

DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS:
POPE’S SPEECHES AND THE DYNAMICS OF CONFLICT IN AFRICA *

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Abstract

Public speeches by leaders can serve as a cost-effective tool for fostering peace, yet their effectiveness remains uncertain, particularly in divided societies experiencing violent conflict. This paper examines the impact of the Catholic Pope’s peace-promoting speeches on conflict dynamics in Africa. We construct a novel dataset covering all papal speeches explicitly addressing violent conflict events in Africa between 1997 and 2022. Using event-study methods, we find that such speeches reduce overall conflict by 23% on average in the weeks following their delivery. Importantly, the effects vary systematically by papal identity: speeches delivered by John Paul II and Francis are associated with substantial reductions in conflict, whereas those delivered by Benedict XVI show no significant aggregate effect and are instead linked to increases in battles and religious violence. We further explore four mechanisms driving these heterogeneous effects. First, the impact of papal speeches is significantly stronger in areas with a Catholic presence, where violence drops by up to 69%. Second, the effectiveness of a speech depends on the bishops’ ideological alignment with the Pope’s vision, with speeches delivered by a Pope who appointed the current bishop being 17% more effective. Third, political leaders play a crucial role in amplifying the Pope’s message, as violence significantly declines in birth regions of national leaders. Finally, the response of armed groups varies depending on their religious affiliation and prior history of violence.

Keywords: Conflict, Violence, Religion, Leaders, Peacebuilding

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1 Introduction

Conflict remains a critical issue in the contemporary world, directly affecting a substantial proportion of the global population.¹ Extensive literature has documented the persistence of violence and conflict, often rooted in entrenched institutions (Acemoglu et al., 2001), ethnic divisions (McGuirk and Nunn, 2024; Esteban et al., 2012), and the appropriation of resources (Berman et al., 2017). However, various local or external factors, such as income disturbances (Dube and Vargas, 2013; McGuirk and Burke, 2020) and environmental shocks (Miguel et al., 2004; McGuirk and Nunn, 2025), can disrupt the dynamics of violence, either exacerbating tensions and fueling escalation or creating opportunities for de-escalation and peace. The complex interplay of these factors poses significant challenges for designing and implementing effective peacebuilding and peacekeeping policies (Rohner, 2024b).

In this context, public speeches by global leaders emerge as a cost-effective and potentially powerful tool for fostering peace. Such speeches can simultaneously raise awareness, facilitate dialogue, mobilize collective action, and establish normative frameworks conducive to peacebuilding, which spread through informational, institutional, and community channels and draw on moral authority as a focal signal. The capacity of leaders to influence societies, shape institutions, and impact economic growth has been extensively documented since the seminal works of Jones and Olken (2005, 2009). Public information transmitted by influential figures can shift public opinion and reshape behaviours and norms, as seen in historical examples such as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who promoted a new national identity in modern Turkey (Assouad, 2020), and Philippe Pétain, whose legacy influenced the diffusion of extreme political behaviours in France’s WWII (Cagé et al., 2023). A more recent example is President Trump’s impact on social norms and behaviours in the contemporary United States (Bursztyn et al., 2020; Grosjean et al., 2023; Muller and Schwarz, 2023).²

A key determinant of leaders’ influence is the reach of their message. Substantial evidence highlights the significant impact of religious leaders (Bassi and Rasul, 2017; Wang, 2021), particularly in Africa, where their authority and extensive networks enable them to engage with diverse and widespread audiences (Ellis and ter Haar, 1998; Freston, 2001).³ The Catholic Church, with its unique hierarchical structure and centralized authority in the Pope, has a profound influence. As the Church’s spiritual, moral, and political leader, the Pope delivers speeches that emphasize moral and ethical considerations, reinforcing anti-violence norms and framing peace as both desirable and achievable. His public addresses focus on reconciliation and forgiveness, addressing

¹In 2024, 12% of the global population was affected by at least one violent political event (battles, explosions, violence against civilians) and 21% by protests or riots within a 5km radius of their residence (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data and WorldPop, Conflict Exposure Calculator, downloaded on February 24th, 2025). Predictions are equally striking, as World Bank estimates show that by 2030, nearly 60% of the world’s extreme poor will live in countries affected by fragility, conflict, and violence (World Bank, 2024).

²Historical examples further illustrate this potential in times of global tensions, conflict, and war: President John F. Kennedy’s 1963 “peace race” speech, which contributed to diplomatic progress during the Cold War; Nelson Mandela’s 1998 appeal to end the Northern Ireland conflict; and President Barack Obama’s 2009 address advocating for renewed relations with the Muslim world. Each underscores the power of international rhetoric in advancing peace agendas.

³In Sub-Saharan Africa, religion plays a central role in daily life, with 85% of individuals (92% of Muslims) considering it very important, and 75% attending worship services at least once a week. These figures are based on computations from the Pew Research Center (2010) database, a public opinion survey conducted between December 2008 and April 2009, involving more than 25,000 face-to-face interviews across 19 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

grievances and emotional drivers of conflict while weakening ideological justifications for violence (Jervis, 1976), and can be amplified or resisted by local elites and by community norms that shape responses to such appeals.

However, the effectiveness of peace-promoting speeches by religious leaders, such as the Catholic Pope, remains uncertain, especially in divided societies experiencing violent conflict. Such speeches, rooted in moral and ethical consideration, can reinforce peace norms, reduce mistrust, and encourage armed groups to reassess the costs of violence. These messages foster dialogue and mutual understanding, address commitment problems that hinder peace agreements, and attract international attention, further encouraging support for peace initiatives. However, in some cases, armed groups may interpret these appeals as partial or intrusive, prompting strategic reactions, backlash, or spoiler dynamics, especially when international visibility raises reputational stakes. Additionally, in highly polarized societies, the Pope's speech may be seen as exacerbating existing divisions, while structural drivers of conflict, such as competition over resources or territorial control, could limit the effectiveness of his message.

This paper investigates the effect of the Catholic Pope's peace-seeking speeches on conflict dynamics in Africa. To this end, we construct a unique dataset covering all peace-promoting speeches delivered by the Pope that explicitly address violent conflict events in Africa over a 26-year period (1997–2022). A key feature of this empirical setting is its inclusion of various local contexts and speeches by three different Popes, each bringing distinct ideological orientations and communication strategies towards Africa.

Transcripts of the Catholic Pope's speeches are systematically recorded on the Vatican's official website for the three pontificates covered by our conflict data: Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis. While these speeches primarily focus on spirituality, moral values, and the Catholic Church's global actions, the Pope also uses them to address conflict zones, highlighting civilian suffering and calling for peace. We identify speeches that explicitly denounce violence in African countries and call for its cessation, using a combination of statistical topic modeling and human classification to ensure accuracy. In total, 85 speeches contain peace-promoting messages targeting at least one conflict in Africa. For identification purposes, we restrict our analysis to speeches delivered outside the country being referenced, which constitute the vast majority of cases.⁴

A crucial assumption underlying the relevance of investigating the effects of the Pope's speeches on conflict in Africa is that peace-seeking addresses, often delivered from the Vatican, are effectively disseminated to local audiences. To test this, we first examine media coverage of the Pope's speeches in conflict-affected countries in the days following a speech. Using novel data from national African newspapers, we find a significant increase in the presence of articles mentioning both the Pope and conflict-related terms in outlets distributed within the country targeted by the speech.

⁴This restriction excludes speeches directed at countries the Pope is physically visiting. In our sample, 88.3% of speeches were delivered from the Vatican, while 11.7% were given during official visits to foreign countries but addressed issues in nations other than the host country. This restriction is motivated by the fact that papal visits are planned years in advance, and the Pope's physical presence in a country significantly influences key outcomes in our empirical context, such as heightened security measures. As a result, disentangling the effects of a speech from the broader impact of the Pope's visit becomes challenging.

The likelihood of such mentions rises by 5.1 percentage points (34% of a standard deviation) in the first two days and by 3.6 percentage points (24% of a standard deviation) in the following two days. We also analyze how papal speeches spread through local Catholic institutions, leveraging original data on the Facebook activity of dioceses. The likelihood of a diocese posting about a speech increases significantly after a two-day lag, peaking at 6.7 percentage points (29% of a standard deviation) on days three and four before returning to baseline. The short-lived nature of these effects, along with the absence of pre-trends, supports the interpretation that the increase in coverage reflects the diffusion of papal speeches across both national media and the Facebook pages of local dioceses. Interestingly, the lag in diocesan communication likely reflects the time needed to process and disseminate the messages, in contrast to professional media, which can publish immediately. Finally, using Afrobarometer survey data, we find that Christian respondents interviewed after a papal speech mentioning their country and conflict report a higher perceived importance of religion and greater trust in religious leaders, with no significant effects observed among non-Christian respondents.

The central focus of this paper is to estimate the impact of a papal speech directed at an African country on conflict incidence in the following weeks. The analysis is conducted at the level of a week-by-cell grid, where each cell measures 0.5×0.5 degrees in latitude and longitude (approximately $55 \text{ km} \times 55 \text{ km}$ at the equator). The sample includes weeks surrounding a speech specifically addressing the country corresponding to each cell. For the empirical strategy, we use an event-study approach, defining the event as a week (or a series of weeks, if the Pope gives multiple peace-seeking speeches targeting the same conflict within a short period of time) during which a papal speech is directed at a given African country. We then compare the incidence of conflict before and after the speech within the affected country, using a window extending from five weeks prior to eight weeks following the speech. Since the Pope occasionally addresses multiple conflicts in a single speech, our dataset of 85 speeches translates into 100 isolated “speech events”.⁵ Conflict incidence is measured using the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED), which provides detailed information on conflict events, including the date, location, involved armed groups, and event type. However, ACLED does not indicate whether religion plays a role as a motivating factor in these conflicts. An empirical contribution of this paper is the use of a prompt-based classification approach, leveraging a pre-trained large language model (via OpenAI’s API) to analyze event descriptions for a large subset of events and identify whether an event is religious in nature—such as when religious beliefs, affiliations, or leadership are central. This method is also used to assess whether armed groups can be identified as having a religious affiliation.

The baseline estimates highlight the significant impact of the Pope’s speeches on conflict dynamics. Overall, papal speeches are associated with a 23% reduction in conflict incidence in the weeks following the speeches. This effect varies by type of violence, with a 27% reduction in battles and a more pronounced 34% decrease in low-intensity events. Speeches by John Paul II and Francis significantly reduce conflict, with overall decreases of 89.5% and 21%, respectively. John Paul II’s impact is concentrated in battles, while Francis’ speeches show broader effects, reducing

⁵See Section 3.2 for details on the definition of a speech event.

battles and low-intensity events. In contrast, speeches by Benedict XVI show no significant overall effect on conflict but are associated with substantial increases in battles (85.8%) and religious events (60%). This suggests potential unintended escalations, possibly influenced by the timing, content, or reception of his speeches, or broader policies during his tenure. We identify a specific turning point, the 2006 Regensburg speech, after which Benedict XVI's speeches start to be associated with an increase in conflict. While this speech likely shaped the reception and effects of his messages, other factors, including broader policies during his tenure, may also play a role. In a similar exercise, we assess whether UN Security Council resolutions, as a formal peacekeeping institution, achieve outcomes similar to the Pope's speeches. While the likelihood of African newspapers articles mentioning the UN Security Council rises after the resolution, we find no impact on conflict dynamics. This suggests that religious institutions influence conflict differently, with papal speeches shaping behaviour through moral authority rather than enforcement mechanisms (Iannaccone, 1998; McCleary and Barro, 2006).

Finally, in the last part of our analysis, we examine four key mechanisms. First, building on the idea that audience identity shapes a message's impact (DellaVigna et al., 2014), we assess whether the Pope's speeches have similar effects on conflict in areas with and without Christian communities. As expected, we find that violence significantly decreases in areas with Christian communities following a speech, with an overall reduction of 33.5%, a 48% drop in low-intensity events, and a 69% decline in religious violence. In contrast, no discernible effect is observed in regions without Christian communities. Second, we explore the role of local religious institutions, specifically Catholic bishops, in amplifying the Pope's message. We find that the speeches' effectiveness depends on the bishop's ideological alignment with the Pope: the pacifying effect increases by 17% in places where the current bishop was appointed by the Pope delivering the message, compared to those where the bishop was appointed by a previous Pope. Additionally, while a bishop's local experience (years in the diocese before the speech) has little measurable effect, overall experience (years since ordination) significantly enhances the speeches' impact, particularly in reducing low-intensity and religious violence. Third, we examine whether the Pope's speeches, by drawing global attention to a country, influence political leaders to act in ways that reduce violence—particularly in their stronghold regions. We find that violence decreases significantly in a leader's birthplace region after a speech, with a 71% drop in low-intensity events (compared to 45% elsewhere) and an 87% decline in religious violence (compared to 67%). These results highlight the interaction between the Pope's message and national leadership in shaping conflict dynamics. Fourth, we analyze how armed groups respond to the speeches, focusing on their religious affiliation and prior history of violence. Using bilateral links between actors in the same event window and country, we find that violence decreases by 45% overall for actor pairs with no religious affiliation, by 60% for pairs with at least one Christian group, and shows no significant effect for pairs with at least one Islamic group. Specifically for religious violence, conflict declines by 70% for pairs with at least one Christian group but increases by 230% for pairs with at least one Islamic group, underscoring the varied impact of the Pope's message based on religious affiliation. Additionally, the speeches reduce overall violence and battles by 210% when groups have no prior conflict. How-

ever, for groups with a long-standing history of violence (more than 10 events since 1997), conflict likelihood increases by 30% across overall violence, battles, and religious violence. This suggests that while the speeches help de-escalate less entrenched conflicts, they may escalate hostilities or prompt strategic reactions in deeply rooted conflicts.

Contribution to the literature. This paper contributes to several strands of the literature. First, it adds on the determinants of conflict where factors such as ethnic diversity (e.g., [Cederman et al., 2009](#)), weather conditions (e.g., [Harari and Ferrara, 2018](#); [Eberle et al., 2020](#); [McGuirk and Nunn, 2025](#)), natural resources (e.g., [Dube and Vargas, 2013](#); [Berman et al., 2017](#)), agriculture productivity (e.g., [McGuirk and Nunn, 2024](#); [Iyigun et al., 2017](#); [Cervellati et al., 2022](#); [Berman et al., 2021](#)), and cultural distance ([Guarnieri and Tur-Prats, 2023](#); [Guarnieri, 2025](#)) have been of particular interest. Specifically, it contributes to the literature examining the extent to which external shocks—those outside the conflict zone, such as fluctuations in global prices—affect conflict dynamics ([Dube and Vargas, 2013](#); [Berman and Couttenier, 2015](#); [McGuirk and Burke, 2020, 2022](#)). Our paper also aligns with the call made in [Rohner \(2024a\)](#) on the challenges of conflict interventions aimed at resolution through mediation, military peacekeeping operations, and financial support. It emphasizes the need for more robust statistical analyses and cross-country studies on third-party interventions through mediation. We contribute to understanding the role of peacekeeping interventions in mitigating violence, demonstrating that external actors, in our case a major religious leader, can foster stability through both mediation and enforcement mechanisms ([Rohner and Zhuravskaya, 2023](#); [Rohner, 2024b](#)).⁶

Second, while the economics of religion literature has flourished in recent years, few studies explore the interplay between religion and conflict, particularly in Africa.⁷ This gap arises partly from the difficulty of measuring religiously motivated violence and distinguishing it from other factors, such as ethnicity. One notable exception is [Anderson et al. \(2025\)](#), who use a dictionary-based method to show that a quarter of violent events in Africa are linked to religion. We contribute to this emerging literature by introducing a novel methodology to identify religious conflict events using a prompt-based machine learning approach (via OpenAI’s API). We leverage this data to demonstrate how violence overall, and religious violence in particular, are influenced by peace-seeking messages from a leading religious authority. In line with this approach, [Laville \(2021\)](#) show in a cross-country analysis that the travels of John Paul II reduced the risk of conflict in host countries. We extend the analysis by focusing on papal speeches delivered from outside the conflict zone (often from the Vatican), which allows for stronger causal identification and are more frequent and less costly than papal visits to Africa. By examining variation in responses across different papacies and local contexts, we show that these remote speeches can de-escalate violence. However, we also

⁶See [Rohner \(2024a\)](#) for a comprehensive review of the extensive literature on third-party interventions, spanning both economics and political science.

⁷Religious institutions function as both social and economic entities, influencing political stability and collective action ([Iannaccone, 1998](#); [McCleary and Barro, 2006](#)). Recently, religion has been shown to impact economic growth ([Becker et al., 2024](#)), social behaviour ([Bassi and Rasul, 2017](#)), and political outcomes ([Wang, 2021](#); [Bentzen and Gokmen, 2023](#); [Bentzen et al., 2025](#)). [Engelberg et al. \(2016\)](#) examine the supply side of religion, showing that the quality of religious leaders significantly impacts congregation growth and engagement. For a comprehensive literature review, see [Iyer \(2016\)](#).

reveal significant heterogeneity in this effect, driven by the Pope’s identity and characteristics of the local conflict zone, including local religious institutions and armed groups. Our finding that local religious institutions are key drivers of the effects complements [Martinez-Bravo et al. \(2025\)](#), who show that the appointment of bishops under John Paul II’s papacy influenced redistributive conflict in Brazil, where landless peasants invaded large estates to demand land redistribution.

Our paper contributes also to the growing literature on how media can both exacerbate and alleviate violence. Media can facilitate insurgent coordination and fuel violence ([Gagliarducci et al., 2020](#); [Adena et al., 2015](#); [Yanagizawa-Drott, 2014](#)) but counter-narratives, such as broadcasts promoting defection, can reduce violence and support long-term reconciliation ([Armand et al., 2020](#); [Esposito et al., 2023](#)). Ethnic divisions often shape how media impacts conflict, with partisan narratives strengthening group identities and intensifying tensions ([Glaeser and Sunstein, 2009](#); [DellaVigna et al., 2014](#); [Mougin, 2024](#)). However, media can also help reduce polarization and tensions by addressing informational asymmetries ([Allport, 1954](#)). Our contribution is in documenting that the dissemination of a religious peace message, particularly through media, can help reduce the intensity of violence, even in conflicts where religious identity plays a significant role.

Finally, we also contribute to the literature on leadership. Previous work has emphasized the role of political leaders in shaping economic outcomes ([Bertrand and Schoar, 2003](#); [Jones and Olken, 2005](#)), with a particular focus on the connection between leaders and their birth regions ([Hodler and Raschky, 2014](#); [Burgess et al., 2015](#)). Many evidence illustrate how leaders have shaped national identity, ideology, and social behaviours through their rhetoric ([Assouad, 2020](#); [Bursztyn et al., 2020](#); [Cagé et al., 2023](#); [Grosjean et al., 2023](#); [Muller and Schwarz, 2023](#)). Our results highlight that, in certain contexts, religious discourse enhances the effectiveness of peace-promoting efforts by simultaneously raising awareness, facilitating dialogue, mobilizing collective action, and establishing normative frameworks conducive to peacebuilding.

2 Conceptual framework

This section develops a conceptual framework highlighting how papal speeches can shape conflict dynamics. Their effects may range from promoting peace to remaining neutral or even escalating violence, depending on context and channels of transmission. For any such mechanisms to take effect, however, papal speeches must first reach relevant audiences. Diffusion can occur through informational pathways (e.g., national media), institutional pathways (e.g., ecclesiastical networks), and community pathways (e.g., local gatherings and social ties). Unless messages are widely diffused and salient, the downstream processes through which speeches shape conflict dynamics remain inoperative.

2.1 Direct channel: Persuasion of combatants

Exposure to papal speeches can influence the preferences and beliefs of commanders and fighters. Internalization of the Pope’s normative appeal for peace may strengthen peace norms and reputational concerns, thereby constraining the means and ends of violence and reshaping acceptable tac-

tics (Blattman, 2022), including addressing unchecked leadership and rents that perpetuate conflict (Acemoglu et al., 2001). Papal messages can also function as focal signals that reduce uncertainty and help relax commitment problems by making de-escalation seem feasible and socially valued (Fearon, 1995; Walter, 1997). Shifts in beliefs about payoffs and legitimacy connect to accounts that emphasize unchecked leadership, uncertainty, and misperceptions (Jervis, 1976; Sawyer, 2004; Fearon and Laitin, 2004).

The force of direct persuasion is context-dependent. It is likely to be stronger where moral authority is broadly recognized, where religious proximity fosters receptiveness, and where command structures are permeable to ethical constraints. Conversely, persuasion may be weakened, or even generate opposite effects, when messages are perceived as partial or intrusive (Autesserre, 2014), or when they threaten core identities in polarized settings (Cederman et al., 2011). These possibilities resonate with classic discussions of escalation and polarization (Pruitt and Kim, 2004; Tilly, 2003), with theories of opportunistic signaling and strategic reinterpretation of external appeals (Powell, 2006; Weinstein, 2007; Wood, 2003; Kalyvas, 2006), and with analyses of backlash dynamics in contentious environments (Pearlman, 2013; Walter, 2014), as well as foundational distinctions in peace–violence frames (Galtung, 1969).

2.2 Indirect channels

We next consider indirect channels through which papal speeches can shape behavior, operating via domestic elites, the international environment, and communities.

2.2.1 Local elites as interpreters and coordinators

Local elites provide institutional interfaces that translate papal speeches into locally meaningful action. Within the Church, *bishops* have historically mediated conflicts and convened broad coalitions, a role repeatedly emphasized in papal teaching documents such as *Ecclesia in Africa* (1994), *Africae Munus* (2011), and *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013).⁸ Two features shape their influence: *alignment* with the Pope’s vision, which can facilitate responsiveness but generate tensions during transitions between pontificates,⁹ and *experience*, which enhances credibility and local knowledge (Orobator, 2018) but can also entrench rigidity (Blattman, 2022).

Beyond the Church, *political leaders* can amplify or reshape papal appeals through media signals and constituency-based incentives. Accountability pressures are particularly pronounced in

⁸Bishops have frequently assumed responsibilities beyond strictly religious duties, advocating for justice, reconciliation, and systemic change (Orobator, 2018). Across pontificates, they have mediated conflicts and promoted peace: John Paul II underscored episcopal leadership in *Ecclesia in Africa*, with mediation in Sudan and Rwanda; Benedict XVI reaffirmed this mandate in *Africae Munus*, though priorities sometimes intersected with sensitive interfaith and health debates; and Francis has emphasized grassroots engagement and interfaith collaboration, with notable initiatives in the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan (Prunier, 1997; Turner, 2007; Johnson, 2011).

⁹For example, bishops appointed under Benedict XVI, often identified with theological conservatism, have at times resisted Pope Francis’s decentralizing reforms (Ivereigh, 2014). Ivereigh (2014) discusses resistance from bishops appointed during Benedict XVI’s papacy, notably during the Synod on the Family (2014–2015) and in opposing Francis’s financial transparency and decentralization efforts. These tensions have been covered by *The Guardian* (2017) and *National Catholic Reporter* (2023), while Lamb (2020) provides an in-depth analysis of the broader challenges faced by Pope Francis in his reform efforts.

leaders' core constituencies, where populations are denser and monitoring is easier, making endorsement of a papal appeal especially rewarding—or costly to ignore (Franck and Rainer, 2012; Hodler and Raschky, 2014; Burgess et al., 2015). Such incentives can also generate countervailing pressures: dependence on intransigent factions reduces leaders' willingness to compromise, rivals may characterize responsiveness to papal speeches as weakness, and hierarchical patronage systems tend to reward immediate control rather than sustained de-escalation.¹⁰

In sum, local elites link papal messages to behavior as moral messengers, coordinators, or institutional gatekeepers. These functions are not mutually exclusive and may overlap depending on context. Misalignment, intra-elite competition, or instrumentalization can attenuate this channel, whereas alignment, experience, and constituency density can magnify it. Although direct evidence of elite interventions is unavailable, historical accounts show that such roles have often been assumed, reinforcing the plausibility of these mechanisms.

2.2.2 The international spotlight mechanism

Papal appeals can bring specific conflicts onto the international agenda. Increased visibility raises reputational costs for escalation, invites diplomatic engagement, and may mobilize humanitarian resources or mediation. The consequences of such attention depend on issue salience, the timing of media coverage, and the interests of external actors (e.g., foreign governments, international organizations, or NGOs). In some cases, greater visibility can also provoke resistance, as actors opposed to de-escalation may intensify violence in order to signal resolve (Petersen, 2002).

Not all forms of international visibility are equivalent. Formal political resolutions, such as statements by the United Nations Security Council, may increase news coverage without necessarily modifying the short-run incentives that shape tactical choices on the ground. By contrast, papal appeals combine international visibility with both political and religious authority, enabling them to reframe domestic salience and reputational calculations in ways that other forms of international attention cannot.

International attention can also interact with domestic constituencies. Where national leaders' reputations are especially salient in their home regions, external spotlight can strengthen accountability pressures and increase the return to visibly endorsing de-escalation (Franck and Rainer, 2012; Hodler and Raschky, 2014; Burgess et al., 2015). While direct evidence of international engagement in response to papal speeches remains limited, historical evidence indicates that papal interventions have, at times, mobilized diplomatic concern and humanitarian engagement, thereby supporting the theoretical plausibility of an international visibility mechanism.¹¹

¹⁰Political leaders' alignment with the Church varies: some may leverage papal messages to enhance legitimacy or unity, while others may resist them on ideological grounds. Historical examples include Nelson Mandela's embrace of reconciliation messages in 1995 and Augusto Pinochet's attempt to co-opt papal rhetoric in 1987.

¹¹Examples include John Paul II's repeated speeches during the Balkan wars, in which he appealed to international political circles to step up efforts to stop the fighting (Holy See, 1999); Benedict XVI's Regensburg lecture in 2006, which triggered international protests and prompted new initiatives for interfaith dialogue such as the *A Common Word* letter (Cesari, 2013); and Pope Francis's recognized mediating role in the U.S.-Cuba rapprochement, where Vatican diplomacy was credited with helping broker the resumption of ties and facilitating prisoner releases (Reuters, 2014; Vatican News, 2025).

2.2.3 Citizens and communities as vectors of norms

Communities are not passive recipients of papal speeches. Peace messages can shift local attitudes and practices in ways that shape the moral environment in which armed groups are embedded. First, strengthened pro-peace norms and the stigma attached to violent practices can raise social and reputational costs for aggression, consistent with evidence that mass messaging can alter beliefs and behavior in large populations and supported by research showing that community moral narratives can normalize or stigmatize violence (Wang, 2021; Dunia et al., 2025). Second, communities may withdraw logistical, informational, or financial support that sustains armed actors, as armed groups often emerge from local networks and depend on informal institutions and elites for resources (Marchais et al., 2024). Third, cooperation with authorities, mediators, and peacebuilders can expand when moral narratives reinforce norms of moderation and dialogue.

The strength of this channel should vary with community characteristics. Effects are plausibly larger where religious infrastructure is dense and embedded in everyday civic life, where armed groups recruit locally and draw legitimacy and resources from surrounding communities, and where interfaith relations are not tightly polarized. In settings defined by sharp communal cleavages, however, papal appeals may be reframed through group boundaries, potentially reinforcing identities rather than loosening them. In this sense, papal messages may amplify grassroots pressure for de-escalation in some contexts, while in others they risk exacerbating divisions that sustain conflict dynamics.¹²

The framework implies that the overall effect of papal speeches is theoretically ambiguous. Channels may reinforce or counteract each other, for instance, strong elite coordination can compensate for weak direct persuasion, and international attention can deter escalation or provoke spoilers depending on context. Channels may also differ in their temporal dynamics, with informational salience often immediate and institutional or community responses unfolding more gradually. Substantial heterogeneity is therefore expected, with reductions, null effects, or increases in violence possible depending on messenger identity, diffusion, institutional intermediation, international attention, and the community context in which armed groups are embedded.

2.3 Papal identity

The identity of the Pope shapes also how his speeches are received across the channels described above. Research on leadership and social influence shows that credibility, legitimacy, and group

¹²As an illustrative recent chronology: in late January 2025, Pope Francis publicly appealed for peace in the DRC as fighting intensified around Goma (Vatican News, 29 Jan 2025). Within days, senior leaders of CENCO and the Protestant ECC met President Tshisekedi to present a joint peace roadmap (CISA, 4 Feb 2025) and announced their intention to include M23 in dialogue (RFI, 5 Feb 2025). A joint CENCO–ECC delegation then met M23/AFC representatives in Goma (ACI Africa, 14 Feb 2025); international mediation steps followed, including Angola’s announcement of direct Kinshasa–M23 talks (Le Monde, 12 Mar 2025) and a Doha track that opened but stalled in April (Reuters, 23 Apr 2025). A separate DRC–Rwanda “Washington Accord” was signed on June 27 (U.S. Department of State, 27 Jun 2025), and a DRC–M23 ceasefire declaration was announced in Doha on July 19 (Le Monde, 19 Jul 2025). This sequence is purely illustrative and does not imply causality; it is offered to show how community-level reception, elite coordination, and international visibility can intertwine.

alignment condition whether audiences internalize or resist messages (Seyranian and Bligh, 2008; Seyranian, 2014). Evidence from other leadership settings also indicates that exposure to central figures and their networks can legitimize and diffuse values and behavior well beyond direct followers (Cagé et al., 2023). In our context, covering 1997–2022, three very different Catholic leaders occupied the papacy. Their theological priorities, communication styles, personal histories, and reputations in African contexts created distinct conditions under which papal messages could be diffused, amplified, or contested.

Pope John Paul II (October 16, 1978, to April 2, 2005) was a highly influential figure, known for his strong advocacy of human rights and inter-state peace.¹³ He viewed the Church as a universal institution advocating for reconciliation and dialogue (John Paul II, 1995). His critical role in ending the Cold War, his appeals for peace during the Gulf War, and his continued advocacy for global nuclear disarmament exemplify this priority.¹⁴ He placed Africa at the center of his global geopolitical agenda, emphasizing its challenges and potential through a series of influential speeches and initiatives (John Paul II, 1994). His advocacy for economic justice, including debt relief (e.g., 1987 UN address), and the promotion of human dignity as foundational to peace (1995 *Evangelium Vitae*), reinforced the need to view Africa as a partner rather than a mere aid recipient (1994 *Ecclesia in Africa*).¹⁵ His 14 visits to 42 African countries (some of them multiple times), over a third of his total travels, underscored this commitment. By advocating a shift from aid to trade and positioning bishops as key societal actors, he established the Church as a pivotal force in political and social transitions.

Pope Benedict XVI (April 19, 2005, to February 28, 2013), unlike his predecessor, made few visits to Africa, traveling to only three countries (13% of his total travels). His papacy, characterized by theological conservatism (Thornton and Varenne, 2008), prioritized traditional Church values, doctrinal clarity, and Western principles (Seewald, 2020; Rowland, 2008; Marshall, 2012). This doctrinal emphasis posed challenges in Africa, where interfaith dynamics and cultural sensitivities required a more pastoral and inclusive approach. Benedict XVI's Regensburg speech in 2006 became controversial due to a quotation perceived as critical of Islam, sparking protests and straining interfaith relations.¹⁶ His opposition to condom use to combat AIDS during his visit to Cameroon

¹³His unwavering stance on these issues contributed to his canonization, making him one of only three popes of the 20th century to have been declared a saint.

¹⁴John Paul II supported the Solidarity movement in Poland (e.g., his speeches during the 1979 visit to Warsaw emphasized human dignity and freedom), inspiring systemic change. His efforts included diplomatic advocacy, collaborating with global leaders like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher to dismantle oppressive regimes (Weigel, 1999). In his 1981 Encyclical, *Laborem Exercens*, he highlighted the dignity of labor and the rights of workers, indirectly challenging communist practices. During the Gulf War, he repeatedly appealed for peace (e.g., his public statement in 1991 and his letters to U.S. President George H. W. Bush and Iraqi leadership calling for an end of hostilities) and persistently called for global nuclear disarmament.

¹⁵In *Ecclesia in Africa* (1994), John Paul II emphasizes the pastoral role of bishops in promoting justice, peace, and development across African nations. It highlights the Church's responsibility in addressing socio-political challenges and underscores the importance of collaboration among Church leaders and local communities to foster reconciliation and societal transformation.

¹⁶In his speech, Pope Benedict XVI cited a dialogue between the 14th-century Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaiologos and a Persian scholar, where the emperor stated that spreading faith through violence is unreasonable and contrary to the nature of God. Although Benedict XVI did not explicitly endorse the statement, its inclusion was widely interpreted as a critique of Islam, leading to significant backlash in many Muslim-majority countries. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the second-in-command of Al-Qaeda, declared in a video message released on an Islamist website on September 29,

further illustrates the challenges arising from his doctrinal approach in Africa. This stance generated controversy, raising critical questions about the Church’s role in public health and highlighting tensions between theological principles and the urgency of pragmatic health interventions.

Pope Francis (March 13, 2013, to April 21, 2025) has prioritized decentralization and dialogue, emphasizing the empowerment of local Churches to foster inclusivity and diversity (O’Connell, 2019). His pastoral approach and focus on social justice have defined his papacy, with his four visits to Africa reflecting a commitment to addressing social inequalities and advocating for marginalized communities. His engagement with independent Churches and interfaith initiatives, particularly in Sierra Leone, underscores his efforts to foster dialogue beyond Catholic communities, reinforcing the Church’s role in peace and reconciliation. This approach aligns with “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” where he emphasizes dialogue as a means of promoting mutual understanding and societal healing (Francis, 2013).

3 Data and Empirical Strategy

3.1 Data

Unit of Analysis. To analyze conflict dynamics, we use 0.5×0.5 degree grid cells ($\approx 55 \times 55$ km) across Africa, maintaining this structure for the weeks surrounding the Pope’s speeches from 1997 to 2022. This approach helps mitigate the potential endogeneity of political boundaries.¹⁷

Conflict data. We use the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED, Raleigh et al. 2010) which covers conflict events in African countries from 1997 to 2022.¹⁸ ACLED reports information about the date, location, type of violence, and actors for each event. Events are compiled from various sources, including press accounts from regional and local news, humanitarian agencies, and research publications. The dataset contains information on 325,541 distinct violent events. Following the strategy developed in Couttenier et al. (2024), we keep only events with the highest level of geographical precision, i.e. town level (events coded as “part of a region”, “region”, or “country” are excluded) leaving us with 240,334 events. ACLED reports information on the nature of violence associated with each event (battles, explosions/remote violence, protests, riots, strategic developments, and violence against civilians), but it provides no information on whether the event may be motivated or explained by religious reasons. We propose a strategy to overcome this limitation by leveraging a unique feature of ACLED, which provides a description of the event for a large subset of the events and using a prompt-based classification approach (via OpenAI’s API). An event is classified as religious if religious beliefs, affiliations, or leadership play a central role. This approach is also applied to armed groups to determine whether we identify them with

2006, that “this charlatan accused Islam of being incompatible with reason, while forgetting that his own Christianity is unacceptable to any rational mind” (L’Orient Le Jour article from September 30, 2006).

¹⁷See Harari and Ferrara (2018); Berman et al. (2017); McGuirk and Nunn (2025); Eberle et al. (2020) for papers using similar spatial unit of analysis.

¹⁸Downloaded on June 28th, 2023. See Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2016); Berman et al. (2017); Harari and Ferrara (2018); Eberle et al. (2020) for papers using ACLED data.

a religious affiliation, such as Christian or Islamic. Accordingly, we define an event as a *religious event* if a group is identified as religious or if the text classification model indicates that the event is religious.¹⁹ See Online Appendix A for examples, the prompt used and some relevant statistics.

Pope’s speeches. For each of the three pontificates overlapping the ACLED time period (Pope Francis, Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope John Paul II), the transcript of each speech has been recorded and made freely available on the Vatican’s official website.²⁰ In our terminology, “speeches” denote the full set of official papal communications made available on the Vatican’s website, including general audiences, homilies, encyclicals, apostolic exhortations, and other addresses, which vary considerably in subject matter and length.²¹ The majority of papal speeches are delivered from the Vatican, with only 5% given during papal travels. As discussed further in Section 3.2, we exclude all speeches targeting countries that the Pope is physically visiting for identification purposes.

Between 1997 and 2022, 1’438 unique documents mention at least one African country. Since our aim is to detect peace-seeking speeches, a key challenge is identifying explicit references to conflict events. To ensure the accurate identification of speeches mentioning conflicts in Africa, and minimize both false positives and false negatives, we follow a two-step strategy. First, we use statistical topic modelling to exclude irrelevant speeches. Specifically, we apply the Correlation Explanation (CorEx) model, a learning approach used in the literature to detect political and conflict-related news (Gallagher et al., 2017; Hatte et al., 2021; Djourelova et al., 2024).²² The model takes preprocessed text as input and outputs two key elements: the top words associated with each topic and the probability distribution of topics across documents. The number of topics to be detected is set to 25, and we do not anchor any topic, as the outcomes of this unsupervised CorEx method naturally yield relevant topics. Table B1 in Online Appendix B presents the list of topics. As expected, the five most prevalent topics in papal speeches relate to the Catholic Church, spirituality, and moral values.²³ We focus on the conflict topic detected by the model (Figure B2 in Online Appendix B, which presents the word cloud of this topic) and exclude all speeches where the probability of the conflict topic is below 10%. Second, we manually verify those that mention an African country, resulting in 386 distinct speeches. Each speech was labelled by two human annotators, with discrepancies resolved by a third reviewer. Ultimately, 85 speeches were identified as explicitly addressing conflict in Africa.²⁴ Since some of these documents reference multiple conflict

¹⁹To our knowledge, two teams have started to collect information on religious conflicts. First, ACLED has undertaken a pilot project to collect data on religious repression and unrest (ACLED-Religion). This pilot focuses on seven countries—Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, and Yemen—over the period from January 2020 to March 2022. Second, Anderson et al. (2025) use a dictionary-based method to classify events as religious based on the event descriptions in ACLED.

²⁰<https://www.vatican.va>

²¹The length of the speeches is highly heterogeneous, ranging from 200 to 17’000 words, with an average of 3’250.

²²Whereas Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) imposes a probabilistic structure that treats topics as independent, CorEx employs an information-theoretic criterion to extract patterns of dependence among words. This yields more flexible topic assignments, permitting words to belong to several interrelated themes.

²³These five topics are “spiritual journey” (present with a probability greater than 0.5 in 53% of speeches), “journey, memory, and hope” (40%), “values” (37%), “inner struggles” (37%), and “truth, meaning, and fulfilment” (33%).

²⁴Overall, 29 countries are involved in these 85 speeches. Pope John Paul II made 17 of them, Pope Benedict XVI made 21 and Pope Francis made 47. There is on average 2 speeches per year, going from only one in 1999 to 9 in 2015 and 2017. An example of one speech identified in our sample as addressing conflict is in Online Appendix B.4.

zones in Africa, this results in a total of 131 individual peace-seeking messages delivered by the Catholic Pope in response to conflicts in Africa.²⁵ Online Appendix B provides further details on the data, while Online Appendix C discusses the data generating process of the Pope’s speeches.²⁶

Bishops. We use the Catholic Hierarchy website, which provides detailed information on the structure of the Catholic Church, including current and historical data on bishops and dioceses.²⁷ From this source, we compile data on 1’810 bishops, including their appointment dates, birth details, and career trajectories, specifying the dioceses where they served as priests and bishops.²⁸ The richness of the data allows us to define three specific characteristics for bishops. First, the Pope who appointed them. Second, a general measure of experience based on the number of years since their ordination as a priest (*overall experience*). Finally, a measure of experience accumulated within their diocese, approximated by the number of years between their arrival in the diocese and the date of the Pope’s speech (*local experience*). In our sample, bishops are on average 62 years old, with 35 years of *overall experience* and 12 years of *local experience* in the diocese. The boundaries of African dioceses were retrieved from the [Catholic Geo Hub](#).²⁹

Google Maps. To approximate the diversity of religious presence within cells, we collected geolocation data on places of worship from multiple denominations, including their type and name, using Google Maps.³⁰ In total, 332’794 distinct places of worship were scrapped, and within our final sample of 7’319 cells, 2’002 contain at least one Christian place of worship.

Additional data: African newspapers, Facebook posts of African dioceses, Afrobarometer, UN security council resolutions, and identity of national leaders. We exploit five additional datasets. First, to document the coverage of papal speeches in African national news, we gathered novel data on all stories published in national newspapers included in Factiva and Europresse around the time of speeches targeting a given country. This data collection resulted in articles from 27 national newspapers across 13 African countries. Specifically, we track the presence of articles mentioning the Pope alongside at least one element of conflict-related lexicon.³¹ Second, we collected origi-

²⁵The average likelihood of the conflict topic appearing in the final sample of speeches is 74%.

²⁶In Online Appendix C, we examine speeches timing and content to characterize the factors driving Pope’s interventions. Low levels of democratization, major events such as natural disasters or terroristic attacks, and conflict situations predict papal addresses to specific countries. However, when focusing on within-country variation in the likelihood of being mentioned by the Pope, we show that the key determinant—particularly for peace-promoting speeches—is the ongoing and prolonged presence of violence.

²⁷<https://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/>

²⁸In our sample, 281 bishops have been appointed by Paul VI ; 474 by John Paul II ; 196 by Benedict XVI and 214 by Francis.

²⁹Downloaded on 4th, July 2023. Stored on ArcGIS REST Servers. Global Diocesan Boundaries: [Burhans et al. \(2016\)](#). See Online Appendix E to visualize the African dioceses.

³⁰Churches, Mosques, Temples and Synagogues. Data accessed in October 2024. Data on churches was cross-checked with the *Annuario Pontificio* at the diocese level; however, official Vatican data appears to underestimate the number of churches as some locations listed on Google Maps may be unofficial buildings or open-air worship sites. Additionally, the higher precision of Google Maps data allows us to estimate religiosity at the cell level for multiple denominations, which would not be feasible using official Vatican sources.

³¹The conflict lexicon includes the following keywords: conflict, peace, war, peacebuilding, mediation, negotiation, resolution, reconciliation, ceasefire, diplomacy, violence, hostility, humanitarian, disarmament, truce, tension, crisis,

nal data on the diffusion of papal speeches on the Facebook pages of African dioceses around the time of speeches targeting a given country. To achieve this, we first manually identified whether each diocese in Africa had an official Facebook Page. We then scraped all posts published on these pages using Meta’s CrowdTangle platform and identified mentions of the Pope as well as the presence of the conflict-related lexicon used in the newspaper data analysis. This process resulted in a post-level database covering 151 dioceses in 35 African countries from 2010 to 2022. As Facebook usage in Africa has expanded significantly in recent years—particularly since 2015 (Hatte et al., 2025)—the vast majority of the posts (89%) in our dataset come from the 2015–2022 period. Third, we incorporate data from three rounds of the Afrobarometer survey, focusing on attitudes toward religion. Specifically, we examine respondents’ views on the importance of religion in their daily lives, their trust in religious leaders, their tolerance toward neighbors of different religions, and their perceived discrimination based on religion. Fourth, we collect from the UN Security council webpage 1’553 distinct resolutions from 1997 to 2022. Fifth, we collected additional information on the religious affiliation and place of birth of all African national leaders from 1997 to 2022. See Online Appendix C.1 for more details.

3.2 Empirical strategy

We aim to document the effect of peace-seeking speeches delivered by the Catholic Pope on the dynamics of violence in Africa.

Event-study estimation. We estimate the following equation:

$$Conflict_{k,i,s,t} = \beta Post_{i,s,t} + \eta_k + \omega_t + \mu_{i,s} + \epsilon_{k,i,s,t} \quad (1)$$

Where $Conflict_{k,i,s,t}$ represents the incidence of conflict in cell k , in country i , during week t , within an event window spanning from 5 weeks before to 8 weeks after the Pope’s speech s . The variable $Post_{i,s,t}$ is a binary indicator equal to 1 for weeks following a Pope’s speech mentioning country i , and 0 otherwise. Crucially, we include three sets of fixed effects to address key challenges in the estimation. First, we include cell fixed effects (η_k) to control for time-invariant cell-specific characteristics, such as geographic or historical factors. Second, we incorporate week-by-year fixed effects (ω_t), e.g. level of fixed effects for each calendar week in a given year (for instance, week 39 of 2001, week 40 of 2001, and so forth). These fixed effects account for time-specific shocks unrelated to the Pope’s speeches but affecting all cells simultaneously. Examples include recurring seasonal factors (e.g., reduced activity during major holidays such as Christmas or Easter), global or regional conflict dynamics, or systematic variations in social, economic, or political conditions associated with specific weeks of the year. By absorbing these time-varying influences, week-by-year fixed effects isolate variation in conflict levels that can plausibly be attributed to the speeches, ensuring the estimates are not confounded by broader temporal fluctuations in violence. Third, we

victim, death, suffering, loss, grief, insecurity, justice, hope, trauma, and injury. Keyword searches were conducted in the languages of the newspapers: Arabic, English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish.

include event-window-by-country fixed effects ($\mu_{i,s}$), which capture time-varying dynamics specific to a country during the event window. These dynamics may include shifts in government policy, escalation or de-escalation of conflict at the country-level, or heightened international attention to the region, which could simultaneously influence both conflict levels and the likelihood of a Pope’s speech. Robust standard errors are clustered at the cell level.

We exploit an event-study estimation, which estimates the effect of the speech within cells located in the targeted country, comparing the incidence of conflict events a few weeks before and after the Pope’s peace-seeking message. Additionally, by accounting for country-specific and time-specific variations through the inclusion of fixed effects, our approach ensures that the estimated effect of the Pope’s speeches is not biased by pre-existing trends or contextual factors that independently influence conflict levels. Identification relies on relative variations in conflict incidence after the speech compared to before, within a given country, while accounting for time-invariant cell characteristics and global shocks.

One potential concern about the validity of our empirical design remains: messages from the Catholic leader can only credibly impact conflict dynamics if they reach local actors. We take this concern seriously and provide systematic evidence of the reach of the papal speeches using original data, as detailed in section 3.3, to carefully assess their local impact.

Event definition. In the simplest case, an event is defined as a week in which a speech by the Catholic Pope includes a peace-seeking message directed at a specific country. The 131 individual peace-seeking messages presented in subsection 3.1 correspond to 128 country-week pairs in which at least one speech addresses an ongoing conflict in that country. From there, we face three main challenges and outline our strategies to address each.

First, major conflict events may prompt the Pope to deliver multiple peace-seeking speeches on the same conflict, not only within the same week but also over several weeks. To account for this, we group all speeches addressing the same country within a four-week period as a single treatment and consider the entire period from the first to the last speech as treated. After applying this grouping, we identify 119 speech events out of the 131 individual messages, meaning that 91% are not repeated messages (given our four-week window definition). These speech events are defined as the weeks during which a papal speech targets a country due to an ongoing conflict. Second, papal speeches delivered outside this four-week window may still fall within a “pre-speech” or “post-speech” period. We restrict our analysis to isolated speech events, defined as those occurring within an event window where no other speeches mentioning the same country and conflict are given in the five weeks before or eight weeks after.³² This restriction excludes 16 speech events from the initial 119, ensuring that estimated effects can be attributed to a single speech event rather than the cumulative influence of multiple interventions.³³ It also allows for a proper examination

³²We assess the sensitivity of our findings to alternative time windows around papal speeches ($-5/+10$, $-8/+8$, and $-10/+10$). Some of these alternative specifications may involve a different set of speeches compared to our main analysis. Additionally, we conduct a complementary test that retains the original set of speeches while varying the event window length. Our results remain largely consistent (Online Appendix H).

³³Note that the 16 events excluded from our baseline sample do not originate from a single country or year but cover six countries and nine different years. Furthermore, for these 16 events, the level of violence observed before the speeches

of the pre-speech period to confirm the absence of pre-trends. Third, as noted in subsection 3.1, 5% of the Pope’s speeches are delivered during visits planned years in advance. These visits include speeches specifically addressing the host country, which is the case for 3 conflict-related speech events among the remaining 119. We exclude these speech events, as the visits likely influence conflict dynamics through the security measures implemented to protect the Pope.

These steps, detailed further in Online Appendix B.3, result in a final sample of 100 speech events, defined as (series of) weeks of papal peace-seeking speeches targeting a specific African country, excluding those delivered during papal trips to Africa.

Summary statistics. Our analysis covers 100 speeches, with 22 delivered under Pope John Paul II, 23 under Benedict XVI, and 55 under Pope Francis. It spans 27 African countries and includes slightly more than 7,300 cells over a 26-year period. In the five-week window before a Pope’s speech, the probability of observing at least one conflict in a given cell is approximately 1.73%, with a 0.57% likelihood for battles, 0.64% for low-intensity events, and 0.41% for religious conflicts. In the eight weeks following the speech, this probability rises slightly to 1.77%, with battles remaining at 0.57%, low-intensity events at 0.64%, and religious conflicts increasing to 0.46%.

3.3 Evidence on diffusion and reception of Papal speeches

For papal speeches to affect local conflict dynamics, they must first reach relevant audiences. As emphasized in our conceptual framework, diffusion through media, institutions, and communities is a prerequisite for any downstream mechanism to operate. Measuring the extent to which messages are actually received “on the ground” is inherently difficult given the limits of available data. We therefore focus on channels that are observable and quantifiable, testing three key assumptions: (i) national media report on papal speeches; (ii) local Catholic institutions disseminate them; and (iii) papal speeches shape individual perceptions.

News covering the Pope’s speeches in national outlets. We estimate whether the Pope’s speeches appear in the national news of the targeted countries. To this end, we use all main African newspapers available on Europresse and Factiva, covering 27 national newspapers from 13 countries, with content accessible around the time of a papal speech addressing them. Specifically, we investigate whether the presence of articles mentioning the Pope, alongside at least one element of conflict-related lexicon, increases in the days following a speech.³⁴ Of the 4’900 articles collected, 34% mention conflict. We estimate the following event-study equation:

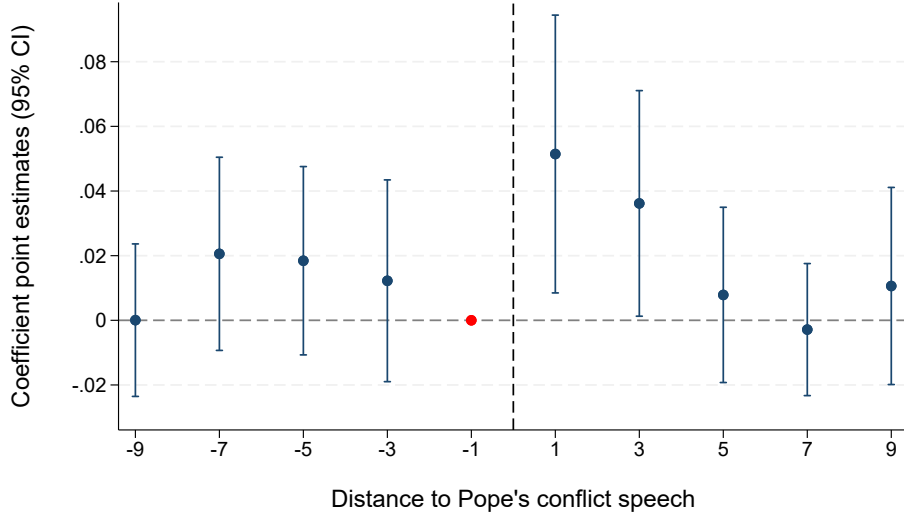
$$PopeNews_{j,i,s,t} = \sum_{k=-9}^9 \beta_k \cdot Post_{i,s,t+k} + \omega_{j,i,s} + DoW_t + \epsilon_{j,i,s,t}$$

is not significantly higher than that measured for the speeches included in the baseline sample – even for battles. If a difference exists, it seems to indicate a slightly lower intensity.

³⁴The following keywords are included in the conflict lexicon: conflict, peace, war, peace building, mediation, negotiation, resolution, reconciliation, ceasefire, diplomacy, violence, hostility, humanitarian, disarmament, truce, tension, crisis, victim, death, suffering, loss, grief, insecurity, justice, hope, trauma, injury. Keyword searches were conducted in the languages of the newspapers: Arabic, English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish.

where j, i, s and t denote newspaper, country, event-window and date, respectively. For each newspaper available at the time of a speech targeting its country, we include all days within a -14 to $+14$ day window around the speech. $PopeNews_{j,i,s,t}$ is a dummy variable indicating whether newspaper j contains at least one conflict-related article mentioning the Pope. $Post_{i,s,t+k}$ is a set of dummy variables indicating whether the Pope delivered a peace-seeking speech mentioning country i k days prior to date $t + k$, measured in 2-day intervals. We include newspaper-event window fixed effects ($\omega_{j,i,s}$) to account for differences in newspapers' propensity to cover the Pope and other time-varying factors. Additionally, we include day-of-the-week fixed effects (DoW_t) to control for within-week seasonality in Papal coverage.

Figure 1: Coverage of Papal speeches in national media of targeted countries



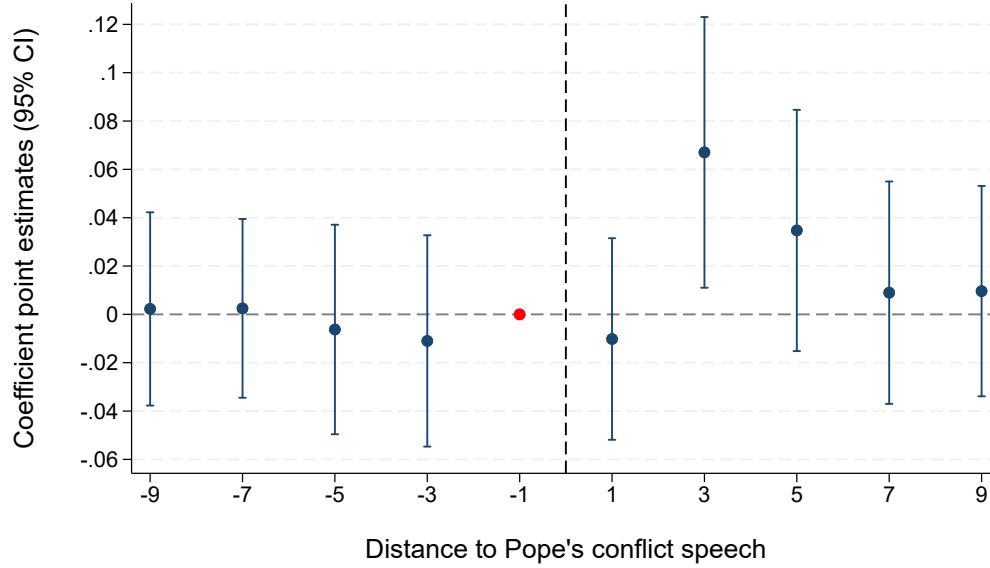
Note: The figure shows the daily average effects of the Pope's speeches on national news coverage in the targeted countries, using a 14-day pre-speech and 14-day post-speech event window with 2-day intervals. The omitted category is $t = -1$, representing days -1 and -2 relative to the speech. The specification includes an additional bin for days -14 to -11 and another for days $+10$ to $+15$, on top of the 10 bins for which we report the estimated coefficients in the graph. The unit of observation is a national newspaper $\times$ date. The dependent variable is a dummy indicating whether at least one article about the Pope's speech appears. The specification includes newspaper-event window fixed effects and day-of-the-week fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the date level.

Estimates presented in Figure 1 show that the presence of news covering the Pope's speech rises significantly in national newspapers of the targeted country. This effect is substantial: in the first two days following the speech, the probability increases by 5.1 percentage points (34% of one standard deviation) and by 3.6 percentage points (24% of one standard deviation) on the two following days. Notably, the effect is short-lived, with no pre-trend, suggesting that the increase is directly driven by the timing of the Pope's speech.

Diffusion of Papal speeches by local religious institutions. To examine how papal speeches spread through local Catholic institutions, and in the absence of data on the daily offline communications of dioceses, we leverage novel data from the Facebook activity of dioceses in our sample. Specifically, we estimate a version of Equation 2, where the dependent variable is a dummy indi-

cating whether a post by a diocese in the targeted country mentions the Pope or contains at least one element of conflict-related lexicon.

Figure 2: Coverage of papal speeches in Facebook posts by Catholic dioceses in targeted countries



Note: The figure shows the daily average effects of the Pope's speeches on the presence of papal messages in Facebook posts by dioceses in the targeted countries, using a 14-day pre-speech and 14-day post-speech event window with 2-day intervals. The omitted category is $t = -1$, representing days -1 and -2 relative to the speech. The specification includes an additional bin for days -14 to -11 and another for days +10 to +15, on top of the 10 bins for which we report the estimated coefficients in the graph. The unit of observation is a diocese Facebook Page $\times$ date. The dependent variable is a dummy indicating whether at least one post about the Pope's speech appears. The specification includes diocese-event window fixed effects and day-of-the-week fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the date level.

Figure 2 presents the results. The likelihood of a diocese in a target country posting about the Pope's speech on its Facebook page increases significantly, with a two-day lag. This effect is substantial: on the third and fourth days following the speech, the probability rises by 6.7 percentage points (29% of one standard deviation) before gradually returning to pre-speech levels. As in the newspaper analysis, the effect is short-lived, with no pre-trend, suggesting that the increase is indeed driven by the timing of the Pope's speech. The lack of an effect in the first two days may be due to the time dioceses need to process and post the relevant information, and unlike professional media, which can publish immediately.

Pope's speeches and individual perception. As discussed in Section 2, understanding how populations in areas affected by violence or the presence of armed groups perceive papal messages is crucial. Unfortunately, data on this question are unavailable. We approach it indirectly by examining whether the Pope's peace-seeking messages resonate in the targeted countries, focusing on whether individuals, particularly Catholics, adjust their perceptions of religious authority in response to these speeches. To investigate this, we use individual-level data from Afrobarometer, a nationally representative survey conducted across African countries (Depetris-Chauvin et al., 2020; Hatte et al., 2025). We focus on four waves (5, 6, 7, and 8), covering the years 2013–2021

and thus corresponding to the papacy of Francis, as these are the waves that provide information on the importance of religion in respondents' lives, their trust in religious leaders, their tolerance toward neighbours' religions, and their perceived religious discrimination. We estimate the following equation:

$$R_{p,i,t,s} = \beta Post_{p,i,t,s} + \mu_p + \delta \mathbf{D}'_{i,s} + \varepsilon_{p,i,t,s}$$

where p, i, t and s denote respectively individual, country, date of the interview and event-window. R is one of the attitudinal variables described previously.³⁵ $Post_{p,i,t}$ equals to 1 if the respondent was interviewed in the days following a Pope's peace-seeking speech mentioning their country, and 0 otherwise. The term μ_p is a vector of individual controls including age, age squared and an indicator for living in urban area. The inclusion of country $\times$ speech fixed effects ($\mathbf{D}'_{i,s}$) ensures that identification relies on comparing respondents interviewed after a given Pope speech mentioning their country with those interviewed in the same country before that speech. Standard errors are clustered at country $\times$ survey round.

Table 1 displays the results based on the sample of Christian respondents. These individuals report a greater importance of religion in their lives and higher trust in religious leaders after the Pope's peace-seeking mentioning their country, with both effects ranging from approximately 2% to 5% relative to the sample mean, similar to the effect of gender (not displayed but around 2%). These quantitatively important effects do not by themselves demonstrate that papal messages shift local attitudes toward peace or reshape the moral environment in which armed groups are embedded. They do, however, provide minimal evidence that papal appeals reach their intended audiences. Moreover, the message does not appear to affect measures of religiosity among non-Christians (Table F5, Online Appendix F.1), nor broader outcomes such as general trust (Online Appendix F.2). This pattern highlights that the effect is narrowly targeted, consistent with the idea that papal appeals resonate primarily within Christian communities rather than generating generalized shifts in attitudes.

4 The dynamics of conflict following the Pope's peace-seeking speeches

4.1 Impact of papal speeches on conflict incidence and violence types

Table 2 presents the baseline estimates from Equation 1. The results indicate a significant decline in violence in the weeks following a papal speech (col. 1): conflict incidence decreases by an average of 23% over the eight weeks after a speech. Disaggregating by violence type reveals notable patterns.³⁶ Battles decrease by 27% (p-value = 0.102; col. 2), while low-intensity events decline

³⁵Specifically, we examine respondents' views on the importance of religion in their daily lives, their trust in religious leaders, their tolerance toward neighbors of different religions, and their perceived discrimination based on religion. Alternatively, we measure this effect using a continuous measure (Online Appendix F.1).

³⁶By construction in ACLED, each event is coded with a single type. However, because we aggregate at the cell-week level, a given cell-week may contain multiple events of different types.

Table 1: Pope speech and religious attitudes

Dummy:	Importance of religion (1)	Trust in religious leader (2)	Tolerance (3)	Personal discrimination (4)
Post	0.019** (0.007)	0.044* (0.024)	-0.003 (0.018)	-0.029** (0.013)
Observations	2192	4242	3708	5392
Mean dep. var.	0.99	0.83	0.84	0.19
Country $\times$ Speech FE	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: The table presents the estimation of the effect of Pope Speeches on attitudinal variables regarding religion in respondent’s lives. The sample includes respondents interviewed within 5 days before and after a Pope Speech. The dependent variable equals 1 if the respondent declares finding religion somewhat or very important in their life (col. 1), if they declare trusting somewhat or a lot religious leaders (col. 2), if they somewhat or strongly like having people of a different religion as neighbours (col. 3), or if they have felt personally discriminated against at least once in the past year because of their religion (col. 4), and 0 otherwise. *Post* is a binary indicator equal to 1 for weeks after a Pope’s speech. Standard errors, clustered at the country $\times$ survey round, are in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

by 34% (col. 3). These findings suggest that papal speeches effectively reduce various forms of violence, supporting the hypothesis that external shocks—such as public messaging by influential leaders—can shape local conflict dynamics by influencing beliefs and norms. The stronger impact on low-intensity events suggests that papal interventions may be particularly effective in mitigating smaller-scale conflicts, where moral authority and rhetorical influence have a more immediate and localized effect. Such events often occur in fragmented violence contexts, where structural factors like resource competition or territorial control play a lesser role (Blattman, 2022; Acemoglu et al., 2001). In contrast, large-scale violent events are typically driven by entrenched political interests, economic incentives, or the strategic objectives of organized armed groups, making them less susceptible to moral persuasion. Another critical dimension of the Pope’s influence is his ability to mitigate religiously motivated violence. Despite imprecise estimates, our analysis suggests that papal speeches tend to reduce the likelihood of religiously motivated conflicts (col. 4). The data also allow us to move beyond the extensive margin by examining the intensive margin of conflict. We do so by redefining the dependent variable as the number of violent events per cell-week. Restricting the sample to cell-weeks with at least one event, and estimating either LPM or PPML models, we find a significant reduction in conflict intensity. Alternatively, retaining the full sample of cell-weeks, including those with zero events, and estimating PPML, which jointly captures both extensive and intensive margins, yields consistent evidence of a decline in conflict intensity (Table G7 in Online Appendix). Taken together, our results indicate that, on average, papal speeches significantly reduce the short-term likelihood of violence. However, neither our estimates nor our empirical strategy allow us to draw conclusions about their effectiveness in bringing about the complete cessation of conflict or the signing of peace agreements between belligerents. While we cannot entirely rule out that part of the effect reflects other interventions acting as confounders,

the analysis of mechanisms (Section 5) makes it unlikely that most of the estimated impact is attributable to such factors.

Table 2: Average effect of papal speeches on different categories of conflict

Dependent variable:	Conflict incidence, by type of events:			
	All (1)	Battles (2)	Low intensity (3)	Religious (4)
Post	−0.409** (0.165)	−0.153 (0.093)	−0.218** (0.105)	−0.118 (0.101)
Observations	473802	473802	473802	473802
Mean dep. var.	1.76	0.57	0.64	0.44
Baseline FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: The table presents the estimation of the effect of Pope Speeches on the incidence of different conflict types. The unit of observation is a cell $\times$ week-year dyad. The sample includes 100 events, defined as papal peace-seeking speeches targeting a given African country outside of papal trips to Africa. Each event window spans from 5 weeks before to 8 weeks after the Pope’s speech. The dependent variable equals 100 if at least one conflict event occurs in the cell during the week: any conflict (col. 1), battle (col. 2), protest/riot (col. 3), or religion-related conflict (col. 4), and 0 otherwise. *Post* is a binary indicator equal to 1 for weeks after a Pope’s speech. Baseline FEs encompasses cell, event-window-by-country $([-5; +8]$ weeks around a speech targeting a given country), and week-by-year fixed effects. Standard errors, clustered at the cell level, are in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

4.2 Robustness

In what follows, we discuss the sensitivity of our baseline estimate (Table 2, column 1).³⁷

Accounting for spatial dependence and alternative aggregation levels. Because the spatial dimension is intrinsic to our analysis, we correct standard errors using spatial HAC estimators that account for both cross-sectional correlation across locations and location-specific serial correlation (Conley, 1999). Following Berman et al. (2021), we impose no restriction on the temporal decay of the Newey–West/Bartlett kernel, so that the horizon at which serial correlation vanishes can be arbitrarily long. In space, we set the kernel radius to 500 km. As an alternative, given that treatment is defined at the country level, and following Abadie et al. (2023), we cluster at the country–speech level. The precision of our estimates is not affected (Table 3, column 1). Up to now, given that we do not estimate the role of cell-level characteristics that may affect persuasion and the effectiveness of the message, we could instead aggregate conflict data to the country–week level. This, in turn, modifies the dependent variable, which can take two distinct forms. First, it may be the number of cells in the country with at least one violent event in a given week (Table 3, column 2). Alternatively, it may be the total number of violent events in the country during the week (Table 3, column

³⁷In addition to the exercises discussed in this section, we test the sensitivity of our findings to alternative time windows around papal speeches (Online Appendix H).

3). The set of fixed effects is very similar to those used in the estimation of Equation 1, and includes event–window–by–country, week–by–year, and country fixed effects. We estimate this specification using Poisson pseudo-maximum likelihood (PPML) with high-dimensional fixed effects. Although based on fewer observations, we find that papal speeches are followed by a marked decline in violence. The number of affected cells decreases by about 25% (column 2), while the number of events falls by 33% (column 3).

Control groups. As in all pre–post analyses, a concern is that the estimated effect may not be fully attributable to the event of interest. There may be other country-level or conflict-level shocks occurring in the same week as a papal speech that could drive sharp changes in the dynamics of violence; alternatively, there may be an underlying (decreasing) trend in violence within the “speech window” that the estimates capture. Nevertheless, given the relatively narrow window around the speech, this concern is substantially mitigated in our setting. In an ideal identification scenario, closer to a standard difference-in-differences framework, we would observe speeches that treat some cells but not others within the same country. Unfortunately, papal speeches do not allow for such fine-grained treatment variation. To overcome this limitation, we use as a control group cells located in other countries with ongoing conflict, which can serve as plausible counterfactuals but are not exposed to a papal speech. To define this control group, we follow the procedure proposed by Imai et al. (2023), which constructs matched sets of comparable untreated units for each treated unit. Treated and control units are matched during weeks –5 to –1 (prior to the papal speech) on a set of contemporaneous and lagged conflict measures (total events, battles, low-intensity violence, and violence against civilians) as well as time-invariant characteristics (population, distance to the national capital, distance to rivers, malaria prevalence, land quality, livestock density, pastoralism, state capacity, and historical mission presence). Matching is implemented using Mahalanobis distance with two matched controls per treated unit. Table 3, column 4 reports results when each treated cell is matched to two controls. Adding treated–control fixed effects (absorbing the treated indicator), papal speeches show no significant impact in untreated cells, but reduce the probability of violence in treated cells by about 10.5% over the eight weeks following a speech.

Pope’s speeches and conflict dynamics over time. In the following part, we systematically track variations in conflict before and after the speeches, offering insights into potential pre-trends, and the timing and duration of the treatment effect. Figure 3(a) presents the estimated coefficients using cell–week as the unit of observation, and Figure 3(b) using country–week. The estimates capture the average effect of papal speeches on conflict incidence for each week relative to the week preceding the speech ($t = -1$). Additionally, we report the mean effects and their respective confidence intervals for four pooled time periods: $t \in [-5, -2]$, $t \in [0, 2]$, $t \in [3, 5]$, and $t \in [6, 8]$.³⁸

Reassuringly, regardless of the level of aggregation, the pre-speech estimates confirm the absence of pre-trends.³⁹ The point estimates for the weeks preceding the speech are close to zero and

³⁸The reported averages of the weekly estimated coefficients and their standard errors are computed using a non-linear combination of the individual variances and covariances of these coefficients.

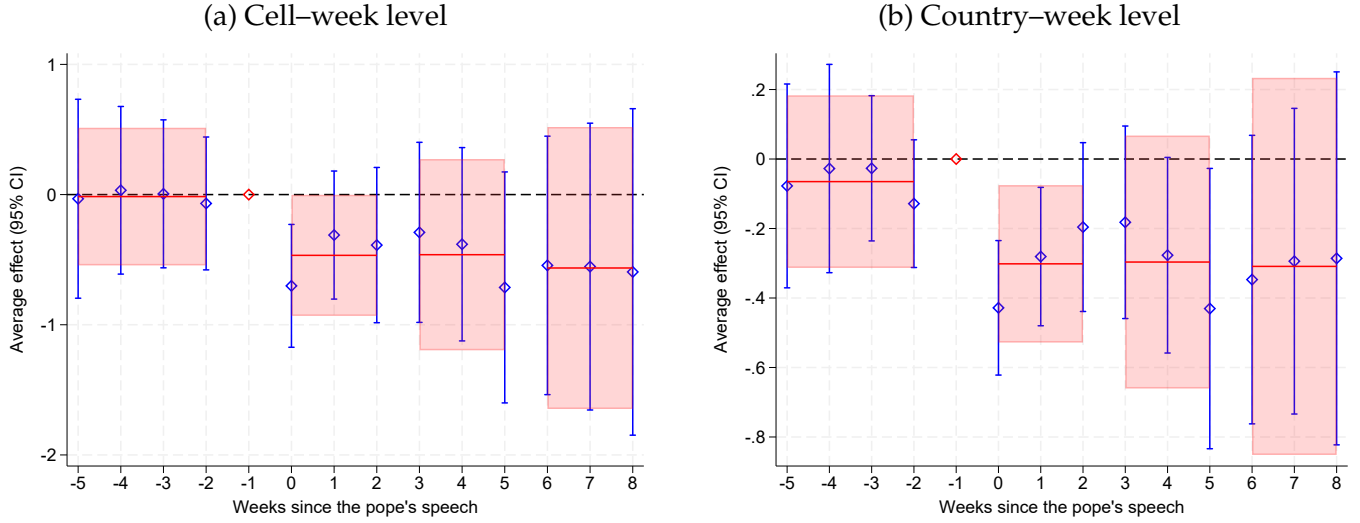
³⁹We also estimate a linear time trend over the pre-treatment window (e.g., weeks -5 to -1), including event-window-

Table 3: Average effect of papal speeches: sensitivity analysis

Dependent variable:	Incidence (1)	Number of cells (2)	Number of events (3)	Incidence (4)
Post	-0.409** (0.185) [0.182]	-0.286*** (0.072)	-0.411*** (0.090)	-0.146 (0.116)
Post $\times$ treated				-0.158** (0.065)
Observations	473802	1027	1027	1422326
Mean dep. var.	1.76	590.10	23.31	1.51
Unit of obs.:	cell-week	country-week	country-week	cell-week

Note: This table reports the estimated effect of papal peace-seeking speeches on conflict outcomes. The sample consists of 100 speeches targeting African countries outside of papal trips to Africa. Each event window spans five weeks before to eight weeks after a speech. The unit of observation is a cell $\times$ week-year in columns (1) and (4), and a country $\times$ week-year in columns (2) and (3). Dependent variables are: (i) an indicator equal to 100 if at least one conflict event occurs in the cell-week (cols. 1 and 4); (ii) the number of conflict-affected cells in the country-week (col. 2); (iii) the number of conflict events in the country-week (col. 3). Column (1) includes cell, event-window-by-country ($[-5; +8]$ weeks around a speech targeting a given country), and week-by-year fixed effects. Columns (2) and (3) are estimated with Poisson pseudo-maximum likelihood (PPML), including event-window-by-country, week-by-year, and country fixed effects. Column (4) is a difference-in-differences design that uses matched cells in other conflict-affected countries not exposed to a papal speech as controls; the specification includes cell, event-window-by-country, week-by-year, and cell-by-treated/control-group fixed effects. *Post* is a binary indicator for weeks after a papal speech. *Treated* (col. 4) indicates matched cells exposed to a papal speech. Standard errors clustered at the country-speech level are reported in cols. (1)–(3); in col. (4), they are clustered at the cell level. Conley (1999) standard errors allowing for spatial correlation within 500 km and infinite serial correlation are shown in brackets (col. 1).

Figure 3: Event-study graphs



Note: The figure shows the weekly average effects of papal speeches on the incidence of conflict within a 5-week pre-speech and 8-week post-speech event window. The speech takes place within week 0. Each event window spans from 5 weeks before to 8 weeks after the Pope's speech. The unit of observation is a cell $\times$ week-year dyad in Figure (a) and a country $\times$ week-year dyad in Figure (b). In Figure (a), the dependent variable equals 100 if at least one conflict event occurs in the cell (country) during the week, 0 otherwise. In Figure (b), the dependent variable is the number of conflict-affected cells in the country-week. The omitted category is $t = -1$, and the shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals. Red regions represent aggregated pre- and post-speech periods. Baseline fixed effects encompass cell, event-window-by-country ($[-5, +8]$ weeks around a speech targeting a given country), and week-by-year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the cell level in Figure (a) and at the country-speech level in Figure (b).

statistically insignificant. This pattern also holds when considering the mean effect over the entire pre-speech period ($t \in [-5, -2]$).⁴⁰ Crucially, the absence of pre-trends mitigates the risk of mean reversion, where conflict levels might naturally decline following periods of high intensity due to cyclical patterns, seasonal influences, or broader temporal trends. This strengthens the validity of our setting, suggesting that any observed post-speech changes in conflict levels are unlikely to be driven by confounding factors or pre-existing dynamics.

In the post-speech period, the results indicate a clear and immediate decline in conflict incidence, with a substantial quantitative impact. In the first week after the speech, the probability of violence decreases by 40%, while in the second and third weeks, the reduction ranges between 18% and 22% (Figure 3(a)). The pronounced effect in the first week, which diminishes by half in the subsequent week but remains statistically significant, aligns with findings in the media literature documenting short-term impacts following widespread coverage on various behaviors and attitudes (DellaVigna and La Ferrara, 2015). On average, conflict incidence decreases by approximately 27% over the three weeks following a papal speech.⁴¹ Although estimated with less precision, the findings suggest a lasting effect of papal speeches. While point estimates remain relatively stable over time, standard errors increase, indicating greater variability in later periods. This variability may

by-country fixed effects. The estimated trend is not statistically different from zero, whether for the incidence of violence (p-value = 0.39) or for the number of violent events (p-value = 0.62).

⁴⁰The average point estimate for the pre-speech period $t \in [-5, -2]$ is -0.0154 with a p-value of 0.955.

⁴¹The average point estimate for $t \in [0, 2]$ is -0.4667, while the pre-speech sample mean of conflict is 1.734.

reflect differences in speech effectiveness across contexts and regions, motivating further analysis in the remainder of the paper. Note that using country-week as the unit of observation yields quantitatively similar estimates (Figure 3(b)).⁴²

4.3 Differences in impact by Pope and the Regensburg speech

Building on Section 2 and the observation that the three Popes in our analysis adopted distinct ideological leanings, particularly regarding Africa, we examine how the effects of their speeches vary based on the identity of the Pope delivering them. We modify Equation 1 by decomposing the *Post* variable into three dummies, each representing the *Post* period for one of the three Popes. Panel A of Table 4 presents the results.

Speeches by John Paul II and Francis are associated with significant reductions in overall conflict incidence, with decreases of 89.5% and 21%, respectively. For John Paul II, the reduction is concentrated in battles (113%), with no significant effects observed for low-intensity or religiously motivated events. In contrast, Francis' speeches exhibit a broader impact, significantly reducing battles (29.6%) and low-intensity events (32.5%). These differences underscore the distinct leadership styles and rhetorical approaches of the two Popes: John Paul II, whose papacy emphasized interstate peace (John Paul II, 1995; see Subsection 2.3), had a pronounced effect on reducing battles, while Francis, with his grassroots engagement, influenced a wider range of conflict dynamics. This contrast aligns with prior research on religious leadership in Africa, which highlights how leaders' influence depends on their ability to engage with both political institutions and broader civil society (Ellis and ter Haar, 1998). While John Paul II's papacy emphasized institutional diplomacy, Francis' broader social engagement aligns with findings on how religious leaders shape public norms through direct social interaction (Freston, 2001). The estimated effects of Papal speeches on religiously motivated conflicts are negative but imprecisely estimated for these two Popes. However, when considering the combined effect of John Paul II and Francis, we observe a significant negative impact of considerable magnitude, with their speeches reducing the probability of religiously motivated conflict by 34.3% (p-value = 0.077).

The results for Benedict XVI, however, present a more nuanced picture. While his speeches show no overall effect on conflict dynamics (col. 1), a closer examination reveals significant variation across conflict types. Specifically, we find no impact on low-intensity events, but his speeches are associated with a substantial increase in battles (85.8%) and religiously motivated violence (60%). Benedict XVI's papacy was characterized by theological conservatism, an emphasis on traditional Church values, and a more limited engagement with Africa. His doctrinal stance frequently sparked controversy in culturally diverse regions, as illustrated by two major incidents: his opposition to condom use during the AIDS crisis in Cameroon and the widely debated Regensburg speech. Delivered in 2006, the Regensburg speech contained remarks that were widely perceived as critical of Islam, triggering significant backlash across Muslim-majority countries and beyond. Given the polarizing nature of this speech and its potential to shape perceptions of Benedict XVI's

⁴²The average coefficient of -0.302 for $t \in [0,2]$ implies that the expected number of conflict cells in weeks 6–8 post-speech is approximately 26% lower than in the baseline weeks 1–4 ($e^{-0.302} - 1 \approx -0.26$).

papacy, we investigate whether it represented a turning point in the impact of his messages on conflict dynamics.

Panel B of Table 4 presents results distinguishing between speeches delivered before (6 distinct speeches) and after the Regensburg speech (17 distinct speeches). Although imprecisely estimated, the effects of Benedict XVI's speeches prior to the Regensburg address is negative (col. 1). The reduction is better estimated for low-intensity violence (p -value = 0.121), where we observe a substantial decrease of nearly 84%. In contrast, following the Regensburg speech, we estimate a sharp and significant increase in battles and religious violence. While other aspects of Benedict XVI's papacy may have contributed to these shifts in conflict dynamics, the clear divergence in effects before and after the Regensburg speech suggests that this speech played a critical role in shaping his broader influence on violent conflicts.

4.4 Distinctive impact of papal speeches and UN conflict resolutions

One might question whether our findings can be extrapolated and remain quantitatively similar when an institution widely regarded as a leader in peacekeeping adopts a position on an armed conflict. To address this, we examine a prominent international actor that actively advocates for and intervenes in conflicts: the United Nations.⁴³

The UN provides a well-documented, structured, and extensive set of resolutions that address conflicts worldwide, allowing for a rigorous evaluation of their impact on conflict dynamics. We collected all resolutions published by the UN Security Council from 1997 to 2022. As the primary UN body responsible for maintaining international peace and security, the Security Council has the authority to adopt binding resolutions, impose sanctions, and authorize peacekeeping operations. Its resolutions play a critical role in conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and post-conflict reconstruction worldwide.⁴⁴ Following the same procedure used to define an event for papal speeches, we identify 215 resolution-based events, defined as UN Security Council peace-seeking resolutions targeting a specific African country.⁴⁵

First, we assess whether UN Security Council peace-seeking resolutions targeting a specific African country are widely disseminated and acknowledged within the mentioned countries. The likelihood of news articles mentioning the United Nations Security Council increases significantly in the country targeted by the resolution (Figure D5, Online Appendix D). The effect is short-lived

⁴³Ideally, testing this hypothesis would require collecting speeches and official statements from a broad range of political and institutional leaders, including regional African organizations, heads of state, and other international actors. However, assembling a comprehensive and systematically comparable dataset across multiple speakers presents significant challenges, particularly in terms of consistency and availability of conflict-related positions. For this reason, we focus on UN resolutions.

⁴⁴The resolutions are available at the [UN Security Council website](#). The Security Council consists of 15 member states, including five permanent members with veto power—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—and ten rotating members elected for two-year terms.

⁴⁵We identify 771 resolutions mentioning at least one African country, accounting for 899 resolution $\times$ country observations. We then apply the exact same procedure used for papal speeches to define an event: i) we group all resolutions targeting the same country within a four-week period as a single treatment; ii) we focus only on isolated resolutions—those published within an event window containing no other resolutions mentioning the same country and conflict in the five weeks prior or eight weeks after the resolution. These steps yield a final sample of 215 events. Online Appendix D provides more details on this procedure.

Table 4: Decomposing post-speech effects by individual Pope

Dependent variable:	Conflict incidence, by type of events:			
	All (1)	Battles (2)	Low intensity (3)	Religious (4)
Panel A: Heterogeneity by Pope				
Post: John Paul II	-0.519** (0.246)	-0.386* (0.204)	0.063 (0.054)	-0.161 (0.127)
Post: Benedict XVI	0.130 (0.221)	0.292* (0.149)	-0.028 (0.089)	0.144* (0.086)
Post: Francis	-0.535** (0.236)	-0.222* (0.124)	-0.338** (0.157)	-0.181 (0.150)
Observations	473802	473802	473802	473802
Mean dep. var. John Paul II	0.58	0.34	0.07	0.05
Mean dep. var. BenedictXVI	0.83	0.34	0.16	0.24
Mean dep. var. Francis	2.56	0.75	1.04	0.66
Post: John Paul II $\neq$ Benedict XVI	0.05	0.01	0.41	0.05
Post: John Paul II $\neq$ Francis	0.96	0.49	0.01	0.92
Post: Benedict XVI $\neq$ Francis	0.04	0.01	0.09	0.06
Panel B: Benedict XVI's Regensburg Speech				
Post: John Paul II	-0.519** (0.246)	-0.386* (0.204)	0.063 (0.054)	-0.161 (0.127)
Post: Benedict XVI pre Regensburg	-0.117 (0.375)	0.004 (0.193)	-0.134 (0.087)	0.000 (0.000)
Post: Benedict XVI post Regensburg	0.240 (0.272)	0.420** (0.198)	0.019 (0.123)	0.209* (0.125)
Post: Francis	-0.535** (0.236)	-0.222* (0.124)	-0.338** (0.157)	-0.181 (0.150)
Observations	473802	473802	473802	473802
Mean dep. var. John Paul II	0.58	0.34	0.07	0.05
Mean dep. var. BenedictXVI	0.83	0.34	0.16	0.24
Mean dep. var. Francis	2.56	0.75	1.04	0.66
Baseline FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: The table presents the estimation of the heterogeneous effect of Pope Speeches on the incidence of different conflict types. The unit of observation is a cell $\times$ week-year dyad. The sample includes 100 events, defined as papal peace-seeking speeches targeting a given African country outside of papal trips to Africa. Each event window spans from 5 weeks before to 8 weeks after the Pope's speech. The dependent variable equals 100 if at least one conflict event occurs in the cell during the week: any conflict (col. 1), battle (col. 2), protest/riot (col. 3), or religion-related conflict (col. 4), and 0 otherwise. In Panel A, *Post: John Paul II*, *Post: Benedict XVI*, and *Post: Francis* are binary indicators equal to 1 for weeks following a speech by the respective Pope. In Panel B, *Post: Benedict XVI* is divided in two periods pre and post Regensburg speech (12/09/2006). Baseline FEs encompasses cell, event-window-by-country ($[-5; +8]$ weeks around a speech targeting a given country), and week-by-year fixed effects. Standard errors, clustered at the cell level, are in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

but substantial, though 24% smaller in magnitude than the impact of papal speeches.⁴⁶ Second, we estimate Equation 1 with UN Security Council resolutions. We find a negative but non-significant effect on overall violence, battles, and religious events, while the effect on low-intensity violence is positive (Table 5).

While both papal speeches and UN Security Council resolutions are disseminated by African local media, as evidenced by printed press coverage, only papal speeches exhibit a statistically significant impact on conflict dynamics. This suggests a fundamental difference in how religious and political institutions influence conflict, with religious discourse potentially shaping behavioral responses in a more nuanced and profound manner. The unique impact of papal speeches aligns with broader research on religious institutions, which emphasizes their role in shaping social norms and political stability through moral authority rather than formal enforcement mechanisms (Iannaccone, 1998; McCleary and Barro, 2006).

Table 5: Average effect of UN Security Council resolutions on categories of conflict

Dependent variable:	Conflict incidence, by type of events:			
	All (1)	Battles (2)	Low intensity (3)	Religious (4)
Post	−0.073 (0.080)	−0.029 (0.051)	0.003 (0.041)	−0.015 (0.031)
Observations	663579	663579	663579	663579
Mean dep. var.	1.15	0.48	0.30	0.17
Baseline FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: The table presents the estimation of the effect of UN Security Council resolutions on the incidence of different conflict types. The unit of observation is a cell $\times$ week-year dyad. The sample includes 215 events, defined as UN Secretary General peace-seeking resolutions targeting a given African country. Each event window spans from 5 weeks before to 8 weeks after the Pope’s speech. The dependent variable equals 100 if at least one conflict event occurs in the cell during the week: any conflict (col. 1), battle (col. 2), protest/riot (col. 3), or religion-related conflict (col. 4), and 0 otherwise. *Post* is a binary indicator equal to 1 for weeks after a the publication of a UN Security Council resolution. Baseline FEs encompasses cell, event-window-by-country ($[-5; +8]$ weeks around a speech targeting a given country), and week-by-year fixed effects. Standard errors, clustered at the cell level, are in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

5 Mechanisms

This section, grounded in our conceptual framework, investigates the potential mechanisms through which the Pope’s messages influence violence dynamics. We focus on three primary channels: local religious communities, local religious institutions, and interactions with political leaders and

⁴⁶On the same day, the probability of news coverage of the UN resolution rises by 5.4 percentage points—29% of one standard deviation—in the targeted country, while in Section 3.3 we document an increase in news coverage of 36% of a standard deviation the same day of a papal speech.

armed groups. Specifically, our analysis explores the presence of Christian communities and the attributes of local Catholic bishops, examining their ideological alignment with the Pope and their diverse experiences both within the broader Catholic Church and in their specific local contexts. Additionally, we analyze the interactions between papal messages and key actors, including political leaders and armed groups, to unpack the complex institutional and strategic dynamics that may mediate their impact on conflict. While our analysis emphasizes these channels, this should not be interpreted as suggesting that other mechanisms are unimportant. Rather, our focus is driven by data availability, as current sources allow empirical testing only of a subset of the mechanisms discussed in Section 2. In particular, the direct persuasion of combatants cannot be empirically tested, as no systematic data exist on how armed actors consume media, engage with Church networks, or perceive the Pope, even though some results indirectly suggest its potential importance.

5.1 Local presence of religious communities

The impact of papal speeches on violence dynamics likely depends on the local presence of religious communities. Shared religious identity among Christians should foster receptiveness, while the Catholic Church’s institutional networks can also facilitate the dissemination of the Pope’s message. In conflict environments, both can enhance social cohesion and unity (Bassi and Rasul, 2017; Wang, 2021).

We replicate Table 2, restricting the sample to cells where Christian places of worship are recorded (see Section 3.1 for more details). Note that our focus on Christian communities, rather than specifically Catholic ones, is driven by the lack of a clear distinction between Catholic and other Christian places of worship in the data. This is likely not a major concern, as the influence of the Catholic Pope extends to the broader Christian community (John Paul II, 1995).⁴⁷ We estimate a significant reduction in violence in the weeks following a papal speech (Table 6, col. 1). Quantitatively, violence decreases by 33.5%, a magnitude 46% larger than that reported in our baseline (Table 2, col. 1). While the effect of the Pope’s speeches on battles is imprecisely estimated (col. 2), they significantly reduce low-intensity violence by 48% in the weeks following the speech (col. 3). Notably, in areas with a Christian presence, there is a significant decline in religiously related events (col. 4), an effect that was imprecisely estimated in the overall sample. Consistent with the conceptual framework, which suggests that peace efforts are more effective when aligned with local institutions and existing belief systems (Blattman, 2022), this reduction is substantial: following the Pope’s speech, the probability of religious violence decreases by 69%.⁴⁸ Taken together, and compared with the magnitudes estimated in Table 2, changes in violence are primarily concentrated

⁴⁷In this encyclical, John Paul II emphasizes the Catholic Church’s commitment to fostering unity among all Christians, highlighting the importance of ecumenical dialogue and collaboration with other Christian denominations. Other key examples in ecumenical dialogue include the Second Vatican Council (1965, in particular the *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1964, i.e. the Decree on Ecumenism), during which Pope Paul VI and Orthodox Patriarch Athenagoras I lifted the mutual excommunications, and the 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, signed by the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation, which underscored the Pope’s influence in advancing Christian unity.

⁴⁸Figures J8 in Online Appendix show the event-study plots with this restricted sample. Table J14 in Online Appendix J.1 shows that speeches by John Paul II and Francis reduce conflict, with John Paul II having a stronger impact, particularly on battles. In contrast, Benedict XVI’s speeches increase battles and religious violence while having no overall significant effect. Francis notably reduces battles, low-intensity events, and religious violence.

in areas with Christian religious communities. This pattern is consistent with two complementary mechanisms outlined in our theoretical framework. On the one hand, exposure may directly influence commanders and fighters by strengthening peace norms and reputational concerns. On the other hand, papal messages may operate through surrounding communities, reshaping local moral environments, stigmatizing violence, and reducing the support structures on which armed groups depend. While the data do not allow us to disentangle these channels empirically, the results highlight their joint plausibility. This conclusion is reinforced by the absence of effects in cells without Christian communities, except for a notable rise in low-intensity events (Table J15 in Online Appendix J). In the following exercises, we limit the analysis to grid cells with documented Christian places of worship.

Table 6: Impact of papal speeches on violence in regions with Christian places of worship

Dependent variable:	Conflict incidence, by type of events:			
	All (1)	Battles (2)	Low intensity (3)	Religious (4)
Post	-1.370*** (0.475)	-0.383 (0.268)	-0.836** (0.329)	-0.674** (0.305)
Observations	159246	159246	159246	159246
Mean dep. var.	4.09	1.21	1.75	0.97
Baseline FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: The table presents the estimation of the effect of Pope Speeches on the incidence of different conflict types. The unit of observation is a cell $\times$ week-year dyad. The sample includes 100 events, defined as papal peace-seeking speeches targeting a given African country outside of papal trips to Africa and observations are restricted to cells where Christian places of worship are recorded. Each event window spans from 5 weeks before to 8 weeks after the Pope's speech. The dependent variable equals 100 if at least one conflict event occurs in the cell during the week: any conflict (col. 1), battle (col. 2), protest/riot (col. 3), or religion-related conflict (col. 4), and 0 otherwise. *Post* is a binary indicator equal to 1 for weeks after a Pope's speech. Baseline FEs encompasses cell, event-window-by-country ($[-5; +8]$ weeks around a speech targeting a given country), and week-by-year fixed effects. Standard errors, clustered at the cell level, are in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

5.2 Local religious institutions and the dissemination of the peace message

The Catholic Church relies on local institutions, particularly in unstable regions, with bishops serving as key intermediaries between the Holy See and local communities (Second Vatican Council, 1965). Recent studies highlight their role in navigating socio-political complexities while advancing the Church's broader mission (O'Malley, 2008). Beyond their spiritual role, bishops guide diocesan activities and facilitate dialogue in conflict zones. Their influence depends on two key factors: alignment with the Pope's agenda and experience within the Church and their dioceses. This sub-

section examines how these factors shape the impact of papal speeches on local conflict dynamics.⁴⁹

Measuring bishops' ideological alignment with the Pope. We expect bishops ideologically aligned with the Pope to be more effective in disseminating his peace message. To approximate this alignment, we leverage variation in the timing of bishops' appointments.⁵⁰ The appointment process is complex and reflects the Church's hierarchical structure (see Online Appendix I for details). While multiple stakeholders—retired bishops, neighboring dioceses, the faithful, the apostolic nuncio, and Roman Curia dicasteries—contribute to the selection, the final decision rests with the Pope, in line with canonical tradition established by the Pio-Benedictine Code of 1917 and subsequent canon law revisions (Vatican Press, 1917; Second Vatican Council, 1965). While some bishops may share the current Pope's ideological views, others may have been appointed by predecessors with different leanings. We define a dummy variable (*aligned appointment*) equal to 1 if the bishop was appointed by the Pope delivering the speech.

Bishops' experience overall, and tenure duration locally. A bishop's leadership effectiveness fundamentally depends on their ability to build trust and institutional networks, both within the Church and locally. Without established credibility, leaders may require significant time to develop crucial ties, underscoring the importance of institutional alignment in effective leadership (Hodler and Raschky, 2014; Burgess et al., 2015). This dynamic is especially pronounced in conflict settings, where a bishop's local connections and contextual knowledge can substantially influence peacebuilding efforts. Long tenure enables leaders to comprehend the socio-political landscape, cultivate networks, and establish trust. Empirical evidence demonstrates that experience enhances leaders' capacity to address local challenges (Becker and Woessmann, 2009; Barro, 2004; Chambru, 2019) and mitigate violence while promoting peace (Acemoglu et al., 2001).

We define two distinct measures of experience. *Overall experience* captures the number of years since a bishop's ordination as a priest, reflecting their general ecclesiastical background. *Local experience* measures the duration of a bishop's tenure within a specific diocese, calculated from their arrival to the date of the papal speech. Local experience is particularly critical for conflict mediation, as long-tenured bishops develop a nuanced understanding of local political and religious dynamics. This includes insights into relationships with non-Catholic leaders and the intricate sources of tension among armed groups. However, extended tenure can potentially diminish a bishop's effectiveness if they have previously aligned with a conflicting party.⁵¹

Estimated contributions of local religious institutions in the nexus between papal speeches and conflict dynamics. To estimate the role of bishops' characteristics, we extend Equation 1 by interacting the variable *Post* with the three measures defined above. We also saturate the model with

⁴⁹We restrict the sample to cells with bishops who do not change in the 5 weeks before and 8 weeks after the speech. This reduces the sample by 13.8%, but the restriction does not significantly bias the selection toward specific countries or regions.

⁵⁰This methodology is also adopted in Martinez-Bravo et al. (2025).

⁵¹Ideally, we would have comprehensive data on bishops' relationships with local actors or their conflict positions, but such information is not available.

an event-window $\times$ bishop fixed effect. Table 7 presents the estimates. The measures of experience are centered, so the *Post* variable represents the effect of a Pope's speech when the bishop was not appointed by the Pope delivering the speech, and for average levels of both local and overall experience.⁵²

Several key results emerge. First, ideological alignment matters: the Pope's message is 17% more effective when relayed by a bishop appointed by the same Pope, compared to one appointed by a predecessor. Second, regarding experience, an intriguing finding is that *local experience* does not appear to be a crucial factor, while *overall experience* has a quantitatively significant effect (col. 1). For every additional year of overall experience, conflict incidence decreases by 1% after a papal speech. The reduction in violence associated with *overall experience* is significant for low-intensity (1.16%) and religious conflict events (2.1%).⁵³ We find also that ideological alignment and *local experience* produce imprecise estimates for battles (col. 2).

Legacy of bishops' appointments. As shown in Tables 2 and 6, we find a difference in the effectiveness of speeches delivered by Pope John Paul II compared to those of Pope Francis. Interestingly, Francis's speeches followed those of Benedict XVI, whose peace-seeking messages in Africa were largely ineffective (if not counter-productive) during his tenure. This raises a natural question: Could the lower effectiveness of Pope Francis's speeches be partially attributed to Benedict XVI's legacy, particularly through bishops appointed during his papacy? To investigate this, while demanding, we focus exclusively on Francis's speeches and estimate their differential impacts based on whether the bishops were appointed by John Paul II, Benedict XVI, or Francis (Table 8).

The results reveal that when a bishop was appointed by Pope Francis, conflict incidence decreases by 34% (*Post* coefficient, col. 1). However, in cells where the bishop was appointed by Benedict XVI, the reduction is 11 percentage points smaller (p-value ≈ 0.13), suggesting that Francis's speeches are notably less effective in these regions.⁵⁴ Although bishops appointed by Benedict XVI have, on average and mechanically, greater local experience (7.9 years) compared to those appointed by Francis (less than 4 years), overall experience is similar among the two groups of bishops (31.5 years for those appointed by Benedict XVI and 30.5 for those appointed by Francis). Controlling for both *local experience* (col. 2) and *overall experience* (col. 3) reveals a persistent 12 percentage-point difference in effectiveness. This indicates that the weaker impact of Francis's speeches in these regions likely reflects a broader legacy effect associated with Benedict's appointees. Interestingly, when comparing the impact of Francis's speeches in cells with bishops appointed by John Paul II versus those appointed by Francis, the initial effect appears similar. However, after accounting for experience (cols. 2 and 3), a 7 percentage-point difference emerges, suggesting that Francis's speeches are slightly more effective where bishops were appointed by

⁵²In this estimation sample, we have data for 400 bishops in 296 dioceses. The average *overall experience* is 34 years, with a standard deviation of 9 years, while the average *local experience* is 11 years, with a standard deviation of 8.6 years.

⁵³The role of *overall experience* in decreasing conflict is confirmed in areas with bishops nominated by John Paul II (despite not precisely estimated) and for Francis (1%), while *local experience* has a significant effect in decreasing conflict incidence in areas with bishops nominated by Pope Benedict (3.3%). See Table J16 in Online Appendix J.1 for details.

⁵⁴The 11 percentage-point difference is calculated by comparing the effect in regions with bishops appointed by Francis $((-1.949 / 5.72) \times 100 = 34.07\%)$ to those appointed by Benedict $((-1.949 + 0.635) / 5.72) \times 100 = 22.9\%$. The estimated effects in cells with Benedict's appointees are somewhat imprecise (p-values between 0.17 and 0.19).

Table 7: How local church leadership shapes the effect of papal speeches on conflict

Dependent variable:	Conflict incidence, by type of events:			
	All (1)	Battles (2)	Low intensity (3)	Religious (4)
Post	-0.742 (0.572)	-0.555* (0.335)	-0.636 (0.395)	-0.414 (0.310)
× Aligned appointment	-0.632* (0.342)	0.007 (0.194)	-0.107 (0.245)	0.031 (0.153)
× Local experience	-0.016 (0.019)	-0.011 (0.012)	-0.000 (0.013)	0.008 (0.007)
× Overall experience	-0.038** (0.016)	-0.007 (0.009)	-0.019* (0.010)	-0.015** (0.007)
Observations	137201	137201	137201	137201
Mean dep. var.	3.79	1.08	1.63	0.71
Baseline FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Event-window × bishop FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: The table presents the estimation of the effect of the Pope's local institutions on the incidence of different conflict types. The unit of observation is a cell × week-year dyad. The sample includes 100 events, defined as papal peace-seeking speeches targeting a given African country outside of papal trips to Africa and observations are restricted to cells where Christian places of worship are recorded. Each event window spans from 5 weeks before to 8 weeks after the Pope's speech. The dependent variable equals 100 if at least one conflict event occurs in the cell during the week: any conflict (col. 1), battle (col. 2), protest/riot (col. 3), or religion-related conflict (col. 4), and 0 otherwise. *Post* is a binary indicator equal to 1 for weeks after a Pope's speech. *Aligned appointment* is a binary indicator equal to 1 if the bishop was appointed by the Pope delivering the speech. *Overall experience* is the number of years since a bishop was ordained as a priest. *Local experience* is the number of years between the arrival of the bishop in the diocese and the date of the Pope's speech. The three measures are interacted with the variable *Post*. Baseline FEs encompasses cell, event-window-by-country ([-5; +8] weeks around a speech targeting a given country), and week-by-year fixed effects. We saturate the model with an event-window-by-country × bishop fixed effect. Standard errors, clustered at the cell level, are in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

him compared to those appointed by John Paul II.

Taken together, these results underscore the critical importance of alignment between papal appointments and papal messages. Francis’s speeches prove most effective when relayed by bishops he appointed. Moreover, the legacy effect of Benedict’s appointees appears more pronounced than that of John Paul II’s appointees, potentially contributing to the lower overall effectiveness of Francis’s speeches compared to those of his predecessor.

Table 8: Legacy effects of bishop appointments on the impact of Pope Francis’s speeches

Dependent variable:	Conflict incidence		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Post	−1.949** (0.948)	−2.086** (1.012)	−2.119** (1.013)
× Nominated by Benedict XVI	0.635 (0.458)	0.728 (0.535)	0.686 (0.534)
× Nominated by John Paul II	0.030 (0.417)	0.337 (0.935)	0.366 (0.936)
× Local experience		−0.018 (0.053)	0.017 (0.053)
× Overall experience			−8.480** (3.814)
Observations	74517	74517	74517
Mean dep. var.	5.71	5.71	5.71
Baseline FEs	✓	✓	✓
Event-window × bishop FEs	✓	✓	✓

Note: The table presents the estimation of the effect of the Pope’s legacy and local institutions on the incidence of conflict. The unit of observation is a cell × week-year dyad. The sample includes 52 events, defined as papal peace-seeking speeches targeting a given African country outside of papal trips to Africa under Francis’ pontificate, and observations are restricted to cells where Christian places of worship are recorded. Each event window spans from 5 weeks before to 8 weeks after the Pope’s speech. The dependent variable equals 100 if at least one conflict event occurs in the cell during the week, and 0 otherwise. *Post* is a binary indicator equal to 1 for weeks after a Pope’s speech. *Nominated by Benedict XVI* and *Nominated by John Paul II* are binary indicators equal to 1 if the bishop was appointed by Benedict XVI or John Paul II, respectively. *Overall experience* is the number of years since a bishop was ordained as a priest. *Local experience* is the number of years between the arrival of the bishop in the diocese and the date of the Pope’s speech. The four measures are interacted with the variable *Post*. Baseline FEs encompasses cell, event-window-by-country ([−5; +8] weeks around a speech targeting a given country), and week-by-year fixed effects. We saturate the model with an event-window-by-country × bishop fixed effect. Standard errors, clustered at the cell level, are in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

5.3 “World is watching”: The role of political leader

Another important dimension concerns the role of political leaders following a papal speech. As discussed in Sections 2 and 3.3, the Pope’s message is universal and widely disseminated, particularly through national media. Consequently, when a country is mentioned in a papal speech, it

comes under global scrutiny and attracts significant international attention. In this context, the country's political leader may feel prompted to take action to reduce tensions and violence. However, in the African context, political leaders tend to exert the most influence in their regions of birth (Franck and Rainer, 2012; Hodler and Raschky, 2014; Burgess et al., 2015). Thus, we estimate whether, following the Pope's speech, violence dynamics differ in the leader's birthplace regions compared to other regions. Table 9 presents the results.

When considering all events, we find no significant differences in conflict dynamics between cells in the leader's birthplace region and those in other regions in the weeks following the Pope's speech (col. 1). This result is similar for battles as well (col. 2). However, significant differences emerge for low-intensity events and events with a religious dimension. For low-intensity events, violence decreases by 71% in cells within the leader's birthplace region compared to a 45% reduction in cells in other regions (col. 3). This significant difference is also observed for religiously motivated events, where the probability of violence decreases by 87% in cells of the leader's birthplace region compared to a 67% reduction in other regions (col. 4). These findings highlight the importance of the Pope's speech in shaping national political dynamics and suggest that it can serve as a mechanism for reducing violence.⁵⁵

Table 9: Local political influence and the impact of papal speeches on conflict dynamics

Dependent variable:		Conflict incidence, by type of events:			
		All (1)	Battles (2)	Low intensity (3)	Religious (4)
Post	× Leader born in region	−1.371** (0.546)	−0.202 (0.322)	−1.243*** (0.368)	−0.850*** (0.315)
	× Other regions	−1.370*** (0.476)	−0.406 (0.267)	−0.784** (0.330)	−0.652** (0.306)
Observations		159246	159246	159246	159246
Mean dep. var.		4.09	1.21	1.75	0.97
Baseline FEs		✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: The table presents the estimation of the effect of political leaders' influence on the incidence of conflict following a Pope's speech. The unit of observation is a cell × week-year dyad. The sample includes 100 events, defined as papal peace-seeking speeches targeting a given African country outside of papal trips to Africa, and observations are restricted to cells where Christian places of worship are recorded. Each event window spans from 5 weeks before to 8 weeks after the Pope's speech. The dependent variable equals 100 if at least one conflict event occurs in the cell during the week: any conflict (col. 1), battle (col. 2), protest/riot (col. 3), or religion-related conflict (col. 4), and 0 otherwise. *Post × Leader born in region* is the effect of the speech in cells located in the region where the political leader was born. *Post × Other regions* is the effect of the speech in cells located in the other regions. Baseline FEs encompasses cell, event-window-by-country ([-5; +8] weeks around a speech targeting a given country), and week-by-year fixed effects. Standard errors, clustered at the cell level, are in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

⁵⁵Table J17 in Online Appendix J.3 presents the results differentiated by the Pope delivering the speech. Significant differences are observed for John Paul II for low intensity conflict, while no significant differences are identified for Pope Benedict nor Pope Francis.

5.4 The role of armed groups

So far, our analysis has examined conflict without distinguishing between the armed groups involved. However, the different actors engaged may respond differently to the Pope’s call for peace. We explore two key dimensions that may influence these responses.

First, as noted in Section 2, an armed group’s reaction may depend on whether they have a religious affiliation. Religious and non-religious armed groups might interpret the Pope’s message differently, influencing their willingness to de-escalate violence. Second, the level of pre-existing violence between two armed groups can shape the impact of the peace-seeking speech. When conflict between groups is already high, the effects are ambiguous. On one hand, violence may decrease for several reasons. Prolonged conflict imposes significant human, material, and reputational costs that armed groups may seek to avoid. The Pope’s speech could act as a focal point for reconsidering alternatives to violence, consistent with research on how peace-promoting interventions reduce uncertainty and facilitate coordination among conflicting parties (Fearon, 1995; Sawyer, 2004). Additionally, groups engaged in intense violence may face growing pressure from local communities, national authorities, or external supporters to de-escalate following the Pope’s intervention. On the other hand, conflict escalation in response to the Pope’s speech is also possible. If a group perceives bias, they may intensify violence to counteract it or signal their strength. The speech could deepen divisions, provoke backlash, or be strategically exploited—such as one group using a ceasefire to gain an advantage. This aligns with findings on how external interventions can sometimes shift conflict incentives, leading to unexpected escalation (Kalyvas, 2006; Wood, 2003). Finally, groups seeking to assert their legitimacy or dominance might interpret the Pope’s message as a challenge to their authority, prompting them to intensify violence as a display of power.

By examining religious affiliation and pre-existing violence levels, we aim to better understand the variation in armed groups’ responses to papal speeches. We exploit a unique feature of the conflict events dataset: ACLED provides information on the armed groups involved in each violent event.⁵⁶ For each actor involved in a conflict event within an event window surrounding a Pope’s speech, we establish bilateral links with all other actors present in the same event window and country. Using this framework, we estimate a bilateral violence incidence regression to assess the likelihood that two armed groups are influenced by the Pope’s speech. Specifically, we estimate the following specification:

$$Conflict_{g,h,k,i,s,t} = \alpha_1 Post_{i,s,t} + \alpha_2 (Post_{i,s,t} \times C_{g,h,i}) + \eta_{g,h,i} + \omega_t + \mu_{i,s} + \epsilon_{g,h,i,s,t} \quad (2)$$

where $Conflict_{g,h,k,i,s,t}$ represents the incidence of conflict between the armed groups g and h in cell k , in country i , during week t , within an event window spanning from 5 weeks before to 8 weeks after the speech s . $Post_{i,s,t}$ is a dummy equal to 1 for weeks following a Pope’s speech mentioning country i , and 0 otherwise. $C_{g,h,i}$ is a characteristic of the pair of armed groups (g, h) in country i that may either reflect a religious attribute or historical violence between groups g and h . For religious characteristics, the variable $C_{g,h,i}$ takes three distinct definitions: (i) if *at least one* of the two groups

⁵⁶Notably, ACLED does not specify the perpetrator or victim, nor does it include information on the directionality of the violence (e.g., who initiated the conflict).

is identified as a religious group; (ii) if *at least one* of the two groups is identified as a Christian group; and (iii) if *at least one* of the two groups is identified as an Islamic group.⁵⁷ To approximate the history of violence between the two groups, we compute the number of events between groups g and h from 1997 up to the year preceding the Pope’s speech.⁵⁸ We define three dummy variables: the first equals 1 if there is no history of violence between the two groups, the second equals 1 for pairs of groups with a history of low-intensity violence (fewer than 10 events), and the third equals 1 for groups engaged in high-intensity conflict (10 or more past events). Crucially, we include actor-pair fixed effects that account for unobserved heterogeneity in actor-pairs ($\eta_{g,h,i}$), resulting in our inference being based purely on time-varying monadic or bilateral characteristics, an approach grounded in the gravity trade literature. As in Equation 1, we include week-by-year fixed effects (ω_t) to account for time-specific shocks that may affect all actor-pairs simultaneously, including seasonal trends or regional instability and event-window-by-country fixed effects ($\mu_{i,s}$) to capture country-specific dynamics within the event window.

Papal speeches, religious affiliation and conflict dynamics. We analyze how a group’s religious affiliation influences the bilateral dynamics of violence following a Pope’s speech (Table 10). On average, bilateral violence decreases by nearly 40% after the speech (col. 1). However, this effect becomes insignificant when at least one of the two groups is identified as religious (col. 2). Among pairs where neither group is identified as religious, violence decreases by approximately 41%, showing that the effect of the peace-seeking message extends beyond religiously affiliated groups.⁵⁹

Next, we distinguish between Christian and Islamic affiliated groups. When at least one group is identified as Christian, violence declines further (p-value = 0.124), leading to an overall reduction of approximately 56%. In contrast, for pairs involving at least one Islamic group, the marginal effect is positive, resulting in a total effect that is not significantly different from zero (col. 3). These results suggest that while religious identity matters, the perception of the Pope’s message varies across religious groups. Similar patterns emerge for battles (cols. 4 to 6), though the effects are more pronounced. Among pairs without religious affiliation, violence decreases by about 77%. When at least one group is identified as Christian, the reduction reaches 100%. However, for pairs involving at least one Islamic group, no significant effect is observed. For low-intensity violence, estimates remain imprecise, preventing clear conclusions about bilateral violence dynamics (cols. 7 to 9). The findings are particularly striking when focusing on religious violence. On average, the Pope’s speech has no effect on bilateral religious violence (col. 10). However, when at least one actor is

⁵⁷Note that we have information on religiosity for 79% overall pairs of armed groups. However, only in 0.07% of pairs both actors are identified as Islamic, and only 0.01% of pairs where both actors are identified as Christians. Therefore, we cannot estimate the effects when both groups are religious and when they share the same religion.

⁵⁸Alternatively, we make use of the number of events divided by the number of years of presence of the actor-pair (see Table J18 in Online Appendix J.4.)

⁵⁹The total effect for each group is computed by combining the baseline effect and the interaction term, accounting for the variances and covariances of these coefficients. To assess its magnitude, this effect is expressed as a percentage of the mean dependent variable. For example, for pairs where at least one actor is identified as religious, the total effect is obtained by summing the interaction term and the baseline post-treatment effect ($Post + Post \times Actor\ identified\ as\ Religious$ = -0.024), then dividing by the mean violence level (Conflict mean = 0.043).

identified as religious, violence increases significantly by 120% (col. 11). This surge is primarily driven by pairs where at least one group is identified as Islamic, with violence more than doubling (230%). Conversely, for pairs where at least one group is identified as Christian, violence decreases by 70%. This variation aligns with findings on how religious identities shape conflict dynamics, documenting that perceived bias or external interventions can exacerbate tensions (Cederman et al., 2011; Tilly, 2003). Additionally, from an analytical perspective, it is reassuring that no effect is observed on religious violence among pairs where neither group is identified as religious.

History of violence and dynamic of violence. In Table 11, we analyze how the history of violence between two groups shapes their responses to the Pope’s speech. Among groups with no prior history of violence, we observe a significant reduction in the probability of violence following the speech (approximately 210%, col. 1).⁶⁰ This aligns with research showing that external interventions are more effective in shaping conflict outcomes when pre-existing hostilities are minimal or absent (Blattman, 2022). In contrast, for groups with a history of low-intensity violence, there is no significant effect. For groups with a history of high-intensity violence, the probability of violence increases by approximately 30%.⁶¹ These results remain consistent in both sign and magnitude when focusing on battles (col. 2), though no significant differences are observed for low-intensity events (col. 3). When examining religious violence, the findings diverge slightly: any history of violence, regardless of intensity, is associated with an approximate 30% increase in the probability of violence. This suggests that the Pope’s speech impacts conflicts differently based on their history, potentially intensifying hostilities or prompting strategic actions. These findings support the idea that entrenched rivalries and grievances can hinder de-escalation efforts and external messaging (Walter, 1997).

6 Conclusion

We provide the first systematic evaluation of the impact of papal peace-promoting speeches on conflict dynamics in Africa. While religious leaders’ public messages have historically influenced social norms, economic outcomes, and political landscapes, their effects on conflict remain under-explored.

Using a comprehensive dataset covering all papal speeches addressing conflicts in Africa from 1997 to 2022 and granular conflict data, we first show that when the Pope targets a country, the speech is covered in local media, disseminated by dioceses online, and leads individuals to place greater importance on religion. Employing high-frequency event studies, we document a significant reduction in conflict incidence (23%) in the weeks following these speeches. The effects vary depending on the Pope’s identity, the religious composition of the affected regions, the history of

⁶⁰We express the estimated effects as percentages of the baseline mean for each subgroup defined by past violence. For each group, we compute the mean of the dependent variable and divide the estimated coefficient by this mean. For the group with no history of violence (Conflict mean = 0.011), the effect size is $-0.023 / 0.011 = -209\%$.

⁶¹For the High intensity history of violence group (Conflict mean = 16.34), the magnitude is computed as $4.88 / 16.34 = 29.8\%$.

Table 10: Religious affiliation and armed groups' responses to papal speeches

Panel A: All and Battles						
Dependent variable:	Conflict incidence, by type of events:					
	All (1)	All (2)	All (3)	Battles (4)	Battles (5)	Battles (6)
Post	-0.017*** (0.006)	-0.018*** (0.006)	-0.018*** (0.006)	-0.012*** (0.004)	-0.012*** (0.004)	-0.012*** (0.004)
Post × Actor identified as Religious		0.018** (0.007)			0.012** (0.006)	
Post × Actor identified as Islamic			0.032** (0.013)			0.022** (0.010)
Post × Actor identified as Christian			-0.006 (0.004)			-0.003 (0.003)
Observations	13221052	13221052	13221052	13221052	13221052	13221052
Mean dep. var.	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.02
Panel B: Low intensity and Religious						
Dependent variable:	Conflict incidence, by type of events:					
	Low intensity (7)	Low intensity (8)	Low intensity (9)	Religious (10)	Religious (11)	Religious (12)
Post	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.003)
Post × Actor identified as Religious		0.000 (0.001)			0.014** (0.006)	
Post × Actor identified as Islamic			0.001 (0.001)			0.025** (0.011)
Post × Actor identified as Christian			-0.001 (0.001)			-0.006 (0.003)
Observations	13221052	13221052	13221052	13221052	13221052	13221052
Mean dep. var.	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Event-window × Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Week-by-year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Actor Pair FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: The table presents the estimation of the effect of the religious affiliation of armed groups on the incidence of different types of conflict following a Pope's speech. The unit of observation is an actor-pair × week-year dyad. The sample includes 100 events, defined as papal peace-seeking speeches targeting a given African country outside of papal trips to Africa. Each event window spans from 5 weeks before to 8 weeks after the Pope's speech. The dependent variable equals 100 if at least one conflict event occurs in the cell during the week: any conflict (Panel A, col. 1 to 3), battle (Panel A, col. 4 to 6), protest/riot (Panel B, col. 7 to 9), or religion-related conflict (Panel B, col. 10 to 12), and 0 otherwise. *Post* is a binary indicator equal to 1 for weeks after a Pope's speech. *Group identified as Religious, Islamic, Christian* are binary indicators equal to 1 if one of the armed group in the pair is identified as religious, or more precisely Islamic or christian respectively. The three characteristics are interacted with *Post*. All specifications include actor-pair, event-window-by-country ([-5; +8] weeks around a speech targeting a given country), and week-by-year fixed effects. Standard errors, clustered at the actor-pair level, are in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table 11: History of violence and armed groups' responses to papal speeches

Dependent variable:	Conflict incidence, by type of events:			
	All (1)	Battles (2)	Low intensity (3)	Religious (4)
Post $\times$ No history of violence	-0.023*** (0.005)	-0.013*** (0.003)	-0.002 (0.002)	-0.004 (0.003)
Post $\times$ History of violence (low intensity)	-0.017 (0.134)	0.056 (0.078)	-0.049 (0.039)	0.101* (0.059)
Post $\times$ History of violence (high intensity)	4.876*** (0.878)	1.100** (0.480)	0.045 (0.243)	1.187*** (0.452)
Observations	15782049	15782049	15782049	15782049

Note: The table presents the estimation of the effect of the history of violence between armed groups on the incidence of different types of conflict following a Pope's speech. The unit of observation is an actor-pair $\times$ week-year dyad. The sample includes 100 events, defined as papal peace-seeking speeches targeting a given African country outside of papal trips to Africa. Each event window spans from 5 weeks before to 8 weeks after the Pope's speech. The dependent variable equals 100 if at least one conflict event occurs in the cell during the week: any conflict (col. 1), battle (col. 2), protest/riot (col. 3), or religion-related conflict (col. 4), and 0 otherwise. *Post* is a binary indicator equal to 1 for weeks after a Pope's speech. Three levels of history of violence are defined for each pair of actors: no history of violence, low intensity of past violence and high intensity of past violence, with past violence defined as the number of conflict events between both actors. The three levels are interacted with *Post*. All specifications include actor-pair, event-window-by-country ($[-5; +8]$ weeks around a speech targeting a given country), and week-by-year fixed effects. Standard errors, clustered at the actor-pair level, are in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

violence, the alignment of local religious authorities, and the responses of political leaders and armed groups. Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis' speeches significantly reduce overall conflict likelihood, whereas Pope Benedict XVI's speeches have no general effect but correlate with increased battles and religious violence. A turning point emerges in 2006, following the Regensburg speech—a particularly controversial address regarding Islam—after which Benedict XVI's speeches are associated with an escalation of violence.

To contextualize these findings, we compare the effects of papal speeches with UN Security Council resolutions, a formal peacekeeping mechanism. While mentions of UN resolutions in local media increase following their adoption—mirroring the media impact of papal speeches—we find no significant effect on conflict dynamics. This contrast suggests that religious institutions influence conflict through moral authority rather than enforcement mechanisms.

We further explore four key mechanisms underlying these heterogeneous effects. First, the impact of papal speeches is driven by regions with a Christian presence. Second, local religious institutions play a pivotal role, with bishops ideologically aligned with the Pope and with greater experience amplifying the speech's effectiveness. Third, political leaders act as intermediaries in conflict de-escalation, as violence declines more sharply in their birthplace regions. Finally, armed groups respond differently based on religious affiliation and prior conflict history. Speeches reduce overall violence among groups without prior conflict linkages but increase it among those with entrenched hostilities. Conflicts—particularly religiously motivated ones—decline when at least one armed group is Christian but rise significantly when at least one group is Islamic.

Our study deepens the understanding of how religious messaging shapes conflict outcomes, highlighting the Catholic Church's distinct role in influencing conflict dynamic. The framework we develop can extend to other contexts, including the study of religious interventions in political stability, economic development, and social cohesion. Future research could examine the long-term implications of papal rhetoric and its interplay with international and domestic peacekeeping efforts.

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