



MAIN ARTICLES

Pope Francis's Theology of Interreligious Relations in the Asian Context

A Teologia das relações inter-religiosas do Papa Francisco no contexto asiático

Fransiska Widyawati *

ABSTRACT: This article examines Pope Francis's theological legacy in the field of interreligious relations within the Asian context. Its central objective is to integrate the pontiff's written magisterium with his pastoral encounters in order to outline a new theological framework for the Church from a global perspective. The research adopts a qualitative methodology of theological analysis, based on a documentary examination of the exhortations and encyclicals *Evangelii Gaudium*, Document on Human Fraternity, and Fratelli Tutti, in dialogue with a contextual theological interpretation of his apostolic journeys undertaken between 2014 and 2024. It is argued that Francis proposes a reconfiguration of the relationship between evangelization and dialogue, understanding them as mutually constitutive dimensions rather than parallel processes. The findings point to a significant shift toward an "incarnational praxis" that validates religious plurality as part of the divine plan and prioritizes a culture of encounter grounded in humility and ethical responsibility. By examining thematic patterns of symbolic, ethical, and spiritual dialogue on the Asian continent, the study demonstrates how Francis's "theology of encounter" is embodied in gestures of reconciliation and public appeals for justice. As a contribution, the research offers a theological synthesis capable of bridging the gap between official doctrine and lived experience. It thus proposes a coherent model for Asian Christianity to confront the rise of religious nationalism and to act in public spheres marked by tensions, reaffirming dialogue not as an optional strategy, but as a constitutive, and sacramental, requirement of the Christian mission.

Keywords: Pope Francis. Asia. Inter-religious Dialogue. Theology.

* Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng, Ruteng, Nusa Tenggara Timur, Indonésia.

RESUMO: Este artigo examina o legado teológico do Papa Francisco no campo das relações inter-religiosas no contexto asiático. Seu objetivo central é integrar o magistério escrito do pontífice com seus encontros pastorais, a fim de delinear um novo arcabouço teológico para a Igreja em perspectiva global. A pesquisa adota uma metodologia qualitativa de análise teológica, baseada no exame documental das exortações e encíclicas *Evangelii Gaudium*, Documento sobre a Fraternidade Humana e *Fratelli Tutti*, em diálogo com uma interpretação teológica contextual de suas viagens apostólicas realizadas entre 2014 e 2024. Argumenta-se que Francisco propõe uma reconfiguração da relação entre evangelização e diálogo, compreendendo-os como dimensões mutuamente constitutivas, e não como processos paralelos. Os resultados indicam uma mudança significativa em direção a uma “práxis encarnacional”, que valida a pluralidade religiosa como parte do desígnio divino e privilegia uma cultura do encontro, alicerçada na humildade e na responsabilidade ética. Ao examinar padrões temáticos de diálogo simbólico, ético e espiritual no continente asiático, o estudo demonstra como a “teologia do encontro” de Francisco se corporifica em gestos de reconciliação e em apelos públicos por justiça. Como contribuição, a pesquisa oferece uma síntese teológica capaz de superar a distância entre a doutrina oficial e a experiência vivida. Propõe, assim, um modelo consistente para o cristianismo asiático enfrentar o avanço do nacionalismo religioso e atuar em esferas públicas marcadas por tensões, reafirmando o diálogo não como estratégia opcional, mas como exigência constitutiva — e sacramental — da missão cristã.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Papa Francisco. Ásia. Diálogo inter-religioso. Teologia.

Introduction

Asia is the continent where Christ was born and Christianity first took root, yet Christian faith remains a minority tradition, un-Asian, amid rich religious and cultural diversity (Brown; Tran, 2020, p. 197). Except for the Philippines and Timor-Leste, Catholic communities in Asia survive as small minorities alongside majority religious traditions such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. It challenges the Church to engage creatively and respectfully with Asia’s pluralistic societies, fostering mutual understanding without compromising its core convictions. Despite their modest numbers, Catholic communities across Asia have shown both stability and growth in certain regions, making the continent a field of hope in the global Catholic landscape. The Asian are active participants in, and representatives of, the Global Church on equal footing with any other Catholic community (Casanova; Phan, 2023; Chambon 2025). The reality invites deeper theological reflection on how minority status shape’s Catholic identity, mission, and dialogue within pluralistic society.

During the pontificate of Pope Francis, special attention has been directed toward Asia. From his first apostolic journey to South Korea in August

2014 to his more recent pilgrimage to Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, and Singapore in September 2024, Francis has consistently chosen Asia as a venue for theological encounters across religions and cultures (Reardon, 2018, p. 215-244; Chambon, 2024, p. 150-152; Lynch, 2019, p. 258-373). His visits have become defining moments of interreligious dialogue, demonstrating that being Catholic in Asia entails immersion in encounters with other faiths. By prioritizing Asia, Francis underscores the continent's role as a testing ground for the Church's commitment to pluralism and peaceful coexistence. His repeated presence also signals a strategic theological vision, that the vitality of Catholicism depends on its ability to engage Asia's diverse religious landscapes with humility and creativity (Phan, 2022; Phan, 2015a; Reardon, 2018, p. 216).

Well before Pope Francis stressed this orientation, the Catholic Church in Asia had already developed a distinctive theological identity: the "theology of dialogue." The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), established in 1970, has consistently highlighted dialogue with other religions, cultural engagement, and solidarity with the poor as the hallmarks of the Asian Church (Cheah, 2020, p. 1-13; Mee Yin Yuen, 2023, p. 142). Influential theologians such as Aloysius Pieris (1993; 2007), Michael Amaladoss (2021), Peter Phan (2003; 2023), and Felix Wilfred (2018; 2024) have articulated approaches that view interreligious dialogue not simply as a strategy of friendship, but as an authentic and constitutive expression of faith in the Asian context. Within this framework, the Church appears not as a hegemonic force but as a dialogical actor walking alongside other traditions in a common search for truth, justice, and peace.

However, although several studies discuss Pope Francis's general approach to interreligious dialogue, limited attention has been given to the theological integration between his magisterial documents and his specific pastoral encounters across Asia. While existing literature often treats his encyclicals and his apostolic journeys as separate categories, the former as theoretical and the latter as purely symbolic, there is a significant gap in understanding how his "dialogue in action" in Asia actually informs and radicalizes his formal magisterium. This study seeks to bridge that gap by examining how Francis's theological vision was not merely reinforced by, but actively embodied through, his immersion in Asia's pluralistic realities. By synthesizing his writings with his lived encounters, this research uncovers a cohesive theological legacy that provides a practical, grounded model for the global Church.

This study seeks to examine how Pope Francis's theological vision and legacy shape the practice of interreligious dialogue across the continent. Two main approaches are undertaken: first, an analysis of magisterial documents in which Pope Francis's theology of interreligious dialogue is articulated; and second, an exploration of the lived dialogues he has engaged in during

his visits to Asian countries. The documents under consideration include *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Document on Human Fraternity and Fratelli Tutti. The countries visited include South Korea, Singapore, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, China, Bangladesh, and Egypt. The aim of this study is to uncover the luminous theological foundations that constitute the Pope's legacy. It offers a resource for learning and a point of departure for further developing this theology within the Asian context. His legacy provides a model for the Church and other religions worldwide.

By situating Pope Francis's engagement within the streams of transmission theology and Asian contextual theology, this study questions how do the integration of Pope Francis's magisterial teachings and his lived pastoral encounters in Asia constitute a new theological framework for interreligious dialogue? To address this question, the research pursues several key objectives through a cohesive narrative approach. First, it undertakes a critical analysis of the evolution of interreligious thought within key magisterial documents, specifically *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Document on Human Fraternity, and Fratelli Tutti. Following this textual foundation, the study examines the thematic patterns, symbolic, ethical, and spiritual, emerging from Francis's apostolic journeys across the Asian continent, providing an empirical counterpart to his written doctrine. Finally, by synthesizing these theoretical and pastoral elements, the study aims to uncover a coherent theological legacy that bridges the gap between official doctrine and "incarnational" praxis. This study argues that his apostolic visits have produced a paradigm shift in global Catholicism. Interreligious dialogue is no longer an optional pastoral strategy but a sacramental dimension of Church life that prioritizes relational presence.

1 Pope Francis's Documents in an Asian Perspective on Interreligious Dialogue

Pope Francis's theology of interreligious relations is expressed both in his writings and in his concrete actions. He developed ideas rooted in earlier Church initiatives, especially *Nostra Aetate* (Farrell, 2016, p. 67-72; Traore, 2021, p. 244-274), which marked a decisive shift from conversion to dialogue by affirming the value of other religious traditions and making mutual understanding a moral duty. Grounded in incarnational witness, the Church is called not to conquer but to accompany, learn, and grow with others. *Nostra Aetate* also teaches that dialogue enriches Christian faith itself, as engagement with Buddhist meditation, Islamic ethics, or Hindu wisdom strengthens shared commitments to humanitarian action, justice, and peace. Interreligious dialogue has therefore become central to modern Catholic identity (Borelli, 2023, p. 300; Ellis, 2020). Under Francis,

these principles gain renewed vitality through *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Document on Human Fraternity, and *Fratelli Tutti*, each advancing a theology of dialogue with particular relevance for the Asian context.

1.1 Evangelii Gaudium

Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel) is Pope Francis's 2013 apostolic exhortation on the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world. In its opening paragraph, he calls the entire Church to embark on a new chapter of evangelization (EG, n. 1). He argues that in a rapidly changing world, the Church must embody a joyful, outward-facing evangelization that renews its missionary orientation and responds to contemporary crises, including those affecting relations between Christians and other religious communities. For Francis, proclamation and interreligious dialogue are inseparable; Thus, EG carries significant implications for interreligious theology, especially in Asia.

Moving beyond earlier paradigms that viewed other religions through deficiency or partial truth, EG articulates a dialogical, culturally attentive, and pastorally grounded mission. This mission, centered on encounter, cooperation, and mutual enrichment, is particularly relevant in Asia's religiously plural and socially unequal societies. It marks a shift from pre-Vatican II ecclesiology and even from the cautious openness of *Nosstra Aetate* and *Unitatis Redintegratio*. In contrast to later post-conciliar tendencies to reassert Catholic centrality, Francis advances a movement from guarded tolerance to active, reciprocal engagement.

In EG (n. 238), Francis identifies three forms of dialogue: with the state, with society (including culture and science), and with followers of other religions. EG (n. 244-246) urges renewed ecumenical dialogue and laments divisions within Christianity that have contributed to conflicts, including in Asia and Africa. EG (n. 250-254) further emphasizes interreligious dialogue as essential for global peace and therefore a responsibility of all religious communities. Such dialogue, marked by sincerity and friendship, must uphold the intrinsic link between dialogue and proclamation. Genuine openness requires steadfastness in one's own faith identity while remaining receptive to the traditions of others. Evangelization and interreligious dialogue thus become mutually enriching. EG also highlights relations with Islam, whose followers share belief in the one merciful God.

In EG (n. 255-256), Francis underscores the importance of a healthy pluralism that respects differences and existing values. He warns against reducing religion to a privatized sphere confined to individual conscience or restricted to religious buildings. Such privatization, he argues, risks becoming a new form of discrimination, especially if respect for non-believers is imposed in a way that silences the convictions of the believing majority

or disregards the richness of religious traditions. Over time, such dynamics foster resentment rather than peace.

A close reading of EG reveals Francis's central theological emphasis in interreligious relations: the inseparability of evangelization and dialogue. He moves beyond deficit-based views of other religions toward a model of mutual enrichment shaped by cultural attentiveness and pastoral humility. Dialogue, in this vision, is not a tactical concession but an essential expression of the Gospel in a religiously diverse world. Francis maintains that strong faith identity and genuine openness are not contradictory but mutually sustaining. Ultimately, he envisions a healthy pluralism in which reciprocal engagement among religions becomes indispensable for social harmony and global peace.

Interpreting EG within the Asian context highlights its particular relevance for societies marked by deep religious pluralism, persistent socio-economic inequalities, and complex political realities. Francis's call for joyful evangelization resonates in a region where Christianity is a minority tradition embedded within ancient religious civilizations. In such settings, evangelization must unfold through dialogical presence, cultural attentiveness, and solidarity with the marginalized rather than doctrinal assertion. This vision aligns with leading Asian theologians such as Aloysius Pieris (1993; 2007), who insists that mission in Asia must engage both the religions and the poor; Raimon Panikkar (1999), whose cosmo-theandric vision emphasizes dialogical interrelatedness; Paul Knitter (2013; 2014), who advances a mutuality model of religions; and Peter Phan (2003; 2015b), who stresses inculturation and multiple belonging. Francis's orientation coheres with these insights by grounding mission in encounter, mutual enrichment, and kenotic openness to the religious other.

At the same time, EG's broader theological posture corresponds to concerns raised by Asian scholars such as Michael Amaladoss (2001) and Felix Wilfred (2018). Amaladoss argues that authentic Christian witness in Asia must foster social harmony and interreligious peacebuilding, while Wilfred critiques religious nationalism and exclusionary politics. Francis's emphasis on sincere, friendly, and reciprocal dialogue mirrors Amaladoss's call for dialogue as a way of life and Wilfred's defense of pluralism that respects both majority convictions and minority rights. In this sense, EG provides not only a renewed mandate for the Church's mission in Asia but also a normative framework for engaging the region's contested public spheres, where religious coexistence remains essential yet fragile.

Ultimately, EG offers a blueprint for minority Christian communities in Asia: deepen contextual theology, build interfaith partnerships, and embody Gospel joy through social cooperation. By doing so, Asian Catholicism contributes humility, synodality, and civic pluralism to the universal Church's

mission in a religiously diverse world (Jehaut; Julivadistanto, 2023, p. 237-250). Finally, this blueprint is not a static artifact. Asia's unique landscape continually challenges the Church to discern how the document can be authentically inculcated. There remain persistent obstacles that demand all parties engage in ongoing reflection and concrete struggle within their specific, localized contexts.

1.2 The Document on Human Fraternity

Pope Francis's visit to the United Arab Emirates on 3 February 2019 marked a major milestone in interreligious dialogue and opened new avenues for global discussions on tolerance. On 4 February 2019, in Abu Dhabi, he and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, signed the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, which now serves as a key roadmap for promoting peace and harmonious coexistence among religious communities.

The document articulates a comprehensive vision for interreligious relations grounded in dialogue, mutual cooperation, and shared ethical responsibility. It affirms that a culture of dialogue must serve as the primary path for engagement among religious communities, while reciprocal collaboration functions as a moral code, and mutual understanding becomes the guiding method. The document calls upon global leaders, policymakers, and religious communities to promote tolerance, peaceful coexistence, and the protection of innocent lives. It urges collective action to end wars, conflict, environmental destruction, and the moral decline that increasingly characterizes contemporary societies. Central to this appeal is the recovery of fundamental values, peace, justice, goodness, beauty, and human fraternity, as essential foundations for global stability (HF, 2019).

The document also warns of the moral dangers accompanying certain forms of modern progress, particularly when technological or economic advancement is detached from spiritual and ethical responsibility. Such conditions, it is argued, contribute to widespread frustration, alienation, and despair, creating fertile ground for atheistic or agnostic extremism, religious fundamentalism, and other forms of blind fanaticism. These dynamics, evident across both East and West, have produced what the authors describe as the gradual emergence of a third world war in pieces. In response, the document emphasizes the need to renew religious consciousness, especially among younger generations, through sound education and adherence to authentic moral and religious teachings (HF, 2019).

A central claim of the document is that religion must never be used to justify violence, hatred, or extremism. It attributes such distortions to political manipulation and misguided interpretations that exploit religious sentiment for narrow political or economic gain. The text therefore calls

for an end to the instrumentalization of God's name to legitimize killing, terrorism, or oppression, affirming that God does not desire human beings to harm one another. Aligned with earlier international declarations, the document highlights the divinely intended plurality of religions, cultures, and identities. Interreligious dialogue is thus understood as a shared space for advancing spiritual, human, and social values. It also underscores the obligation to protect places of worship and condemns all forms of terrorism, including financial or strategic support for violent groups, as grave threats to global peace (HF, 2019).

Pope Francis's central theological theme in interreligious relations is the affirmation of human fraternity as a God-given foundation for dialogue, cooperation, and shared moral responsibility. He understands interreligious engagement not as a strategic gesture but as an essential expression of authentic faith in a world marked by conflict and fragmentation. The Document on Human Fraternity reflects this conviction by insisting that religions must work together to protect human dignity, promote peace, and resist every attempt to justify violence in God's name. Francis also emphasizes that genuine dialogue requires both a strong religious identity and a deep openness to the spiritual and ethical insights of others. Ultimately, he envisions interreligious dialogue as a transformative path toward global coexistence, rooted in justice, compassion, and the shared pursuit of the common good.

Pope Francis's theology of human fraternity aligns closely with the concerns of contemporary Asian theologians who, after 2019, have increasingly emphasized interreligious solidarity as a response to rising nationalism, economic inequality, and religious polarization. Scholars such as Peter C. Phan (2020; 2023) argue that Francis's affirmation of the divinely willed plurality of religions provides a theological foundation for Asian Christians living as minorities within Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Confucian-majority societies, where coexistence is not optional but existential. Edmund Chia (2014) highlights that Francis's insistence on dialogue as the path and mutual understanding as the method strengthens the Asian dialogue of life, where interreligious relations are lived daily through shared struggles for justice, peace, and ecological survival.

Francis's vision affirms the plurality of religions as an expression of the wise divine will, a claim that directly confronts narratives of religious superiority and exclusion. This stance does not imply a theological relativism that equates all truth-claims, but rather acknowledges a permissive divine will that allows for diversity as a space for human freedom and mutual enrichment. By grounding dialogue in dignity, reciprocity, and shared ethical responsibility, he offers a theological counterweight to the pressures faced by minority communities across the continent. His approach strengthens their resilience not by encouraging withdrawal, but by empo-

wering them to participate confidently in the public sphere as partners in shaping the common good. In this sense, Francis reframes minority status not as a deficit but as a privileged vantage point for witnessing humility, solidarity, and peace.

At the same time, his theology challenges the rise of religious nationalism that threatens social cohesion in many Asian societies. By insisting that no tradition can claim a monopoly on truth or moral authority, he exposes the spiritual poverty of ideologies that weaponize religion for political gain. Instead, he provides a shared moral language, rooted in fraternity, justice, and compassion, that enables Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and others to collaborate without erasing their differences. This framework does more than encourage polite coexistence. It calls religious communities to work together in confronting poverty, violence, ecological destruction, and the erosion of human dignity. In doing so, Francis positions interreligious cooperation not as an optional gesture of goodwill but as a theological mandate essential for Asia's future.

1.3 Fratelli Tutti (2020)

Fratelli Tutti articulates Pope Francis's theological vision of interreligious dialogue by grounding it in a universal fraternity modeled on Saint Francis of Assisi. Saint Francis's willingness to cross boundaries (FT, n. 1) and his peaceful encounter with Sultan Malik al-Kamil (FT, n. 3) embody a dialogical posture that neither imposes doctrine nor provokes conflict. This humility shapes the Pope's call for communities that sustain one another in hope (FT, n. 8). Francis insists on openness to the world (FT, n. 12) against cultural fragmentation (FT, n. 13), affirming that divine compassion embraces all creation (FT, n. 59) and that the category of neighbor must be limitless (FT, n. 80-83). True dialogue requires self-transcendence (FT, n. 88-96) and builds an open society that integrates all (FT, n. 97-100).

This theological horizon expands in chapter four, which presents a heart open to the whole world and explicitly links interreligious dialogue to the Abu Dhabi Document (FT, n. 136). Chapter Six frames dialogue as the alternative to indifference and violence (FT, n. 199), critiques media dynamics that obstruct genuine encounters, and rejects relativism as an inadequate moral foundation (FT, n. 211). Life itself becomes the art of encounter (FT, n. 215).

Chapter seven deepens this vision by asserting that peace arises not from uniformity but from cooperative engagement. Drawing on the Korean bishops, Francis highlights justice, dialogue, reconciliation, and shared development as the foundations of peace. Forgiveness and reconciliation, central to Christianity and present in many religions, must avoid fatalism or intolerance (FT, n. 237). Jesus's rejection of violence (FT, n. 238) grounds

the call to resolve conflict through transparent and patient dialogue (FT, n. 244).

Chapter eight affirms that religions are called to serve global fraternity. Interreligious dialogue fosters friendship, peace, and shared moral values, as noted by the bishops of India (FT, n. 271). The Church recognizes truth and holiness in other religions (FT, n. 277), defends religious freedom for all (FT, n. 279), and affirms that peace among religions is possible through cooperation for the common good (FT, n. 281). Francis warns against fundamentalism (FT, n. 284) and, recalling his declaration with Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, insists that religion must never justify hatred or violence (FT, n. 285).

Asian scholars have engaged *Fratelli Tutti* as a timely contribution to interreligious dialogue and social healing in plural societies. Phan (2021) interprets the encyclical as advancing a new phase in the Catholic theology of religions, noting that its vision of universal fraternity resonates strongly with Asia's long-standing traditions of harmony, relationality, and coexistence. For Phan, the document affirms that fraternities must include believers of all religions and those of no religion. In South Asia, Felix Wilfred (2024) reads *Fratelli Tutti* as a critique of rising religious nationalism. He argues that the encyclical's rejection of violence in the name of religion and its insistence on the dignity of every person challenge political movements that manipulate religious identity. From the Philippines, Pilario (2024) emphasizes the encyclical's call for social friendship as particularly urgent in contexts marked by poverty, authoritarian tendencies, and interreligious tensions. He stresses that dialogue must be rooted in the lived experiences of marginalized communities. Many Indonesian Muslim scholar views *Fratelli Tutti* as complementary to the Abu Dhabi Document, aligning with Indonesia's Pancasila ethos which provides a shared ethical platform for Muslims and Christians to counter extremism and strengthen democratic pluralism.

Fratelli Tutti also provides a powerful counter-narrative to Asia's "plural and conflict-marked realities," where the rise of religious nationalism increasingly threatens social cohesion. In India, the surge of Hindu nationalism (*Hindutva*) pressures secular foundations, while in Myanmar, Buddhist nationalism has been instrumentalized to justify the exclusion of the Rohingya. By asserting that "no one can remain excluded" (FT, n. 121), Francis directly challenges these exclusionary politics, reframing religious identity as a bridge for fraternity rather than a tool for state-sponsored alienation.

Furthermore, the encyclical addresses the challenges of political Islam and sectarianism in Southeast Asia, where "us vs. them" rhetoric often creates deep social fractures. In nations like Indonesia and Pakistan, where

digital campaigns of hatred can fuel communal violence, Francis's call for "social friendship" (FT, Chapter 4) offers a vision of civic pluralism rooted in the inherent dignity of every person. This move from defensive communalism toward a "culture of encounter" is essential for rebuilding trust in societies where religious diversity is often viewed through the lens of political competition.

In conclusion, *Fratelli Tutti* must be received in Asia as an urgent ethical mandate for rebuilding a shared civic life across religious boundaries. It provides a robust theological basis for Christian minorities to navigate ancient religious landscapes not as outsiders, but as partners in the pursuit of the common good. Ultimately, the encyclical challenges all Asian faith traditions to reject the "culture of walls" and embrace a model of solidarity that transforms religious diversity from a perceived threat into a prerequisite for a fraternal society.

2 Pope Francis's Dialogue in Real Encounters

Pope Francis does not merely theorize about dialogue; he enacts it through a "theology of encounter" (Rivera, 2021, p. 90-134). His global journeys between 2014 and 2024 function as a living theological legacy, where the "dialogical mission" is embodied through three distinct yet overlapping patterns: symbolic gestures, ethical collaboration for justice, and spiritual reciprocity.

a. Symbolic Dialogue: The Power of Presence and Gesture

In Pope Francis's praxis, the symbolic gesture is far from a mere prelude to speech; it is a definitive theological statement in itself. This "incarnational praxis" asserts that physical presence often carries more weight than formal discourse, positioning the body as a primary site of witness (Rivera, 2021). During his 2014 pilgrimage to the Holy Land, this was poignantly illustrated through gestures of reconciliation that transcended traditional diplomacy. By making an unscheduled stop to touch and pray at the separation wall in Palestine, and offering silent reflection at the Western Wall and Yad Vashem, Francis modeled a theology of encounter rooted in shared human suffering and the quiet, persistent pursuit of peace (Mannion, 2017).

Expanding this model to the margins of the global Church, Francis's 2023 visit to Mongolia further refined the concept of "solidarity in smallness." In a nation where the Catholic community is a microscopic minority, the Pope consciously prioritized humble presence over institutional "numbers or dominance" (Zang, 2020; Fujisaki, 2023, p. 145-158). By engaging deeply

with the vast Buddhist and nomadic culture of the region, he demonstrated that authentic interreligious dialogue rests on a foundation of reciprocity and mutual respect rather than proselytization. This approach reinforces the idea that the Church's mission is not to overshadow the "other," but to exist alongside them as a respectful companion in the search for spiritual and ecological truth.

Finally, the Pope's 2014 journey to South Korea underscored that symbolic dialogue is inseparable from pastoral accompaniment and public mourning. His public embrace of the families of the Sewol ferry victims served as a powerful witness of the Church's solidarity with those on the margins of grief, moving the faith into the heart of a national trauma (Sang-Hun, 2014). This gesture transformed a moment of collective pain into a theological site of encounter, proving that compassion is the most potent language of the dialogical mission. Ultimately, these embodied actions suggest that before the Church can speak to a culture, it must first prove its willingness to stand, and suffer, with its people.

b. Ethical Dialogue: Justice, Peace, and Shared Responsibility

A recurring theme in Francis's global journeys is the conviction that interreligious dialogue serves as the only viable path to social cohesion and global peace. He reframes dialogue not as an ecclesiastical luxury, but as a vital vehicle for "social transformation, education, service, and peace-building" (Rivera, 2021). This ethical engagement was profoundly evident in his visits to Jordan and Bangladesh, where he positioned hospitality toward refugees, particularly the Rohingya, as a "humanitarian imperative" that transcends religious boundaries (Mannion, 2017; Catalano, 2022). By placing the suffering of the displaced at the center of the interfaith encounter, Francis demonstrates that the moral credibility of religions today depends on their collective ability to respond to the "cry of the poor."

In contexts marked by historical trauma and systemic violence, Francis utilizes ethical dialogue as a therapeutic tool for national healing. His missions to Sri Lanka and the Philippines focused on reconciliation after decades of civil war and conflict, asserting that religion must function as a bridge for healing historical wounds rather than a barrier (O'Connell, 2015, p. 28-29; Love, 2021, p. 53-65). This prophetic witness reached a global scale during his pilgrimage to Japan, where his critique of nuclear armament in Hiroshima and Nagasaki reframed the pursuit of peace as a shared ethical duty against global destruction (Rivera, 2021). Through these encounters, the Pope argues that authentic faith must manifest in a public theology that actively rejects violence and promotes the dignity of every human person.

Finally, the evolution of Francis's ethical framework is seen in his integration of "ecological stewardship" with civic pluralism. During his 2024 journey to Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, he linked interfaith encounter

directly to “human dignity and the care of our common home,” suggesting that the climate crisis is a unifying moral challenge for all religious traditions (Chambon, 2024). This strategy requires a delicate balance of “listening and presence,” as seen in his 2017 visit to Myanmar, where he navigated a sensitive Buddhist-majority context to advocate for inclusive peace without exacerbating sectarian tensions (San Win, 2018). Ultimately, these journeys confirm that for Francis, the ethical dimension of dialogue is a “non-negotiable” commitment to justice and the preservation of our shared humanity (Hedges, 2025).

c. Spiritual Dialogue: Shared Values and Mutual Transformation

Pope Francis’s real-world encounters suggest that authentic religious witnesses must be both “contextual and publicly engaged,” moving beyond abstract theory to seek out the “spiritual seeds” inherent in other traditions (Rivera, 2021). In his 2019 visit to Thailand, this was exemplified through his engagement with the Buddhist sangha, where he highlighted a “shared moral vocabulary” rooted in the universal values of compassion, simplicity, and a profound respect for life (Ruankool, 2022). By framing dialogue as a constructive collaboration rather than mere tolerance, Francis demonstrates that interreligious engagement is a primary vehicle for addressing modern crises such as human trafficking and environmental degradation through a unified moral front.

The power of this dialogical witness is further deepened through the shared language of sacrifice and ancestral respect, particularly evident during his 2014 journey to South Korea. By presiding over the beatification of 124 martyrs, Francis reframed the witness of martyrdom not as an exclusionary act, but as a formative expression of faith that resonates deeply within “Confucian-inspired moral communities” (Sang-Hun, 2014, unpaginated). This approach effectively bridges the gap between Catholic tradition and Asian cultural values, encouraging a “generational renewal” of faith that is both authentically Christian and culturally rooted, thereby proving that religious witness is most effective when it acknowledges and honors the ethical foundations of the host culture.

Ultimately, Francis’s journeys, most notably his 2023 visit to Mongolia, advance a model of “reciprocal learning” where the Church does not only teach but actively listens to the “ecological wisdom” of other traditions (Zang, 2020; Fujisaki, 2023, p. 145-158). By linking indigenous nomadic values and Buddhist spirituality to the ecological ethics of *Laudato Si’*, Francis underscores that the Church’s mission in a pluralistic world is a two-way street of spiritual enrichment. These encounters collectively prove that interreligious dialogue is far from a diplomatic formality; it is an “essential pastoral duty” anchored in an “ethical convergence of compassion” that unites all faiths in the service of humanity (Mannion, 2017).

Conclusion

This research synthesizes Pope Francis's encyclicals and apostolic journeys into a coherent theological framework, demonstrating that his "dialogical mission" marks a definitive shift from traditional triumphalism to a model of cultural humility. By analyzing *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Document on Human Fraternity, and *Fratelli Tutti*, this study contributes a clear articulation of how Francis validates religious plurality as a divinely willed gift rather than a pastoral obstacle.

The implications for the Church in Asia are profound: Francis's theology provides a rigorous, practical foundation for Christian minorities to navigate ancient religious landscapes. His alignment with Asian theologians, such as Pieris and Phan, affirms that authentic witness in a pluralistic world requires a "theology of encounter" that is both liberative and mutually transformative. Ultimately, this research underscores that for the modern Church, interreligious dialogue is no longer an elective outreach but a theological necessity for global fraternity.

List of Abbreviations

EG = Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*

HF = Document *Human Fraternity*

FT = Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*

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Fransiska Widyawati is Doctor in Religion and Cultural Studies. She is an Associate Professor at Theology of Education at Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng, Flores — Indonesia. Orcid.org/0000-0002-4248-4133. E-mail: fwidyawati10@gmail.com

Address: A Yani 10, Ruteng Flores
86518 Indonesia

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