen if I were him? What if I were considered different only because my story is different?’

Therefore, the Vatican, taking a personalist approach to migrants and refugees, wants to answer their needs, seeing in them those same brothers and sisters that were previously walking the streets of European cities.

What the above quotes of those pope’s men show is that the story is consistent on every level of the Vatican refugee policy. The policy itself is focused on an encounter—once you meet the person and hear their story, he or she stops being a part of a mass—a person starts to be an individual with a particular background, hopes and dreams. ‘Every stranger who knocks at our door is an opportunity for an encounter with Jesus Christ, who identifies with the welcomed and rejected strangers of every age’ (Francis 2017a), Pope Francis said in his written message to migrants on the eve of the Special Jubilee of Mercy.

Since 2013 the words ‘encounter’, ‘welcome’ and ‘love’ have been used 132 times in just 12 fundamental and most quoted speeches of his refugee public discourse.

The Vatican takes responsibility itself, leads by example and encourages the faithful to do the same:

This is a great responsibility, which the Church intends to share with all believers and men and women of good will, who are called to respond to the many challenges of contemporary migration with generosity, promptness, wisdom and foresight, each according to their own abilities. (Francis 2017a)

The pope also notices the empathy of societies that have managed to put a human face on receiving migrants, praising ‘creativity, tenacity and spirit of sacrifice of the countless individuals, families and communities around the world who open their doors and hearts to migrants and refugees, even where resources are scarce’ (Francis 2017b, 3).

On the very Day of Migrants and Refugees in 2018, while celebrating Mass, Pope Francis said in his homily:

In the Gospel, the two disciples of John ask Jesus, ‘Where do you live?’ (Jn 1:38), implying that the reply to this question would determine their judgment upon the master from Nazareth. The response of Jesus is clear: ‘Come and see!’ (v. 39), and opens
up to a personal encounter which requires sufficient time to *welcome, to know and to acknowledge* the other. (Francis 2018)

Key world figures—those who implement refugee rescue policy—share the pope’s vision of a human-oriented approach. And it is also a common trend to tell the story of refugees not by number but by the people, through personal stories of refugees and those who help them. Short videos produced by the UNHCR communications department go viral daily on social media, framing the stories in a human-oriented way. Melissa Fleming, head of UNHCR communications, dedicated a whole book to the story of one Syrian migrant. The book starts with a story of her rescue from drowning in the sea hours after her husband drowned in front of her eyes:

She was so overcome with grief that if not for the two tiny baby girls in her arms, barely alive, she would have let the sea consume her. No land was in sight. Just debris from the shipwreck, a few other survivors praying for rescue, and dozens of bloated, floating corpses (Fleming 2017)

As David Miliband (2018, 492), who has worked with refugees for a number of years and who is now the head of the International Rescue Committee puts it: ‘Define someone whom you don’t know as your brother or sister, and you set out one definition of human responsibility and kinship; define them as “other”, and you set out on a different and far less humane course’.

2) An immigrant is an opportunity, not a threat

‘Instead of focusing on challenges—which are real and should be answered—let’s also look at the chances that it gives us, the chances we have through the richness of cultures’ (SIR 2017). By these words Fr. Fabio Baggio, undersecretary of the M&R section of the ‘Pope’s Dicastery’, means that putting a human face onto the issue of migration has an impact not only on the well-being of those who are welcomed but also those who welcome them. As research provided in USA has shown, immigrants play an important role in local communities across USA. To show just one example: entrepreneurship of migrants rates much higher than with US born nationals (Greenstone and Looney 2018). Immigrants in America also come from a very diverse background, which means that they bring a diverse set of skills to the welcoming country.

Diversity and opportunity that is brought by migrants is what the Holy Father acknowledges in his message on World Day of Peace 2018:

When we turn that gaze to migrants and refugees, we discover that they do not arrive empty-handed. They bring their courage, skills, energy and aspirations, as well as the treasures of their own cultures; and in this way, they enrich the lives of the nations that receive them. We also come to see the creativity, tenacity and spirit of sacrifice of the countless individuals, families and communities around the world who open their doors and hearts to migrants and refugees, even where resources are scarce. (Francis 2017b)

Yet Pope Francis probably forged the strongest frame of a refugee that is given as a treasure to the welcoming country on Christmas Eve in 2017 when he said:

By decree of the Emperor, Mary and Joseph found themselves forced to set out (…) Then they found themselves having to face perhaps the most difficult thing of all. They arrived in Bethlehem and experienced that it was a land that was not expecting them.
A land where there was no place for them. And there, where everything was a challenge, Mary gave us Emmanuel. (Francis 2017c)

Being raised in a migrant family himself Pope Francis is addressing the world also on the issue of economic migration, seeing it as a basic human right to work and earn a salary in dignity and in a peaceful environment. Again, on this matter, Francis is not saying anything new. In 1985, his predecessor John Paul II stated:

Every human being has the right to freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of his own state. When there are just reasons in favor for it, he must be permitted to migrate to other countries and to take up residence there. The fact that he is a citizen of a particular state does not deprive him of membership to the human family, nor of citizenship in the universal society, the common, world-wide fellowship of men. (John Paul II 1985)

Pope Francis does not make distinctions between those migrants searching abroad for a better life or refugees escaping the war. For instance, he also defends economic migrants: ‘People also migrate for other reasons’, he writes, ‘and the first is the desire for a better life, which is often associated with the desire to leave behind “hopelessness” which is caused by the inability to build future. He leaves to join his own family to find employment or education opportunities: whoever cannot enjoy these rights, does not live in peace’. (Francis 2017b)

Then, the pontiff implements that policy, leading by example: he took three families on board the papal plane from the island of Lesbos. ‘Pope Francis is our Savior’, a headline praised him in the British daily The Independent (17 April 2016). What makes the message even stronger—all the families taken on board were Muslim. The pope therefore has shown that while prejudice is something that applies in the countries the people fled, but not in his own backyard. This was also a cry of leadership.

As Chatham House research has shown (RIIA 2017), more than 20% of Europeans from 10 countries surveyed agreed that ‘all further migration from mainly Muslim countries should be stopped’—and it is important to note that in overwhelmingly Catholic Poland the number of people opposing any Muslim immigration reached over 70%. Twenty-five percent neither agreed nor disagreed, while only one in five respondents felt Muslim immigration should continue (see Figure 4).

Pope Francis, going against the above statistics with his policy, shows that once a hand is given to a person in need, this person is not going to hurt a society that generously welcomed him or her (as it is clear that the statistics presented were driven by pure fear of terrorist attack caused by jihadists).

Nour Essa, one of the women who flew with Francis from the island of Lesbos, is yet one visible example of the pope’s policy. She is now working in a Roman hospital, the Bambino Gesù, and finishing her studies at a Roman university. Nour is a perfectly resettled refugee that quickly found a job and learned the language of her host country: ‘Learning the language of the host country is one of the keys to breaking down the fear of the other’, she said in an interview with the French daily La Croix (25 April 2017). As a Muslim, she owes her second life to a Catholic leader, speaks about it openly and is moved every time she has the opportunity to meet the pope—while interviewed she repeatedly thanks the pope: ‘a great, simple man who changed our life’.
The pope’s policy towards Muslims is identical to the mindset of those responsible for migration aid and those distributing it on a global scale. David Miliband, as of March 2018 head of International Rescue Committee, former British Foreign Minister and a Jew—which is an important factor as his organization tries to protect and safeguard thousands of Muslims—wrote in his latest book: ‘Helping Muslim refugees, both by offering aid to countries hosting them and by welcoming vulnerable and soaking refugees to our own shores, is not just right in itself, it also plays a part in the wider effort.’ (Miliband 2018, 704)

However, the Holy Father is aware that a fear of the ‘other’ is present and needs to be addressed in a proper way. The pope perceives it as an important call to answer not only the needs and anxieties of migrants but also local communities who may fear that their rights and traditions will not be respected by the newcomers. Francis addressed this on the day he celebrated a mass for refugees and migrants in St Peter’s basilica on 14 January 2018: ‘In today’s world, for new arrivals to welcome, to know and to acknowledge means to know and respect the laws, the culture and the traditions of the countries that take them in’. (Francis 2018)

Francis added, addressing western citizens 5 years after his trip to Lampedusa with a message as strong as the former one:

Having doubts and fears is not a sin. The sin is to allow these fears to determine our responses, to limit our choices, to compromise respect and generosity, to feed hostility and rejection. The sin is to refuse to encounter the other, the different, the neighbour, when this is in fact a privileged opportunity to encounter the Lord. (2018)

The quote went viral in the world’s media, showing not only the policy towards a migrant, but also the Catholic Social Doctrine implemented on a global scale. This is a selection of media quotes of that day:

- Daily Mail, Taiwan News and Boston Herald (following an Associated Press wire):
  It’s a sin if fear makes us hostile to migrants;
- *Euronews*: ‘Treat newcomers with respect’ pontiff urges on World Day of Migrants and Refugees;
- *Deutche Welle*: ‘Pope warns against sin of hostility to migrants’;
- *MSN*: ‘Do not fear the other, Pope says on World Migrant Day’;
- *Crux*: ‘Fear of immigrants not a sin, but being driven by it is, Pope says’;
- *Reuters*: ‘Fear and doubt should not determine response to immigrants, Pope says’;
- *Catholic News Agency*: ‘Don’t let fear keep you from welcoming a stranger’.

### 3) Gospel-driven global policy

Using the words ‘God’, ‘Christ’ and ‘Church’ 114 times, bringing up the matter as often as mentioning the ‘culture of love and encounter’ in his messages, the pope focuses his attention on the one that inspires his actions—God, but also on the institution that he leads—the Church. The word ‘politics’ is not a keyword in any of his refugee speeches. In the first sentences of the message for the World Day of Peace (2018), the pope in facts distances himself from current political rhetoric:

> Those who, for what may be political reasons, foment fear of migrants instead of building peace are sowing violence, racial discrimination and xenophobia, which are matters of great concern for all those concerned for the safety of every human being. (Francis 2018, 2)

The Gospel and the Church’s social teachings are the pope’s sources of inspiration and example for his task as leader of the Catholic Church regarding the fate of millions of migrants around the world. Probably the most visible of all examples is the one that recalls an episode of Jesus’ life—when, on his way to Jerusalem, he was not accepted because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, ‘Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?’ But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then he and his disciples went to another village. (Luke 9, 51–57)

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, ‘Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?’ But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then he and his disciples went to another village. (Luke 9, 51–57)

The pope, in his leadership role, not only has to remind the faithful about this passage but has to take concrete steps that will help achieve the goal he has set for the Church on ‘refugee policy’. As was said earlier, the ‘refugee rhetoric’ is only a step on the way to the evaluation of the policy the pope is implementing—creating a welcoming world for migrants, where all governments take responsibility for the current crisis. In fact, Pope Francis feels that the Second Vatican Council and the rest of the social doctrine of the Church oblige him to do this. In other words, he is just fulfilling his mission of carrying out the Gospel when he appeals to and questions those in the political arena.

Pope Francis outlined the current Vatican policy in the Message for World Day of Peace in 2018, reducing the approach to four points for action: welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating refugees. These four points are a distinct proof of the pope’s Gospel-driven policy, based on the Holy Scripture. The pope specifically mentions the biblical source of each point: Hebrews 13:2, Psalm 146:9, Deuteronomy
In addition, the pontiff also set goals that are to be achieved in societies while implementing the policy. Figure 5 breaks them down to points of action and sources.

The pope believes that making politics on a global level should be conducted in an atmosphere of dialogue, and that dialogue is a pathway to welcoming refugees. He stresses that this is possible even by less wealthy countries, ‘if international cooperation guarantees them the necessary funding’. (Francis 2018, 5)

The Migrants and Refugees Section of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development looks at Global Compacts, the aforementioned UN negotiated agreement, with profound interest and hope. The pope’s ‘refugee team’ believes that the interest of the Catholic Church in how this document will appear (it is likely to be published in September 2018) is a ‘sign of a more general pastoral concern that goes back to the very origins of the Church and has continued in her many works up to the present time’. (Francis 2018, 5)

This reference to Global Compacts shows that the Vatican under Francis is actively involved in diplomacy. Besides the collaboration in the preparation of this document, the pope and his closest advisors often try also to take advantage of encounters with heads of state, either at the Vatican or during papal trips, to promote their refugee
policies. Although at the beginning of his pontificate, many (based on Card. Bergoglio’s experiences and public preferences) considered that this would not be a ‘traveling pope’, the Holy Father has chosen to travel, mostly because it helped to focus world attention on the peripheries that are at the core of his papacy. His apostolic journeys form part of a Gospel-driven foreign policy.

There is no more eloquent way of communicating the message than the successor of Peter setting his feet on a land where there is a story to tell. Previous popes have done it as well: for instance, Blessed Paul VI to the Holy Land, or St. John Paul II to many places (e.g. his first trip to Poland, framed by TIME magazine on its cover as ‘John Paul II, a Triumphal Return. The Pope in Poland’ (18 June 1979). With the same spirit, Pope Francis has communicated the message of migration during the following Apostolic Journeys:

- Lampedusa, 8 July 2013,
- Lesbos, 16 April 2016,
- Myanmar and Bangladesh, 26 November 2017–2 December 2017.

The pope’s trip to Lampedusa and his words there could be considered Francis’ first encyclical, as we analyzed earlier in this article. However, it is important to stress that, on that occasion, the pope realized how much an event can strengthen the communication of the message. As Abad (2018, 12) have shown, ‘events are instruments with objectives of a relational nature. They provide the opportunity for direct contact between the organizations and their audiences, without intermediaries and in circumstances which favor the consolidation of interpersonal relationships.’

The Lampedusa trip was as symbolic as it could have been, touching hearts and minds with images of the pope in his white soutane laying a wreath at sea, in commemoration of those who had lost their lives trying to reach European shores. The objective of the trip was reached, and the event was as successful as such an event could be in terms of being a communications tool, ‘mental walls come down, and people open up to explore new horizons’ (Goldblatt 1990, 3).

Probably the boldest example on how Pope Francis influenced his audience with the Lampedusa trip is the story of Regina and Christopher Catrambone. Inspired by Pope Francis the wealthy married couple living in Malta decided to buy a boat equipped with live-saving equipment. Soon after, they started to save people from the shores of Lampedusa and other islands (Ivereigh 2014).

Regina and Christopher set out on their refugee assistance mission to save humans, not numbers. Pope Francis highlighted the power of personal encounter in his second most important journey focused on refugees, to the Greek island of Lesbos:

I have wanted to be with you today. I want to tell you that you are not alone. In these weeks and months, you have endured much suffering in your search for a better life. Many of you felt forced to flee situations of conflict and persecution for the sake, above all, of your children, your little ones. You have made great sacrifices for your families. You know the pain of having left behind everything that is dear to you and—what is perhaps most difficult—not knowing what the future will bring. Many others like you
are also in camps or towns, waiting, hoping to build a new life on this continent. (Francis 2016)

Pope Francis addresses refugees in a compassionate manner, proving he knows, hears and wants to answer the tragic stories of those who have fled violence and are in fear of what the future will bring. Television pictures of migrants kneeling in front of the Pope, Francis kissing the heads of the children, marking crosses on their foreheads and shaking hands of all those who stood on his way were globally broadcast and became the news of the day. Had the pope not gone there, not kissed the children and not covered his white cassock with the dirt of the refugee camp—the message would not have been transmitted.

One of the most symbolic footage of the trip was made by Al Jazeera, the Qatar-based channel. Covering the Pope inviting Muslim families onto the papal plane, its reporter commented in his voice-over: 'It may have been contrived, but it was the pope’s way of showing the world that it should accept refugees and not turn its back on a problem that shows no signs of going away’ (16 April 2016). Interesting comment, especially considering that the families the pope welcomed on his plane were fleeing Islamic violence in their homeland of Syria.

The Catholic leader gave those families a second life. The British paper The Independent made a remarkable comparison:

Their arrival brings to around 20 the number of refugees living in the Vatican, which has fewer than 1000 inhabitants in total. If a similar intake were to be done across Europe, six million people given asylum on the continent of 300 million. (17 April 2016)

Looking through the eyes of Pope Francis—the trip however was effective for another reason—refugees stepping down from the plane became families, women, men, children, biologists, engineers, toddlers—not simply the numbers they had been in a refugee camp. The reframing mission was therefore accomplished.

The most recent and visible example of how Francis sets the world agenda was his trip to Myanmar and Bangladesh, at the end of 2017. The trip could have been just one more that the pope made to the Church’s peripheries. Roughly 200,000 Catholics live in the Buddhist-majority nation of Myanmar or Burma. However, as much as the pope wanted to visit them, he also wanted to bring up the issue of the Muslim minority of the country, the Rohingya. Human Rights Watch describes the humanitarian crisis of the Rohingya minority in the following way:

Since late August 2017, more than 671,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled Burma’s Rakhine State to escape the military’s large-scale campaign of ethnic cleansing. The atrocities committed by Burmese security forces, including mass killings, sexual violence, and widespread arson, amount to crimes against humanity. Military and civilian officials have repeatedly denied that security forces committed abuses during the operations, claims which are contradicted by extensive evidence and witness accounts. (HRW2017)

The pictures of the crisis made news across the globe before the pope’s visit, although they fell into the category of a tragedy in a distant land that would not be protested by marches across Paris or London. The New York Times and other influential media outlets sent out correspondents that covered the story, yet the reports did
not make the headlines of the day. Not that is until the very day the pope announced he was going to Myanmar and Bangladesh.

The term ‘Rohingya’ became the No.1 word in the news when the story broke that the pope would probably not use the name of the ethnic group out of fear that the military regime ruling Myanmar might take revenge on the country’s small Catholic minority. The pontiff was indeed cautious while in Myanmar, not to use the exact term in his speeches although he was critical. However, while on the second part of the Apostolic Journey he did use the word ‘Rohingya’ during the Ecumenical and Interreligious meeting for Peace on 1 December 2017. In his most loved and quoted final remarks Pope Francis a showed a face, the face of a merciful and compassionate father:

There is little that we can do because your tragedy is so great. But let us make room in our heart. In the name of everyone, of those who persecute you, of those who have wronged you, above all for the indifference of the world, I ask your forgiveness (...) The presence of God, today, is also called ‘Rohingya’. May each of us respond in his or her own way. (Francis 2017d)

Most read headlines in the global news on that day were:

- The Telegraph: “Pope Francis uses the word ‘Rohingya’ for first time during his tour of Bangladesh and Burma”;
- BBC News: ‘Pope Francis uses term Rohingya in Bangladesh meeting’;
- Reuters: “Pope holds emotional meeting with refugees, says ‘Rohingya’ for first time”;
- New York Times: “‘I Ask Forgiveness’, Pope Francis Tells Rohingya Muslims in Bangladesh”;
- The Guardian: “By not saying ‘Rohingya’ Pope Francis was just protecting his own”.

Reactions and comments in the secular media varied: from those praising the pope to those (and many) criticizing him for failing to use the word while in Myanmar itself, while giving a speech in front of its military leaders. However, it is again important to recall that if not for the fact that the 81-year-old pope flew for 13 hours from Rome to Myanmar and Bangladesh to meet the Rohingyas, they would not have made the headlines at all. As Wall Street Journal Rome correspondent Francis X. Rocca explains:

Our article, just to take one example, ran six articles that week on the pope’s trip. We ran an article every day. And, basically, all but one was about the Rohingya issue—from one angle or another. So, if you want to give exposure to the issue, he did it. He drew attention to it. (Rocca and Wauck 2018, 20)

Pope Francis knew exactly how he wanted to frame the message. Moreover, he continued framing it and focusing attention on the most important issue of that trip even on board his plane. As in any papal trip, the pope had a press conference on his way back to the Vatican. As soon as reporters started asking questions about different current issues, the pope told them: ‘I would prefer that first you ask questions about the journey; I say this to everyone’ (Francis 2017e). From the point of view of reporters, the press conference was a missed opportunity to ask him about many pressing issues, yet he made a clear point, and international media reported on the issues that
the pope was more interested in. In fact, in a comment full of awareness, he told them how he tries to communicate:

To me, the most important thing is that the message gets across, and therefore to try to say things one step at a time and listen to the responses, until the message gets across (…) the message didn’t just get across here. You have seen the front page of the newspapers today: everyone got the message. (2017e)

This analysis of three different Apostolic Journeys shows that the pope not only managed to reframe migration policy and focus the attention of the world on the vulnerable and defenseless, but also gave an example to world leaders. No head of state has planned a trip to Myanmar to defend the Muslim minority and neither have the heads of other religions. The pontiff challenged other leaders and policy makers in a Message for World Peace Day 2018 with the following words:

They need to be inspired by compassion, foresight and courage, so as to take advantage of every opportunity to advance the peace-building process. Only in this way can the realism required of international politics avoid surrendering to cynicism and to the globalization of indifference. (2017b)

At the beginning of this analysis, we mentioned that the pope uses not only traditional media to pass his message, but also social media. Tweets concerning migration go viral any time the pope posts them (followed by more than 40 million people).

The most viewed Tweet from his trip to Myanmar said: ‘The most holy name of God can never be invoked to justify hatred and violence against other human beings’. It was shared 21,000 times and received 70,000 likes. His tweet from Lesbos said, ‘Refugees are not numbers, they are people who have faces, names, stories, and need to be treated as such’, and received 43,000 likes and was shared 25,000 times. One of the most quoted in the history of the account was a Tweet on 18 March 2017: ‘I invite you not to build walls but bridges, to conquer evil with good, offence with forgiveness, to live in peace with everyone’ (100,000 likes and shared 46,000 times).

4) Creating an office for refugees and migrants

Five years after the Lampedusa visit, many steps have been undertaken by Pope Francis and his Curia to show that the word ‘indifference’ does not apply to Vatican policy.

Previous paragraphs provided a few examples of actions of the pontifical entourage that offer a ‘good example’ to the world. The Argentine pope’s strategic mindset can also be seen in his decision to formalize the ‘refugee team’ that was assisting him from the beginning of his pontificate, and converting it into the Migrants and Refugees Section of the Dicastery of Human Development. The pope did what any good leader would do—he delegated the tasks to his team, giving them tools to operate globally, and implement the pope’s ‘refugee agenda’ and the mandate to speak on behalf of the Holy Father. As anyone working in the Vatican knows, the last of these is a great sign of trust that the pope has given to the two undersecretaries: Fr Michael Czerny, SJ and Fr Fabio Baggio, CS.

The Migrants and Refugees section was created in January 2017. Fr Michael Czerny explains its mission in a video posted on its official website: ‘Our hope in our section of Migrants and Refugees is to help the Church to accompany people. To give people the feeling that they’re not alone, that they’re not unsupported.’
Gerald O’Connell in the Jesuit-run America Magazine (14 December 2016) commented on appointing undersecretaries for the section:

In choosing them, Francis has opted for men with broad experience and deep commitment in the social-justice field, thereby ensuring that this office ‘will have teeth’ in an area that he has designated as a top priority for his pontificate.

Commenting on his appointment Fr Czerny used—in one of his very first public remarks as undersecretary—the frame so often used by the pope, emphasizing that the department will work directly under the pope on what has become ‘one of the most important and urgent human phenomena of our times.’

Therefore, the ‘sign of the times’ statement marked the public discourse of the section from the very beginning of its existence. A year into the section’s operations, Fr. Czerny told members of the International Catholic Migration Commission that, when it comes to the perplexing question of migrants and refugees, ‘we need positive stories’, adding that the migration crisis which has captured the public eye and dominated much of the world’s political discourse over the past few years has largely been painted in a negative light. Czerny added that part of their job is ‘to help change the narrative’ on the issue, because ‘the public view is negative’. (Crux, 8 March 2018)

It is also worth mentioning an interview provided by Fr. Fabio Baggio, who, along with Fr Czerny, is undersecretary of the M&R section. Speaking to TVP, Polish state television, in November 2017, he said:

‘I believe that what is happening today is more of a humanitarian crisis than a migration crisis. This crisis emphasizes all the limitations and limits of our society (…) and I think that the pope is absolutely right when he says that the globalization of indifference affects all hearts and lives. We have a wrong concept of the future, a future that is dedicated only to small groups of people with a lot of resources and not for the joy of the whole human race.’

Calling migration a ‘sign of the times’, Pope Francis and his ‘refugee team’ stress another important point regarding the communications strategy—to look at migration as a phenomenon, which in our world is something obvious and natural. In addition, since this phenomenon is and has been with us for a long time, we have to take it as something that accompanies us, not something that threatens us.

Pope Francis dedicated an additional occasion—World Day of Peace 2018—to talk yet again about migration: ‘All indicators available to the international community suggest that global migration will continue for the future. Some consider this a threat. For my part, I ask you to view it with confidence as an opportunity to build peace’ (Francis 2017b).

Conclusions

Migration and refugees are one of the biggest human dramas of our times, and also one of Pope Francis’ main priorities. As the global leader of the Catholic Church, he acts in two different ways. Internally, he asks Catholic bishops and other people in leading positions within Catholic institutions, to adopt it as one of their main concerns and an object of their teachings, their social initiatives and their prophetic
interventions. Externally, he uses his popularity and his public activities to raise general awareness on this issue.

This is not the first time a pope has been active in defending the rights of migrants and refugees and asking the international community to take action and protect them from hunger, sickness, violence and human trafficking. There is a long tradition in the Catholic Church of defending them, in perfect continuity with Jewish traditions expressed in the Old Testament, and with Jesus’ commandments transmitted in the New Testament.

Nevertheless, quantitative and qualitative analysis of the Argentine pope’s words and actions in his first five years in the chair of St. Peter show that this issue has become one of his most intense concerns and one of the fundamental features of this pontificate. As a Roman pontiff, he has no hard power, but he is fully developing his soft-power at the service of humankind, both for religious motives and for humanitarian reasons.

In doing so, he has adopted—consciously or unconsciously, it does not matter—the strategies known as agenda setting on different levels. On the first level, Pope Francis is well aware of the media’s role in setting the public agenda. Only if the media talks about refugees and migrants, will citizens ask their representatives in democratic regimes to take action. Conversely, if the media does not talk about this problem, distracted by other issues or simply tired of covering these various human dramas happening around the globe, no government will commit itself to contribute to any solution.

Under a clear understanding of newsworthiness, the Holy Father develops an intense activity to ‘make news’ regarding migrants and refugees, using all the means at his disposal to attract the reporters’ attention through stories with impact, timeliness, proximity, human interest and conflict. His credibility is based in his family background, his personal track-record as priest and bishop, and his decisions as the head of the Catholic Church.

Francis also uses his direct digital channels, specially his Twitter account (one of the most influential accounts in terms of number of followers and of re-tweets), to raise awareness around the migrant and refugee issues.

For these reasons, and under the pressure of populism and centripetal forces, Pope Francis has become a vocal and credible spokesperson for migrants and refugees in public arena and among many international leaders, with speeches, trips and symbolic actions.

Pope Francis is also active in framing the issue, or second-level agenda setting. His strategy is based in three principles: he has a vision that inspires all his actions; he has a proactive mentality that pushes him to take the lead in promoting social change; and he gives the maximum possible attention to content.

With these principles in mind, Pope Francis has reframed the issue in three main aspects. In first place, he insists that the migration issue, both in media coverage or in political discussion, should not be centered on numbers, but on people: telling the story of those brothers and sisters, with names and traditions, families and professions, hopes and dreams.

In second place, Pope Francis is trying to switch the present frame of presenting migrants and refugees as a threat to be feared (security, cultural identity, citizens’ jobs
and rights, religious harmony), to an opportunity to create better and more human societies.

Finally, Pope Francis insists on the fact that taking the migrant drama to heart is not a political issue on which believers, and in particular Catholics, can have different views or take different positions. A positive and active concern about those in need is not an optional but a core principle of Christianity, the essence of the Gospel, and one of the main consequences of following Jesus. There are different ‘technical’ options on how to solve their problems, but the Christian approach is that we are responsible of these brothers and sisters of ours. We have a moral duty to them, based on the Gospel.

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