

**Tradition and Change: A Comparative Study of Papal Responses to the Black  
Death and Covid-19**

Julia Pitkänen

S5313031

Faculty of Religion, Culture and Society

University of Groningen

Supervisor: Dr. Manoela Carpenedo Rodrigues

Second supervisor: Dr. Gorazd Andrejc

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## Introduction

Pandemics stop the norms and traditions within societies, setting in motion changes that challenge the existing beliefs, practices, and institutions. In the face of uncertainty and chaos, they require immediate and innovative responses. In these moments, strategic leadership becomes necessary for practical aspects and moral guidance. The thesis examines two major public health crises, with a focus on Catholic leadership. The case of Pope Clement VI in the 14<sup>th</sup> century Black Plague provides a historical perspective, and Pope Francis in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Covid-19 pandemic is an example of modern Catholic leadership. Both Popes were tasked with guiding a spiritual community with strong traditions through unforeseen situations. The case studies provide insight into how the papal leadership navigated their pandemics, preserving traditions or initiating change.

In the pandemic context, the leaders face unique challenges. The uncertain situations demand fast and precise decision-making, clarity, and connection to the public. Religious leaders in particular face the challenge of providing moral and spiritual guidance in a fast-paced scientific and political context. While pandemics have been widely researched from medical, political, and sociological perspectives, the role of papal leadership remains largely unstudied. The gap in existing research is particularly relevant, given the immense influence of the catholic church, which currently has over 1.3 billion followers globally.<sup>1</sup> Through their moral and symbolic authority, the papal leadership of the Catholic church shapes community responses, behaviours, and social cohesion in uncertain times. On an institutional level, the papal authorities influence politics and inform public health strategies. In times of public health crises, such as pandemics, the papacy's actions have far-reaching impact on how societies respond in unforeseen situations. Studying the impact of religious leaders reveals how symbolic leadership shapes public responses and societal cohesion. The knowledge gained from the research has practical implications for future pandemics and public health communications. By understanding the impact of their influence and how religious leaders, such as the Pope, shape public responses, public health officials can more effectively collaborate with religious communities. The ability to

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<sup>1</sup> A. E. Orobator, *The Pope and the Pandemic: Lessons in Leadership in a Time of Crisis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021), <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=2741850>, 9.

engage with different communities and understand each other increases the likelihood of fostering social inclusion during crises, rather than exacerbating social tensions, and minimizing the harm that uncertain situations cause.

The thesis employs a qualitative comparative approach to the two case studies, providing a historical perspective on Catholic religious leaders' responses to global public health emergencies. Building on a theoretical framework, the scholars create a leadership lens that emphasizes core elements of crises described by Boin: threat, urgency, and uncertainty.<sup>2</sup> Emphasizing the importance of good leadership in the crisis outcome. Klann further highlights the most important qualities of good leadership and effective responses, communication, clarity of vision and values, and caring.<sup>3</sup> Viewing the crises as opportunities for critique of the status quo, proposals for policy reform, and lasting institutional changes, in which well-coordinated responses help limit the impact and harm produced.<sup>4</sup> Lastly, Sharfstein provides an extensive view of the leadership communication in crisis that together builds effective leadership.<sup>5</sup> Through the leadership theory lens, document and content analysis enhance the depth of understanding the crisis context. The research aims to identify recurring patterns in the communication throughout the historical period to the present day. While the analysis faces limitations on the availability of the 14th-century sources and methods, it highlights the role of religious leaders in the pandemic context and their influence.

Beginning with a literature review that provides background on leadership in public health care, crises, and religious leadership. The study is situated within the broader context of public health emergencies such as pandemics and leadership theories, providing a framework and context for the role of the Catholic church within the larger social system. Furthermore, the methodology chapter outlines qualitative and comparative approaches, including thematic analysis of both historical and comparative sources. The theological framework and methods are

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<sup>2</sup> Arjen Boin, Paul 't Hart, Eric Stern, and Bengt Sundelius, *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership under Pressure*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Gene Klann, *Crisis Leadership: How Military Lessons and Corporate Experiences Can Help Leaders Find Opportunity in Times of Chaos* (Greensboro: Center for Creative Leadership, 2003), 12, <https://search.ebscohost.com/direct.asp?db=bth&jid=1IBE&scope=site>.

<sup>4</sup> Boin et al., *The Politics of Crisis Management*, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Joshua M. Sharfstein, *The Public Health Crisis Survival Guide: Leadership and Management in Trying Times*, updated ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 4, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197660294.001.0001>.

followed by case studies of each pandemic, which provide contextual information and insight into the popes public messaging and actions. These elements are brought together in the comparison chapter, where recurring changes and patterns are identified. Finally, the conclusion brings together the case studies with the previously stated theoretical framework.

At the core of the comparison and analysis of the case studies, the thesis aims to identify the recurring patterns in the statements and actions of the Catholic leaders. To interpret the patterns and changes through the lens of leadership theories, and assess whether the leaders acted as forces of stability or change in response to public health crises.

## Literature review

### Leadership in (public health) crisis

In times of public health crises, such as pandemics, leadership has a critical role in determining whether societies face transformative change or maintain traditions. In this study, leadership is defined as individuals' and institutions' capacity to influence, provide direction, and mobilize collective responses in crises, and simultaneously promote stability mentally, morally, and spiritually. In the context of public health crises and religious leadership, it involves strategic decision making, the ability to communicate meaning, and create trust through moral and symbolic guidance. Throughout history, crises have revealed the complexity of leadership roles and responsibilities, whether from the perspective of public health officials, political leaders, or religious leaders. In order to explore leadership and its most important qualities and roles within crisis, focusing particularly on the context of public health emergencies and Catholic leadership, the thesis builds on the work of Boin, Klann, and Sharfstein. Providing insights into the most important leadership aspects within public health crises and the unique challenges leaders face. For a more specific perspective, author Orobator explores religious leadership during a pandemic, revealing how Catholic leadership influences public reactions and actions within contemporary public health crises, also impacting wider secular societies.<sup>6</sup> These sources

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<sup>6</sup> Orobator, *The Pope and the Pandemic*.

together provide a broader context to examine how papal leadership as a form of Catholic authority has acted as a force of stability or change in response to public health crises.

The leadership roles are not only problem-solving but also creating community resilience and preparing for unexpected shocks. Gene Klann defines leadership influence as “The ability to persuade, convince, motivate, inspire, and use power to affect others positively.” Creating an overview of the most important responsibilities and pitfalls that the leaders may face.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, on challenges specific to pandemics, author Sharfstein refers to crisis as: “a time when a difficult or important decision must be made,” and “the turning point of a crisis is when an important change takes place.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Arjen Boin uses the definition “a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making vital decisions.”<sup>9</sup> At the core of each of these definitions is whether the existing structures and values can withstand the uncertainty and pressure, or if decisions are needed to create change. All of the definitions emphasize the necessity of decision-making under uncertainty and the potential for transformative change. While crises can have large differences, they share three elements: threat, urgency, and uncertainty. Boin emphasizes that regardless of the nature of the crisis, well-coordinated responses help limit the impact and harm produced.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Klann highlights the main qualities a leader must have to create effective responses: communication, clarity of vision and values, and caring.<sup>11</sup>

In response to any crisis, leaders are expected to act strategically. Boin has defined strategic crisis leadership in five critical tasks: Sense-making, decision-making and coordinating, meaning-making, accounting, and learning.

- Sense-making depicts the leader's ability to collect and process information, detect emerging crises, and understand their significance.

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<sup>7</sup> Klann, *Crisis Leadership*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Sharfstein, *The Public Health Crisis Survival Guide*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Boin et al., *The Politics of Crisis Management*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>11</sup> Klann, *Crisis Leadership*, 12.

- In decision-making, the leaders must be able to make critical calls and create coherent responses to the decisions.
- In meaning making, they must be able to convince and help the public inspire them to respond and follow the rules.
- Leaders have the responsibility to explain to the public what decisions were made and why.
- And lastly, the leaders must be able to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their approaches, and learn for future remedial actions.<sup>12</sup>

Together, these values create transparency, forming a comprehensive and effective framework for crisis management while also supporting the three key elements described by Klann: communication, clarity of vision and values, and caring.<sup>13</sup> Sharfstein emphasizes the same values in effective crisis communications in public health, highlighting six core values that all relate to transparency: being first, being right, being credible, empathy, promoting action, and showing respect.<sup>14</sup> In other words, effective communication in strategic leadership is proactive, clear, inclusive, and creates connections to the public by demonstrating personal engagement. Sharfstein contends that the most effective and clear way of communication is to designate one or two trusted and knowledgeable officials who can maintain consistent communication with the public and the media.<sup>15</sup> Centralized communication reduces the chance of mixed messages and misinformation while building trust and authority with familiar faces. In contemporary times, this has become even more important, due to the wide reach and fast pace of social media. Officials are required to be faster and more authoritative in their communication. Rumours, different ideologies, and problematic knowledge spread more easily, with a lack of leadership skills possibly leading to misinterpretation and confusion for the public.<sup>16</sup>

Leaders and their actions are under stronger scrutiny, and negative outcomes are magnified. While the leaders are strongly criticised by the public, Klann argues that leaders have

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<sup>12</sup> Boin et al., *The Politics of Crisis Management*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Klann, *Crisis Leadership*, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Sharfstein, *The Public Health Crisis Survival Guide*, 101.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 106.

the responsibility to learn and adapt to future crises.<sup>17</sup> He explains that small groups and individuals of the public are unlikely to learn and change from uncertain situations. While for the public, the crisis is a time to rely on the known, the uncertainty creates opportunities for critique of the status quo, proposals for policy reform, and lasting institutional changes. The consequences of the decisions resonate in the new events, crises, and policy making for years, if not decades.<sup>18</sup> However, leaders' decisions are restricted by a variety of political, legal, and moral limitations that force considerations between effectiveness and efficiency against other values, shaping the leaders' responses.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, one of the questions left to ask is whether leadership results in reform or preservation of old policies and practices, and whether the changes are intended improvements or unintentional consequences.

### Religious leadership in a pandemic context

Turning to the religious leadership in a pandemic context, *The Pope and the Pandemic* by Orobator explores Pope Francis as a religious leader during the global Covid-19 crisis.<sup>20</sup> Emphasizing the constitutive elements of effective religious leadership, communication, clarity of vision and values, and caring. While the religious leaders are not usually responsible for policy decisions, implementation of lockdowns, or leading discussions on the national economy, they maintain a wide range of impact by exercising moral, symbolic, and emotional authority. As a Catholic church leader and an important Christian figure, the Pope has a long tradition as the leader of a global community, which today consists of approximately 1.3 billion adherents, with influence on political and economic decisions through impact on the public.<sup>21</sup> Orobator describes the core characteristics of the Christian religious leadership in a pandemic context to be “a kind of prophetic and pastoral leadership that seeks to be inclusive yet decisive in reforming the politics, economics, and practices of the Roman Catholic Church.”<sup>22</sup> This impactful leadership style reflects on strategic leadership by Boin, particularly on sense-making, meaning-

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<sup>17</sup> Klann, *Crisis Leadership*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Sharfstein, *The Public Health Crisis Survival Guide*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Boin et al., *The Politics of Crisis Management*, 14.

<sup>20</sup> Orobator, *The Pope and the Pandemic*, 10.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 10.



making, and communication.<sup>23</sup> Interpreting the crisis through moral and spiritual perspectives, religious leaders help the public understand the pandemic and the consequent decisions, such as lockdowns or social distancing. Through empathy and solidarity, they provide mental support and morale, reflecting the open and credible communication principles of Sharfstein. According to Orobator, the pandemic also tested the religious communities' flexibility in changing situations. Due to the circumstances, many were compelled to adapt their practices or abandon some of their traditions without clarity of how long the changes would last.<sup>24</sup> In doing so, the pandemic tested both the religious constructs as well as the individual's faith. These adaptations depicted the power of religious leadership in leading the public through crisis, while balancing the changes with traditions, illustrating how papal authority can act as both a force of stability and change in response to public health crises.

Papal authority in crisis is not a new phenomenon, as is depicted in the historical sources of *The Black Death: The Great Mortality* by John Aberth,<sup>25</sup> and a sociological study, *Elements of Sociology of the Black Death* by Camille Akmut.<sup>26</sup> These sources provide insight into the context of the historical pandemic, including the changes faced by the Catholic church and European societies, highlighting class inequalities, the role of clergy in the medieval period, and the newfound medical and scientific thought. Furthermore, Heather Para provides a historical narrative of the position and decisions of Pope Clement VI in her article *Plague, Papacy and Power*, depicting the social context and power of the Catholic institution in medieval times as intertwined in the secular and political decision-making.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the scholarly interpretations of leadership, the thesis employs papal letters to examine how Catholic leaders communicated and responded in the crises. The two primary

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<sup>23</sup> Boin et al., *The Politics of Crisis Management*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Orobator, *The Pope and the Pandemic*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> John Aberth, *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348–1350: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005).

<sup>26</sup> Camille Akmut, "Elements of Sociology of the Black Death (1340–1350s): Inequalities Before Pandemic Death in the Middle Ages – 'Chantryes,' 'Private' Priests, Lower 'Surgeons,' and Other Farces of the Rich," *Open Science Network*, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Heather Para, "Plague, Papacy and Power: The Effect of the Black Plague on the Avignon Papacy," *Saber and Scroll* 5, no. 1 (April 2016): 7–22, <https://saberandscroll.scholasticahq.com/article/28614>.

sources, *Sicut Judeis*<sup>28</sup> by Pope Clement VI and the *Urbi et Orbi* message by Pope Francis,<sup>29</sup> depict how the papal authority addressed societal challenges of crisis through public messaging. *Sicut Judeis* represents a papal intervention defending the marginalized community amid the pandemic and uncertainty. The pope issued a statement against violence towards Jews and their scapegoating on the basis of spearing plague. Presenting insight to Clement VI's attempt to theologically and socially promote stability and social restraint in uncertain times, it depicts an authoritative attempt to maintain order and reinforce moral boundaries among the public. Similarly, in the *Urbi et Orbi* message, Pope Francis addressed his Catholic followers and the global community, emphasizing on the social solidarity, peace, and resilience across different faiths. Emphasizing the Christian values while discussing the shared modern problems, depicting a moment of symbolic leadership focused on those in less fortunate positions. Each of the statements reflects its own historical and cultural setting, emphasizing the moral messaging and crisis communication, which, through a contextual approach, provide significance to the study as they depict continued patterns in the leadership forms.

While the thesis is grounded in leadership theories on crisis management and public health, the study approaches Christian leadership in the pandemic through a contextual analysis, interpreting both historical and contemporary sources within their specific historical and cultural settings. The research methods are more elaborately detailed in the methodology section.

## Research focus and rationale

This thesis contributes to the field of leadership communication in public health crises by introducing a long-term institutional religious perspective, focusing on the Catholic church. It examines how theological framing shapes the crisis communication and symbolic leadership over time.

Existing academic research on the topic of crisis leadership is dominated by case studies of secular responses and the corporate context. Pandemics are often grouped with crises such as

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<sup>28</sup> Clement VI, "Sicut Judeis (Mandate to Protect the Jews)," in *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348–1350: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. and trans. John Aberth (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Francis, "Urbi et Orbi Message of His Holiness Pope Francis, Easter 2020," *The Holy See*, April 12, 2020.

terrorist attacks or natural disasters, overlooking the moral and social dimensions. For example, the book *Who's in charge?* By Laura Kahn.<sup>30</sup> Her book focuses on the coordination of the challenges and their economic impact between political and public health authorities. These cases dismiss the inclusion of religion, despite the institution's influence on values, global reach, and public perception. When religion is included in the research, the existing studies often focus solely on isolated events, lacking historical reach. While they provide in-depth research from single case studies, they miss an evolutionary perspective, how the Christian denomination has changed its views over time, which can provide important background knowledge for reasons behind decision-making in crises. This is visible in *the Christian Nations Project* by Emma Teale.<sup>31</sup> While she provides a thorough depiction of different Christian reactions and perspectives to the Covid-19 pandemic, her research lacks a historical basis for the constructions of decisions and actions.

In contrast, the approach of this thesis provides a historical evolution from the long tradition of Catholicism, highlighting recurring patterns and changes, providing insight into the religious leaders' impact on pandemic leadership, and framing unique modes of crisis communication. Historical perspective in the study of Catholic crisis communication provides a unique depth to understanding the religious impact, as it is one of the oldest continuously operating institutions, with a centuries-long history linked to other political and secular institutions. While the Catholic tradition frames the meaning of moral obligations and collective responsibility from the long-standing theological doctrines and traditions, they shape the way catholic leadership approaches crises. This creates insights into how religious leaders adapt over time, maintaining traditions or creating change.

The study is grounded in the recognition of the Catholic church having a moral and social role during times of crises, such as pandemics. As the spiritual leader of over a billion adherents, Pope maintains power as a communicator and a leadership character who can influence the

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<sup>30</sup> Laura H. Kahn, *Who's in Charge? Leadership during Epidemics, Bioterror, Attacks, and Other Public Health Crises*, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3201/eid1606.100345>.

<sup>31</sup> E. Teale (Curator), "Church in Lockdown," The Christian Nation Project, 2020, <https://thechristiannationproject.net/church-in-lockdown/>.

public during uncertainty.<sup>32</sup> By examining the Popes in different social settings and historical moments, we can better understand the roots of catholic papal responses.

The comparison of two Popes, despite the vastly different social, historical, and economic contexts, is feasible, as it depicts the extensive archival traditions of the catholic church, and the recurring nature of global health crises. From the archival traditions, the case studies depict how the popes bring their own theological background to the current social contexts, impacting their leadership, providing insights into how the religious leaders approach unprecedented situations and social unrest. The comparative approach highlights the shifts in societal values, the evolution of theological emphasis, and reveals changes in the religious leader's perspectives about their own positions and audience engagement. Through this, the study explores the broader question of how religious leaders act as forces of stability or change in response to public health crises.

## Methodology

This thesis employs qualitative, historical, and comparative research methodology to examine how religious leaders, particularly in Catholic tradition, have acted as forces of stability or change in response to public health crises. Depicting case studies of Pope Clement VI during the Black Plague in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and Pope Francis during the contemporary Covid-19 pandemic, the research employs document analysis on both historical and contemporary sources. Combined with content analysis, the methods provide a comparative approach. To conduct qualitative research, the leadership theory introduced by Klann, Sharfstein, and Boin is implemented as a conceptual lens.

Using document analysis as a foundational method for examining primary sources, the thesis draws on the approach of Davie and Wyatt. Suited for both historical and contemporary texts, the documents are viewed as social products created within and for a specific context, reflecting values and intentions within specific moments in time.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the analysis of

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<sup>32</sup> Orobator, *The Pope and the Pandemic*, 10.

<sup>33</sup> Grace Davie and Sally Wyatt, "Document Analysis," in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Steven Engler and Michael Stausberg (London: Routledge, 2021), 245.

the documents is not only for records of events but also for exploring their functions within the original setting and how their meanings may shift over time.<sup>34</sup>

To explore the thematic structures in papal leadership responses to public health crises, content analysis is employed as an interpretive method.<sup>35</sup> This approach provides a systematic description of the sources, aiding in identifying recurring themes, patterns, and expressions in the case studies.<sup>36</sup> This provides insights into the evolution of ideas and values over time, offering both historical and cultural insights to the research problem.<sup>37</sup>

A comparative lens creates connections in the distinct cases of Pope Clement VI during the Black Plague and Pope Francis during the Covid-19 pandemic, while focusing on how the leaderships navigate crises through religious perspectives. The research employs a comparative approach by Stausberg, which focuses on observing similarities and differences.<sup>38</sup> Rather than creating a comprehensive historical narrative, the aim is to analyse how the religious leaders responded in the pandemic context, leading the public and shaping their understanding.

To interpret the papal actions during pandemics, a qualitative research approach based on thematic analysis is employed. By implementing leadership theory, the analysis uses five dimensions of strategic crisis leadership by Boin as a conceptual framework: Sense-making, decision-making, meaning-making, accounting, and learning.<sup>39</sup> The dimensions of the analysis are complemented by the emphasis on communication, clarity of vision and values, and caring introduced by Klann and Sharfstein.<sup>40</sup>

To systematically explore the patterns of messages and communication, thematic analysis is employed to:

- Identify recurring patterns in the actions and statements of the religious leaders.
- Interpret the patterns in the leadership theories.

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<sup>34</sup> Davie and Wyatt, "Document Analysis," 247.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Badzinski, James Woods, and Mark Nelson, "Content Analysis," in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Steven Engler and Michael Stausberg (London: Routledge, 2021), 180.

<sup>36</sup> Badzinski, Woods, and Nelson, "Content Analysis," 181.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Stausberg, "Comparison," in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Steven Engler and Michael Stausberg (London: Routledge, 2021), 16.

<sup>39</sup> Boin et al., *The Politics of Crisis Management*, 15.

<sup>40</sup> Klann, *Crisis Leadership*, 12..

- Assess whether the leaders acted as forces of stability or change in response to public health crises.

While the methods provide a strong analytical framework, the analysis is subject to certain limitations. For historical document analysis, the availability and reliability of the 14th-century documents are limited. The few translations available may impact the accuracy and interpretations of the texts. According to Stausberg, while possible, different contexts of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries may complicate creating depth in comparison.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, content analysis relies heavily on the interpretations and constructions of an interpretive lens.<sup>42</sup> When implementing contemporary leadership theory to a historical source, the leadership theory must be carefully applied.

Despite the limitations, the methodology creates an extensive framework for addressing the research question and meaningful insights.

## Case studies

### The Black Plague and Pope Clement VI

The Black Plague is considered the defining event of the Middle Ages. By the end of 1347, the plague had spread to all of Europe through trading routes.<sup>43</sup> Likely beginning in Central Asia, within two years, the disease killed approximately 50 percent of the European population.<sup>44</sup> In addition to being the first of its kind in Europe for centuries, the Black Plague had a wide impact on society and culture due to its size, timing, and geography.<sup>45</sup> This case study focuses on Pope Clement VI's statements and reactions to the plague. The case is situated in Avignon, France, which at the time was the official residence for the Pope, administrative headquarters for the Catholic church, and therefore the centre of power for Medieval Europe.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Stausberg, "Comparison," 23.

<sup>42</sup> Badzinski, Woods, and Nelson, "Content Analysis," 183.

<sup>43</sup> Aberth, *The Black Death*, Vii.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Frans van Liere, "The Pope and the Plague," *Historical Horizons* (Calvin University Historical Studies Department Blog), March 27, 2020, <https://historicalhorizons.org/2020/03/27/the-pope-and-the-plague/>.

About 40 years before the plague, the papacy moved its headquarters to Avignon, creating rapid population growth, increasing the negative effects of overcrowding and unsanitary conditions.<sup>47</sup> In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic church maintained power among secular institutions.<sup>48</sup> When Pierre Roger became Pope Clement VI, he was favoured for the position by King of France Philip VI and the cardinals.<sup>49</sup> Having a well-deserved reputation as a theologian and as one of the finest orators of his time, he enjoyed the religious duties, preaching to the masses, and making memorable speeches. The cardinals welcomed his urban, gentle, and aristocratic leadership style. Similarly, with a university education, his views on the church jurisdiction made an impression on the king. While his background as a Benedictine monk called for values of poverty, his style of leadership was lavish and connected to secular politics.<sup>50</sup> Christianity was central to the identity of the public and monarchies. Higher offices were bought, and their subordinates were recruited from the offspring of the upper classes.<sup>51</sup> Though not politically impartial, Clement maintained a personal relationship with the leaders of many countries. The papacy had funded the near-bankrupt war efforts of France with large amounts of money.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, the church's decisions were partly made in accordance with secular politics and leaders. As such, Pope Clement and King Philip of France often collaborated on decisions reflecting their political alliance.<sup>53</sup> This was also reflected in the court of Pope Clement, which was known as the most civilized in Europe, filled with nobility and figures such as painters, astronomers, physicians, and doctors.<sup>54</sup> It resembled more a monarchy and a wealthy kingdom rather than a papacy, displaying luxurious living standards among the members, entertaining various forms of art, and a newfound medical and scientific thought. During his papacy, Clement VI heightened papal materialism. Reflecting a broader trend toward secularization and materialism, straying away from the expected ideals of piety. Historian Para describes Avignon to

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<sup>47</sup> Para, "Plague, Papacy and Power," 11.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>49</sup> Guillaume Mollat, *The Popes at Avignon, 1305–1378*, 37. (London and New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1963).

<sup>50</sup> Akmut, *Elements of Sociology of the Black Death*. 3.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Para, "Plague, Papacy and Power," 64.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Mollat, *The Popes at Avignon*, 39.

have “had the air of a hedonistic secular court rather than the celibate capital of Christendom”.<sup>55</sup> For the public, these values were incompatible with Catholic beliefs, casting doubt on the Pope's morals and leadership, marking a significant shift in the perception of the Catholic church.

For seven months, Avignon was hit by the disease, similar to other cities. In seeking reasons for such horridness as a plague, in the medieval worldview and the absence of medical knowledge, the common explanation was “God's will to intervene in human affairs for their sins.”<sup>56</sup> Clement recognised the common view, agreeing with the theological reasoning for the destruction, stating, “when in fact it is the result of an angry God striking...”<sup>57</sup> Many viewed the plague as a punishment for the Catholic Church having strayed away from true Christianity. Among peasants, the wealthy papal court of Avignon and the extravagant living presented the sins and corruption of the papal leadership.<sup>58</sup> However, Clement regarded the disease as a punishment for the whole of humanity's sins, reasoning on the wide reach of the disease “universal pestilence, in accordance with God's hidden judgment...”<sup>59</sup> And an impact on all, regardless of their denomination. Other common explanations for the disease included human or artificial causes, particularly intentional poisoning of the water wells.

To maintain some sense of human control over the uncertainty, minorities were blamed for spreading the plague. This gave grounds to fanatic groups, such as Flagellants, that sought answers to the disease from the fault of humans. Which led to minorities, especially Jews, being targeted in scapegoating.<sup>60</sup> While their values were based on Christianity, Flagellants depicted their beliefs through unorthodox methods: self-punishment, beliefs of the end of the world, and rejecting church authority, which eventually led to the removal of church approval.<sup>61</sup> Their blame on Jews caused Christian mobs to attack the minority communities, executing individuals throughout Europe, with thousands of victims.<sup>62</sup> Clement VI and the King of France were not impressed with their beliefs, religious practice, or the public unrest their statements caused,

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<sup>55</sup> Para, “Plague, Papacy and Power,” 10.

<sup>56</sup> Aberth, *The Black Death*, 5.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>58</sup> Para, “Plague, Papacy and Power,” 12.

<sup>59</sup> Aberth, *The Black Death*, 159.

<sup>60</sup> Para, “Plague, Papacy and Power,” 13.

<sup>61</sup> Aberth, *The Black Death*, 118.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 139.



leading to official condemnation and the disbanding of the group.<sup>63</sup> Encouraged by both theological and social reasons to protect the minority, Clement VI took significant steps and called for the protection of the Jews by issuing a papal bull.<sup>64</sup> In July 1348, he enforced the theological closeness of Christians and Jews stating, “Accordingly, following in the footsteps of our predecessors..., we have taken the Jews under the shield of our protection”<sup>65</sup> Reasoning the basis of protection by highlighting the Christian duty and moral obligation to help, and emphasizing the shared background of Jesus: “our Saviour chose to be born of Jewish stock when he put on mortal flesh for the salvation of the human race.”<sup>66</sup> In the very timely fashion of medieval Europe, he recognized Jews as a group that rejected Christ, but simultaneously acknowledged the Christian truth. Furthermore, he emphasized the logical reasoning, noting “throughout many parts of the world the same plague... has afflicted and afflicts the Jews themselves and many other races who have never lived alongside them,”<sup>67</sup> pointing to the lack of evidence based on universal reach and a similar impact on Jewish communities. And in order to provide insight into other possible reasons behind the persecution, such as Christians gaining better economic positions through the persecutions: “Some of these Christians are chasing after their profit and are blinded by greed in getting rid of the Jews, because they owe great sums of money to them.”<sup>68</sup> Recognizing the danger of the increasing social divide, he condemned the violence, demanding the Christians to stop harming others regardless of their reasons. “they are not to presume to seize, strike, wound, or kill Jews, no matter what the occasion or by what authority”<sup>69</sup> Through such statements Clement VI recognised the increasing divide impacting the political stability, the role of Jews in local economics, and the theological undermining of the papal authority in the individual actions by the Christians. Eventually, his papal bull was not

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<sup>63</sup> van Liere, “The Pope and the Plague.”

<sup>64</sup> Clement VI, “Mandate Concerning the Jews,” in *The Black Death*, trans. Rosemary Horrox (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 221.

<sup>65</sup> Clement VI, *Mandate Concerning the Jews*, 221.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>68</sup> Clement VI, *Sicut Judeis*, 159.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

followed by all, as some cities massacred Jews regardless, as the Jewish quarters filled with refugees and cases of infections increased.<sup>70</sup>

In September 1348, Pope Clement VI published a follow-up to the papal bull, instructing his clergy to take action against anyone persecuting Jews, relying on the legal system to enforce justice. Highlighting the civil order he emphasized leaving the punishment for the legal authority “We order you by apostolic writing... command those subject to you, both clerical and lay, when they are assembled in worship at mass, not to dare to capture, strike, wound or kill any Jews or expel them from their service on these grounds.”<sup>71</sup> Further warning those who would not comply to “lose his title or office, or suffer the ultimate penalty of excommunication”.<sup>72</sup> As such, while he argued for the protection and support of the church for Jews, he also recognized the power of secular legal system in asserting control over punishments. “But if they have ground of complaint against the Jews... these letters in no way remove the power to proceed against them as was their right, but they should prosecute them in proper judicial form for these matters or any other offences before competent Judges.”<sup>73</sup> Combining the theological duty for caring to others and the secular powers of punishment, he emphasized curbing unjust violence through the correct channels, and the authority of the legal channels alongside the church leadership.

Despite the controversial reputation of the Avignon papacy, Clement VI aimed to act as a good leader. While for the most part he remained isolated in the papal chambers, and eventually fled Avignon to a papal retreat.<sup>74</sup> He aimed to monetarily help his subordinates, which led to the depletion of the church's resources.<sup>75</sup> As the Black Plague began, he continued to allocate significant funds, ordering doctors to visit the sick and making sure the poor received all necessities possible. While Clement aimed to act as a community pillar, he faced backlash as some of his subordinates refused to care for their congregations due to the fear of becoming ill. While he could not instruct all of the priests to help, he arranged burials and bought a piece of land for an additional cemetery. As a spiritual leader, he provided a general absolution of all sins

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<sup>70</sup> Aberth, *The Black Death*, 141.

<sup>71</sup> Clement VI, *Mandate Concerning the Jews*, 222.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>74</sup> Para, “Plague, Papacy and Power,” 12.

<sup>75</sup> Mollat, *The Popes at Avignon*, 38.

for victims of the plague who had died without proper confession or last rites, adapting sacramental theology to the level of the crisis when the needs of the individuals could not be met.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, when burials were no longer possible, he consecrated the Rhone river, providing the deceased a blessed death, symbolically creating a sacred space, bending the traditional rules.<sup>77</sup> Simultaneously, he established some more unorthodox methods in hopes of learning ways to stop the disease. Seeking help from the emerging medical and scientific fields, he demanded daily reports on the deaths, assigned doctors to the areas, and hired men to collect and bury the dead. One of the more controversial decisions in the context of the Catholic beliefs, he authorized autopsies as the first instance outside of universities to learn more about the cause of the plague. While it is possible Clement recognised the value in new scientific and medical inventions, it is also likely that, due to the high rates of mortality and uncertainty of the causes, the new controversial ways to research the plague were approved out of necessity.

With the restrictions on public interactions, the closing of the services also impacted the economy of the Catholic church. The main income for the church came through bequests, funds received from the deceased congregates. By donating their wealth to the church, the members could receive salvation, buying their way into heaven.<sup>78</sup> In addition, Clement VI claimed the church had unlimited pardons in exchange for money. In the pandemic, the rich took advantage of the system, indulging and fleeing without worrying about the spiritual consequences. Among the lower classes, the disease led many to abandon their families, leave dead unburied, or throw them into the river, testing the social norms.<sup>79</sup> Para regards, that these societal changes led to the public growing resentful towards the Catholic church for overcharging for services and neglecting the sacraments to the dying. Despite having awareness of the high mortality rate of the priests, as one of the cornerstones and core rituals of the Catholic church, the seriousness of receiving sacraments made it unforgivable to the public. The neglect of last rites was believed to condemn the deceased to “burn in hell for all eternity.”<sup>80</sup> Eventually, the criticism reduced the

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<sup>76</sup> van Liere, “The Pope and the Plague.”

<sup>77</sup> Para, “Plague, Papacy and Power,” 11.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.,14.

<sup>79</sup> van Liere, “The Pope and the Plague.”

<sup>80</sup> Para, “Plague, Papacy and Power,” 16.

papacy from the height of its power to its lowest point in centuries.<sup>81</sup> Not only did the Black Plague cause shifts in the reformation, secularization of the societies and medical field, but it also pushed for technological innovation, agricultural techniques, and the creation of the printing press. Due to labour shortages caused by high rates of mortality, the plague created working opportunities for women, alongside reforms of labor services and laws, improving the lives of the peasants.<sup>82</sup>

As the church received strong criticism on its approach to the Black Plague, Para argues that the disease led to a desire for a more personal relationship with God.<sup>83</sup> The transformation into the privatization of religion would have led individuals to disregard papal authority while maintaining a more personal and autonomous approach to religion. Such a change largely conflicts with some of the core values and traditions of Catholicism, such as sacraments. Meaning that individuals who reportedly changed in their spirituality were willing to change some of their core beliefs and traditions. It is important to note that privatized Christianity is a highly Protestant view, possibly depicting the author's own theological view and background. While declining participation in the Catholic church after the plague may represent dissatisfaction in papal leadership, other reasons must be considered. For example, in both the public and clergy, the high mortality rates have been estimated to be around 50 percent, also impacting the demographic within the cities. However, as a community pillar and support, the church is seen as a selfless support that aids the public in their time of need.<sup>84</sup> When the crisis hit and that support was not received, some individuals likely lost their faith in the institutional church and their ways, but not in their spirituality, wishing for a more individual approach. The impact of the failure of providing support by the church was especially evident through the class difference, with the rich paying their way out while the poor were unable to receive the sacraments or even bury their deceased family members.

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<sup>81</sup> Para, "Plague, Papacy and Power," 7.

<sup>82</sup> Aberth, *The Black Death*, 70.

<sup>83</sup> Para, "Plague, Papacy and Power," 15.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

## Covid-19 and Pope Francis

In 2020, the world changed abruptly as it faced a new crisis when Chinese officials reported cases of strange pneumonia in Wuhan, China. A few months after the first cases, the WHO declared a “Public Health Emergency of International Concern” as the coronavirus had spread across the world. By July 2020, most countries had implemented restrictions on socializing, educational institutions, travel, and commercial activities.<sup>85</sup> This case study focuses on the sayings and actions of Pope Francis during the Covid-19 pandemic. More specifically, his *Urbi et Orbi* message and prayer, which in this specific context was aimed at the hope of social cohesion globally, and togetherness in the face of the crisis. For religious institutions, these restrictions meant closing their doors, denying the adherents the possibility of physical participation in worship. This eventually led to new and different ways of worship and the implementation of technology in spiritual practices.<sup>86</sup> The fear and uncertainty of Covid-19 provoked chaos, further worsened by fake theories, news, and remedies, as well as fears of economic consequences and the lack of a clear healthcare strategy.<sup>87</sup> The fear and lack of clear guidelines led to crude blame for others as Covid-19 got more serious and the number of deaths rose.<sup>88</sup> One of the myths circulated in the public was that the pandemic worked as a social equalizer, with every individual, regardless of their wealth, gender, race, or position, experiencing the same way. Rather, the pandemic strongly impacted the poorer and more vulnerable populations with preexisting conditions.

The standard public health advice mandated isolation, quarantine, and physical and social distancing as non-negotiable measures of mitigation, prevention, and containment.<sup>89</sup> With the modern abilities of communication, Pope Francis was able to join people in a new way safely, still in spiritual and affective depth. Under such circumstances of widespread distress, fear, and anxiety, he understood that mere words were not enough; rather, gestures of faith, hope, and love would reach the public.<sup>90</sup> This was also evident in his Easter *Urbi et Orbi* message amid

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<sup>85</sup> Orobator, *The Pope and the Pandemic*, 11.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

strict lockdowns in 2020. Broadcasting from an empty St. Peter's Square, the pope addressed the world through cameras, acknowledging the deep suffering and shared uncertainty. He spoke directly to the isolation globally, referring to the Christian teachings "Christ, who has already defeated death and opened for us the way to eternal salvation, dispel the darkness of our suffering humanity and lead us into the light of his glorious day".<sup>91</sup> Extending spiritual reassurance and compassion, as he further turned to those who had directly been affected by the pandemic, "May Jesus... grant strength to all who work diligently to guarantee the essential services necessary for civil society, and to the law enforcement and military personnel who in many countries, have helped ease people's difficulties and sufferings."<sup>92</sup> Recognising the trauma and sacrifice of those limited in final farewells, and those who give up their safety to help others. With the uncertainty and despair, faith seemed to be a source of personal and collective comfort and reassurance, with Francis affirming the role of the church as consolation and guidance.

Leading a global community with a set of beliefs, rituals, and actions that embody their faith, Pope Francis rose to be one of the most followed leaders during the pandemic. Living in the Vatican with approximately a thousand citizens, he was not responsible for making consequential decisions such as running health services or imposing lockdowns. Rather, he exercised authority over the Catholic global community, with his influence intersecting with political and economic domains.<sup>93</sup> In the pandemic context, his messages were tailored to the world, also reaching the secular public, impacting decision-making and actions globally.<sup>94</sup> As he focused on Christian values and Catholic principles, he brought forward themes of solidarity, dialogue, and the common good. Influenced by his Jesuit background and Latin American roots, Pope Francis brought forward a pastoral, humble, and people-centered approach.<sup>95</sup> Originally, begun in the 1700s, Jesuits were characterised as flexible to accommodate local circumstances, with a commitment to the gospel and affirmation of positive characteristics of the culture they

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<sup>91</sup> Francis, *Urbi et Orbi Message*, 3.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>93</sup> Orobator, *The Pope and the Pandemic*, 9.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>95</sup> Hang T.H. Nguyen, "Pope Francis' Leadership in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Obsculta* 15, no. 1 (April 28, 2022): Article 20, College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, 20.  
<https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol15/iss1/20>.

were implemented in.<sup>96</sup> They were the first group to pay attention to global connectivity and consciousness. In the wake of world wars and decolonization, in the 1960s, Jesuits renewed their commitment to global relations, promoting the universal common good as central to their faith.<sup>97</sup> With themes as human rights, social justice, and interreligious dialogue, Banchoff argues that often their interfaith approach was not theological, but rather philosophical.<sup>98</sup> As such, the Jesuits implemented themselves in political and civic affairs, aiming to aid the poor and oppressed through religious faith. In the 1970s, Jesuits further strengthened their connection to liberation theology, setting integral liberation as the priority of their preaching.<sup>99</sup> These values are closely connected to the dialogue of Pope Francis, who, as an advocate for the poor and a church that is close to humans, provided a newfound closeness and communication with the public that created connections beyond the traditional church boundaries.

While the physical worship was shut down, the Catholic church remained active in spreading its message through other means. However, this created challenges in some of the rituals and traditions that required physical closeness. The interruption of the embodied practices, such as sacraments, led to some parishes finding creative ways to minimize human contact, such as moving masses outdoors, hearing confessions through car windows, or wearing masks and face shields.<sup>100</sup> The ministries also began to implement online tools, and individuals began to find more unorthodox methods to practise their communion and connection. Catholic decisions regarding the pandemic were not always unilateral, with different visions on the seriousness of the restrictions. Undeniably, the church community did not adapt easily to the change.<sup>101</sup> Local catholic churches globally had differing views of the threat of Covid-19 and the necessity of lockdowns. Many Australian dioceses refused to close down for individual reception

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<sup>96</sup> Thomas F. Banchoff and José Casanova, eds., *The Jesuits and Globalization: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Challenges* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 1. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/11212793>.

<sup>97</sup> Banchoff, Thomas F., and José Casanova, eds. *The Jesuits and Globalization*, 2.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>100</sup> "COVID Emergency Phase Ends for Catholic Church," *Angelus News*, May 11, 2023, <https://angelusnews.com/news/nation/covid-emergency-phase-ends-catholic-church/>.

<sup>101</sup> Orobator, *The Pope and the Pandemic*, 50.

of sacraments outside of Mass.<sup>102</sup> While they followed the guidelines of distancing, hand hygiene, and masks, they refused to comply with complete lockdowns. Many of the churches that went against the official guidelines of shutting down their services based their decision on the government falsely depicting the religious rituals as “nonessential”.<sup>103</sup> As they were categorised together with the same higher-risk category as pubs, cinemas, hairdressers, and beauty salons, the restrictions disregarded the importance of physical gathering on mental well-being. In the United Kingdom, bishops successfully appealed to be exempt from lockdown during the second wave of restrictions.<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, at the beginning of the pandemic, the Diocese of Rome decreed that all the churches in Rome close due to the virus. Pope Francis disagreed with the unprecedented decision, stating that “drastic measures are not always good.”<sup>105</sup> The statement by Francis led some of the churches to stay open while continuing to serve meals for the poor and homeless. The Pope had to make difficult decisions weighing the spiritual well-being of his community and the proper actions to protect the priorities of public health. Eventually, the Vatican cancelled or postponed all gatherings, shutting the doors of the churches under papal leadership.<sup>106</sup> While he was sceptical about drastic measures, he continuously affirmed the value of science and medicine, encouraging vaccinations and listening to the scientific experts. Rather than viewing religion and science as opposed, Pope Francis promoted a worldview in which the two coexist.<sup>107</sup> According to Francis, “both science and faith, for a believer, have the same matrix in the absolute Truth of God”.<sup>108</sup> In other words, both of them come from the same source. As such, religion provides meaning and morality, while science provides ways to protect life and physical health. Strongly in the philosophical manner of

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<sup>102</sup> Martyr, "Australian Catholics' Lived Experiences,". Philippa Martyr, "Australian Catholics' Lived Experiences of COVID-19 Church Closures," *Journal of Religion and Health* 62, no. 4 (2023): 2881–2898, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-023-01823-6>.

<sup>103</sup> "Brooklyn Diocese Gets Court Date." "Brooklyn Diocese Gets Court Date for Lawsuit over NY Coronavirus Restrictions," *Catholic News Agency*, October 15, 2020, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/46213/brooklyn-diocese-gets-court-date-for-lawsuit-over-ny-coronavirus-restrictions>.

<sup>104</sup> "Brooklyn Diocese Gets Court Date."

<sup>105</sup> Orobator, *The Pope and the Pandemic*, 51.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>107</sup> Francesca Merlo, "Pope to Scientists: Harmonise Faith and Science in the Pursuit for Truth," *Vatican News*, June 20, 2024, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-06/pope-francis-address-scientists-black-holes-specula.html>

<sup>108</sup> Merlo, "Pope to Scientists."



the Jesuits, he emphasized the unity of humanity regardless of religious or personal differences, focusing on the actions and consequences, rather than the reasons why people participate in good deeds. Stating, “This is not a time for indifference, because the whole world is suffering and needs to be united in facing the pandemic.”<sup>109</sup> Urging the public to follow the shared guidelines and think of keeping each other safe, regardless of whether they decide to act based on moral or practical reasons. Simultaneously, Francis recognised the difficulty of lockdown on the public, especially those in more vulnerable positions. “Grant comfort and hope to those still suffering, especially the elderly and those who are alone. And help from those who are especially vulnerable, such as persons who work in nursing homes, or live in barracks and prisons.”<sup>110</sup> Eventually strongly implemented technology and alternative methods to reach his followers.

As he reached out to people using telephones, media, and television, his speeches and communications were live-streamed, reaching millions of listeners, viewers, and followers globally.<sup>111</sup> Reaching out to locations with high rates of infections and fatalities, Pope Francis adopted a personal perspective to his communication. He brought leaders and individuals together. For example, by inviting leaders of Christian churches and communities of various confessions and traditions globally to join in a unanimous recitation of the Lord’s Prayer and to implore God’s mercy for humanity afflicted by the pandemic. The Christian nominations, in turn, encouraged their communities to participate from a distance. At the encouragement of Pope Francis, these communities united their voices around a common goal. The interfaith approach of Pope Francis, established in dialogue and mutual respect, emphasized the collective responsibility and solidarity, core values of his Covid-19 communication.

Leaning on the Jesuit theology in his leadership, with his ideas closely connected to the marginalized communities, Pope Francis recognised human suffering and aimed for social justice, particularly for those in disadvantaged positions. “Let us ensure that they do not lack basic necessities (all the more difficult to find now that many businesses are closed), such as

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<sup>109</sup> Francis, *Urbi et Orbi Message*, 2.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Orobator, *The Pope and the Pandemic*, 36.

medicine and especially the possibility of adequate health care.”<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, in hopes of impacting the politics, at the key moments of the pandemic, he reminded the world leaders and the public of shared humanity and responsibility across geographical, economic, political, and social boundaries, including himself in various political and secular events.<sup>113</sup> Attempting to promote social justice, peace, and environmental protection.<sup>114</sup> He joined the UN Security Council to “call for an immediate cessation of armed hostilities in all parts of the world to create humanitarian corridors to deliver aid to people in coronavirus-hit conflict zones.”<sup>115</sup> Arguing for the protection and value of humanity regardless of the ongoing conflicts, “provide the means and resources needed to enable everyone to lead a dignified life and, when circumstances allow, to assist them in resuming their normal daily activities.”<sup>116</sup> Asking countries to forgive debts or relax international sanctions in support of citizens in the struggling areas.<sup>117</sup> He also recognised the tensions among countries, urging for discussions of peace: “May this be the time when Israelis and Palestinians resume dialogue in order to find a stable and lasting solution that will allow both to live in peace.”<sup>118</sup> Through his outreach, Pope Francis provided spiritual support and a humanistic focus on justice, hope, and solidarity during the crisis. In his response to the pandemic, he took on an active, compassionate role, reaching out to individuals and institutions to work together.

## Comparison

This chapter examines the leadership of Pope Clement VI in the Black Plague and Pope Francis in Covid-19, analysing whether the actions of the leaders led to continuity or transformation, highlighting their similarities and differences. While separated by centuries, both popes assumed leadership positions providing aid to the public, partaking in political discussions, and negotiating new scientific and social solutions. The thematic analysis focuses on identifying

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<sup>112</sup> Francis, *Urbi et Orbi Message*, 2.

<sup>113</sup> Orobator, *The Pope and the Pandemic*, 47.

<sup>114</sup> Nguyen, “Pope Francis' Leadership,” 20.

<sup>115</sup> Orobator, *The Pope and the Pandemic*, 45.

<sup>116</sup> Francis, *Urbi et Orbi Message*, 2.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 3.

patterns in the statements and actions of both Popes, interpreting these patterns through a leadership lens, and assessing whether they led to change or the preservation of traditions. In both cases, the crisis context aligns with Sharfstein's description of crisis: they are moments when difficult decisions are made, and important changes take place.<sup>119</sup> Framing the pandemic as a transformative moment in decision-making. To examine the leadership dynamics, the five critical tasks of Boin's strategic leadership are implemented: sense-making, decision-making and coordination, meaning-making, accounting, and learning.<sup>120</sup> In providing structure for the comparison, the tasks frame the popes as administrators, moral, and symbolic figures. Crucial to this are the three key elements described by Klann: communication, clarity of vision and values, and caring.<sup>121</sup> As well as Sharfstein's effective communication, the core values of transparency and being active are emphasized.<sup>122</sup>

Understanding the distinct historical and social context of the pandemics is essential to the comparison of papal responses. The Black Plague was an unseen event that, with limited medical knowledge and communication, grew rampant within weeks.<sup>123</sup> In contrast, with rapid technology and information flow, Covid-19 was already warned about after the first cases in China.<sup>124</sup> While there were no immediate solutions to Covid-19, societies quickly imposed restrictions to curb some of the impact.<sup>125</sup> From a leadership perspective, in the contemporary pandemic, the leaders immediately recognised the threat and began to make sense of the disease. They began to adapt the societies accordingly and maintained open communication with the public. Pope Francis recognised the societal weight of uncertainty and provided insights into the solutions, fears, and chaos in the world. In his communication, Pope Clement lacked the tools that were implemented in the Covid-19. Without modern technology, communication was much slower, allowing the Plague to grow more rampant before the public began to understand the seriousness. Furthermore, he employed an authoritative approach to leadership communication, which, in the case of protecting the Jews, turned out to be less effective. In the

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<sup>119</sup> Sharfstein, *The Public Health Crisis Survival Guide*, 4.

<sup>120</sup> Boin et al., *The Politics of Crisis Management*, 15.

<sup>121</sup> Klann, *Crisis Leadership*, 12.

<sup>122</sup> Sharfstein, *The Public Health Crisis Survival Guide*, 101.

<sup>123</sup> Aberth, *The Black Death*, 2.

<sup>124</sup> Orobator, *The Pope and the Pandemic*, 11.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

Covid-19 pandemic, the blame centered on the secular leadership and lack of an action plan, instead of religious minorities. The problems of spreading blame were more severe in unclear and slower communication, in which false information had time to grow, or moral values were not emphasized in the decision-making.

Examining the leadership styles of the popes depicts how they navigated their responsibilities, balancing authority, empathy, and public visibility within their context and roles. Clement VI adopted a gentle yet authoritative leadership style, working closely with the king of France and secular politics.<sup>126</sup> He based his authority on the higher power and the secular leaders, ordering people through the apostolic writing in both religious and legal discussions. While Pope Francis also maintained a humble leadership style guided by his Jesuit teachings, he spoke directly of the Christian teachings in a more people-centered and philosophical manner. Rather than ordering people, he guided them to recognise collective responsibility.<sup>127</sup> He also participated in secular and political conversations, asked for help, and urged open discussions, imploring humanity to overcome the coronavirus pandemic by the strength of religious power.<sup>128</sup> Both employed a coordinated leadership style, while Clement ruled by authority through theology and ordered the public for action, Francis focused more on persuasion and cooperation on the individual's good nature and hope, reflecting a participatory or symbolic leadership model. Among the political relationships, the leaders must account for their actions to maintain credibility and public trust.

The public's reactions to the papal actions and messages provided insights into the church's credibility, oral authority, and the societal impact during uncertainty. In the Black Plague, the authoritative and detached character of Pope Clement VI was seen as incompatible with Christian values.<sup>129</sup> While the class system separated him from connecting with the public, it also undermined his character as a leader. The public felt wronged as the church overcharged for its services and neglected the sacraments.<sup>130</sup> Which eventually reduced the papacy's power

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<sup>126</sup> Para, "Plague, Papacy and Power,"

<sup>127</sup> Nguyen, "Pope Francis' Leadership," 20.

<sup>128</sup> Orobator, *The Pope and the Pandemic*, 44.

<sup>129</sup> Para, "Plague, Papacy and Power," 12.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 16.

to its lowest in centuries.<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, wealth differences and materialism were visible in each, as the rich isolated themselves while the poorer and more vulnerable struggled to meet necessities. The social divide, whether from blaming others, differences in resources, or the inventions implemented in the decision-making, highlighted the stronger need for credible and authentic communication and leadership. In Covid-19, Pope focused a lot of his efforts towards those in poorer positions, such as the ones fighting the pandemic on the front lines.<sup>132</sup> He openly judged leaders for their uncaring actions and called for the public to participate and be safe, including different faiths. With the accountability to follow the pandemic guidelines, Pope Francis made changes and unique decisions to lead from a distance with inclusive leadership.

The pandemics disturbed the traditional church practices and sacraments, prompting new ways of participation that reflected the rigidity and flexibility of the Catholic church under pressure. In both cases, religious institutions were forced to close their doors and socially distance. In medieval Europe, this led to social isolation and abandonment of families, while in Covid-19, it led to new technological implementations in religious practices, emphasizing the human connections above physical rituals. Clement VI began to offer general absolutions from a distance, and eventually consecrated the Rhone river as the graveyards were too full for bodies.<sup>133</sup> Addressing the needs of the dying from a distance, he monetarily aided his subordinates to conduct their duties in helping the public. While the help by Clementine was mainly monetary, Pope Francis similarly maintained isolation, and to a large part reached out to people, creating symbolic connections, raising awareness, and participating in conversations.

He adapted technology in global communication for a personal approach to individuals.<sup>134</sup> As the closing of the physical locations was implemented in both pandemics, people found it easier to adapt to the new ways of worship in the Covid-19 pandemic. Partly due to the technological inventions in remaining in contact, but also due to the proactive and positive approach by Pope Francis in implementing these tools in communication. While

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<sup>131</sup> Para, "Plague, Papacy and Power," 7.

<sup>132</sup> Francis, *Urbi et Orbi Message*, 2.

<sup>133</sup> Para, "Plague, Papacy and Power," 11.

<sup>134</sup> Orobator, *The Pope and the Pandemic*, 36.

Clement took actions for survival, Pope Francis pursued a spiritual rather than institutional approach with clarity of vision.

Theological interpretations and their framing depict how the pandemics were understood and how meaning was made in their context. In the Black Plague, the dominant narrative was theological, with the disease as God's punishment for sins.<sup>135</sup> However, Clementine also recognised the value of scientific and medical innovations, such as doctors and autopsies.<sup>136</sup> The medical field was not developed well enough to explain phenomena such as pandemics, contributing to the commonality of explanations based on sins, magic, and astrology. This tension reveals an attempt to make sense of uncertainty and unforeseen situations through religion, which also offered moral reasons for suffering. In turn, Pope Francis led the Catholic church through a pandemic in a context that recognised science and spirituality as coexisting qualities, where the reason for the pandemic was largely explained by scientific means. While seeking explanations for the disease, Pope Francis did not portray Covid-19 as a divine wrath, but rather employed theology as a support system for mental and spiritual well-being.<sup>137</sup> He framed the pandemic around communal responsibility, ecological care, and interreligious respect. Although lacking modern knowledge, Pope Clement aimed to curb the impact of the pandemic. By taking steps to implement unforeseen scientific and medical solutions, he stretched the traditional morals and limits of the Catholic church. For example, general absolution, skipping sacraments, and consecrating the Rhone river.<sup>138</sup> Moves that were deemed mandatory but attempted to maintain the Christian values. Allowing some of the priests to flee, as he did himself, acknowledged the limitations of the Catholic church and its power in the pandemic.<sup>139</sup>

Economically, Pope Clement VI also supported the purchasing of pardons, which served the higher classes in atoning for their sins, while the lower classes saw increasing social inequality and religious hypocrisy.<sup>140</sup> Para argues the Black Plague led to a desire for a more

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<sup>135</sup> Aberth, *The Black Death*, 5.

<sup>136</sup> Para, "Plague, Papacy and Power," 11.

<sup>137</sup> "COVID Lockdown of Churches Was 'Outrageous', Admits Former Government Minister." *Catholic Herald*. May 17, 2023. <https://thecatholicherald.com/covid-lockdown-of-churches-was-outrageous-admits-former-government-minister/>

<sup>138</sup> Para, "Plague, Papacy and Power," 11.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>140</sup> van Liere, "The Pope and the Plague."

personal relationship with God, and consequently privatization of religion, with individuals disregarding the papal authority.<sup>141</sup> The view emphasizes individual spirituality instead of institutional religiosity, more in line with protestant ideals rather than catholic beliefs. While individuals' attendance may have changed after the Black Plague, it is uncertain whether the reason for the change was the disregard for papal authority or other reasons, such as the high mortality. In contrast, on the Covid-19 pandemic, Pope Francis was very open to new ways of spirituality and religiosity from a distance, taking the new technological tools into his use. He employed the newfound isolation in his messaging symbolically, such as standing alone on the empty St. Peter's Square. Focusing on the human closeness, individual ways of spirituality, and mental well-being, his Jesuit roots were very visible, as he preached for the universal common good and the care of those in more unfortunate situations. In his statements for political and civic affairs, he empowered the Christian faith in spreading awareness of those in additional danger.<sup>142</sup> While traditions such as sacraments were important, he recognised the difficulty in them, affirmed the value of science and medicine, encouraging vaccinations and listening to the scientific experts.

## Conclusion

Researching papal responses to the Black Plague and Covid-19 pandemics, the thesis examined papal leadership in major public health crises, with a central aim to analyse whether the leaders acted as forces of stability or change in response to public health crises. Through comparative case studies, the analysis identified recurring patterns in the statements and actions of the Catholic leaders and interpreted the patterns and changes through the lens of leadership theories.

Combining key leadership theories, the thesis builds on a qualitative, comparative approach to two different case studies. Building a framework of leadership and communication, the thesis provides an evolutionary perspective from the historical pandemic to the contemporary context in global public health emergencies. Emphasizing the core elements of

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<sup>141</sup> Para, "Plague, Papacy and Power," 15.

<sup>142</sup> Banchoff, Thomas F., and José Casanova, eds. *The Jesuits and Globalization*, 19.

the crises, effective responses, communication, clarity of vision and values, and caring are highlighted.<sup>143</sup> Viewing the crises as opportunities for critique of the status quo, proposals for policy reform, and lasting institutional changes, it highlights the role of religious leaders in the pandemic context and their influence. The documents are viewed as social products created within and for a specific context, reflecting values and intentions within specific moments in time, carrying meaning and expressing thoughts.<sup>144</sup>

The findings suggest that the pandemics disturb the norms and traditions in societies, causing uncertainty and chaos, which requires effective leadership responses that can influence, provide direction, and mobilize collective responses in crises, and simultaneously promote mental, moral, and spiritual well-being. The changes occur without clarity on the severity and permanence of the changes. In a religious context, this unknown tests both the institutional religious constructs as well as the individual's faith. The comparison between case studies depicts that both popes took on similar roles, providing moral, spiritual, and symbolic guidance, engaging in sense-making, meaning-making, and political matters, reflecting the norms and tools of their eras. For Clement, the style of leadership was authoritative demand with papal letters, whereas for Pope Francis, the style was constructed from inclusive and symbolic leadership through technological tools. The findings suggest that the Popes were limited by the knowledge and norms of their times, while they both aimed to preserve catholic traditions and rituals, they both faced necessary changes with adaptive innovation. One of the largest differences the Catholic church faced in the Black Plague was the use of science and medicine. While it was not well developed, Clement saw the value of scientific inquiries and prevention methods, being one of the first institutions in the world to employ them. Similarly, while there were strong debates about the scientific solutions, such as vaccines or lockdowns, in the Covid-19 pandemic, Pope Francis regarded them as essential for the physical well-being, with religion as a support for the mental well-being. Another change both Popes faced was the inability to physically preach to their congregants. Finding solutions for providing sacrament to those most in need took on innovations and alternative ways. While Pope Francis could conduct his sermons and liturgical

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<sup>143</sup> Klann, *Crisis Leadership*, 12.

<sup>144</sup> Davie and Wyatt, "Document Analysis," 245.



sacraments through technological tools such as television or telephones, for Pope Clement VI, this was impossible.

Understanding how the leaders respond to crises and what the consequences are provides insights into how moral and symbolic leadership shapes the public responses and societal cohesion. The knowledge gained from the research has practical implications for future pandemics and public health communications. By understanding how religious leaders, such as the Pope, shape public responses and the impact of their influence, public health officials can more effectively collaborate with religious communities. The ability to engage with different communities and understand each other increases the likelihood of fostering social inclusion during crises, rather than exacerbating social tensions, and minimizing the harm that uncertain situations cause. In the case studies, each pope understood their role in the crises differently. Pope Clement was strongly embedded in the politics and hoped to stop public unrest through authoritative messages, while encouraging the scientists to find solutions. Pope Francis, on the other hand, aimed to provide hope and unity through symbolic and emotional messages, while providing insights into the conflicts happening globally and asking for trust and responsibility from the secular leaders.

Certain limitations must be acknowledged. The availability of historical documents is limited. With the few available translations, the reliability also comes into question, as it may impact the accuracy and interpretation of the original texts. Furthermore, creating a comparison between two vastly different contexts, such as medieval and contemporary, may make it difficult to create depth for the analysis.<sup>145</sup> Thirdly, applying modern leadership theories to a historical case study is highly interpretive, with a risk of implementing modern assumptions into the historical reality. Despite the limitations, the methodology provided an extensive framework for addressing the research question and meaningful insights.

Future research can expand on the religious leaders within the political context, depicting how their political views impacted the decision-making of the secular leaders. It could also implement a broader range of religious leaders, denominations, or geographic locations. With the large impact of religious leadership, spirituality remains one of the main factors in an

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<sup>145</sup> Stausberg, "Comparison," 23.

individual's decision-making and responses to crises, and should be considered in leadership strategies and effective communication.

The crises create grounds for change and open doors for renegotiating traditions, institutions, and social norms. With the most important aspect from the pandemic is for the leaders to learn and enhance their communication for future crises.

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