



Media Competencies in the Communication of Faith in Pope Francis' Messages for World Communications Day (2014–2025).

Part One: Cognitive and Ethical Competencies

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Abstract: The article offers partial results of research on media competencies in the communication of faith, reconstructed on the basis of Pope Francis' Messages for the World Communications Day (2014–2025). The research problem focuses on identifying the competencies deemed essential for the Christian proclamation within the digital culture and on analysing their theological and anthropological grounds in the face of such contemporary challenges as disinformation, social polarisation, and the development of artificial intelligence. A three-stage qualitative content analysis (exploration—categorisation—interpretation) was supported by contextual validation through comparison with the relevant literature and the teaching of the Church. The analysis helped to define five equivalent categories of media competencies: cognitive, ethical, relational, technical, and spiritual (each with four subcategories). This article discusses the first two of them, i.e. cognitive competencies (related to the search for truth, critical discernment, and reflection) and ethical competencies (responsibility, the culture of encounter, the ethics of technology, resistance to disinformation). Their mutual complementarity and deep grounding in Christian anthropology and Francis' theology of communication were demonstrated. The messages show communication of the faith as an act of love, witness, and community-building, in which cognition and ethics constitute two inseparable dimensions of the mature presence of Christians in the media. The article concludes with seven findings and formative recommendations for media education and pastoral ministry in the context of digital culture. The remaining categories (relational, technical, and spiritual) will be discussed in a separate publication.

Keywords: communication of faith, disinformation, media and digital competencies, media literacy, Pope Francis, World Communications Day

1. Introduction

In the era of accelerated digitization, the globalization of information, and the development of artificial intelligence, the media are not only a space for the exchange of content, but also an educational and formative environment that impact interpersonal relationships, value systems, and the identity of individuals and social groups. In this context, the communication of the Christian faith faces a great challenge, as it requires preserving the integrity of the Gospel message while simultaneously making use of the technological potential of contemporary media. By publishing annual Messages for the World Communications Day from 2014 to 2025, Pope Francis provided a coherent insight into the role of the media in evangelization. One of his

principal indications is the necessity of developing media literacy that combines the theological dimension, rooted in Revelation and the mission of the Church, with the anthropological aspect, which respects the dignity of the person and the dynamic social relations.¹ The pontiff's messages both comment on the changing reality of communication and offer a unique agenda of media formation. They thus contribute to the integral vision of the Church's presence in the digital environment. The subject is acutely topical in the face of mediatisation of social life; it offers opportunities as well as poses challenges, e.g., polarisation, disinformation, cyberviolence, new forms of addictions (cf. *ChV* 88). That is precisely why media literacy and digital competencies are the key skill set of present-day evangelisers.

1.1. The Theoretical Background and Definitions of Key Terms

Reflection on media competencies² in the communication of faith requires grounding in two complementary fields: media studies and theological-anthropological perspectives. In media-studies approaches, media competencies comprise the ability to use media consciously, critically, and ethically in both receptive and productive roles across three dimensions: cognitive (understanding media mechanisms and critical content analysis), operational (practical skills in content creation and digital navigation), ethical (awareness of ethical and social consequences) (Rivoltella 2017, 57–98).

Polish literature largely follows this tripartite structure while placing greater emphasis on digital-age challenges (Ptaszek 2019; Ogonowska 2013, 2016) and educational contexts (Drzewiecki 2013; Szajda 2021). Recent contributions, particularly concerning Generation Z, further highlight the importance of self-regulation and critical thinking in complex digital environments (Jabłońska 2024). Compared with Pier Cesare Rivoltella's model, Polish definitions reveal strong structural similarity but differ in their stronger focus on digital-specific issues and pedagogical applications.

Media competencies are the outcome of media education (media literacy). From an ethical viewpoint, media are rooted in the relational and personalist nature of the human person and the call to communion (Drożdż 2005, 266). According to Rivoltella, media education is systematic educational activity that integrates technical, critical, and ethical skills (Rivoltella 2017, 18), whereas in a theological perspective it constitutes formation of senders and receivers in the spirit of Christian values (Adamski and Łęcicki 2016, 18). Monika Jabłońska proposes a three-paradigm

¹ Francis, Messages for the World Communications Days (WCD) from 2014 to 2025, see <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications.html>. Hereinafter in the article references to the messages will be marked by the following abbreviation: WCD 2014/48. The first number indicates the year of the message, the second one its consecutive number. Numbers of the messages are continuous since the first document of this type, issued in 1967 for the World Social Communications Day.

² For the evolution of the concept of media, information, and digital competencies, see Gruhn and Brzózka-Złotnicka 2014; Chmielewski 2016; Ogonowska and Walecka-Rynduch 2024.

approach (transmission, critical, and practice-oriented) and stresses the need for their integration, especially for Generation Z (Jabłońska 2024, 35, 271, 293).

1.2. Review of Relevant Literature (*Status Quaestionis*)

Research on media competencies in the communication of faith as presented in Pope Francis's Messages for World Communications Day combines theological and media-studies perspectives. Józef Majewski (2020) analyses media in the family context (WCD 2015/49, 2018/52; *AL*), emphasizing balance between media use and direct relationships. Wojciech Misztal (2018) links the 2014–2017 messages to the presence of God, proposing competencies of conscious communication, critical information evaluation, and dialogue in hope (pneumatological dimension). Mateusz Podlecki (2017, 2018) examines fake news (WCD 2018/52), highlighting source credibility assessment, patience, and verification as responses to disinformation. Katarzyna Pokorna-Ignatowicz (2020) interprets new media as spaces of “culture of encounter” and “journalism of peace” (WCD 2014/48, 2018/52), underscoring competencies for dialogue and ethical journalism. Robert Nęcek (2016) explores media education in Francis's social teaching as formation for conscious reception and creation of content in line with Christian values. Marek Weresa (2019) studies the informational mission of media (2014–2017), stressing verification, combating disinformation, and promoting truth for the common good. Damian Koper (2024) examines the social role of digital media, showing their integration with pastoral mission and competencies supporting relationships, solidarity, and ethical technology use for evangelization.

More recent works broaden the scope: Noel Asiones et al. (2025) address intercultural dimensions and thematic evolution (from culture of encounter to AI and the “delicacy of hope”); Mario Knezović et al. (2020) identify coherent promotion of truth, hope, and relationships in the first six messages; Veronika Müllerová and Jaroslav Franc (2023) analyze adaptation to social media and digital leadership competencies (Francis on Twitter); Aldona Maria Piwko (2025) demonstrates coherence between the World Communications Day Messages and religious diplomacy in the Middle East, emphasizing intercultural dialogue skills.

The research gap consists in an absence of a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the full corpus of Pope Francis's Messages for the World Communications Day (2014–2025) exists from a theological-anthropological perspective on media competencies in the communication of faith. Existing studies are limited to selected messages or themes (e.g., dialogue, fake news) and do not cover the latest texts on artificial intelligence (WCD 2024/58) and the “delicacy of hope” in the face of technicism (WCD 2025/59). The present article fills this gap by reconstructing and offering a theological-anthropological interpretation of the media competencies articulated by Pope Francis.

1.3. Research Question, Objective and Topicality of the Subject Matter

The research question was defined as follows: which media competencies are promoted in Pope Francis' Messages for the World Communications Day in the years 2014–2025 as vital for the communication of faith in the digital culture, especially in the face of disinformation, social polarisation, and the development of artificial intelligence? How do these competencies reflect the theological (kerygma, hope, mercy, the evangelising mission) and anthropological (the dignity of the human person, relationality, dialogue, community-building) foundations of the Christian proclamation?

The overarching objective of the study is the identification, reconstruction, and a theological and anthropological interpretation of the key media competencies present in Pope Francis' Messages for the World Communications Day (2014–2025). The detailed aims include: to distinguish and systematise the media competencies postulated in the examined corpus of texts; to situate the reconstructed competencies in the broader context of the Church's teaching on the media and evangelisation; and to formulate practical recommendations for media education, catechesis, and communicational formation of clerics and lay persons in the digital culture reality.

At the theoretical level, the analysis may expand the discourse on religious communication by integrating the perspectives of theology and media studies. In the broader social context, the study may contribute to reflection on digital ethics, promoting communication grounded in Christian values for the sake of the common good. The outcomes of the study may contribute both to practical theology (theology of communication and media) and to Catholic media pedagogy, laying the groundwork for designing formation programmes addressing the current challenges of the digital civilisation.

1.4. Materials and Selection of Sources

The primary source material consists of Pope Francis' Messages for World Communications Day (2014–2025), published on the official website of the Holy See. The collection consists of 12 documents (approx. 55 pages), which will be reviewed together in order to capture the thematic continuity. It is complemented by the literature on the subject discussed in the review and Italian studies from a series of commentaries on Pope Francis' messages.³ The criteria for selecting literature included: (1) relevance to the issues of media competence and communication of the faith; (2) the time frame 2000–2025; and (3) analyses of the Church's teaching about the media from the perspective of theology and media studies.

³ It is a series of comments by Italian social scientists, theologians and philosophers to Pope Francis' Messages for World Communications Day. The series is published by Scholé – Morcelliana from Brescia, cf. Bibliography.

1.5. Theoretical Framework, Research Methodology and Analytical Procedure

1.5.1. Faith-Based Media Literacy as a Theoretical Framework of Media Competencies in the Communication of Faith

The concept of faith-based media literacy (FBML) serves as the primary theoretical and interpretative framework of this study, integrating media education with the theological understanding of the communication of faith. The term was introduced in American Christian education by Stephanie Iaquinto and John Keeler (2012, 20–24), who define FBML as the formation of media competencies in the light of Christian anthropology, ethics, and spirituality. Their model rests on five principles: (1) media actively shape human perception of reality; (2) media values often contradict Gospel values; (3) critical analysis is essential for discerning truth; (4) media education forms Christians for responsible social participation; and (5) media competencies foster spiritual and moral growth.

In the American tradition the model has been further developed by Heidi A. Campbell, who explores digital religion and spiritual formation (Campbell and Tsuria 2022); by Paul A. Soukup, who focuses on the theological and hermeneutical dimension (Soukup 2002); and Maria Rosalia Tenorio de Azevedo, who examines faith-based media literacy as education for social justice and ethical media engagement (Tenorio de Azevedo 2019). In Europe, Rivoltella (2017, 2020), a leading Catholic theorist of media education, proposes media education as a “pedagogy of values” (“educazione ai media come educazione ai valori”), in which media competencies are inseparable from moral and spiritual formation, leading to discernment in the Holy Spirit and community-building. All the above authors emphasise that faith-inspired media education is not defensive in character. Rather than being limited to protection against the influence of the media, it constitutes a positive proposal for spiritual and social formation within the culture of communication.

In the Polish context, parallel concepts have been developed independently by Bishop Adam Lepa, who proposed the iconosphere—logosphere—ethosphere triad (Lepa 2003, 2010); by Piotr Drzewiecki (2013, 45–68; 2024, 327); by Andrzej Adamski and Grzegorz Łęcicki, who work on media theology and inculturation of the Gospel (Adamski and Łęcicki 2016); by Łęcicki, who studies media education in the service of catechesis (Łęcicki 2011); and by Mirosław Chmielewski, who analyzes media competencies in the communication of faith (Chmielewski 2016, 2019, 2020). All these authors share the conviction that faith-inspired media education is not merely defensive but constitutes a positive proposal for the integral formation of the person, enabling responsible, creative, and evangelizing participation in digital culture.

In the current study, the FBML concept (broadly understood, beyond the literal sense) serves as a theoretical and interpretative framework, enabling the

reconstruction and theological-anthropological analysis of the media competencies present in Pope Francis' Messages for the World Communications Day (2014–2025).

1.5.2. Research Methodology and Analytical Procedure

This study will apply qualitative content analysis in a hermeneutical approach, in line with the approach of Mariette Bengtsson (2016). This means that the papal messages will be read not solely as linguistic material to be categorised, but as texts rooted in a specific ecclesial, theological, and historical context, while their interpretation will consider the author's intention and the researcher's awareness of pre-understanding. The analysis will be hermeneutically inspired, which means that—although it will not aim at a full reconstruction of meaning in the sense of Gadamer's "fusion of horizons"—it will preserve the essential elements of theological hermeneutics described by Werner G. Jeanrond: the dialogical nature of the interpretative process, openness to multilayered meanings, and the grounding of the text's reading in the experience of the faith community (cf. Jeanrond 1999, 142–68, 186–208).

The reliability of the analysis will be reinforced through contextual validation, consisting in comparing the results with theologically and thematically related Church documents, which will enable the verification and deepening of the interpretative accuracy. Such a research procedure is consistent with the methodological standards of qualitative research in the humanities and theological sciences, in which a theoretical interpretative framework, a transparent coding path, and interpretative coherence constitute the fundamental criteria of credibility (cf. Mayring 2014, 107–9).

The research procedure will follow a three-stage approach and will include:

- 1) Exploratory stage: the aim of this stage will be a preliminary mapping of the research field through a critical, focused reading of the full corpus of Pope Francis' Messages for the World Communications Day (2014–2025). During the analysis, a purposeful open coding procedure will be applied, aimed at identifying recurring theological and anthropological motifs as well as all passages explicitly or implicitly referring to media competencies. This stage will lead to the extraction of analytical units, defined as semantically autonomous fragments of text (a sentence, a few sentences, or a short paragraph) that express a coherent idea concerning one or more media competencies. These units will be further systematised in the subsequent stages of the study.
- 2) Categorisation stage: development and operationalisation of media competence categories through a multi-source comparative analysis of the papal messages, scholarly literature, and Church documents. The main categories will be elaborated into subcategories, after which the textual units will be coded into the appropriate (sub)categories, accompanied by the author's explanatory notes.
- 3) Interpretation stage: an in-depth theological and anthropological analysis of the categories of media competencies obtained in light of the relevant literature and the teaching of the Church on the media and evangelisation. This stage will help

anchor the outcomes in the broader Catholic reflection on the digital culture and formulate theoretical conclusions and practical recommendations for pastoral care and media education.

The designed research procedure will enable the reconstruction of media competencies present in the communication of faith in Pope Francis' Messages for the World Communications Day, as well as their thorough interpretation in a theological and anthropological perspective. The results of the content analysis (exploratory and categorial stages) will be presented in the "Results" section. Their significance, relation to the broader context of Church teaching, and the theological and pastoral conclusions (interpretative stage) will be developed and discussed in the Discussion and Conclusions sections.

2. Results

The presentation of the results of the qualitative content analysis of Pope Francis' Messages for the World Communications Day (2014–2025) is preceded by a description of the categorisation and coding procedure, which had a number of stages and was iterative (see Table 1). In the first stage, an in-depth, focused reading of the entire corpus of texts was carried out to identify recurring theological-anthropological motifs and passages relating to media competencies. The second, categorial stage, began with the adoption of Rivoltella's tripartite typology (cognitive, ethical, and relational competencies) as a preliminary coding framework. The iterative comparison of the data and the confrontation with the scholarly literature and Church documents⁴ helped to single out two additional emergent categories: technical competencies and spiritual competencies. Ultimately, a five-element model comprising 20 subcategories was developed.

In the third stage, 314 coding units were coded. Each unit was first open-coded and subsequently allocated to the categories and subcategories of the final pattern.

The reliability and credibility of the analysis were ensured through: iterative readings of the texts; consultation of the categories and interpretations with an independent expert in pastoral theology and pedagogy (peer debriefing); contextual validation by confronting the results with Rivoltella's model and with the teaching of the Church; and the researcher's systematic reflection.

⁴ *Directory for Catechesis* clearly indicated that the digital culture poses challenges for the Church in terms of critical, ethical, and spiritual formation (cf. DC 213–14; 359–72). *Antiqua et Nova* stresses the need to humanise communication in the age of AI (cf. AN 7–12), while *Towards Full Presence* recalls e.g., that the presence of Christians in the media cannot by any means be only technical, but should be an embodied form of the witness to faith.

Table 1. Analytical procedure diagram

Analysis stage	Procedure description	Numerical and descriptive result
Source corpus	Complete set of texts subject to analysis	12 messages of Pope Francis for the World Communication Day (2014–2025)
Analytical units	Object subject to content analysis—each message treated as a separate semantic whole	12 analytical units (one message per year)
Coding units	Semantic identification of autonomous text passages (most often one sentence or a short paragraph) applying to media competencies, code assignment	314 coding units
Main categories	Grouping 314 coding units into five main areas of competencies	5 categories: cognitive, ethical, relational, technical, spiritual
Subcategories	Precise definition of individual categories in line with highlighted aspects of competencies	20 subcategories (4 per category)

Source: own elaboration.

The results of the analysis indicate that Francis' teaching focuses on five main categories of key media competencies, each developing a crucial dimension of communicating faith in the digital age.

Table 2. Structure of the key media competencies in the communication of the faith in the messages Pope Francis (2014–2025)

Category	Subcategories
Cognitive Competencies, <i>n</i> = 78	(1) Awareness of the role of truth; (2) Critical analysis and discernment; (3) Understanding media mechanisms; (4) Reflection and silence
Ethical Competencies, <i>n</i> = 65	(1) Responsibility for content; (2) Culture of encounter; (3) Avoiding disinformation; (4) Ethics in the face of new technologies
Relational Competencies, <i>n</i> = 75	(1) Dialogue and openness to the other; (2) Empathy and sensitivity; (3) Inclusive language; (4) Building a community
Technical Competencies, <i>n</i> = 44	(1) Skilful use of digital tools; (2) Creating multimedia content in the spirit of mission; (3) Safety and protection of privacy; (4) Adaptation to new technologies
Spiritual Competencies, <i>n</i> = 52	(1) Rootedness in the Gospel; (2) Spiritual discernment in the media; (3) Witness and mission in the digital world; (4) Prayer and silence as a source of communication

Source: Author's own elaboration based on content analysis.

Due to the extensive nature of the results obtained, this article presents only a detailed analysis of the first two of the five main competence categories—cognitive and ethical—together with their corresponding subcategories. The analytical units selected from the messages for these two categories make up 46% of the full source corpus (with 314 units).

2.1. Cognitive Competencies (n = 78)

In the analysis of Pope Francis' messages from 2014–2025, four subcategories of cognitive competencies were identified: awareness of the role of truth, critical analysis and discernment, understanding media mechanisms, and reflection and silence. Each of these was present in the examined material in a recurring manner, confirmed by multiple textual units.

2.1.1. Awareness of the Role of Truth

The analysis of the messages shows that awareness of the role of truth in media communication constitutes one of the most frequently recurring motifs. Truth appears as a criterion of the communicator's authenticity and credibility, without which a media message loses its ethical and spiritual foundation. In conditions of increasing disinformation, the pope emphasizes that fidelity to the truth is a prerequisite for building community and social peace.

In the very first message of his pontificate, Francis recalled that "communication should be ... a reflection of the soul, the visible surface of a nucleus of love that is invisible to the eye." (WCD 2023/57) He therefore demonstrated that the truth is no cold, intellectual category, but rather a dynamic relation which opens one up to the other person and makes one an interlocutor in the community of dialogue. In subsequent years, the pope would elaborate on this idea, especially in the context of threats related to fake news. The 2018 message reiterates the words of the Gospel: "*The Truth Will Set You Free*" (Jn 8:32): *Fake News and Journalism for Peace* (WCD 2018/52). This document stresses the crucial role of truth in journalism as Communication without truth becomes a tool of manipulation, and its goal is no longer encounter but domination.

From Francis' perspective, truth is not limited to the verifiability of facts; it is also a path for building relationships. As he emphasizes in the same message: "In Christianity, truth is not just a conceptual reality that regards how we judge things, defining them as true or false.... Truth involves our whole life.... Freedom from falsehood and the search for relationship: these two ingredients cannot be lacking if our words and gestures are to be true, authentic, and trustworthy." (WCD 2018/52) Truth thus becomes the foundation of credibility and a bridge connecting people, even in a world divided and polarized by digital media.

In the 2024 message titled *Artificial Intelligence and the Wisdom of the Heart: Towards a Fully Human Communication* (WCD 2024/58), the pope demonstrates that in the digital age, when the boundaries between reality and its simulation become increasingly fluid, fidelity to the truth remains the foundation of the ethical and spiritual dimension of communication.

In summary, for Francis, awareness of the role of truth in media communication entails: (1) the courage to oppose false narratives; (2) rooting communication in the values of the Gospel; (3) treating truth as a space for encounter and community building; and (4) discernment regarding technological challenges that may blur the criteria of truth in digital culture.

2.1.2. Critical Analysis and Discernment

In Francis' teaching, critical analysis and discernment emerge as essential tools for participation in the media world. The pope repeatedly emphasizes that mere access to information is insufficient if the recipient lacks the ability to verify it and to distinguish truth from falsehood. A concept ingrained in Ignatian spirituality, discernment is part of the realm of media communication as a competence enabling full, responsible and conscious engagement with the media.

In the 2018 message, the pontiff highlights the necessity of exposing manipulation: "We need to unmask what could be called the 'snake-tactics' used by those who disguise themselves in order to strike at any time and place." (WCD 2018/52) This biblical image is used by Francis to demonstrate that false narratives are especially harmful when they ostensibly pose as truth. In turn, in the 2021 message Francis stresses the method of discernment based on an encounter: "*Come and See*" (*Jn 1:46*): *Communicating by Encountering People Where and as They Are* (WCD 2021/55). This means that discernment cannot be merely an intellectual process but demands empathy for the other's life experience.

In 2022, the pope highlights the spiritual aspect of this competence: *Listening with the Ear of the Heart* (WCD 2022/56). This metaphorical expression indicates that the analysis of media content requires not only the mind but also the heart, capable of discerning the truth amidst informational noise: "The true seat of listening is the heart.... Saint Francis of Assisi exhorted his brothers to 'incline the ear of the heart.'" (WCD 2022/56) Finally, in 2024 Francis notes that profound discernment leads to the "Wisdom of the Heart" (WCD 2024/58) and the critical analysis cannot be reduced to technical procedures but must be supported by integral Christian anthropology.

2.1.3. Understanding Media Mechanisms

Another subcategory of cognitive competencies is the capacity for understanding media mechanisms. Pope Francis emphasizes that without reflection on how the media operate, how they impact narratives, prioritise information, and

influence social relationships, a Christian remains at the mercy of oversimplifications and polarization.

In the 2019 message, the pope stresses the role of the media in the formation of communities: *"We Are Members One of Another"* (Eph 4:25): *From Social Network Communities to the Human Community* (WCD 2019/53). When properly understood, the media may enhance ties rather than deepen divides. The following year, in 2020, the pope highlights the narrative function of the media: *"That You May Tell Your Children and Grandchildren"* (Ex 10:2): *Life Becomes History* (WCD 2020/54). Here media mechanisms are shown as narrative structures that impart meaning to the experience of individuals and communities.

In his messages from 2022 and 2023, Francis expands this perspective of understanding media mechanisms. In his view, the qualitative process of change in communication takes place when listening and speaking become self-giving (cf. WCD 2022/56, 2023/57). This means that the media both transmit information and impact the way people experience their relations and offer themselves to others. Therefore, the analysis of media mechanisms helps discern that the media are no neutral tools but a dynamic cultural environment with profound anthropological and ethical consequences.

2.1.4. Reflection and Silence

The final subcategory of cognitive competence involves reflection and silence. Francis notes that in the era of excess information and constant onslaught of stimuli, we must regain the capacity for silence, contemplation and deliberate pause. Silence does not imply a withdrawal from communication but deepens it. It enables authentic encounter and a finer understanding of content. In the 2014 message, the pope writes: "We need ... to recover a certain sense of deliberateness and calm. This calls for time and the ability to be silent and to listen," (WCD 2014/48) demonstrating the need for distancing oneself to the pressure of the media. In 2021, he adds: "an account of reality, calls for an ability to go where no one else thinks of going ... [to] curiosity, openness, passion." (WCD 2021/55) The above excerpt describes the work of journalists and emphasizes the need for patience and engagement in understanding human stories, which can be interpreted as requiring reflection and attentive listening. Furthermore, the pope's idea shows that communication rooted in reflection is not a rapid transmission of data packets but a process that engages the whole person.

A similar concept recurs in later messages, where the pope emphasizes that only through reflection can one avoid superficiality and informational chaos. Silence and stillness are therefore not a luxury but a necessary component of media competencies in the process of communicating the faith.

2.2. Ethical Competencies (*n* = 65)

Ethical competencies in media communication, according to Pope Francis, include fidelity to the truth, responsibility for the message, opposition to disinformation, and the ability to foster a culture of encounter. The pope repeatedly emphasizes that the media are not merely a neutral channel of information but a space in which the consciences of participants in media communication and social relationships are shaped. As such, they require clear moral criteria.

2.2.1. Responsibility for Content

Francis consistently reminds us that each communicator, be it a journalist, content author or another user of social media, bears responsibility for the message. “All of us are responsible for the communications we make, for the information we share, for the control that we can exert over fake news by exposing it.” (WCD 2021/55)

In the 2016 message, the pope points out that communication is primarily “closeness” and emphasizes in the same message that it should serve the common good rather than particular interests: “In a broken, fragmented and polarized world, to communicate with mercy means to help create a healthy, free and fraternal closeness between the children of God and all our brothers and sisters in the one human family.” (WCD 2016/50) This implies that it is not merely a matter of adhering to professional rules, but of the ethics of communication, which concerns truth, the common good and the dignity of the other person. Responsibility for content is therefore not limited to factual accuracy but includes care for the meaning and purpose of communication. The pope emphasizes that every story affects life: it can destroy if it offers an illusion, or edify if it is rooted in truth (cf. WCD 2020/54, 2021/55). “Often on communication platforms, instead of constructive stories which serve to strengthen social ties and the cultural fabric, we find destructive and provocative stories that wear down and break the fragile threads binding us together as a society.” (WCD 2020/54) This awareness becomes the cornerstone of ethical participation in the digital space as the media content have the power to create social and individual reality.

2.2.2. Culture of Encounter

The second key ethical competence is the promotion of a “culture of encounter.” Francis warns against the polarization and fragmentation of social life, which are often consequences of media simplifications and manipulations. A “culture of encounter” is an alternative to the “cancel culture.”

In 2014, the pope develops the most concise reflection on a culture of encounter. He emphasizes that the media and communication help to overcome differences, build unity, and foster mutual understanding and respect. He points to the need for a capacity to give and receive. In this way, communication can help build bridges, fosters meeting one another in truth, and respects differences. Moreover, the internet

should serve as a tool for solidarity and encounter (cf. WCD 2014/48).⁵ The pope points out that the media and communication have the capacity to serve as tools that unite rather than divide communities. In 2016, the pope highlights the personalist and social aspect of communication and observes: "Communication has the power to build bridges, to enable encounter and inclusion, and thus to enrich society."⁶ (WCD 2016/50) In 2019, in turn, he recalls that media may become platforms for creating communities: "*We Are Members One of Another*" (Eph 4,25), which means that be it online communities or human ones, we must strive for a profound understanding and solidarity (cf. WCD 2019/53).

The culture of encounter in communication is not only a moral ideal, but a specific competence, which requires that both the recipient and the sender should adopt a deliberate choice of a communications style, which respects diversity and promotes dialogue.

2.2.3. Avoiding Disinformation

Francis pays special attention to disinformation, which he calls in no uncertain terms a sin against the truth. Fake news, manipulation and one-sided narratives erode the foundation of social trust and thus the capacity for building peace.

In his 2018 message, Francis recalls the words of the Gospel in the title: "*The Truth Will Set You Free*" (Jn 8:32): *Fake News and Journalism for Peace* (WCD 2018/52). The document is a bona-fide ethical manifesto of the pope to the media. The pontiff indicates that fighting disinformation is not merely a technical verification of information, but first and foremost the formation of consciences: "I would like to contribute to our shared commitment to stemming the spread of fake news and to re-discovering the dignity of journalism and the personal responsibility of journalists to communicate the truth." (WCD 2018/52)

Furthermore, Francis warns against the vicious character of manipulation: "Artificial intelligence systems ... can be a source of 'cognitive pollution,' a distortion of reality by partially or completely false narratives, believed and broadcast as if they were true. We need but think of the long-standing problem of disinformation in the

⁵ "In a world like this, media can help us to feel closer to one another, creating a sense of the unity of the human family which can in turn inspire solidarity and serious efforts to ensure a more dignified life for all. Good communication helps us to grow closer, to know one another better, and ultimately, to grow in unity. The walls which divide us can be broken down only if we are prepared to listen and learn from one another. We need to resolve our differences through forms of dialogue which help us grow in understanding and mutual respect. A culture of encounter demands that we be ready not only to give, but also to receive. Media can help us greatly in this, especially nowadays, when the networks of human communication have made unprecedented advances. The internet, in particular, offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity. This is something truly good, a gift from God." (WCD 2014/48)

⁶ "Communication, wherever and however it takes place, has opened up broader horizons for many people. This is a gift of God which involves a great responsibility. I like to refer to this power of communication as 'closeness.'" (WCD 2016/50)

form of fake news, which today can employ ‘deepfakes.’” (WCD 2024/58) In this way he indicates the “snake-tactics,” i.e. the deceptive methods of masquerading as truth, which must be exposed. In 2023, the pope emphasizes that *Speaking with the Heart: “The Truth in Love”* (Eph 4:15) is an alternative to false narratives (cf. WCD 2023/57).

In the 2023 message, the pope notes: “As Christians, we know that the destiny of peace is decided by conversion of hearts, since the virus of war comes from within the human heart. From the heart come the right words to dispel the shadows of a closed and divided world and to build a civilization which is better than the one we have received.” (WCD 2023/57)

2.2.4. Ethics in the Face of New Technologies

The final dimension of ethical competencies is moral discernment of new technologies, especially in the context of artificial intelligence, algorithms and automation of communication processes. Pope Francis is aware that these tools may serve the good and yet can potentially entail the risk of manipulation, depersonalisation and loss of truth and responsibility.

In the context of various medial narrative forms, in the 2020 message Francis warns us against the superficiality of information and communication: “Not all stories are good stories.... In an age when falsification is increasingly sophisticated. We need wisdom to be able to welcome and create beautiful, true and good stories. We need courage to reject false and evil stories.” (WCD 2020/54) This is a call for the critical use of new narrative forms, including those generated by technology, and the need for reflection and responsibility in the transmission of content.

Francis recalls that “the development of systems of artificial intelligence ... is radically affecting the world of information and communication, and through it, certain foundations of life in society.” (WCD 2024/58) He therefore points out the risk of the loss of truth and humanity due to the exclusive reliance on big data, which “ultimately entails a substantial loss of the truth of things, hindering interpersonal communication and threatening our very humanity.” (WCD 2024/58)

The pope stresses the fact that technology is to serve humans, not to replace them: “The use of artificial intelligence can make a positive contribution to the communications sector..., provided that it values the professionalism of communication, making every communicator more aware of his or her responsibilities, and enables all people to be, as they should, discerning participants in the work of communication.” (WCD 2024/58) In this context, the term “discernment” is of key importance as it indicates that people must be active, informed and critical recipients and authors of content rather than its passive consumers. First of all, the very title of the 2024 message, *Artificial Intelligence and the Wisdom of the Heart: Towards a Fully Human Communication* (WCD 2024/58), unmistakably indicates that even the most advanced technologies must be subordinated to rather than replace the wisdom of the heart. In the face of new technologies, such ethics is an indispensable competence

for the contemporary user of media culture, who must combine mastery of the technical operation of tools with profound moral reflection and responsibility for the message produced.

In the cognitive category, Francis emphasises the role of truth, critical analysis and reflection, which protect against manipulation and superficiality. Ethical competencies focus on responsibility for content, the culture of encounter and avoiding misinformation. An analysis of the first two categories of competencies and their subcategories helps formulate a conclusion to be verified in the next part of the study ("Discussion"), namely that the pope proposes a coherent vision of these two media competencies in communicating faith in the digital culture.

3. Discussion

3.1. Cognitive Competencies

The published messages of 2014–2016 stress the need for both an awareness of the role of truth in communication and a critical evaluation of information sources. After 2017, more complex aspects emerged, related to the interpretation of media narratives and the ability to analyse the cultural context of the message. In 2020 the stress shifted to the role of history in the transmission of meaning and significance, which was in 2022 and 2023 developed through reflection on more profound listening and understanding of the other person in the communication process. In turn, 2024 and 2025 bring an element of cognitive discernment with respect to artificial intelligence and its impact on public opinion.

The analysis of Pope Francis' messages from the years 2014–2025 highlights the key components of cognitive competencies, which define a responsible participation in the digital culture. This reflection attempts to establish an interdisciplinary dialogue between theology, media studies and media pedagogy, focusing on the foundation of truth, critical discernment, comprehending the media mechanisms, and the importance of reflection and silence. Each of the elements is not only an individual skill but part of the integral vision of man as an active subject of the digital culture:

- Truth as the cognitive foundation. Francis prioritizes the truth, which is not solely an adequacy of facts, but first of all a relation-based foundation of trust and social unity. In the 2018 message, he stresses: "The truth will set you free" (Jn 8:32), demonstrating the moral and spiritual underpinnings of the problem of fake news, seen as a manifestation of a "moral and spiritual poverty" of contemporary communication (WCD 2018/52). From this perspective, truth is not a set of information and data but rather a meta-competence that informs all the other cognitive aspects. Media formation must be based on the virtues of truthfulness and ongoing verification of the sources (cf. *TFP* 14, 66). This echoes Rivoltella's

approach to media education as a process of “formation to truth,” interpreted through the lens of anthropological and religious values (Rivoltella 2017, 49–52). Formation to the truth is a personalist process that links freedom with responsibility in the relation with God and the fellow human being (Goliszek 2017, 460–462).

- Critical analysis and discernment. Francis develops the idea of a critical approach to media content, extending it with interpersonal and contextual aspects. In his 2021 message, Francis calls: “*Come and See*” (*Jn 1:46*): *Communicating by Encountering People Where and as They Are* (WCD 2021/55). Discernment in this sense is not only a reliable analysis of facts, but also the capacity for empathetic encounter and interpretation of the contexts of communication. The aspect of “wisdom of the heart” is essential, integrating intellect with the practical virtue of discernment, protecting against manipulation and enabling authentic encounter (WCD 2024/58). This dimension of critical thinking is further confirmed in other Church documents, which call for the ability to critically interpret digital culture, distinguish threats from integral human development, and emphasise the importance of hermeneutic competence of interpretation (DC 213; Rivoltella 2017, 193–201).
- Understanding the mechanisms of the media. Another major aspect of cognitive competence is the awareness of the work of the media in shaping identity and social relations. Francis points to the impact of algorithms, which not only select content, but also shape the ways in which we learn about the world and form public opinion; this poses an ethical and spiritual challenge (WCD 2024/58). The authors of *Towards Full Presence* emphasise the importance of understanding narrative logics, of digital storytelling, which forge individual and collective identities (cf. *TFP* 69–70; Marcyński 2024, 23–87). This reflection fits into the anthropological dimension of media literacy, showing that the media are a structure rather than a neutral tool, which requires the development of critical discernment skills in digital ecosystems (Benanti 2016, 79; cf. *TFP* 13, 58).
- Reflection and silence. In his teaching, Francis attaches particular importance to silence and reflection as a space free from the overload of stimuli and data. As early as in his 2014 message he urges: “We need ... to recover a certain sense of deliberateness and calm,” (WCD 2014/48) and in 2020 he stresses the need for “patience and discernment” in the narrating of histories which will help us discover the truth of who we really are (cf. WCD 2020/54). Media pedagogy indicates that reflection prevents us from reducing media to pure consumption, while silence is not merely an element of digital hygiene, but also a spiritual space that fosters contemplation and dialogue with God (Rivoltella 2017, 63). The Vatican document *Towards Full Presence* elaborates on the above subcategory of cognitive competence, in particular when it comprehensively justifies the importance of the competence of reflection and silence (cf. *TFP* 30–35). It is thus

a major source of building an integral vision of cognitive competencies as a process of discernment that involves truth, critical approach, understanding media mechanisms, and silence.

The discussion of the research findings in this particular area indicates that cognitive competencies, as defined by Pope Francis, are not a set of isolated skills, but an integral process of discernment that enables free, responsible and spiritually profound participation in digital culture. Truth remains the foundation as a transcendental value that unifies such other aspects as critical thinking, conscious understanding of media mechanisms, and the ability to reflect and become calm and silent. Competencies understood in this way counterbalance risks like manipulation, over-stimulation and misinformation. Furthermore, they correspond to the Church's current reflection on media communication, opening up space for communication based on freedom and responsibility.

3.2. Ethical Competencies

Early on (2014–2015), communication ethics were strongly linked to truthfulness, transparency and the avoidance of manipulation. Starting in 2016, the concept of “communication ecology” emerged, which expanded the responsibility of the sender to involve the entire media space and its impact on culture. In 2018 and 2019, special emphasis was put on the need to counter disinformation and fake news, while at the time of the pandemic (2020–2021) ethic was linked to being mindful of solidarity and hope during a global crisis. In 2023–2025, the central question was that of a responsible use of new technologies, especially artificial intelligence, including its potential and threats to human freedom. Therefore, ethical competencies occupy the central position in Pope Francis' reflection on the media. The analysis of his messages from the years 2014–2025 shows that communication is no neutral technical tool, but rather a space of moral choices, whose stakes involve truth, responsibility and community. Francis distinguishes four key dimensions: responsibility for content, culture of encounter, avoidance of disinformation, and ethics in the face of new technologies:

- **Responsibility for content:** refers to the “ethics of truth.” In the 2018 message, the pope recalls: “*The Truth Will Set You Free*” (Jn 8:32): *Fake News and Journalism for Peace* (WCD 2018/52). Here, truth is not only an epistemological category but also an ethical requirement, the cornerstone of social trust and community unity (cf. Drożdż 2005, 509–33). Italian scholars Vincenzo Corrado and Stefano Pasta note that in the digital world, every user contributes to the “information ecosystem” in that every publication entails a moral responsibility (Corrado and Pasta 2024, 9). The authors of *Towards Full Presence* understand responsibility for published content in a multifaceted way: as the necessity for reflective and

ethical publishing, countering conflicts and disinformation, caring for the community, and being aware of the technological and algorithmic context that shapes the message (TFP 14, 56, 75).

The communicator's responsibility is therefore twofold: toward the recipient and toward the technological architecture that co-shapes the circulation of content. This theme is further developed in the document *Antiqua et Nova*, which addresses the use of tools based on artificial intelligence. It emphasizes the necessity of transparency, responsibility, and moral reflection in the design, implementation, and use of AI systems in order to prevent abuse and social harm (cf. AN 36–48).

- **A culture of encounter** is one of the recurrent elements of Pope Francis' messages. As early as 2014, the pope observed: "It is not enough to be passersby on the digital highways, simply 'connected': connections need to grow into true encounter." (WCD 2014/48) An encounter is an ethical imperative of respect, dialogue and relations-building. In turn, in the 2023 message, the pope indicates the most comprehensive *modus operandi* for the sake of building a culture of encounter: *Speaking with the Heart: "The Truth in Love" (Eph 4:15)* (WCD 2023/57). This urge transcends the cognitive perspective. It enters the ethical dimension, as it obliges respect for the other person in the process of communication. The pope wants the word to be constructive rather than destructive, which directly opposes the logic of hate and polarization. The document *Towards Full Presence*, in turn, stresses the fact that the online presence of Christians should support the logic of gift and solidarity rather than competition or violence (TFP 15). In this respect, Francis sees communication in the media as a space for bridge-building, or a shift from the sending "channel" to personal "relations": "Communication has the power to build bridges, to enable encounter and inclusion, and thus to enrich society." (WCD 2016/50; cf. Nęcek 2016, 51–52; Bojko 2017, 58) That is why the ethics of communication must be based on the logic of dialogue which, respectful of differences, nevertheless seeks the truth (cf. Drożdż 2019, 162–90).
- The pope regards **avoiding disinformation** as a moral duty. The entire 2018 message addressed this very problem. Francis warned then: "we need to unmask what could be called the 'snake-tactics.'" (WCD 2018/52) Disinformation is not only a cognitive error but a sin against the fellow human being, as it destroys community and freedom. The document *Antiqua et Nova* indicates that algorithms multiply the phenomena of fake and deep fake news, containing people in filter bubbles (cf. AN 87–89). Media education should prepare us to "read between the lines" and to analyse the different aspects of the media message, which helps the modern media user grasp the implicit intentions of the sender (Ptaszek 2019, 28–87). For "allogoretics," combating disinformation calls not only for fact-checking as well as comprehending data, logic and risks related to systems linked to digital platforms (Fiorentino and Benanti 2024, 14, 18;

cf. Benanti 2020, 97–98; AN 38–48). The challenge posed by fake news can only be understood and addressed through multidisciplinary cooperation (Levy 2024, 116), including from the perspective of Christian anthropology and theology.

- **Ethics in the face of new technologies.** AI is central for this reflection. The pope's main idea is as follows: AI technologies must serve the human being (cf. WCD 2024/58). Francis does not reject technology yet demands that its development be subject to the common good and to the integral vision of the person. Paolo Benanti implies that the AI era calls for a “new anthropology” (*nuova antropologia*), where the human being would not become a tool of machines (Benanti 2016, 73–78). The rapid development of AI poses new ethical challenges for the protection of human dignity and freedom; it requires strengthening an ethical stance of responsibility in both the design and use of these tools (cf. Fabris 2024, 104–8; Corrado 2024, 30–34). The document *Antiqua et Nova* highlights the fact that ethical responsibility related not only to AI users, but also to its designers, producers and managers of its systems, which should enhance social relations rather than erode them and replace with technology. It is therefore vital that the development and use of AI take place in the spirit of responsibility, respect for the dignity of the human person and promotion of the common good (cf. AN 44–46).

To sum up, the ethical competencies indicated by Pope Francis include four interrelated aspects: ethics of truth, culture of encounter, fight against disinformation, and reflection on technology. Together, they form a coherent vision of communication that prioritises people, truth and the common good. Thus, not only does the pope respond to the challenges of the day, but he also anticipates the directions of media studies, pointing out that the future of digital communication depends on being rooted in Christian anthropology and relational ethics.

The analysis of cognitive and ethical competencies in Pope Francis' Messages for the World Communications Day (2014–2025) demonstrates a coherent vision of communicating the faith, where the knowledge of truth and ethical responsibility are an inseparable foundation of Christian presence in the digital culture. They confirm the continuity of the Pontiff's teaching with the most recent documents of the Church, in particular the 2023 document *Towards Full Presence* and the 2025 document *Antiqua et Nova*, while simultaneously furthering it in the new context of the challenges of the age of artificial intelligence. Francis calls for an ecosystem of communication ingrained in the dignity of the human person and in love, where the media cease to be merely a technical instrument and become a space of encounter, discernment, and witness.

The outcomes obtained are clearly aligned with Rivoltella's concept of integral media education (2017), Benanti's ethical approach to technology (2020), and Corrado's idea of digital discipleship (2024). They nevertheless add a distinct theological-anthropological aspect to these models, absent from many secular

approaches (cf. Ogonowska 2013). Cognitive and ethical competencies are the foundation on which relational, technical, and spiritual competencies may rest; their full analysis will be presented in the second part of the article.

Despite limitations resulting from the qualitative and interpretative character of the study, its exclusive focus on the corpus of the World Communications Day Messages, and the presentation of only two categories of media competencies, the results obtained allow one to conclude that Pope Francis' teaching constitutes an original paradigm of communicating the faith in the digital age. This paradigm may be described as a "hermeneutics of communication in the perspective of faith,"⁷ where cognition, ethics, relations, technology, and spirituality merge to offer an integral formation of a person and community. The proposed model makes an invaluable contribution to the Catholic theology of the media and media pedagogy, providing at the same time specific pointers for the formation of clerics, catechists, and lay persons engaged in evangelisation in the digital environment. Further research, involving methodological triangulation and analyses of the reception of the messages, would help verify and expand the range of conclusions drawn.

4. Conclusions

The analyses of Pope Francis' Messages for World Communications Day from 2014 to 2025, read in the light of selected documents of the Catholic Church and compared with theological, anthropological and media studies literature, allow us to formulate a number of key tentative proposals of a theoretical nature as well as practical conclusions and recommendations for the pastoral ministry of the Catholic Church.

- 1) The research findings show that media competencies constitute a form of response to the anthropological challenges of the digital age. Francis repeatedly emphasizes that in the face of disinformation, polarization and the algorithmicising of social life, the capacity for discernment and grounding in truth is necessary. Truth, as a cognitive foundation, should be understood as a meta-competence integrating knowledge and ethics. Truth is not merely a collection of facts but a relational foundation of trust that unites critical thinking, source verification, and cognitive reliability, thereby linking the subcategories of cognitive and ethical competencies.
- 2) Even this part of the research results reveals their significance for the theology of media, showing that the Church's reflection on the media constitutes an original

⁷ "Communicative hermeneutics of faith," at this stage of research connotes a theological and anthropological interpretation of communicative acts in the light of faith, integrating cognitive, ethical, relational, technical, and spiritual aspects.

proposal from theological, anthropological, and educational perspectives. Although the papal vision is not parallel to academic reflection, it enters into dialogue with it, giving it a prophetic and spiritual dimension.

- 3) Critical discernment and capacity for assessment of media texts is a dialogic competence, as the “wisdom of the heart” combines content analysis with the empathetic understanding of context and person. Reflection and silence are the protective shields against the pressure of immediacy and excess stimuli, fostering a more mature interpretation of information.
- 4) This section of the study indicates that the media are primarily structures, not only tools. Algorithms and narrative formats impact interpersonal perception and relations. Therefore, the ethics of communication (culture of encounter, responsibility for the word) and understanding the mechanisms of digital environments are inseparable from being a mature subject online. In this context, the communication of the faith, in particular as the teaching of religious education in Poland, must be taken into account in the new National Curriculum of the Catholic Religion in terms of discovering truth in the media space of post-truth and of shaping the ethical position of the young generation, who live in a hybrid information reality known as onlife (cf. *TFP* 69–70; Chmielewski 2024).
- 5) Algetics and AI urgently require that the community of the Church develop a training programme for catechists, pastors, and lay leaders concerning the following areas: (a) rudiments of AI literacy; (b) transparency and designation of generative content; (c) phenomena of data bias and risk assessment; (d) need for a *human-in-the-loop*; and (e) good practice of AI use in catechesis, in the teaching of religious education in school and evangelisation (e.g., lesson plans, ethics-related checklists, guidelines and procedures to be used in parishes/dioceses).
- 6) Ethical competencies are communal and institutional in nature; they require some formation background. Given the limitations of religious education and the lack of a general subject called Ethics, the Church should intensify its activities as follows: (a) ongoing training of teachers (especially RE teachers) in media and AI competencies; (b) modules for parents, catechists, preachers, and evangelisation teams; (c) diocesan support centres (materials, consultations, micro-certificates); and (d) cooperation with universities and media centres, especially Catholic ones. In practice, we might take advantage of the formation measures implied in relevant literature, such Bilicka (2021) on religion in the digital culture, Kiciński (2015) on education programs for media leaders, and Chmielewski (2020) on media education for new evangelization.
- 7) In the face of dynamic shifts in the realm of digital technologies, there is an urgent need to teach media and digital competence of candidates to the priesthood, i.e. to modify the *Ratio studiorum pro Polonia*. The number of hours of instruction and work methods is insufficient now: the program includes only 30 hours of exercises in media education. What is necessary are lectures, seminars and

project-based learning, which would facilitate the presentation of a broad spectrum of digital issues in pastoral work. This is a *signum temporis* which necessitates a deeper formation in this area of the Church's social teaching.

Arising from the above research findings, the above conclusions confirm that the cognitive and ethical competencies as articulated by Pope Francis constitute a coherent theological and anthropological foundation for media literacy in the service of the Gospel. From schools to pastoral work, formation should be oriented toward personal freedom, the common good, and the integral communication of the faith. Directions for further research will be presented in the second part of the article, which will show the research outcomes related to the other three competence categories, i.e. relational, technical and spiritual, identified in Pope Francis' messages. The presentation of the first part of the research justifies an assertion that the future of media education in the Church does not lie in adapting to the logic of technology, but in the formation of people capable of communicating the truth in love (Eph 4:15). In this sense, the papal vision of media competencies is significant for both the Church and the broader reflection on the anthropology and theology of the media and their role in global culture.

Translated by Marcin Turski

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