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**Keywords:** Diplomacy, Postcolonial Accountability, Rhetorical Analysis, Pope Leo XIV, Unity Palace

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## Prophetic diplomacy and postcolonial accountability: A Rhetorical analysis of Pope Leo XIV's Address at Unity Palace, Yaoundé, Cameroon, April 15, 2026



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### Abstract

On April 15, 2026, Pope Leo XIV delivered a landmark address at Unity Palace, the official residence of President Paul Biya in Yaoundé, Cameroon, during the second leg of his eleven-day Apostolic journey to Africa. Addressing heads of state, military generals, civil society leaders, and diplomats, the Pope's speech stood out for its direct engagement with corruption, political authority, human rights, and national unity. Drawing on Augustinian theology, postcolonial ethics, and Catholic social teaching, Leo XIV's address exemplifies what scholars may term 'prophetic diplomacy': pontifical speech that blends pastoral care with candid political critique. This article contends that the Pope strategically applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) using four primary rhetorical strategies and five central thematic clusters to simultaneously urge spiritual reflection, demand postcolonial accountability, and affirm solidarity with Cameroon's marginalized communities. The article situates these findings within the wider tradition of papal diplomacy in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Keywords:** *Diplomacy, Postcolonial Accountability, Rhetorical Analysis, Pope Leo XIV, Unity Palace*

### Introduction

The apostolic visit of a reigning pontiff to a nation-state is never merely ceremonial. It is, at once, a pastoral gesture, a diplomatic event, and a rhetorical occasion of the highest symbolic register. When Pope Leo XIV, the first American-born pope in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, arrived at Yaoundé-Nsimalen International Airport on April 15, 2026, he was received with a 21-gun salute, a guard of honour, and the jubilant welcome of hundreds of thousands of Cameroonians lining the streets, many wearing colourful dresses bearing the Pope's image, singing and dancing as his motorcade passed (American Magazine, 2026; Washington Times, 2026). It was, by all accounts, a moment of extraordinary popular enthusiasm—the first papal visit to Cameroon since Pope Benedict XVI's journey in 2009. Yet the formal centrepiece of the day was not the roadside spectacle but the address Leo XIV delivered inside Unity Palace before an audience of political and diplomatic elites. That speech—delivered in French, in the presence of President Paul Biya, who has been in power since 1982 has been widely described as among the most forthright and challenging addresses ever given by a pontiff to a sitting African head of state (Al Jazeera, 2026; NPR, 2026). This article examines the rhetorical strategies, theological grounding, thematic architecture, and political implications of that address. It is worth noting at the outset that Leo XIV's choice to travel to Africa as part of only his third apostolic journey signals a deliberate prioritisation of the Global South. The continent is home to the fastest-growing Catholic population in the world, and the church's moral authority there carries significant social and political weight. By stopping in Cameroon—a country simultaneously burdened by civil conflict, authoritarian governance, and a youthful population—the Pope signalled that his pontificate



would not avert its gaze from political realities. The Cameroon leg of the journey, with Unity Palace as its focal point, made good on that signal.

## Theoretical Framework

The article is grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a theoretical paradigm associated primarily with the work of Norman Fairclough, Teun A. van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak. CDA proceeds from the foundational premise that language is never ideologically neutral: discourse does not merely describe social reality but actively constructs, reproduces, and sometimes challenges it (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993). For CDA scholars, the analysis of text is always also the analysis of power—who is speaking, to whom, in what institutional context, and with what social consequences. Three theoretical strands within CDA are particularly relevant to this analysis. First, Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, which distinguishes between the text itself, the discursive practices surrounding its production and consumption, and the broader social practices within which it is embedded, provides the structural scaffolding for the analysis conducted here (Fairclough, 1992). Applied to the Unity Palace address, this model directs our attention not only to what the Pope said but also to the institutional conditions that made it possible (a papal visit, a state audience, international press coverage) and to the social structures of inequality and political power that the speech sought to address. Second, van Dijk’s socio-cognitive approach to CDA foregrounds the role of ideology in shaping discourse. He argues that elite discourse, such as speeches by heads of state, religious leaders, and other figures of authority, plays a constitutive role in reproducing or contesting dominant social ideologies (van Dijk, 1993). Pope Leo XIV’s address is a clear instance of elite discourse: it deploys the moral authority of the papacy to contest the ideologies of self-serving governance, impunity, and the silencing of civil society that have structured Cameroonian political life for decades. Complementing CDA, the paper also draws on the concept of ‘prophetic diplomacy’ as a theoretical-rhetorical category. Building on the work of scholars such as Scott Appleby (2000) in the field of religious peacebuilding, prophetic diplomacy refers to a mode of religiously grounded public speech in which a moral authority figure speaks truth to power in a context of political injustice, combining critique with care and challenge with an offer of solidarity. This concept, as argued throughout this study, accurately captures the rhetorical posture of Leo XIV at Unity Palace.

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## Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design, employing Critical Discourse Analysis as its primary analytical method. The data corpus comprises the Unity Palace address as reported and excerpted across seven major news sources published on or around April 15, 2026, including Vatican News, America Magazine, AL Jazeera, NPR, the Washington Times, EWTN News, and Exaudi. In the absence of a single officially published verbatim transcript at the time of writing, the speech text has been reconstructed from corroborating excerpts across these sources, a procedure consistent with established practices in media discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The analytical procedure followed three sequential stages. In the first stage, a thematic coding exercise was conducted, in which key passages of the speech were assigned to emergent thematic categories: governance and authority, corruption and rule of law, security and human rights, civil society and inclusion, and interreligious solidarity. These categories were derived inductively from close reading of the data, following the grounded theory principle of allowing themes to emerge from the text rather than imposing them a priori (Charmaz, 2006). In the second stage, a rhetorical strategies analysis was performed, drawing on classical and contemporary rhetorical theory. Each major passage was examined for its deployment of ethos (appeals to emotion and moral feeling), as well as more specific strategies such as metaphor, inclusive pronoun use, and dual-audience address. In the third stage, the findings from the thematic and rhetorical analyses were contextualised against the sociopolitical background of Cameroon in 2026, drawing on secondary sources including think-tank reports, journalistic accounts of the Anglophone crisis, and scholarship on papal diplomacy in Africa. This triangulation of primary textual analysis with contextual secondary sources strengthens the validity of the interpretive claims advanced in the results section. Limitations of the study should be acknowledged. The reliance on media-reported excerpts rather than a complete official transcript introduces the possibility of selective

quotation by news organisations. Additionally, the analysis is synchronic rather than longitudinal: it captures the speech's immediate meaning and reception without being able to assess its long-term political effects, which remain to be seen.

### **Sociopolitical context: Cameroon in 2026**

To understand the significance of Leo XIV's words at Unity Palace, one must first appreciate the fraught political and social landscape of Cameroon in 2026. A nation of approximately thirty million people, Cameroon is home to more than two hundred ethnic groups and an even greater number of linguistic communities (Vatican News, 2026). Since 2017, the country has been engulfed in what the International Crisis Group has described as a brutal separatist conflict in its Anglophone northwest and southwest regions, in which English-speaking groups have sought independence from the French-speaking majority. The conflict has, to date, claimed more than six thousand lives and displaced over six hundred thousand people (NPR, 2026). The political situation has been further complicated by President Biya's re-election in October 2025, his eighth presidential term, in a poll widely contested by opposition figures, including his rival Issa Tchiroma Bakary, who called on Cameroonians to reject the official results (NPR, 2026). Cameroon also hosts a significant influx of refugees from the Central African Republic, whose vulnerability has been exacerbated by cuts to foreign aid by the U.S.A and other donor nations (America Magazine, 2026). According to reports cited by the Jesuit scholar Ludovic Lado prior to the visit, nearly two thousand political prisoners are currently held in the country (America Magazine, 2026). It was into this context, of civil war, political contestation, and systemic governance failures, that Pope Leo XIV arrived bearing what he himself described as a message of peace, justice, and moral accountability.

### **Results**

The CDA of Pope Leo XIV's Unity Palace address yields findings across two complementary dimensions: thematic content and rhetorical strategy. Together, these dimensions reveal a speech carefully crafted to fulfil multiple simultaneous functions-pastoral, diplomatic, prophetic, and political.

### **Thematic Results**

The thematic coding exercise identified five dominant clusters in the speech: (1) the theology of servant leadership and the common good; (2) corruption as a structural and moral evil requiring systemic dismantling; (3) the conditional legitimacy of state security operations; (4) civil society, women, and youth as agents of national renewal; and (5) interreligious solidarity as a foundation for national cohesion. These five clusters are not isolated but form an interconnected normative framework: together, they articulate a vision of the just state grounded in service, transparency, inclusion, and respect for human dignity. Notably, the first and second clusters-servant leadership and anti-corruption-occupied the most substantial portion of the speech and were expressed in the most direct and unambiguous language. This weighting reflects both the Vatican's pre-announced thematic priorities for the visit and the Pope's own scholarly formation in Augustinian political theology. The fifth cluster-interreligious solidarity-was less prominent in the Unity Palace address than in Leo XIV's earlier addresses in Algeria, but its presence in the closing benediction signals that it functions as a consistent background value throughout the entire apostolic journey.

### **Rhetorical Results**

The rhetorical strategy analysis identified four principal strategies deployed across the address: the prophetic register, theological grounding as diplomatic legitimation, inclusive first-person plural language, and dual-audience construction. These strategies work in concert to produce a speech that is simultaneously confrontational and collegial, challenging and affirming, globally authoritative and locally sensitive. Of particular analytical significance is the dual-audience construction identified in Section 6.4 below. The analysis reveals that virtually every major claim in the speech is formulated to be receivable by both its elite, immediate audience and its broader popular audience, but with different primary effects: accountability demands for those in power and solidarity affirmations for those subject to that power. This

structural feature distinguishes the address from conventional diplomatic speech, which typically prioritises either the immediate interlocutor or the wider public, rarely both simultaneously.

### **The Address: Thematic Architecture:**

#### **The Duty of Governance and the Common Good**

The Pope's address opened with a foundational claim about the nature of political authority, grounding his argument in the Augustinian tradition. Citing St Augustine directly, 'Those who rule serve those whom they seem to command; for they rule not from a love of power, but from a sense of duty they owe to others', Leo XIV established from the outset that authority is not a possession but a vocation, a service oriented towards the common good of all (Washington Times, 2026). This Augustinian framework was not incidental: Leo XIV wrote his canon law dissertation on the exercise of authority by Augustinian religious superiors, lending the reference an autobiographical as well as theological resonance (Washington Times, 2026). From this premise, the Pope issued a direct challenge: 'Serving one's country means dedicating oneself, with a clear mind and an upright conscience, to the common good of all people in the nation, including, crucially, both majority populations and minorities' (America Magazine, 2026). In a country torn by linguistic and ethnic division, the phrase 'minorities' carries unmistakable political weight, a pointed gesture towards the Anglophone communities whose grievances have fuelled nearly a decade of armed conflict.

#### **Corruption, Institutional Credibility, and the Rule of Law**

The most rhetorically striking passage of the address was undoubtedly the Pope's indictment of corruption as a systemic threat to national stability and moral legitimacy. 'In order for peace and justice to prevail,' he declared, 'the chains of corruption-which disfigure authority and strip it of its credibility-must be broken. Hearts must be set free from an idolatrous thirst for profit' (AL Jazeera, 2026; Washington Times, 2026). The language here is notable: the metaphor of 'chains' locates corruption not merely as an institutional deficiency but as a form of bondage-a structural evil that enslaves both those who perpetrate it and those who suffer beneath it. The phrase 'idolatrous thirst for profit' similarly draws on the rich theological vocabulary of Catholic social teaching, characterising the abuse of public resources as a form of false worship. The Pope went on to call explicitly for 'transparency in the management of public resources and respect for the rule of law,' insisting that 'just and credible institutions become pillars of stability' (America Magazine, 2026). He framed this not as an external imposition but as a moral imperative: 'It is time to examine our conscience and take a bold leap forward. Public authorities are called to serve as bridges, never as sources of division, even when insecurity seems prevalent' (America Magazine, 2026). Cameroon television is reported to have halted its live feed during parts of this speech, though whether for technical or editorial reasons remained unclear (Washington Times, 2026).

#### **Security, Human Rights, and the Vulnerable**

Leo XIV did not ignore the security dimension of Cameroon's crisis, acknowledging that 'security is a priority', a concession likely directed at the government's framing of its military operations in the Anglophone regions. However, the Pope immediately qualified this acknowledgement with a significant condition: security 'must always be exercised with respect for human rights, combining rigor and magnanimity, with particular attention to the most vulnerable' (America Magazine, 2026). This formulation reflects a consistent thread in Catholic social teaching, namely that the legitimate functions of the state are constrained by, and ultimately in service of, fundamental human dignity.

#### **Civil Society, Youth, and Women**

A distinctive feature of the address was the Pope's elevation of civil society, young people, and women as agents of national renewal. Calling for a 'change of approach,' Leo XIV argued that 'civil society must be recognised as a vital force for national cohesion,' adding that: 'Cameroon is ready for this transition!'

(Washington Times, 2026). He placed particular emphasis on the roles of women and young people, noting that their 'commitment to education, mediation and the rebuilding of the social fabric is unparalleled and serves to curb corruption and abuses of power.' He concluded this section with a pointed normative claim: 'For this reason, too, their voice must be fully recognised in decision-making processes' (Washington Times, 2026).

### **Closing Benediction**

The address concluded with a prayer that encompassed the full breadth of Cameroonian society: 'I ask God to bless the entire Cameroonian people-Christians and non-Christians alike-and to help them build together a future of justice and peace' (America Magazine, 2026). The deliberate inclusion of non-Christians in the papal blessing reflects Leo XIV's broader commitment to interreligious solidarity, a theme that had also marked his visit to the Great Mosque of Algiers earlier in the journey.

### **Rhetorical Strategies:**

#### **Prophetic Register**

Students of the rhetorical tradition will recognise in Leo XIV's Unity Palace address a sustained deployment of what Old Testament scholars call the 'prophetic register', a mode of speech in which the speaker positions themselves as a moral witness who speaks truth to power, regardless of consequence. The address's directness the willingness to invoke corruption, human rights abuses, and minority exclusion before the very authorities responsible for them-aligns with this tradition. Leo XIV himself acknowledged as much, stating elsewhere on the trip that he had 'no fear' in speaking frankly about political matters (AL Jazeera, 2026).

#### **Theological Grounding as Diplomatic Legitimation**

By anchoring his critique in the theology of St. Augustine rather than in political science or international law, Leo XIV was able to challenge the Cameroonian government with moral authority that transcended partisan politics. The move is rhetorically sophisticated: criticism issued in the name of the ancient Christian tradition is harder to dismiss as foreign interference than criticism framed in the idiom of liberal democracy or international human rights law.

#### **Inclusive Language and National Address**

The Pope's repeated use of the first-person plural 'we,' 'our,' 'us' throughout the address served to include himself within the moral community being called to account. Rather than positioning himself as an external critic, Leo XIV inserted himself into the shared moral project of building a just Cameroon. This rhetorical move subtly deflects the charge of postcolonial interference by constructing the speaker as a participant in, rather than a judge of, the national community he addresses.

#### **Dual-Audience Construction**

Perhaps the most analytically significant rhetorical strategy in the address is what this study terms its dual-audience construction. The speech was delivered before an elite audience of heads of state, generals, and diplomats, but it was also broadcast, at least partially, to the wider Cameroonian public and the international press corps. Leo XIV appears to have composed the address with both audiences in mind, crafting passages that could be read as demands for accountability by those in power while functioning as affirmations of solidarity for ordinary citizens and marginalised communities. This dual-audience logic explains some of the speech's apparent rhetorical tensions: the acknowledgement of security concerns alongside the insistence on human rights; the affirmation of presidential authority alongside the demand for its reform.

## Discussion

The Unity Palace address sits at the intersection of several scholarly conversations in the fields of rhetorical studies, political theology, and African studies. This discussion situates the address within those conversations and considers its broader implications. First, the address exemplifies what this study has called prophetic diplomacy, a mode of religiously grounded public speech that combines pastoral solidarity with frank political critique. As a category, prophetic diplomacy occupies an uncomfortable middle ground between the traditional norms of diplomatic courtesy (which typically mandate avoiding embarrassment to one's hosts) and the prophetic imperatives of the Christian tradition (which mandate speaking uncomfortable truths to those who hold power). Leo XIV's address navigates this tension with considerable skill: it acknowledges the legitimate authority and good intentions of the Cameroonian government while insisting, plainly, that current governance practices fall short of the moral standard to which all authority is accountable.

Second, the address raises important questions about the postcolonial dynamics of papal diplomacy in Africa. Critics might argue that a Western-born pontiff arriving in a former European colony to lecture its government on corruption and human rights reproduces the very paternalistic logic of the colonial civilising mission. This critique deserves serious consideration. However, the analysis here suggests that Leo XIV was alert to this danger and adopted rhetorical strategies - theological rather than political framing, inclusive pronoun use, and an emphasis on solidarity and shared humanity - designed to minimise it. Whether these strategies are sufficient to overcome the structural asymmetries of power that underpin any speech act between a Global North institution and an African government is a question that scholars of postcolonial discourse are better placed to answer than this study alone. Third, the address raises questions about the relationship between speech and political effect in contexts of authoritarian governance. Leo XIV's words were strong and direct; but the Biya government has survived decades of international criticism without significant reform. Whether prophetic diplomacy of this kind produces measurable political change, or whether it functions primarily as a form of moral witness with symbolic rather than instrumental effects, is an empirical question that only longitudinal analysis can answer.

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## Conclusion

Pope Leo XIV's address at Unity Palace, Yaoundé, on April 15, 2026, marks a significant moment in the tradition of papal diplomacy in Africa. Through the careful deployment of a prophetic register, Augustinian theological grounding, inclusive rhetorical framing, and a dual-audience construction, the speech achieved something that conventional diplomatic address rarely manages: it simultaneously challenged those in power and affirmed those subject to that power, issued a demand for accountability and offered a gesture of solidarity, and spoke the language of eternal moral truth while engaging the very specific and urgent realities of a nation in crisis. The CDA conducted in this study reveals that these effects were not accidental but the product of deliberate and sophisticated rhetorical craft. Whether that craft will prove sufficient to move the Cameroonian political situation towards the justice and peace that Leo XIV invoked remains, as of this writing, an open question. What is not open is that the address constitutes a remarkable instance of what religious leaders can accomplish when they bring the full weight of their moral authority to bear on the political realities of their time, not as distant observers but as engaged prophets, speaking with pastoral care and without fear.

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