

## Symbolic Meaning of Pope Francis' Apostolic Journey in Indonesia and Its Public Reception: Strengthening Interfaith Fraternity

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the symbolic meaning of Pope Francis' apostolic journey to Indonesia in September 2024, using George Herbert Mead's Symbolic Interaction Theory. The research focuses on how the symbolic actions, words, and objects during the visit were interpreted by Indonesian society, particularly in the context of interfaith relations. The study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing literature study techniques to analyze primary sources such as official documents, speeches, and media reports, as well as secondary sources like academic journals and books. The findings reveal that Pope Francis' visit carried profound symbolic meanings, particularly through his gestures (e.g., kissing the hand of the Grand Imam of Istiqlal Mosque), speeches, and the signing of the Istiqlal Declaration on Religious Harmony. These actions were widely perceived as promoting interfaith dialogue and solidarity, although some skepticism existed among certain groups. This research contributes to the understanding of how symbolic interactions can foster interfaith harmony in a multicultural society like Indonesia, offering insights for future studies on religious diplomacy and public reception of symbolic actions.

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### ABSTRAK

Studi ini menganalisis makna simbolik dari perjalanan apostolik Paus Fransiskus ke Indonesia pada September 2024 dengan menggunakan Teori Interaksi Simbolik dari George Herbert Mead. Penelitian ini berfokus pada bagaimana tindakan, kata-kata, dan objek simbolik selama kunjungan tersebut ditafsirkan oleh masyarakat Indonesia, khususnya dalam konteks hubungan antaragama. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan teknik studi pustaka untuk menganalisis sumber primer, seperti dokumen resmi, pidato, dan laporan media, serta sumber sekunder, seperti jurnal akademik dan buku. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa kunjungan Paus Fransiskus memiliki makna simbolik yang mendalam, terutama melalui gestur (misalnya, mencium tangan Grand Imam Masjid

*Istiqlal), pidato, dan penandatanganan Deklarasi Istiqlal tentang Keharmonisan Antaragama. Tindakan-tindakan tersebut secara luas dipersepsikan sebagai upaya untuk mempromosikan dialog dan solidaritas antaragama, meskipun terdapat skeptisisme dari beberapa kelompok. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman mengenai bagaimana interaksi simbolik dapat memperkuat harmoni antaragama dalam masyarakat multikultural seperti Indonesia, serta memberikan wawasan bagi studi-studi mendatang tentang diplomasi keagamaan dan penerimaan publik terhadap tindakan simbolik.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a country known for its diversity, including in terms of religion (Jati et al., 2022). As a country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia is also home to various other religions such as Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. This diversity is one of the characteristics of Indonesia, as well as a challenge in maintaining harmony in living together (Sulbi & Siregar, 2021). Although Indonesia is recognized as a tolerant country, challenges remain in maintaining harmonious relationships between religious groups that must be addressed (Artariah, 2024). Inter-religious conflicts, prejudices, and stereotypes still often arise and become challenges that must be faced by this nation. In this situation, the presence of world religious leaders can help promote peace, cooperation, and interfaith dialog (Ananta et al., 2005).

Pope Francis' trip to Indonesia in September 2024 is an important event, both for Catholics and Indonesians in general (Faggioli, 2020). As the supreme leader of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis is not only well known among Catholics, but also respected as a world leader who promotes peace, interreligious dialogue and universal brotherhood (Francis & Al-Tayeeb, 2019). This visit has a deep meaning, especially in an effort to strengthen relations between religious communities in Indonesia. This study aims to understand the symbolic meaning of the visit and its impact on interfaith brotherhood in Indonesia. The visit took place in a global context filled with challenges, such as rising interfaith tensions and social polarization (Kamal, 2024). At the national level, Indonesia also faces similar problems, including efforts to maintain tolerance amidst the diversity of society. Therefore, the presence of Pope Francis can be seen as a symbolic step to encourage interfaith unity and dialog, which is very relevant to the current situation (Marchlewska et al., 2019).

As a religious leader, Pope Francis is known for the great attention he pays to issues of peace and diversity (Kusuma & Susilo, 2020). Since the beginning of his leadership, Pope Francis has emphasized the importance of interreligious cooperation and solidarity. The document "*Fratelli Tutti*," released in 2020, is a clear example of Pope Francis' views on the importance of universal brotherhood. Pope Francis' visit to Indonesia can be considered as a concrete step towards realizing this idea in a country as diverse as Indonesia (Francis, 2020).

In his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis emphasized the importance of universal brotherhood by stating that all human beings are brothers and sisters who have a shared responsibility to create a life of peace and harmony (Francis, 2020). He called on all parties, regardless of religious or cultural background, to promote dialogue, mutual understanding and solidarity. Pope Francis also criticized the tendency of the modern world to prioritize individualism and self-interest. He reminded us that collective solidarity is needed to overcome global challenges such as poverty, social inequality and environmental degradation (Satrio & Viktorahadi, 2021).

The encyclical also emphasizes that peace cannot be achieved through conflict or war, but only through honest and open dialog (Ali et al., 2021). In this context, reconciliation becomes the main way to resolve differences and create harmony. Pope Francis encourages humanity to strengthen social relations based on love, respect for human dignity, and recognition of the human rights of every individual. He calls this social friendship, a concept that emphasizes the importance of togetherness and cooperation in building a more just and inclusive world (Faggioli, 2020).

Furthermore, Fratelli Tutti also underlined the important role of religion in promoting peace and fraternity (Francis & Al-Tayeeb, 2019). Pope Francis highlighted that religion can be an effective means to strengthen interfaith relations and encourage interfaith cooperation. In this document, he cited *the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Coexistence*, previously signed with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, in 2019. The document is the basis for his call for all religions to work together to create a world of peace and harmony. Fratelli Tutti is thus a moral guide that emphasizes the values of compassion, dialogue, and cooperation amidst the diversity of humanity (Francis & Al-Tayeeb, 2019).

The symbolic meaning of Pope Francis' visit to Indonesia can also be seen from the locations visited, the messages delivered, and Pope Francis' interactions with other religious leaders (Berek, 2024). For example, if Pope Francis visits a mosque or speaks directly with other religious leaders, these actions will be a strong symbol of the importance of dialogue and mutual respect between religions (Nurani & Ayu, 2024). These will be the focus of analysis in this study. In addition, the response of the Indonesian government and society is also an important part to consider. In recent years, Indonesia has actively championed the values of diversity and tolerance, both at the national and international levels. Pope Francis' visit could be an opportunity for Indonesia to emphasize its commitment to peace and harmony amidst differences (Ikeke, 2023).

To understand the symbolic meaning of this visit, the research will use an approach that focuses on analyzing the symbols and messages conveyed during the visit. The theory used is the theory of symbolic meaning. Symbolic meaning theory emphasizes that humans interact with the surrounding world through symbolic meanings given to objects, words, and actions (Har, 2024). With this approach, the research can explore the meaning behind Pope Francis' actions and messages in the context of interfaith relations in Indonesia. In addition, the response of the Indonesian people to this visit will also be the main concern of the research, as this can show the extent to which the messages conveyed are accepted by various groups.

Previous studies have extensively discussed the theological and social-political aspects of Pope Francis' encyclical Fratelli Tutti (Faggioli, 2020; Ali et al., 2021). However, few have explored how the symbolic actions of his apostolic journeys are interpreted by local communities, particularly in a multicultural and multireligious context like Indonesia. There is a lack of research on how these symbolic actions are interpreted and received by the Indonesian public. This study addresses this gap by applying Mead's Symbolic Interaction Theory to analyze the public reception of Pope Francis' visit, offering a new perspective on the role of symbolic actions in interfaith relations. This research examines the symbolic meanings of Pope Francis' apostolic journey in Indonesia, focusing on his actions, words, and objects. It explores how these symbols were interpreted by the Indonesian public and assesses their impact on interfaith relations, aiming to enhance understanding of how symbolic actions can promote interfaith harmony in diverse societies.

George Herbert Mead (2013), explains that meaning is built through social interaction, especially through symbols mediated by language and action. Mead argues that humans do not only act based on direct stimulus, but also based on the interpretation of the symbols around them (Mead & Morris, 2013). In this context, every action or message delivered by a religious leader such as Pope Francis can be seen as a symbol that carries a certain meaning for its audience. According to Mead, symbolic meaning is created through a three-stage process: (1) a person's action, (2) the response of others to the action, and (3) the processing of meaning by individuals based on their social context (Miller, 2010). This approach is relevant to analyze how Pope Francis' actions,

messages, and interactions during his visit were received and interpreted by the Indonesian public, which consists of various religious groups with different backgrounds.

This research is based on the assumption that the symbols that emerge through the actions, speeches and messages of a world leader have a significant influence on people's perceptions, understanding and attitudes in responding to social issues, including religious diversity (Miller, 2010). This assumption refers to the theory of symbolic meaning developed by George Herbert Mead (2013), which states that human actions are not only practical but also mediated by symbols that convey certain meanings (Mead & Morris, 2013). In the context of this research, Pope Francis' actions and messages during his visit to Indonesia can be understood as important symbols that convey the values of interfaith dialog, solidarity and brotherhood (Francis, 2020). Therefore, the analysis of these symbols provides a conceptual basis for understanding how these messages are received and interpreted by the pluralistic Indonesian society.

The conceptual framework of this research is built by integrating the theory of symbolic meaning. The research will examine Pope Francis' symbolic actions, such as visits to interfaith places of worship, meetings with religious leaders, as well as the content of his speeches that focus on the theme of universal brotherhood (Hanan et al., 2024). In addition, the research will also explore how Indonesian society, which consists of various religious groups, responds to these symbols. These responses will be analyzed in the unique social, cultural and religious context of Indonesia, which has a long history of building harmony but also faces challenges in the form of stereotypes, conflicts and interfaith dynamics (Francis & Al-Tayeeb, 2019).

Conceptually, the symbols that emerged in this visit are understood as a medium of communication that goes beyond verbal and visual messages (Maharani et al., 2023). They serve as bridges to reduce interreligious gaps, promote cooperation, and create inclusive spaces for dialogue. In the Indonesian context, these symbols have relevance not only as universal representations of peace values, but also as tools that have local impact, given the complexity of interfaith relations in the country (Taufik, 2021).

The basic assumption of this research is that religious symbols interpreted positively can be a catalyst in promoting tolerance values and strengthening social relations (Muhammad Sifa' Muizzuddin et al., 2024). This rests on the view that messages of peace conveyed through the symbolic actions of a religious leader not only reflect personal intentions, but also have the capacity to influence social norms and values in society (Irawan et al., 2023). Based on this assumption, this study hypothesizes that Pope Francis' visit to Indonesia, through his various symbolic actions, can strengthen interfaith relations and strengthen the narrative of togetherness in the midst of diversity.

This conceptual framework is designed to answer several key questions, such as: (1) How are the actions and messages of Pope Francis during his visit interpreted as symbols by the public? (2) How do Indonesians respond to these symbols, both as individuals and as a community? (3) How do these symbols affect people's perceptions and attitudes towards religious diversity. Through this approach, this study not only aims to understand the events of Pope Francis' visit to Indonesia, but also to make a conceptual contribution to the study of symbolic meaning, interfaith dialogue, and social change in Indonesia's multicultural society.

In general, the purpose of this research is to understand the symbolic meaning of Pope Francis' visit to Indonesia, evaluate its impact on interfaith relations, and provide suggestions for efforts to strengthen interfaith dialog in the future. This research is expected to provide benefits for the development of religion and peace studies in Indonesia, as well as input in building more harmonious relations between religious communities. Therefore, this research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the importance of symbols in building interfaith dialog. Furthermore, this research can also be a real contribution to efforts to build stronger interfaith relations in Indonesia. Pope Francis' visit is a very meaningful moment to create a more inclusive space for dialogue and cooperation for all parties.



## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a type of qualitative research with a literature study approach (Kothari, 2004). This approach aims to analyze data obtained from various literature sources, such as books, scientific journals, research reports, and other relevant documents (Hikmawati, 2015). This method was chosen because it allows researchers to explore, understand, and interpret phenomena in depth based on documented information (Darmalaksana, 2020).

This study focuses on the symbolic actions, words, and objects associated with Pope Francis' apostolic journey to Indonesia in September 2024, with a focus on key locations such as the Istiqlal Mosque, Gelora Bung Karno Stadium, and the Merdeka Palace. The symbolic actions including his speeches, gestures, and interactions with religious leaders and the public. Therefore, the data for this study were collected from primary sources, including official documents, speeches by Pope Francis, and media reports, as well as secondary sources such as academic journals, books, and articles on interfaith relations and symbolic interaction theory.

Data analysis in this study uses Symbolic Meaning Theory, which emphasizes understanding the symbols and meanings contained in the phenomenon of Pope Francis' Apostolic Journey in Indonesia. This approach helps researchers reveal the relationship between the symbols in the literature data and the meaning they produce, so as to provide a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon studied (Sugiyono, 2015). Therefore, this research is expected to produce relevant and in-depth findings in accordance with the objectives of the study.

The research process followed Miles and Huberman's framework (1994) for qualitative data analysis, which consists of three interconnected stages: (1) data reduction, where collected data from primary and secondary sources were systematically categorized and condensed based on their relevance to symbolic interaction theory; (2) data display, where the organized data were presented in a structured format, such as thematic matrices, to identify key symbols, their meanings, and patterns in Pope Francis' actions and public reception; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, where the displayed data were interpreted to draw meaningful insights about how these symbols were received by the Indonesian public, with findings cross-checked against theoretical frameworks and additional sources to ensure validity. The analysis was guided by Mead's Symbolic Interaction Theory, which emphasizes the role of symbols in social interaction and meaning-making.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Profile of Pope Francis

Pope Francis, originally named Jorge Mario Bergoglio, was born on December 17, 1936, in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He is the 266th Pope in the history of the Catholic Church and serves concurrently as the head of state of Vatican City. Pope Francis has achieved several historic milestones, including being the first Jesuit priest to be elected Pope, the first Pope from the Southern Hemisphere, and the first non-European Pope since Gregory III of Syria, who passed away in 741 (Sullivan, 2015).

Before embarking on his religious vocation, Jorge Mario Bergoglio completed formal education in chemistry and worked as a laboratory technician. In 1958, he joined the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), a congregation renowned for its commitment to education and social service. Following his religious training, Bergoglio was ordained as a priest in 1969. Between 1973 and 1979, he served as the provincial superior of the Jesuits in Argentina, demonstrating a strong dedication to church service and education (Fransiskus & Harun, 2015).

In 1998, Bergoglio was appointed as the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, a role that brought him closer to the community through his pastoral approach. As Archbishop, he became known for his humble lifestyle, opting to live in a modest apartment and use public transportation instead of the official residence and facilities provided for his position. In 2001, Pope John Paul II elevated Bergoglio to the rank of Cardinal in recognition of his devotion to ecclesiastical service (Fransiskus & Harun, 2015).

After the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI in 2013, Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected Pope on March 13, 2013. He chose the name Francis in honor of Saint Francis of Assisi, a saint renowned for his simplicity, love of nature, and commitment to peace and poverty. This choice reflects Pope Francis's vision of bringing the Catholic Church closer to these values (Vallely, 2015).

Pope Francis's leadership emphasizes addressing social issues relevant to contemporary challenges, including poverty, social injustice, and environmental crises (Francis, 2017). Through his teachings, he highlights the importance of inclusivity and compassion within the Church and promotes constructive dialogue with non-Catholic communities (Fransiskus & Harun, 2015). He has also actively advocated for global cooperation to address universal issues (Francis, 2020). One of Pope Francis's significant contributions is the publication of the encyclical *Laudato Si'* in 2015, which urgently addresses the environmental crisis. In this document, he calls for collective action to protect the earth as humanity's "*common home*" (Setiadi et al., 2023). He also emphasizes the close connection between environmental degradation and poverty, urging all stakeholders to participate in environmental conservation as a moral responsibility (Sullivan, 2015).

Additionally, Pope Francis is known for his openness toward various controversial issues within the Church, such as homosexuality and the role of women (Politi, 2014). While upholding the traditional teachings of the Church, he underscores the importance of respecting and accepting every individual without judgment (Ivereigh, 2019). This approach reflects his commitment to conveying Christian love within a context relevant to the modern world. Pope Francis's leadership exemplifies a strategic effort to make the Catholic Church more relevant, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of the contemporary era (Sullivan, 2015). With a leadership style marked by simplicity and empathy, he strives to bring the Church closer to its people while reaffirming its moral role in addressing complex global challenges (Fransiskus & Harun, 2015).

### Understanding Apostolic Journey

Apostolic journeys refer to missionary travels undertaken by apostles or religious figures to spread their faith across various regions (Gunkel, 1979). In Abrahamic traditions, particularly Christianity, these journeys aim to fulfill Jesus Christ's mandate to "*go and make disciples of all nations*" (Matthew 28:19). Beyond spreading religion, such journeys expand theological understanding, strengthen faith communities, and foster social and cultural development in the regions they reach (Schaff, 2002). Historically, apostolic journeys date back to the first century, with figures like Paul playing a significant role in spreading Christianity (Gregory & Tucket, 2005). Paul visited cities such as Ephesus, Corinth, and Thessalonica to share the Gospel and establish church communities. His approach to evangelism included cross-cultural dialogue and adapting to the socio-economic contexts of his audience (Niebuhr & Wall, 2009).

The theological significance of apostolic journeys lies in their embodiment of obedience to God's call to bear witness to the faith (Gregory & Tucket, 2005). Paul emphasized the importance of preaching the Gospel without cultural or ethnic discrimination (Romans 1:16), underscoring the universal nature of the Christian message (Marchlewska et al., 2019). These journeys represent a practical manifestation of active faith. However, apostolic journeys were not without challenges. Paul faced rejection, persecution, and physical dangers, including the risks of sea travel (Gregory & Tucket, 2005). These experiences highlight the sacrifices and steadfastness required to carry out a mission of faith. The contribution of apostolic journeys to the spread of religion is substantial. In Christianity, these travels enabled the Gospel to extend beyond Palestine, shaping the church into a diverse global community (Schaff, 2002). Additionally, they enriched theological perspectives through cultural and intellectual exchanges.

In modern times, apostolic journeys remain relevant. Missionaries now utilize technology, such as digital media, to reach broader audiences (Pejunis & Woda, 2024). The focus has also expanded to include social services like education, healthcare, and community empowerment, reflecting a holistic expression of faith (Francis, 2020).

Similar concepts exist in other religions, such as *da'wah* in Islam, which involves spreading the message of faith to others (Muttaqin et al., 2022). This illustrates that missionary journeys are a

universal phenomenon reflecting the dynamic nature of religious practice (Muhammad, 2024). Understanding apostolic journeys involves exploring their theological, historical, strategic, and social dimensions. As acts of faith-driven service, these journeys continue to be a meaningful way to build communities and positively impact society.

### **Symbolic Meanings of Francis' Apostolic Journey in Indonesia**

The discussion in this sub-chapter will contain three symbolic meanings forms when Pope Francis made an apostolic journey in Indonesia, namely symbolic objects, symbolic words, and symbolic actions.

#### ***Symbolic Objects***

Pope Francis is visiting Indonesia on September 3rd – 6th, 2024. This visit is part of his apostolic journey to several countries in Southeast Asia. While in Indonesia, Pope Francis carried out several activities. The Pope's series of activities in Indonesia include meeting with President Joko Widodo at the Merdeka Palace, meeting with interfaith leaders at the Istiqlal Mosque, signing the *Istiqlal Declaration on Religious Harmony for Humanity*, dialoguing with bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated life practitioners, seminarians, and catechists at the Jakarta Cathedral Church, visiting the Friendship Tunnel connecting the Istiqlal Mosque and the Jakarta Cathedral Church, and Attending Holy Mass at Gelora Bung Karno (GBK) Senayan, Jakarta.

During his visit to Indonesia in September 2024, Pope Francis met with President Joko Widodo at the Merdeka Palace, Jakarta. This meeting has an important diplomatic and symbolic dimension, given the good relations between the Vatican and Indonesia as a country with the largest Muslim population in the world (Kamal, 2024). During the meeting, Pope Francis and President Joko Widodo discussed a wide range of relevant global and national issues, including the promotion of interreligious dialog, efforts to maintain world peace, and shared responsibility in the face of climate change. The discussion reflected a shared commitment to tolerance and interfaith cooperation as the basis for creating social harmony in the midst of diversity (Nurani & Ayu, 2024).

Pope Francis also expressed his appreciation for Indonesia's efforts in promoting religious freedom and cultural diversity. In turn, President Jokowi emphasized Indonesia's support for the Pope's initiatives in fighting for social justice, environmental protection, and global solidarity. The Pope's visit to the Merdeka Palace was not only limited to formal discussions, but also featured symbolic moments that strengthened friendship between the countries. The event highlighted the values of simplicity and unity that are at the heart of Pope Francis' messages, while reflecting the principles of diversity that characterize Indonesia.

Pope Francis' visit to Jakarta's Istiqlal Mosque in September 2024 is an important symbol in promoting interfaith dialogue and strengthening interfaith brotherhood. As one of the largest mosques in the world, the Istiqlal Mosque symbolizes the principle of Unity in Diversity, reflecting Indonesia's harmony in diversity. The Pope was received by the Grand Imam of the Istiqlal Mosque, Nasaruddin Umar, along with a number of religious leaders, and was invited to tour the mosque and see the architectural elements that are rich in spiritual and national values.

During his visit, Pope Francis delivered a short speech emphasizing the importance of universal brotherhood and interfaith cooperation in the face of global challenges, such as social injustice, poverty, and climate change. Citing peace-first teachings from both the Catholic and Islamic traditions, he delivered a moral message to build a harmonious and just future. His presence at the Istiqlal Mosque symbolizes respect for Indonesian Muslims and the Catholic Church's commitment to inclusiveness.

From a Symbolic Meaning Theory perspective, this visit conveys a profound message of interfaith harmony and global solidarity. Pope Francis' actions demonstrate how religion can be a means to unite humanity in the face of world challenges. This symbolism also inspires ongoing dialog, reinforcing the values of peace, compassion and interfaith cooperation as a response to the complexities of the modern world.



**Figure 1.** Photos of Pope Francis' visit to the Merdeka Palace welcomed by President Joko Widodo (left) and Pope Francis' visit to the Istiqlal Mosque welcomed by the Grand Imam of the Istiqlal Mosque, Nasarudin Umar, along with several national figures (right).



Source: [www.presidenri.go.id](http://www.presidenri.go.id) and [www.cnnindonesia.com](http://www.cnnindonesia.com)

### Symbolic Words

Pope Francis was a state guest during his apostolic journey to Indonesia. When he visited the Merdeka Palace, like other state guests, Pope Francis wrote his name in the state guest register. In the guest book, he was seen writing a message that read: "Immersed in the beauty of this land, a place of encounter and dialogue between different cultures and religions, I wish the Indonesian people growth in faith, fraternity, and compassion. God bless Indonesia!". In Bahasa Indonesia, it means: "*Tenggelam dalam keindahan negeri ini, tempat perjumpaan dan dialog antara budaya dan agama yang berbeda, saya berharap rakyat Indonesia bertumbuh dalam iman, persaudaraan, dan kasih sayang. Tuhan memberkati Indonesia!*".

The message in the state guestbook holds profound symbolic meaning. Through this writing, Pope Francis implicitly acknowledged Indonesia's national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). It can also be interpreted as a call to practice the principle of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* in daily life, likening the nation's cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity to the ocean that unites the archipelago. The Pope seemingly sought to convey that Indonesia's biodiversity and diversity are sources of richness and beauty. Furthermore, Pope Francis encouraged the continued display of kindness and goodwill to serve as builders of unity and peace. He also expressed a desire to enhance interfaith dialogue across the various regions of the country.

In addition to the message conveyed through his writing, Pope Francis also delivered a message emphasizing the strengthening of interfaith fraternity through a homily or reflection on Scripture readings during the Holy Mass he led at Gelora Bung Karno Stadium. In the homily, the Pope highlighted two fundamental attitudes for Catholics as disciples of Jesus: listening to the Word and living out the Word. He emphasized that "...let us not forget this: the primary task of a disciple – and we are all disciples – is not to wear an outwardly perfect spiritual guise, perform extraordinary deeds, or undertake grand efforts. Rather, the first task, the initial step, is to learn how to listen to the one Word that saves, which is the Word of Jesus." (Fransiskus, 2024).

The Pope also conveyed that Catholics must live out the Word. He emphasized that, "...the Word of God must not remain merely a beautiful abstract idea or stir fleeting emotions. The Word of God demands a transformation in our way of seeing, allowing our hearts to be reshaped into the heart of Christ. It calls us to courageously cast the nets of the Gospel into the sea of the world, to take risks, and to live out the love that He has taught us and first demonstrated Himself. To us as well, the Lord, through the burning power of His Word, invites us to open pathways to life, to break free from the stagnant shores of bad habits, fear, and lukewarmness, and to boldly embrace a new way of living." (Fransiskus, 2024).



In front of the entire congregation at the Holy Mass, Pope Francis called for maintaining fraternity through the path of dialogue. He praised Indonesia's diversity and urged Catholics to continue sowing love and peace. The Pope emphasized, "...do not grow weary of sailing and casting your nets, do not tire of dreaming and rebuilding a civilization of peace! Always dare to dream of fraternity! Guided by the Word of God, I encourage you all to sow love, to confidently walk the path of dialogue, and to continue demonstrating kindness and goodwill with the characteristic smile that distinguishes you, to become builders of unity and peace. In this way, you will spread the fragrance of hope around you. This is the aspiration recently expressed by the Bishops of Indonesia, and I too wish to extend it to all the faithful of Indonesia: walk together for the good of the Church and society! Be bearers of hope, the hope of the Gospel, which does not disappoint but opens us to the joy without end." (Fransiskus, 2024).

**Figure 2.** The Pope's inscription in the State Guestbook at Merdeka Palace (left) and his address during the Holy Mass at Gelora Bung Karno Stadium (right).



Source: Kumparan.com

### Symbolic Actions

Another notable moment during Pope Francis' apostolic journey was his visit to the Istiqlal Mosque, where he participated in an interfaith dialogue and signed the Istiqlal Declaration. After the event concluded, Nasarudin Umar accompanied Pope Francis to the mosque's courtyard for a photo session. During this moment, an interesting and heartfelt interaction occurred when the Grand Imam of Istiqlal Mosque kissed the forehead of the Supreme Leader of the Catholic Church. Nasarudin Umar was seen kissing Pope Francis' forehead twice, a gesture reciprocated by Pope Francis with a kiss on Nasarudin Umar's hand.

According to Jadul Maula, Chairperson of the Institute for Arts and Culture of the Muslim Community of Indonesia (Lesbumi) under the Executive Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU), the moment reflected the maturity and wisdom shared by these two great religious leaders, despite the traumatic history of conflict and wars between their respective faiths in the past. Maula emphasized that both leaders were able to transcend destructive patterns and transform them into new, constructive approaches (Masyhadi, 2024).

In addition to the symbolic gestures of kissing the forehead and hand, Pope Francis, together with religious leaders in Indonesia—represented by Ahmad Fahrur Rozi (NU), Abdul Mu'ti (Muhammadiyah), Jacky Manuputty (Christianity), Wishnu Bawa Tenaya (Hinduism), Philip Wijaya (Buddhism, Permayudi), Bhante Dhammasubho (Buddhism, Walubi), and Budi S. Tanuwibowo (Confucianism)—signed the *Istiqlal Declaration on Dehumanization and Climate Change*. The document highlighted two key issues: first, the global phenomenon of dehumanization, marked by the widespread violence and conflicts resulting in an alarming number of casualties; and second, humanity's exploitation of creation, our shared home, which has contributed to climate change. This,

in turn, has led to destructive consequences such as natural disasters, global warming, and unpredictable weather patterns (Masyhadi, 2024).

The two symbolic acts—kissing Nasarudin Umar's hand and signing the Declaration Document—demonstrate Pope Francis' commitment as a religious leader to the agenda of peace, environmental preservation, and the strengthening of interfaith fraternity. These symbolic gestures illustrate that the Pope's dedication extends beyond words and is manifested through actions, serving as an example for people of all faiths to follow.

**Figure 3.** Nasarudin Umar kisses the forehead of Pope Francis (left), and Pope Francis kisses the hand of Nasarudin Umar (right).



Source: pinterest.com

**Figure 4.** Pope Francis and Nasaruddin Umar signing the Istiqlal Declaration (left) and Reading of the Declaration by representatives of religious groups in Indonesia (right)



Source: Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia

### Indonesian's Views on Pope Francis' Apostolic Journey

The Indonesian public's perception of Pope Francis' apostolic journey was generally very positive, reflecting high regard for the messages delivered during his visit. As a predominantly Muslim country, Indonesia demonstrated openness and inclusivity toward the interfaith dialogue initiated by the Pope. Many appreciated Pope Francis' efforts to strengthen interreligious fraternity and promote the values of peace, social justice, and environmental conservation (Sonda, 2024).

Visits to key locations such as the Istiqlal Mosque and Gelora Bung Karno Stadium underscored the Pope's commitment to fostering relationships with diverse communities. His presence in Indonesia was viewed as a symbol of global solidarity and recognition of Indonesia's role as a model of interfaith harmony. The interfaith dialogues conducted during his visit highlighted the importance of collaboration in addressing global challenges such as dehumanization and climate change, which garnered widespread approval across various groups (Indra, 2024).

Young people, in particular, responded enthusiastically to this historic visit, perceiving it as a moment of hope and renewal. Many religious leaders and community figures regarded Pope Francis' symbolic gestures and concrete actions, such as kissing the hand of the Grand Imam of the Istiqlal Mosque, as exemplary in breaking down barriers of difference. The visit also reinforced Indonesia's image as a nation upholding the principle of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* or Unity in Diversity (Suryana & Saat, 2024).

However, a small number of groups viewed the journey with skepticism, questioning the visit's agenda and its implications for interfaith relations in Indonesia (Detik.com, 2024). Nevertheless, the discussions that arose enriched public discourse on the importance of interfaith dialogue and cooperation in fostering a more peaceful and just world. Overall, Pope Francis' apostolic journey to Indonesia not only marked a historic milestone in Catholic-Islamic relations but also underscored the urgency of strengthening unity, tolerance, and collective action in addressing global challenges.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The apostolic journey of Pope Francis to Indonesia was a profound demonstration of symbolic acts, words, and objects that carried deep meaning for interfaith fraternity and global solidarity. His visit to the Istiqlal Mosque and the signing of the Istiqlal Declaration on Dehumanization and Climate Change were emblematic of his commitment to fostering unity among diverse faiths and addressing pressing global challenges. These actions symbolized a shared responsibility among religious leaders to overcome divisions and advocate for justice, peace, and environmental preservation.

Pope Francis' gestures, such as kissing the hand of Grand Imam Nasarudin Umar and receiving a reciprocal gesture of respect, conveyed a powerful message of humility and mutual reverence. These acts transcended religious boundaries, underscoring the importance of interpersonal respect and the breaking down of historical tensions between faith traditions. Through his homilies, Pope Francis emphasized listening to and living out the Word of God as foundational to discipleship, encouraging Catholics to embody love, hope, and courage in their daily lives. His words inspired not only the Catholic community but also the wider public to embrace the values of dialogue and cooperation.

The symbolic resonance of these actions was amplified by the cultural and religious diversity of Indonesia, showcasing the potential of interfaith harmony as a model for the global community. By advocating for shared values such as compassion, respect, and the stewardship of creation, Pope Francis highlighted the urgent need for collaboration in addressing contemporary crises. His visit reaffirmed that religious dialogue and action are indispensable tools for building a more peaceful and unified world.

Ultimately, the apostolic journey was a testament to the transformative power of symbolic interaction in promoting understanding and solidarity. The legacy of Pope Francis' visit lies in its call to embrace diversity as a strength and to work collectively toward a future rooted in fraternity, justice, and the common good.

This study contributes to the understanding of symbolic interaction in interfaith relations by applying Mead's theory to the context of Pope Francis' apostolic journey in Indonesia. Unlike previous studies that focused on theological or political aspects, this research highlights how symbolic actions are interpreted by the public, offering new insights into the role of religious diplomacy in multicultural societies.

This study has several limitations. First, it relies primarily on secondary data, which may not fully capture the diversity of public reactions. Second, the analysis is limited to the context of Indonesia, and the findings may not be generalizable to other countries.



Consequently, future research could explore the long-term impact of symbolic actions on interfaith relations, using methods such as surveys or interviews to gather more comprehensive data. Additionally, comparative studies could be conducted to analyze how similar symbolic actions are received in different cultural and religious contexts.

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