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Media Farewell to Pope Francis: The Pope from the End of the Earth Returns to the Father's House

Medialne pożegnanie Papieża Franciszka –
papież „z krańca świata” powrócił do Domu Ojca

Abstract

The article presents the results of a content analysis of Polish and foreign media reporting on the departure and funeral of Pope Francis. The aim of the article is to identify the main motifs of media narratives concerning the „Pope from the End of the Earth.” The analysis included press publications that appeared from April 21 to April 26, 2025 (from the day of the Pope's death to his funeral) in the online editions of Polish newspapers and weeklies, and also included the main themes of coverage from Pope Francis's funeral in Polish and international television stations. The analysis reveals that key motifs in the media narratives include, among others, the symbolic significance of the date of the Pope's death, which occurred during the Easter Octave, his humility and advocacy for marginalized communities, as well as his role as a bridge-builder in times of crisis. Furthermore, the media's attention to the gathering of world leaders at the papal funeral emphasized the universal importance of his message, including compassionate support for the poor and excluded. The analysis reveals an image of the Pope distinguished by his unconventional style and spontaneous connection with people. The article demonstrates how the media reporting on the farewell to Pope Francis highlighted how, through simple gestures, he conveyed a message of mercy while remaining close to people until the very end.

Keywords

Pope Francis, media, narratives, metaphors, funeral, press, reports, content analysis, pontificate

Abstrakt

Artykuł prezentuje wyniki analizy zawartości przekazów medialnych relacjonujących odchodzenie i pogrzeb Papieża Franciszka w Polsce i na świecie. Celem artykułu jest wskazanie głównych motywów narracji medialnych dotyczących „Papieża z krańca świata”. Analiza obejmowała publikacje prasowe, które ukazały się w okresie od 21 do 26 kwietnia 2025 roku (od dnia śmierci Papieża do jego pogrzebu) w internetowych wydaniach polskich dzienników i tygodników, a także uwzględniła główne wątki relacji z pogrzebu Papieża Franciszka w telewizyjnych stacjach krajowych i zagranicznych. Z przeprowadzonej analizy wynika, że kluczowe motywy medialnych narracji obejmują m.in. symboliczny wymiar daty śmierci Papieża, która miała miejsce w czasie Oktawy Wielkanocnej, jego skromność oraz orędowanie na rzecz społeczności marginalizowanych, jego rolę jako budowniczego mostów w czasach kryzysu. Ponadto media, zwracające uwagę na zgromadzenie światowych przywódców na papieskim pogrzebie, podkreślały uniwersalne znaczenie jego przesłania, w tym współczujące wsparcie dla biednych i wykluczonych. Z medialnych relacji wyłania się obraz Papieża, którego wyróżniał niekonwencjonalny styl i spontaniczna więź z ludźmi. Artykuł pokazuje, w jaki sposób media relacjonujące pożegnanie z Papieżem Franciszkiem podkreślały to, jak za pomocą prostych gestów niósł przesłanie miłosierdzia, pozostając do końca blisko ludzi.

Słowa kluczowe

Papież Franciszek, media, narracje, metafory, pogrzeb, prasa, relacje, analiza treści, pontyfikat

Introduction

On Easter Monday morning, April 21, 2025, news from the Vatican reported that at 7:35 a.m., “the Bishop of Rome, Francis, returned to the House of the Father.” This biblical metaphor, articulated by Cardinal Kevin Farrell, the camerlengo of the Holy Roman Church, was later repeated by journalists in both Polish and international media.

In 2013, when the faithful gathered in St. Peter’s Square to greet the newly elected Pope with applause, enthusiastically reacting to his chosen name, Francis, the Argentinian Jorge Bergoglio used another metaphor, jokingly saying that the cardinals had found a pope “at the end of the Earth”.

Metaphorical expressions, vivid epithets, and expressive symbols are hallmarks of the language used to convey the solemnity of this unique farewell, much like the one witnessed in April 2025. The gravity of the occasion and the significance of the moment are reflected in the media narratives accompanying media events¹, such as the funerals of St. Peter’s successors.

How did the media in Poland and abroad bid farewell to the Pope “from the End of the Earth”? This is the main research question the article aims to address, presenting initial findings from a content analysis of media coverage surrounding the passing of Pope Francis. The analysis included press articles published in Poland during the week following the Pope’s death and leading up to his funeral. Additionally, it was supplemented by an examination of Polish and global television coverage of the Pope’s funeral, focusing on the dominant themes that shaped the narratives about “the Pope of the Poor.”

While media coverage of the passing of Pope John Paul II has received extensive scholarly attention (see Dyczewski, et al., 2008; Hodalska, 2008; 2010a; 2010b; 2010c; 2010d), and much has been written about the language of his homilies and works (e.g. Oźóg & Taras, 2010), there is a notable gap in the literature regarding Pope Francis. In Polish scholarship, there are still very few publications analyzing Pope Francis and his papacy from a media perspective (Przyczyna & Załazińska, 2017; Mrozek, 2017), and nothing yet regarding his death. Our article fills this gap, offering insights into media narratives about Pope Francis and his legacy.

¹ The papal funeral was portrayed as an example of media events in the book titled *The Passing of John Paul II to the Father’s Home in Polish Media*, edited by L. Dyczewski, A. Lewek, and J. Olędzki (Katowice, 2008), by K. Marcyński (2008, pp. 113—120), among others. The term ‘media events’ was introduced to the field of communication and media studies by Elihu Katz and Daniel Dayan in their work *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*, where they presented three scenarios of media events. The funeral of John Paul II was a media event, the characteristics of which are discussed in M. Hodalska’s book, *The Death of the Pope, The Birth of a Myth* (Kraków, 2007).

The passing of Pope Francis marked the conclusion of a papacy defined by humility, compassion, and a steadfast dedication to the marginalised and impoverished. The world's media captured the essence of a pontiff whose unconventional style and genuine connection to the people distinguished him. This article explores the media's portrayal of Pope Francis's final farewell, tracing the narratives that honored his life's work, his impactful messages of mercy and peace, and his enduring legacy as a bridge builder during contemporary challenges and crises. As the world turned its focus to Rome, the tributes and commemorations created a vivid portrait of a shepherd who remained close to his flock until the very end.

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Methodology

The content analysis of media reports included 79 publications that appeared from April 21 to April 26, 2025, from the day of Pope Francis's death to the day of his funeral, in the online editions of newspapers (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita*) and weekly magazines (*Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Gość Niedzielny*, *Przegląd Katolicki*, *Polityka*, *Newsweek*). The analysis was supplemented by television reports on the Pope's funeral, along with comments from guests and experts on various TV stations. It covered the broadcasts from TVN 24, Polsat News, BBC, CNN, and Sky News on the day of Pope Francis's funeral. The article presents the first conclusions from the analyses, identifying the most important themes in the media narrative surrounding Pope Francis's passing away in April 2025.

The deliberate selection of the research sample was motivated by the choice of identical press titles for content analysis conducted by Magdalena Hodalska 20 years ago, when the focus was on the media portrayal of the passing away of John Paul II. When the Polish Pope died in April 2005, 670 articles were published in the print editions of the same media outlets: daily newspapers (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita*) and weekly magazines (*Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Gość Niedzielny*, *Przegląd Katolicki*, *Polityka*, *Newsweek*). These texts were included in the analysis, the results of which are presented in the book titled *The Death of the Pope, the Birth of the Myth* (Hodalska, 2010).

After the death of Pope Francis in 2025, it seemed both reasonable and useful from the perspective of future comparative analysis to refer to the same sources

of press coverage, only this time analyzing articles published in the online editions of those same media outlets that were considered 20 years ago when the media bid farewell to John Paul II.

This article demonstrates both the relevance and continuity of a research project initiated two decades ago. In this case, the purposive sampling involved selecting articles about Pope Francis and his legacy published in the very same media outlets as those covered in the 2005 analysis of media farewell to John Paul II. In 2025, during the week from the day of Pope Francis's death to his funeral, only 79 publications were published in the Polish news media included in the content analysis, the results of which are presented in this paper.

Content analysis is a method which helps draw conclusions based on the "systematic and objective identification of precisely defined properties of the text" (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2004, p. 16). Applying this method requires conducting research in an organized manner, according to clear principles. Content analysis allows for the detection of patterns and order within the entire dataset (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2004, p. 20-21). It is a qualitative research method that is transparent and replicable, which is especially important in this type of research project, where the same categorization key used 20 years ago—tested previously during the analysis of publications about the death of the Pope John Paul II—is employed again. In both cases, the research tool used was a simple categorization key, designed in such a way that it allowed for the analysis of extensive data, facilitated comparison and correlation of results, and enabled the inclusion of parts of analyzed publications.

In this article, we present the results of the content analysis of 79 publications about Pope Francis's life, published after his death. This is the first stage of a larger research project aimed at comparing media reports on the passing of two Popes. Such a comparison is made possible precisely through the application of the content analysis method.

Results

The predominant themes in the media narrative surrounding the passing of Pope Francis in April 2025 include the motifs described in the following paragraphs.

1. Passing away

The death of Pope Francis was in line with the tradition of *ars moriendi*. The Pope left this world reconciled with everyone and attended by people whom he had prepared for his death. Although the news was surprising, his long-term illness and recent health crises had been reported in the media, and those who had been following news from the Gemelli clinic since February 2025 were aware that the Pope's health was deteriorating. After his death, television commentators recalled that Francis's long-term illness and his struggle with physical weakness were an example he left

for sick individuals (TVN24; Sky News), and he showed everyone how to serve until the last day, in a “life of service” (BBC).

2. The Easter Octave

In media reports, the symbolism surrounding the time when the faithful learned of the Pope’s passing was significant. Francis died on Easter Monday, “during the most important time for Christians, as Easter reminds us of Jesus’s victory over death, of the resurrection” (Kaczorowska, 2025), and he was buried on the vigil of Divine Mercy Sunday. Commentators emphasized that Francis was a fervent advocate of Mercy, recalling his words: “Mercy is the name of God; God never tires of forgiving us” (Dziedzina, 2025). The Easter Octave is a special time in the liturgical year, and this period lent itself to the exceptional nature and splendor of media narratives. With appropriate reverence, reflecting the media coverage during both the Easter season and the unexpected mourning period, journalists recalled the last Triduum Sacrum, the papal visit to the prison on Holy Thursday, and finally his “Boun Pasqua” wishes during the last *urbi et orbi* blessing on Easter morning – a blessing that “symbolically closed Pope Francis’s pontificate with a clasp” (Huf, 2025), just as it had begun with a blessing. Television broadcasts showed the last footage of the Pope as he wanted to greet the faithful gathered in St. Peter’s Square on Easter Sunday. This was his farewell to the people he always wanted to be close to, for he will be remembered as the “pope among the people” (CNN).

3. The Pope of the people

Francis was „just like us,” (*Tygodnik Powszechny*, 2025, special edition cover, p. 1). Journalists emphasised, and memories recalled the words: humility, humbleness (Kuźmiński et al., 2025), simplicity (Szewczyk, 2025). In an article titled „The Unceremonial Pope,” the author writes: „Francis remained simply himself, the same man who, as a cardinal, took the tram every day in Buenos Aires” (Kucharczyk, 2025). Commentators recalled his humble lifestyle and the Pope’s poignant gestures, such as living in the Casa Santa Marta instead of the papal apartments, or the fact that Francis did not want the cape or red shoes traditionally worn by popes (Kucharczyk, 2025). He was also dressed in old, worn shoes, bearing marks of wear that symbolized his simple life (De Ruiter, 2025), even when placed in the coffin, which was highlighted in coverage of the funeral (TVN24).

Journalists reminded that „from the very first moments of his pontificate, he sought to minimize everything around him that smelled of courtly ceremony” (Kucharczyk, 2025). Columnists noted that for some people the Pope was not dignified enough (e.g. Szewczyk, 2025) while for others, he appeared as „an ordinary, simple man, close to the people” (Gołąb, 2025). Francis is referred to as „the Pope of the people” (Kokot, 2025), „the Pope of the poor or the marginalized” (Bojdo,

2025). As one columnist noted, „Pope Francis was loved by the world of the excluded, the poor, and migrants. He served them even in the suburbs of Buenos Aires” (Chrabota, 2025). The Pope’s priorities were „the poor, the excluded, and the forgotten. Equally important was his concern for those who feel excluded from the Church, emphasizing that God’s mercy and forgiveness are available to everyone” (Kłosowski, 2025).

4. The voice of the peripheries

The words of journalists paint a picture of a pope who „defied conventions” (Kłosowski, 2025). Early in his pontificate, he gained the title of „the parish priest of the world,” which he liked. „This is how he wanted to be perceived – as one who is close to people, especially those from – using his term – the peripheries” (Kłosowski, 2025). Global media wrote: „Francis was the voice of the peripheries” (see Katkowski, 2025), while journalists willingly recalled the metaphorical comparison of the church to a field hospital (e.g. BBC). In this field hospital, Bergoglio found a place for “the excluded, the representatives of the LGBTQ+ community, refugees, and the divorced” (*Tygodnik Powszechny*, 2025, special edition cover, p. 1). These were the groups he took particular care of, and they stood on the steps of the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore during the final part of his earthly journey as Pope. Francis spoke „about what people want to hear, what worries them, what they hope for. He spoke simply and sincerely” – and this was “his signature”, Adam Szostkiewicz (2025) noted. The words of the columnists and reporters allow us to reconstruct the media representation of Pope Francis, his pontificate, and his farewell.

In the funeral homily, Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re recalled that the Pope was „full of human warmth and deeply sensitive to everyday dramas. Pope Francis truly shared the worries, sufferings, and hopes of an era of globalization, dedicating himself to bringing comfort and courage with a message that could reach people’s hearts in a direct way” (TVN24).

5. Pontificate full of surprises

Pope Francis „surprised at nearly every turn, (...) defied conventions, refusing to be categorized” (Krzyżak, 2025). His pontificate was similarly full of surprises. „The Argentine pope acted swiftly. At the very beginning, he confessed that he had a feeling his pontificate would be short. So he took action” (Krzyżak, 2025). And through his actions, he „showed the human face of the papacy and the friendly face of the Church” (Makowski, 2025) Journalists wrote: „He wanted to give the Church a tender face” (Halcewicz, 2025) – a clear reference to Francis’s words on March 19, 2013, encouraging people not to be afraid of tenderness (*non abbiate paura della tenerezza*).

The pope was „tender toward the poor and unyielding toward the dignitaries” (Hlebowicz, 2025) writes the author of the article titled „The Pontificate of Francis like a Roller Coaster.” The late Pope had his own style. „This is how we will remember him: as a pope who was not afraid of controversy or often unjust attacks from within the Church establishment, but who walked his own path, neither revolutionary nor counter-revolutionary” (Szostkiewicz, 2025). He reached out to people rather than waiting for them to come (Szostkiewicz, 2025).

6. Francis

The style of the pontificate was dictated by the choice of name, emphasized Cardinal Re in the funeral homily, who reminded us of the papal spontaneity and informal way of speaking to people. „All of his gestures – from renouncing privileges, living in the Casa Santa Marta, to embracing a man with a deformed face, kissing the feet of leaders from Sudan, and praying alone in St. Peter’s Square – reflected the Gospel” (Huf, 2025).

Francis „was not afraid to dream about the Church and to realize those dreams. He initiated processes” (Kłosowski, 2025). He was „a pope of spectacular gestures, breaking protocols and rituals. He sought to cleanse the Church – from pedophilia, corruption, and networks in the Vatican” (Kuźmiński et al., 2025). Commentators noted that some of the Pope’s statements remained misunderstood, and that he made many mistakes, which were part of „this very human pontificate. And it is his human face, which he was not afraid to show, that remains the most important message and inspiration after this pontificate” (Dubiel, 2025).

7. *Pontifex*, bridge builder

Journalists referred to his call to build bridges instead of walls as the pope’s legacy (TVN24). Moreover, „bridge builder,” *Pontifex Maximus*, is the Latin term for the successor of St. Peter. During the funeral liturgy, Cardinal Re echoed Pope Francis’s words, „no one saves themselves alone,” and reminded that „in the face of wars, Francis constantly called for peace” (TVN24). This statement was met with applause by the faithful gathered in St. Peter’s Square, similar to the clapping that erupted when Cardinal Re mentioned the first papal pilgrimage to Lampedusa (which symbolizes the dramas of refugees) or the Mass that Pope Francis celebrated at the US-Mexico border during his papal visit to Mexico.

Francis was also „the pope of nature,” who, during his pontificate, emphasized the „protection of our Mother Earth” (Boff & Matejko, 2025). This is the image of Pope Francis and his pontificate that emerges from the media coverage of the week following the pope’s death, as faithful from around the world travelled to Rome to bid farewell to their Shepherd. The burial itself, following the Pope’s wishes, was to be

modest, much like the simple grave in the ground with the solitary inscription *Franciscus*, the Latin form of his papal name.

8. St. Francis of Assisi

In media coverage – from the beginning of his pontificate to the final moments when the television broadcasts from the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore concluded, with the poor standing on the steps of the church – the figure of St. Francis continually emerges. The story of Pope Francis is a narrative of a pontificate inspired by and realized in the spirit of the poor man of Assisi, whose name he took, while the poor and marginalized accompanied him in the last segment of his earthly journey, bidding him farewell on the steps of the basilica he chose as his resting place.

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9. A shepherd and disciple of Christ

The media emphasised that, following the Holy Father's wishes, his funeral was to be one of a shepherd and disciple of Christ, rather than a powerful figure of this world. New guidelines signed by Pope Francis in 2024 simplified the papal funeral rituals, reflecting this intention. He did not want to be buried in the Vatican, but in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, due to his special attachment to the basilica, which he visited before every papal pilgrimage and always upon returning to Rome, where he would lay flowers in front of the image of Our Lady, even when returning from the hospital just before Easter.

The testament of the Pope and his instructions regarding the burial were made known to the public on the day of his death. It was then that the media showcased memorable footage from papal pilgrimages and homilies. Newsrooms around the world began preparations for broadcasting the funeral ceremonies. Reporters in Rome spoke with pilgrims who had arrived in the Eternal City to pay their respects to Francis, whose body was lying in state in St. Peter's Basilica. The Italian capital was preparing to receive 160 delegations from several dozen countries, whose

representatives had announced their participation in the funeral planned for Saturday, the 26th of April 2025.

10. The gathering of world leaders

Global media reported on the preparations for the funeral, highlighting an important theme in the narratives: the gathering of world leaders. As late as Saturday morning, journalists informed viewers that the world leaders attending Francis's funeral would be seated in alphabetical order according to the French names of the countries they represented. French is the language of diplomacy, and this arrangement was a particular measure intended to minimise tensions between the President of the United States and the President of Ukraine, whose recent exchange in the Oval Office in February 2025 had been met with significant discomfort by viewers, not only in Europe. Notably, when Volodymyr Zelensky appeared in front of St. Peter's Basilica, applause erupted in St. Peter's Square (TVN24). Shortly after the broadcast of the papal funeral concluded, the media reported that just before the funeral ceremony began, Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky sat down in St. Peter's Basilica for their first face-to-face meeting (CNN), recorded by cameras, particularly capturing the exchange of peace gestures and handshakes between other world leaders during the funeral services. Just like the funeral of Pope John Paul II in 2005, the funeral of Pope Francis 20 years later presented an opportunity for meetings that could potentially lead to reconciliation—a wish expressed by many commentators worldwide (CNN, BBC, TVN24).

11. The Pope of the Times of Crises

The funeral of Pope Francis, broadcast by global media, began on the morning of Saturday, April 26, 2025, on the eve of the Feast of Divine Mercy, in St. Peter's Square. „On a simple oak casket, standing at the altar in front of the Vatican basilica, the Gospel was laid, its pages turned by a gentle breeze. A copy of the icon of *Salus Populi Romani* from the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore was placed at the altar, which had also been set up in the square during the Pope's solitary prayer during the COVID-19 pandemic on March 27, 2020” (Polsat News, 2025). The icon and its presence beside the Pope, who blessed people isolating themselves during the global quarantine due to the coronavirus epidemic, also served as a reminder for BBC and TVN24 journalists to reflect on the coronavirus pandemic and the pontificate that took place during challenging times of crises.

12. The Pope of the Youth

The Pope of the poor, the Pope of refugees, the Pope of the excluded, the Pope of the pandemic, the Pope of nature—among these media images, one cannot omit the Pope of the youth. Young people came to meet him during the World Youth Days

in Krakow in 2016, and they travelled to Rome to bid farewell to Francis in April 2025. Their testimonies and the pope's calls to „make noise” and „get off the couch” were also significant themes in the media narratives about Francis's pontificate. It was the young people who applauded him as he crossed to the other side.

They were not the only ones who bid farewell to the pope's casket, which travelled through the streets of Rome on the papamobile, from the Vatican to the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. Along the route, the faithful applauded as they said goodbye to Pope Francis. Cameras from global media captured mourners gathered along the procession route, either clapping or busy with smartphones, as many people wanted to commemorate the special moment and document their participation in an event that would go down in history. The pope was honored by 400,000 people in Rome and millions watching the live broadcast of the funeral, which concluded in the basilica chosen by the pope, Santa Maria Maggiore.

13. The Pope, who wanted to remain among the poor

The commentators emphasized that the pope deliberately chose the basilica located in a very poor neighborhood of Rome, an area inhabited by many immigrants. Moreover, it is a basilica built on land where slaves were once buried. E.g. “Being laid to rest in this place sends a clear message that the Pope wants to remain among the poor” (BBC). The theme of the poor and the needy – the legacy of the Poor Man of Assisi – is a dominant motif in the media narratives about Pope Francis.

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A reporter from TVN stated: “In St. Peter's Square, state leaders and royals bid farewell to the Pope. At the grave, he was honored by those whom he continually advocated for” (TVN24): the poor, the excluded, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and prisoners. “In front of the basilica, a group of homeless people, the poor, and refugees welcomed the casket. This gesture highlighted how important they were in Francis's ministry” (Polsat News). He referred to them as “brothers from the peripheries.” They stood on the steps of the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore to pay their final respects to him.

“Pope Francis wanted to be buried, not as a man of power, but as a disciple of Christ, and this is what we are seeing now,” said one of the BBC commentators of the live broadcast from the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, during the funeral of Pope Francis in 2025.

Conclusions

The media coverage surrounding Pope Francis's passing in April 2025 vividly encapsulates several profound themes that defined his pontificate. His death on Easter Monday served as a poignant reminder of the Christian celebration of resurrection and mercy, emphasizing the interconnectedness of faith and service. Journalists highlighted Francis's dedication as the "voice of the peripheries," consistently advocating for the marginalized, the poor, and the excluded throughout his papacy.

The surprise and spontaneity that characterized his pontificate were reflected in both his actions and his genuine outreach to those on the fringes of society. Francis's legacy resonates deeply with the teachings of St. Francis of Assisi, embodying a commitment to humility and simplicity while fostering an inclusive Church. The narrative of Pope Francis reflects a pontificate shaped by and rooted in the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi, after whom he was named. Throughout his final journey, he was accompanied by the poor and marginalized, who came to bid him farewell on the steps of the basilica he selected as his final resting place.

Furthermore, the gathering of world leaders at his funeral underscored the universal impact of his message, transcending geographic and political boundaries. This assembly reminded audiences of his role as a bridge builder, calling for peace, compassion, and understanding in a world often divided by conflict. As the images of mourners, the poor, and the marginalized paying their final respects at the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore illustrate, Pope Francis's ministry was anchored in a commitment to those who are often overlooked.

The long-term impact of Pope Francis's legacy cannot be confirmed by the current research, but the media reports on his death tell the story of a man who sought to inspire a renewed sense of hope, solidarity, and mercy.

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