

# BONDINGS

Vol. 39 No. 4

A Publication of New Ways Ministry

Fall 2020

## In Shift for Church, Pope Francis Voices Support for Same-Sex Civil Unions

By Jason Horowitz  
*The New York Times*  
October 21, 2020

ROME — Pope Francis expressed support for same-sex civil unions in remarks revealed in a documentary film that premiered on Wednesday, a significant break from his predecessors that staked out new ground for the church in its recognition of gay people.

The remarks, coming from the leader of the Roman Catholic Church, had the potential to shift debates about the legal status of same-sex couples in nations around the globe and unsettle bishops worried that the unions threaten what the church considers traditional marriage — between one man and one woman.

"What we have to create is a civil union law. That way they are legally covered," Francis said in the documentary, "Francesco," which debuted at the Rome Film Festival, reiterating his view that gay people are children of God. "I stood up for that."

Many gay Catholics and their allies outside the church welcomed the pope's remarks, though Francis' opposition to gay marriage within the church remained absolute.

His conservative critics within the church hierarchy, and especially in the conservative wing of the church in the United States, who have for years accused him of diluting church doctrine, saw the remarks as a reversal of church teaching.

"The pope's statement clearly contradicts what has been the longstanding teaching of the church about same-sex unions," said Bishop Thomas Tobin of Providence, R.I., adding that the remarks needed to be clarified.

There was little doubt that Francis, recorded on camera, made the statements during his pontificate. But there was con-

fusion on Wednesday about when he had said them and to whom. The Vatican dismissed them as old news.

Francis has a tendency for making off-the-cuff public remarks, a trait that maddens both supporters and critics alike. The comments shown in the film are likely to generate exactly the sort of discussion the pope has repeatedly sought to foster on issues once considered forbidden in the church's culture wars.

Francis had already drastically shifted the tone of the church on questions related to homosexuality, but he has done little on policy and not changed teaching for a church that sees its future growth in the

Southern Hemisphere, where the clerical hierarchy is generally less tolerant of homosexuality.

The remark "in no way affects doctrine," the Rev. Antonio Spadaro, a Jesuit priest and close ally of Francis, told the television channel of the Italian bishops conference on Wednesday evening.

The remarks in the documentary were in keeping with Francis' general support for gay people, but were perhaps his most specific and prominent on the issue of civil unions, which even traditionally Catholic nations like Italy, Ireland and Argentina have permitted in recent years.

The director of the documentary, Evgeny Afineevsky, told *The New York Times* that Francis had made the remarks directly to him for the film. He did not reply to a question about when the

remarks were made by the pope.

The Vatican and allies of Francis publicly cast doubt on the notion that the pope said the remarks to Mr. Afineevsky, asserting that the pontiff instead had made them to a Mexican journalist, Valentina Alazraki in an interview in the Vatican in May 2019. Earlier on Wed-



nnesday, Ms. Alazraki had told *The Times* that she did not recall the pope making the comments to her.

In 2010, as Argentina was on the verge of approving gay marriage, Francis, then cardinal archbishop of Buenos Aires, supported the idea of civil unions for gay couples.

As pope in 2014, he told the *Corriere della Sera*, Italy's largest newspaper, that nations legalizing civil unions did so mostly to give same-sex partners legal rights and health care benefits and that he couldn't express a blanket position.

"You have to see the different cases and evaluate them in their variety," he said then.

But Francis' remarks in the documentary, explicitly supporting civil unions as pope and on camera, had the potential for much greater impact on the debate over the recognition of gay couples by the church.

"Homosexuals have a right to be a part of the family," Francis says at another point in the documentary. "They're children of God and have a right to a family. Nobody should be thrown out, or be made miserable because of it."

Church teaching does not consider being gay a sin, but it does consider homosexual acts as "intrinsically disordered" and by extension holds that a homosexual orientation is "objectively disordered."

Church doctrine also explicitly states that marriage is between a man and a woman, a teaching Francis unwaveringly supports.

Francis' predecessors had also expressed their opposition, though, to civil unions.

In 2003, under the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, the church's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, its doctrinal watchdog then led by the future Pope Benedict XVI, issued "Considerations regarding proposals to give legal recognition to unions between homosexual persons."

The document read, "The Church teaches that respect for homosexual persons cannot lead in any way to approval of homosexual behavior or to legal recognition of homosexual unions."

Those views were not incorporated into church teaching, but bishops and some bishops conferences, which can be politically influential in certain countries, often opposed civil unions as a threat to the church's view of traditional marriage.

Advocates within the church for civil unions seized on the pope's remarks in the documentary as a major blow to those efforts and as a breakthrough in the church's long-painful relationship with gay people.

"This is a major step forward in the church's relationship with L.G.B.T.Q. people," said the Rev. James Martin, a Jesuit priest who has written a book on how to make gay Catholics feel more welcome in the Church, and who has met with the pope and served as a consultant for the Vatican's Secretariat for Communications.

"It's going to be harder for bishops to say that same-sex civil unions are a threat against marriage," he said. "This is unmistakable support."

Some of the pope's most consistent critics inside the Catholic hierarchy agreed that the pope seemed to support civil unions, and they were vexed by it.

"The church cannot support the acceptance of objectively immoral relationships," said Bishop Tobin of Providence. . . .

Starting in 2013, on a papal flight back from Brazil, his openness to gay people stunned the faithful inside the church, and secular fans outside of it, who were more accustomed to doctrinaire scoldings about homosexuality and gay marriage.

"Who am I to judge," Francis famously answered when asked about a supposedly gay priest on that flight.

In his landmark 2016 document on the theme of family — titled "Amoris Laetitia," or "The Joy of Love" — Francis rejected same-sex marriage, yet called on priests to be welcoming to people in nontraditional relationships, such as gay people, single parents and unmarried straight couples who live together.

He also once told Juan Carlos Cruz, a Chilean sexual abuse survivor and gay person whom he befriended, and who is featured in the documentary, that "God made you this way and loves you this way, and the pope loves you this way."

But under Francis, the church also rejected what it cast as the notion that individuals can choose their gender, and he also told the leaders of seminaries that it was better not to admit gay candidates. . . .

But those who support the church being more welcoming of gay couples were pleased by the pope's remarks in the

**More responses to  
Pope Francis' comments  
supporting same-sex  
civil union can be found  
on pages 4-5, 7-8**

film.

"A pope sets the tone for the church and what he is doing is signaling to bishops and church leaders that a welcome for gay and lesbian couples has to go forward," said Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry, an organization of L.G.B.T. Catholics.

He noted that in the United States, the Supreme Court was poised to weigh whether Philadelphia may exclude a Catholic agency that does not work with same-sex couples from the city's foster-care system. In Germany's more liberal Catholic hierarchy, bishops had built momentum in their push to bless same-sex unions. Those deliberations and others, he hoped, would be influenced by the pope's remarks.

"They will ripple through the church and legislatures and courts and the personal and spiritual lives of Catholics who have been waiting for years and decades for an affirming word from their church leader," Mr. DeBernardo said. "The significance is immense." ♦

## New Ways Ministry Celebrates Pope's Remarks on Civil Unions

**Bondings 2.0**  
[NewWaysMinistry.org/blog](http://NewWaysMinistry.org/blog)  
October 22, 2020

New Ways Ministry gratefully welcomes Pope Francis' latest support for civil unions for same-gender couples. It is an historic moment when the leader of the Roman Catholic Church, long seen as a persecutor of LGBTQ people, moves in such a supportive direction for lesbian/gay couples and their families. It signals that the church is continuing to develop more positively its approach to LGBTQ issues.

At the same time, we urge Pope Francis to apply the same kind of reasoning to recognize and bless these same unions of love and support within the Catholic Church, too. Since the pope framed his support for civil unions by saying that same-gender couples are "right to be a part of the family," it would not be a long stretch for him to do so.

Bishops, priests, and theologians in the German-speaking church have been making strong calls for blessing same-gender couples for several years now. The Synodal Way process in Germany may issue its support of recognizing and blessing these unions in the church early next year.

Pope Francis' support for full civil marriage rights, beyond civil unions, is needed, too. Traditionally Catholic nations have one-by-one been passing civil union and marriage equality laws for a while now. Among them: Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Ireland, Malta, Mexico

(in part), Portugal, Spain, and Uruguay. Such recognition shows that overwhelming majorities of Catholic citizens support legal protections for same-gender couples.

While this is certainly the pope's strongest statement in support of civil unions, he has hinted at support for such legal recognition at least twice before. Before his election as pope in 2013, while archbishop in Argentina, Francis endorsed civil unions as an alternative to the movement for marriage equality. In a 2017 interview as pope, he gave tacit approval, saying rather than marriage, the relationships of same-gender couples should be referred to as civil unions.

The pope's statement could have a great impact on an upcoming U.S. Supreme Court case, *Fulton vs. City of Philadelphia*, in which the rights of legally married lesbian and gay couples to adopt or foster children from Catholic social service agencies is at issue. If the pope supports such couples, what should prevent lower-level Catholic officials from doing so.

This statement will have an effect beyond church discussions and legal debates. When the pope says something positive about LGBTQ issues, he sends forth an enormous wave of goodwill to LGBTQ people, and, at the same time, teaches a positive lesson to people whose anti-LGBTQ views are religiously-based. It is no overstatement to say that with this statement not only has the pope protected LGBTQ couples and families, but he also will save many LGBTQ lives.

# BONDINGS

Fall 2020

Vol. 39, No. 4

Francis DeBernardo, *Editor***Board of Directors**Jeannine Gramick, SL, Chair  
Dr. Jerry Fath  
Ryan Sattler  
Cristina Traina**Board of Advisors**Robert Brady  
Rev. Peter Daly  
Jeremy Dickey  
Brian Flanagan  
Rev. James Kiesel  
Elizabeth Linehan, RSM  
Anne Marie Miller, RSM  
Elsie Miranda**Staff**Francis DeBernardo, Executive Director  
Matthew Myers, Associate Director  
Robert Shine, Associate Director  
Dwayne Fernandes, Director of Spirituality**Co-Founders**Sr. Jeannine Gramick, SL  
Rev. Robert Nugent, SDS

*Bondings* is a seasonal publication designed to keep our subscribers informed of issues that pertain to LGBTQ people and the Catholic Church.

Founded in 1977, New Ways Ministry is an educational and bridge-building ministry of reconciliation between the Catholic LGBTQ community and the institutional structures in the Roman Catholic Church.

New Ways Ministry seeks to eradicate prevalent myths and stereotypes about homosexuality and gender identity and supports LGBTQ civil rights.

**New Ways Ministry**4012 29th Street  
Mount Rainier, Maryland 20712  
(301) 277-5674  
[Info@NewWaysMinistry.org](mailto:Info@NewWaysMinistry.org)  
[NewWaysMinistry.org](http://NewWaysMinistry.org)

**TO SUBSCRIBE  
COMPLETE AND RETURN THE FORM  
BELOW**

Enclosed is:

 \$25.00 in the US or Canada \$35.00 outside US or Canada I wish to receive *Bondings*,  
but cannot donate at this time.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_

Day Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Night Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Cell Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Please make check payable to "New Ways Ministry". Outside the US, please use *only* checks drawn on a US bank in US dollars or go to [www.newwaysministry.org](http://www.newwaysministry.org).

Mail to:

**New Ways Ministry**  
4012 29th Street  
Mount Rainier, MD 20712

## Catholic/LGBTQ Advocates, Theologians, and Others Offer Insights on Pope's Civil Union Remarks

The following are excerpts from comments by bishops around the U.S. and around the globe who responded positively by the pope's statements. All of these statements, plus many others, were quoted on Bondings 2.0, New Ways Ministry's daily blog on Catholic LGBTQ news, opinion, and spirituality. You can find these posts by going to [www.NewWaysMinistry.org/category/pope-francis/](http://www.NewWaysMinistry.org/category/pope-francis/)

**Sister Jeannine Gramick, SL, Co-Founder, New Ways Ministry:**

"This is wonderful news for the LGBTQ community and for their families. What Pope Francis is telling us is that lesbian and gay people are part of families. He's holding up family values and this is so important. I am elated that Pope Francis is making this public statement. He's speaking from his heart. If we let our heart speak, then our minds will be changed. We have to lead from the heart and that's what he's doing."

**Fr. José María Olaizola, SJ, a Spanish priest-sociologist:**

"Our task is not to tell homosexual people what to do in their civil life, but to facilitate their belonging in the Church. For the record, I do not minimize the worth of what the Pope has said.

What I believe is that more Church people need to speak out even more so that the Pope can come to say more."

**Eve Tushnet, Catholic lesbian writer:**

"What surprised and delighted many gay people, both outside and within the church, was the possibility that he would speak about our longings in positive terms. . .He hasn't yet — but I hope he will."

**Yayo Grassi, gay former student of Pope Francis:**

Francis' comments represent a "seismic movement within the church, but it also started with a very gentle wave" in 2013 when he said gay men and lesbians should not be judged or marginalized.

"Several years ago, something like that was almost seen like a tsunami. Now we see that it really was just a gentle wave, that the tsunamis are coming little by little, that every wave that he sends out makes this movement much, much greater and difficult to walk back."

Grassi added that supporting civil unions was "an affirmation of everything that I know about him," even if the pope would never endorse equal marriage.

**Julie Hanlon Rubio, Theologian:**

The pope's support for civil unions is altering how Francis understands family, in keeping with the church's evolving understanding of family for decades. For instance, Rubio notes how much Vatican II shifted and enriched Catholic conceptions of family beyond just warning against ills, such as divorce and cohabitation. She writes:

"Francis' critics worry that the pope is watering down Catholic doctrine on marriage and family. But what I argue is that Francis is not changing doctrine. He is encouraging a broader view of who counts as families inside and outside the church. . .

"The comments in the documentary show a persistent move toward welcoming families in contemporary Catholic thought. Francis proposes that a welcoming church should support all families, especially those who are hurt-

ing. Similarly, as he says, governments should do the same — including supporting gay and lesbian couples."

**Father James Martin, SJ, Author:**

"For those who think that Pope Francis's comments about same-sex civil unions today are no big deal: Perhaps that may seem true in some parts, and to some people, in the US or Western Europe. But in places like Poland, where some bishops are virulently anti-LGBT, have called LGBTQ people the 'rainbow plague' and compared them to Nazis; or in places like Uganda, where many bishops side with repressive laws criminalizing homosexuality; it's a very big deal. We always need to remember how this will be 'received' by the worldwide church. So again, a big deal."

**Marianne Duddy-Burke, Executive Director, DignityUSA**

"If true, the Pope's comments could represent an international game-changer and a major step forward for LGBTQI equality. It would remove a key obstacle to LGBTQI inclusion in many places around the world, especially in areas where LGBTQI people are especially vulnerable to discrimination and violence. Civil union laws can provide essential legal protections to LGBTQI couples and their children. . .Already, Cath-

olics in many parts of the world have moved beyond the official Church, and have fully embraced LGBTQI people, their families, and marriage equality in their communities. We hope and pray that Catholic officials will follow their example."

**Aaron Bianco, fired gay church worker**

"It is a colossal step for the pontiff to endorse civil unions. In doing so, he shows that he, and in turn, the Church, are looking for ways to be a welcoming place for all LGBT Catholics. All Catholics should applaud this advancement."

**Natalia Imperatori-Lee, theologian**, said the pope's words could "prompt Catholic institutions to stop firing teachers, catechists, music ministers and others who are part of the LGBTQ community and a vital part of the Catholic community as well,"

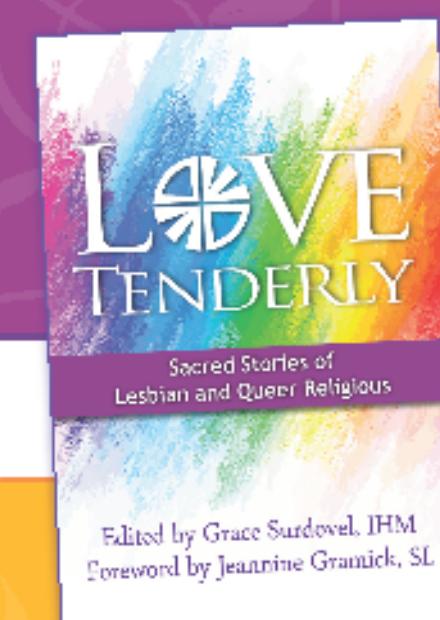
**Fr. Bryan Massingale, openly gay priest who holds an endowed theology chair**, told NPR's "Morning Edition" he was "jubilant" upon hearing the pope's words. He called it an "affirmation of the humanity of gay and lesbian persons," adding further:

"I see this as a necessary step in the evolution in the church's thinking on same-sex issues. . .What the pope is doing with this kind of declaration, he is clearly putting the church on the side against the criminalization of behavior and in favor of protecting the dignity of gay and lesbian persons."

**Ruby Almeida, Co-chair, Global Network of Rainbow Catholics:**

"The many negative and destructive condemnatory statements recently made by several US and Polish Bishops about the LGBTQI communities have left our communities hurt and violated. So, this is good news indeed." +

**A new book from New Ways Ministry**



**LOVE TENDERLY**

is an anthology

written by twenty-three vowed women religious who embrace their sexual identity as lesbian or queer.

To purchase a copy, visit

[www.NewWaysMinistry.org/lovetenderly](http://www.NewWaysMinistry.org/lovetenderly)



**New Ways Ministry**

4012 29th Street, Mount Rainier, MD 20712

Telephone: 301-277-5674

Email: [info@newwaysministry.org](mailto:info@newwaysministry.org)

## Priest Ready to Bless Same-Gender Couples, Calls Catechism “Embarrassing”

By Robert Shine

*Bondings 2.0*  
NewWaysMinistry.org/blog  
October 21, 2020

A priest tasked with diocesan ministry to lesbian and gay people has said he would happily bless same-gender couples if he was asked, adding that the *Catechism*'s statements on homosexuality are “embarrassing.”

Fr. Christoph Behrens spoke to *Katholisch.de*, the German bishops' media outlet, about his ministry with lesbian and gay people, specifically about the question of church blessings for same-gender couples. He said that not only would he do so, but would do so publicly, and recommend others to follow suit. Here's part of the exchange (via Google Translate):

“Behrens: I would not let myself be forbidden from blessing a homosexual couple. I see it as my mission to bring people into contact with God and not to close the doors, but to open them.

“Question: So you have not yet received a specific request from a homosexual couple to bless them?

“Behrens: No. I'm actually waiting for it (laughs).

“Question: What exactly could such a blessing look like?

“Behrens: I am a creative person and would think of something that suits the

people, is beautiful and expresses a message. The most important thing is that the focus is on the couple who want this blessing. A little liturgy could be devel-

humane and inviting for everyone involved. To put it piously, it must be about the kingdom of God. But I would hardly use a template for this, but develop it from the respective situation. . .

“Question: So you wouldn't shy away from giving such a blessing in a church either?

“Behrens: I would even recommend it. I wouldn't want to hide such a blessing. And I wouldn't ask that much – not even the bishop. He gave me a free hand and commissioned me. So I'm very relaxed about that.”

In June, the priest was directed to be a contact for lesbian/gay people by Bishop Heinrich Timmerevers of Dresden-Meissen, who endorsed such blessings for same-gender couples this year. Behrens said he feels supported by not only the bishop, but fellow priests, too. That said, there have been difficulties making contact with LGBTQ people because, in the priest's words, “We have done a great job as a church to ensure that homosexual people never even think of contacting a pastor.”

Part of the problem with how the church treats lesbian and gay people can be found in the *Catechism*, about which Behrens commented:

“From my pastoral and theological point of view, such statements are just plain embarrassing. One can only hope that not too many people read this non-

sense. What psychologists and other scientists have found out in the meantime does not seem to matter at all and there is no will to be cleared up. It's just embarrassing.”

Beyond church blessings, Behrens was clear that his ministry to lesbian and gay people is about a broader listening and accompaniment, not only with Christians, but with non-Christians, too. His goal: ” If the people in this community in the Dresden-Meissen diocese knew that they could go to the Catholic Church with their worries and concerns, then we would have achieved a lot.”

Finally, the interviewer asked Behrens if he feared consequences of this ministry. The priest offered a remarkably strong reply:

“No. That wouldn't bother me, because I'm more of a fighter type. When I am convinced of something and have realized that it is right and important, I am not afraid of the consequences. If we believe in God's creation and that he did everything well, then I must also make sure that the thought of God can live in the world. And although we are a very small diocese, we have not received any hostility for our work so far – even though we feared it. That also encourages us to say: We are on the right track.”



Father Christoph Behrens

oped from their life story. I've often seen this work in pastoral care, whether with children or now in hospital pastoral care with the dying. It has to be beautiful,

## Another German Bishop Endorses Church Blessings for Same-Gender Couples

By Robert Shine

*Bondings 2.0*  
NewWaysMinistry.org/blog  
October 1, 2020

Another bishop in Germany has endorsed church blessings for same-gender couples, while a group of young theologians calls for an end to discrimination in the church.

Bishop Heinrich Timmerevers of Dresden-Meissen was interviewed by *KNA* earlier this week about his efforts to better include LGBTQ people in the church. The interviewer asked the bishop about church blessings, to which Timmerevers answered (via Google Translate):

“Timmerevers: The question is: What do I bless? I bless people. And when a person stands in front of me and asks for a blessing – how can I refuse this blessing? A blessing is God's promise. It has to be differentiated from the fact that I do not ‘approve’ everything with such a blessing and I like what these people do. You have to take a very differentiated look.

“Question: Does that mean you would like the Catholic Church to allow homosexual couples to be blessed?

“Timmerevers: Yes. Of course you have to think about the form. But in principle I would welcome such an opening.”

*KNA*'s report also noted that Timmerevers had recently appointed two church officials specifically to provide pastoral care for LGBTQ people. Asked why he is engaging in LGBTQ outreach, the bishop replied:

“Timmerevers: I met the group of gay-lesbian-transgender Christians in various places in the diocese, and they told me their life and faith stories. That moved me very deeply because I noticed what a struggle there is for many. They want to be Christians and also to live their faith in the church. And I don't want to leave these people alone in this struggle.

“Question: What does that mean in concrete terms?

“Timmerevers: One of the findings of my engagement with the letter *Amoris Laetitia* from Pope Francis is that in some areas, we were conducting a very exclusive [unwelcoming] pastoral care. If someone did not conform to our norms, they had little chance to be part of the Church. We have to fight against this exclusion, we have to work on it. It is important to me that we further develop and strengthen acceptance and tolerance for homosexuals in our communities and in the whole church. In this respect, the two pastors I have now commissioned should be a signal: We are there for this group.”

When asked if his efforts could be construed as criticism, Timmerevers added that what was needed was a “process of reflection,” commenting, “in my opinion, the Catholic Church has to reposition itself: How do we deal with same-sex people in our pastoral work, and how do we assess it?”

In related news, three graduate students in theology, Luisa Bauer, Lisa Baumeister and Claudia Danzer, have launched a website opposing discrimination in the Catholic Church. Titled “MeinGottdiskriminiertnicht.de” (“My God does not discriminate”), the initiative includes a desire for greater LGBTQ inclusion. *Novena News* reported:

“Only if the Church abolishes its discriminatory structures can it again speak credibly of a loving and just God,” explained Danzer, who pointed to the ‘standstill of the reforms’ promised by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s as the culprit of the Church's continuing marginalization of certain groups, in-

cluding women and LGBTIQ+ people.

“In the Church, people have daily hurtful experiences of discrimination, which affect them at the deepest core of their identity,’ denounced Bauer, adding that the founders of the ‘My God does not discriminate’ initiative feel that that discrimination ‘does not fit in with Jesus’ advocacy for the disadvantaged and marginalized.’

“We cannot and do not want to believe in a God who excludes women and queer people from the priesthood,’ insisted Danzer.”

Again, we have German Catholics

leading the way for LGBTQ equality in the church. Bishop Timmerevers is but the latest prelate in that country to acknowledge the need for same-gender couples to receive church blessings. Both the bishop and the theologians recognize the need for reform, joining with other church leaders' statements and the larger lay movement of German Catholics in this assessment. Taken together, all these developments are hopeful signs that the German Church's Synodal Way process will take prophetic steps when it comes to sexual morality, women's leadership, and other needed reforms. ♦



Bishop Heinrich Timmerevers

## Spanish Jesuits: “One day no Pride will be necessary”

By Cameron Doody

*NovenaNews.com*  
July 1, 2020

The Spanish Jesuits have shown their support for LGBT Pride, publishing an article on their website encouraging homosexual people by saying “each person must be proud to be as God created them.”

Ahead of Madrid Pride Week July 1 -5 – which this year will take place online, due to the ongoing coronavirus crisis, Jesuit José María Rodríguez Olaizola penned an article in which he condemned the fact that LGBT people are still subject to “contempt, rejection or persecution” more than fifty years after the Stonewall riots that marked the beginning of the Pride movement.

Rodríguez Olaizola also called the Church to overcome its “incomprehension” still of the realities of LGBT people and to commit to a “greater and better integration, welcome and acceptance ... of their need and their right to love.” The following is *NovenaNews.com*'s English translation of the Jesuit article which originally appeared in *Pastoral SJ*:

This year there will be no floats, no parades, no crowds... There are those who will miss it, and those who will breathe a sigh of relief instead. Also within the LGTBQ world, there are those who will regret the lack of this

explosion of publicity and visibility, and those who, at the opposite extreme, will be happy that other paths must be sought to separate the demand for the dignity of homosexual people from the parades with all their mixture of publicity, visibility, marketing, frivolity and defiance.

One day there will be no need for Gay Pride or any other Pride. The day when everyone recognizes the dignity of people, of each person, without sexual orientation being something that undermines it or calls it into question for some mindsets. The day when someone's coming out of the closet is not news, because it is pure normality.

The day when they pass into history the contempt, rejection or persecution that in a distant 1969 led a group of homosexuals to stand up to the police who were raiding the Stonewall Inn because the mere fact of being homosexual in public was a scandal.

And the day when, also as a Church, we will have advanced towards a greater and better integration, welcome and acceptance of the reality of homosexual people, of their need and their right to love, and will have overcome the doses of incomprehension that still exist in some people of the Church towards the reality of LGTBQ people.

But that day has not yet come. There are still many homosexual people who live in torment because they feel

judged. Many teenagers are looking for their place but hearing only mockery and derogatory comments, sometimes in family surroundings and from their loved ones – who cannot imagine that “that” could happen in one of their own.

There are still many mindsets for which “having a gay child” is a tragedy, a shame, something to hide, and that is why the son, the daughter, has no other way to go but to find their own pride without letting themselves be beaten down.

And yet, in the Church, there is too much silence in the face of some declarations and wordings that do not respond to the pastoral reality of our communities, parishes, groups and spaces of accompaniment.

There are too many people who reduce sexual orientation to gender ideology, and turn that identification into an alibi for not listening to the testimonies of so many homosexual Christians who only ask to feel a little more at home when it comes to being in community. Too much slander and too little blessing.

Each person must be proud to be as God created them. Because, in the end, homosexuality or heterosexuality is not someone's whimsical decision. It is part (and only part) of who a person is. ♦

## Pope's words on civil unions mean much, but LGBT Catholics deserve more

By Xavier M. Montecel

NCRonline.org

October 26, 2020

The news of Pope Francis' endorsement of civil unions for same-sex couples in the new documentary "Francesco" has taken the Catholic world by storm. Progressive Catholics have applauded the remarks as a major step forward in the church's pastoral attitude toward LGBT people. Conservatives have decried it as a break with official church teaching and a tacit approval of sexual immorality.

For some, no doubt, this will be the moment in which Francis lost all credibility as the leader of the Catholic Church. For others, it will be the moment in which he gained it.

The secular media coverage, of course, will focus on a "reversal" of church teaching. And many Catholics, too, will assume that Francis has simply changed the doctrine of the church by fiat, and that now the Catholic Church has accepted same-sex couples universally into the fold. But Francis' comments must be read in context.

**Related:** Pope's civil union comments appear to be taken out of context

To begin with, Pope Francis has historically opposed efforts to inscribe same-sex marriage in law. And he still does. The idea of civil unions for same-sex couples is intended by Francis as a compromise: one that makes room for LGBT people to enjoy some protection of the law without damaging the theological integrity of marriage. Its purpose is to insulate the ecclesial and sacramental character of marriage from intrusion by same-sex couples.

In fact, it is not the first time that Francis has taken the position that perhaps same-sex couples should have access to civil unions. Speaking both as archbishop of Buenos Aires and in occasional interviews after his election to the papacy, Francis has gestured toward civil unions as a measure to avoid the legalization of same-sex marriage as such.

Moreover, the reasoning behind Francis's proposal is not new. It has roots in the history and tradition of the Catholic Church. In countries such as Mexico, for instance, Catholics have for more than a century accepted a firm distinction between civil and religious marriage, the result of a long history of struggle between the government and the church over questions of ecclesial authority in the secular realm. I remember quite regularly hearing relatives and friends describe the two-stage process of getting married as a Catholic in Mexico: *se casaron por lo civil y mas luego por la iglesia*.

sia.

Most European countries today practice a similar division. The case of the American Catholic Church, in which priests serve simultaneously as agents of the state and ministers of the church, grows more and more extraordinary (and it raises serious theological problems).

Francis' proposed distinction between canonical marriage and civil unions has roots even further back in the history of the tradition. Thomas Aquinas himself, the great monument of post-Tridentine Catholicism, insisted that personal morality and human law were not identical. The law, he said, exists for the sake of the common good, and so it should only permit or forbid things in light of their effect on the good of the whole community. Thus, there are any number of evidently immoral activities or styles of life that ought to be permitted by the law, or perhaps even protected, so long as doing so conduces to the common good. Aquinas references the venerable Augustine on this point, who offered the example of prostitution as an immoral activity the law should not forbid.

So it is entirely thinkable, from a Catholic theological understanding, to propose civil unions for same-sex couples, even while affirming that such relationships are immoral. This relies on a hard distinction between civil law, on the one hand, and moral or ecclesial law on the other. And Pope Francis very clearly places same-sex relationships on the far side of the line.

Francis' remarks are also in complete continuity with the central theme of his papacy, which has privileged mercy and inclusion over moral judgment. "Homosexuals have a right to be a part of the family. They're children of God and have a right to a family. Nobody should be thrown out, or be made miserable because of it," says Francis in the new documentary.

Quite right! The "throwaway culture" against which Francis so fiercely preaches invades the very heart of the church when Christian parents, for purportedly Christian reasons, discard their LGBT children as broken, polluted things.

Christian religious motives are the most frequently cited reason for LGBT youth homelessness, according to Carl Siciliano, founder and executive director of the Ali Forney Center in New York City. Young people, made to believe that they are unworthy of family, are turned out onto the streets where they are exposed to the violence of poverty, drug use and sexual assault, while trying to survive, often through sex work.

For Francis to affirm so boldly that LGBT people are "children of God," that they deserve to be part of a family, and indeed that their relationships have a place in our communities is an enormous act of mercy. Without a doubt, many LGBT Catholics were brought to tears by the news of his comments. It was, for most of us, the first time in which the

share with other people of the same sex is a sacrament of God's grace, and therefore that it is marriage in the fullest sense. Their unions and the families they create are a gift to the church, which the church still refuses to receive.

Some well-meaning Catholics may bristle at this point. Of course, they say, LGBT people deserve more. Surely their love is sacramental. But the church is too divided right now. This is as far as Pope Francis can go, and even this small gesture of mercy toward LGBT people may bring about schism.

Like any other Catholic, my heart breaks at the polarization we see in the church. But I have never understood why LGBT people, already relegated to the margins of church life, should shoulder the burden of inhumanity for the sake of avoiding schism.

I do not want to undervalue the power of what Francis has said or the good it will do for LGBT people around the world. To insist upon civil unions for same-sex couples is to affirm that their relationships deserve a place in the family and contribute to the common good. This is precisely a theological statement, since the common good is nothing other than the social expression of God's desire for humanity.

But if LGBT people can be a part of that — part of God's vision for human flourishing in community — then they must also be a part of God's vision for the church. And we are not there yet. The Catholic Church still teaches that LGBT people are disordered and that same-sex love is wrong. Francis's latest remarks have not changed church doctrine in that regard.

This is a reality that Francis or some future pontiff will need to confront. Because if all this talk of civil unions does indeed place LGBT Catholics in the center of the family, at the heart of the common good, then the church can no longer claim they are a threat to the basic unit of society or the integrity of the whole. It must admit that same-sex couples can, in fact, contribute something to the work of human flourishing, which for Christians is always rooted in the liberating work of God. It must admit, in the end, that same-sex couples can embody the grace of God for the church and the world as they strive, just like opposite-sex couples, to love as Christ loves. +

Xavier M. Montecel is a doctoral candidate in theological ethics at Boston College, where he works also as an adjunct faculty member in the Department of Theology. He is also an adjunct faculty member at Salve Regina University.



Xavier Montecel

church looked at us and saw not disordered creatures but persons who belong.

Some of us, from the comfort of our progressive environments, may not appreciate how badly this message is needed in the global church. Bishops around the world still militate against LGBT people, regarding them as a plague or as infiltrators of the true church, or working to criminalize homosexual activity. One thinks especially of the anti-LGBT work of bishops in Poland and in certain African countries. Pope Francis has just made their work much harder.

But LGBT Catholics still deserve more. While civil unions may offer security and inclusion to same-sex couples as far as the law is concerned, they cannot do so within the church. I applaud Francis for his courage and for the care he offers to those who live "on the existential peripheries." But frankly, to keep LGBT people at the peripheries and to make life on the margins just a bit more livable through legal arrangements that do not transform the life of the church is not good enough.

Radical mercy brings those at the margins to the center. There is a host of LGBT Catholics who know in their bones and in their souls that the love they

## Pope's 'yes' to civil unions will lead to a more open and equal Catholic Church

By Francis DeBernardo

OpenlyNews.com

ThompsonReuters Foundation

October 21, 2020

Gene and Bill had been partners for more than 50 years when I first heard their story. The two men met and fell in love when they were both 22. Because of the socially oppressive climate, it was not safe to live together as a couple, so they moved in as "roommates." After one brief year, Bill developed a debilitating disease that required full-time nursing care and he moved to a skilled facility. He remained there his entire life.

Gene visited him every day but was unable to let staff or residents know the true nature of their relationship. He also attended Mass daily, but his relationship was hidden from fellow parishioners. Even though their relationship was invisible, it was a model of commitment and fidelity for all Catholic couples.

While his soulmate lay paralyzed, Gene remained faithful to him for more than 50 years until Bill died.

When I heard the news that Pope Francis had made a strong public statement in support of civil unions, my first thought (after "Hallelujah!") was of Gene and Bill. If a pope or any Catholic leader back then said that they have "a right to



be part of a family," as the pontiff remarked in a new documentary film, their lives would have been greatly eased.

Pope Francis's support for legal protections for same-sex couples can't change the past, but it will definitely have a great impact on the future. As the director of New Ways Ministry, I've been involved in educating and advocating Catholic leaders and lay people about LGBT+ issues since 1992.

I've seen the power that a pope's words have on the church's atmosphere,

policies, and pastoral practice.

The words of the last two popes, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, too often wounded LGBT+ people, damaged their faith lives, and pushed them from the church. Worse yet, the popes' words often encouraged political leaders and garden variety thugs to socially and physically harm LGBT+ people. The words of these two popes are summed up in two letters: "No."

Pope Francis's message to LGBT+ people, however, is an emphatic "Yes!" Since he arrived at the Vatican in 2013, I have seen that his positive tone has encouraged pastors in parishes to be more welcoming to LGBT+ people, has allowed Catholic high schools to affirm their LGBT+ students, and has opened up the theological conversation on doctrine concerning gender and sexuality in bold new ways. His latest statement will push these initiatives even further.

Was the pope's support all that I have hoped for? No, but it is a step in the right direction – and a big one at that! Change happens slowly in the church, and it happens step by step.

I hope for the day when a pope will support not only civil unions, but full and equal marriage rights, in the civil realm and in the church. I want popes and bishops to speak out against laws that criminalize LGBT+ people in more than 70 nations worldwide. I want LGBT+ people who work in church institutions to be free of the fear they will be fired for their identity or relationship.

Those changes will come. It's just a matter of time. Pope Francis is making that time shorter and shorter. Already in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, Catholic bishops, priests, theologians, and lay people are speaking out for the church to recognize and bless same-sex couples. More than 15 predominantly Catholic nations have legalized civil unions or marriages for lesbian and gay couples.

Gene and Bill said "Yes" to their love decades ago. That "Yes" is heard today in Pope Francis's positive words. Both of these affirmations will echo into the future in a Catholic Church where LGBT+ people can live openly, faithfully, and equally. +

## Pope's Theology of Family and Marriage Shows His Support for Civil Unions

By Cristina Traina

*Bondings 2.0*  
NewWaysMinistry.org/blog  
November 5, 2020

What springs to mind when you hear the word "family"? If it's vulnerability, humility, fidelity, unconditional love, selflessness, mutual support and respect, teaming up with others to support the community, and a welcome to children (in particular those with special needs) and LGBTQ members—and if it comes in many shapes and sizes, including same-sex couples—you have a highly placed ally in the Roman Catholic Church: Pope Francis.

These views did not suddenly come to light in the new documentary *Francesco*. According to both Francis and his old friend Yayo Grassi, a gay man, they date back to his public ministry in Argentina, which is to say that they hardly represent a sudden pivot in the face of pressure from the progressive church in the global North. Instead, they represent Francis's encounters with real families of all kinds—including same-sex couples—who have tutored him in their concrete joys and struggles.

The comments also are not just a part of his private conversations. Neither are they unofficial, off-the-cuff remarks. A matter of official teaching, they infuse Francis's 2016 exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, "The Joy of Love," which emerged from the Synod on the Family. *Amoris Laetitia*'s whole point is to meet families where they are, in what Francis calls a mosaic of different circumstances: separated, widowed, di-

vorced, remarried, single-parent, same-sex-partnered, married, or facing challenges of poverty, dislocation, and violence.

Francis acknowledges that Vatican documents typically focus on the "stereotype of the ideal family" (57), which tends to be presented as adhering to "black and white" rules about sacramental marriage (305) that "only lead people to feel judged and abandoned" by the Church (49). Instead, he wants to reflect on common experiences of *all* families, only some of which are built around sacramental marriage.

This shift of emphasis changes the game entirely. Instead of starting with the question, "what is a valid *marriage*?" he asks, "What is the core or essence of *families*?" For Francis, in the end, family comes down to love. Quoting the document that emerged from the 2015 Synod on Family, Francis argues that "the strength of the family lies in its capacity to love and to teach how to love...it can always grow, beginning in love" (53). He pins hope on the fact that "many families, which are far from considering themselves perfect, live in love, fulfill their calling and keep moving forward, even if they fall many times along the way" (57).

To be sure, Francis himself still swings back and forth between the language of mosaic and the language of

"more" and "less" perfect adherence to the Church's definition of marriage; *Amoris Laetitia* still views families built around heterosexual sacramental marriage as more complete, stable, and fulfilled than others. As *Bondings 2.0* has already reported, Francis's support of civil union laws and his insistence on the "right to a family" do nothing to alter this teaching.

Still, Francis's recent comments on our need for family and his focus on love in *Amoris Laetitia* confirm many

LGBTQ families' choices of conscience and indicate a path to future change in teaching. What do sacramentally married families have that others lack, according to Francis? The pope affirms that both involve permanent

commitment, selfless love, patience, community-mindedness, and often parenthood. Non-sacramental families would seem to lack only the grace of the sacrament.

But would they? Even St. Thomas Aquinas, the standard of Roman Catholic orthodoxy, insisted that anyone who truly desired baptism but died before they could be baptized received the "baptism of desire"—in effect, received the grace of baptism. Would God be so stingy with grace as to deny same-sex couples the grace of marriage, who publicly and enthusiastically take on all its burdens and joys? Francis says no: God's grace also

inspires "families who participate in the life of the Church in an incomplete manner" to love, do good, and be of service to others (291). Moreover, quoting Pope Paul VI, he adds that *every* family found in a covenant of love "can become a light in the darkness of the world" (66).

In the end, Francis suggests that families are communities of intimate love that deserve encouragement and protection not because they are perfect but because they are human and seek the good. All families have much to learn, and all have much to teach. Research has shown that same-sex couples often do a better job of managing the concrete practicalities of relationship, such as lovingly sharing household work, than their heterosexual counterparts. The advantage imperfect same-sex couples may have over imperfect sacramentally married couples is that because there has been no ready-made template and little social support for their unions, they can't avoid thoughtfully discussing what their commitment to family means and how they will show and sustain love.

As people who have spent our whole lives thinking about these questions, LGBTQ Catholics are particularly well positioned to engage in a conversation that begins with families rather than with marriage. And for once, we have a pope who seems to be listening. +

**Cristina Traina** is the Avery Cardinal Dulles Professor of Theology at Fordham University. She is also a member of New Ways Ministry's Board of Directors.

## Joe Biden, Second U.S. Catholic President, Attends LGBTQ-Friendly Parish

By Robert Shine

*Bondings 2.0*  
NewWaysMinistry.org/blog  
November 18, 2020

Joe Biden, who will become the second Catholic U.S. president, attends Mass at an LGBTQ-friendly parish. *The Delaware State News* reported:

"On the morning after Election Day, President-elect Biden attended church at

St. Joseph's on the Brandywine, a Catholic church in Greenville. He then visited the church's nearby cemetery, where he visited the graves of his son Beau, daughter Naomi and first wife Neilia.

"Mr. Biden does attend mass there on occasion when he's in the area," said Robert Krebs, the director of the Diocese of Wilmington's communications department.

"St. Joseph is listed as one of three

LGBTQ-friendly Catholic churches in Delaware on the website of New Ways Ministry, a group that advocates for equality for the LGBTQ community in the Catholic church."

In view of Biden's record, the newspaper concluded that his attendance at St. Joseph then "makes sense." As the presidential transition slowly gets underway and his administration begins to take shape, let us pray Joe Biden continues to

be a Catholic defender of LGBTQ equality in a time when it has come under attack from legislatures, courts, and executive orders. +

*New Ways Ministry's list of LGBTQ-friendly parishes will return to print in the next issue of Bondings. If you want to find a friendly parish go to: www.NewWaysMinistry.org/parishes..*

## Why Pope Francis Was Missing From the U.S. Supreme Court's Fulton Case

By Patrick Hornbeck

*Bondings 2.0*  
NewWaysMinistry.org/blog  
November 5, 2020

One major figure in the tortuous saga of the Roman Catholic Church's relationship with the LGBTQ+ community was noticeably absent from the U.S. Supreme Court yesterday: Pope Francis.

The justices were hearing oral arguments in *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia*, which concerned whether the city could require Catholic Social Services (CSS) to assess same-sex couples for fitness as foster parents. Philadelphia had long contracted with CSS as a provider of foster-care services, but two years ago, when the city learned that a different religiously affiliated agency had refused to work with a same-sex couple, it chose not to renew its contracts with all agencies that discriminate, including CSS.

As readers of *Bondings 2.0* know, Pope Francis has a complex history of public remarks concerning the dignity and, sometimes, the civil rights of LGBTQ+ individuals and families. From "Who am I to judge?" to the comments about secular civil unions revealed last month in the documentary *Francesco*, the pope seems to have sought to walk a fine line between affirming magisterial Catholic doctrine on homosexuality (and gender identity) and reaching out to the LGBTQ+ community as a pastor. His remarks on civil unions seem at least somewhat pertinent to the Philadelphia dispute. After all, the city was not asking CSS to bless same-sex households religiously, but only to affirm that they meet secular standards of suitability for foster children.

So one might have expected the pope's words to make an appearance in yesterday's arguments at the Court. One *amicus curiae* (friend of the court) brief submitted on the city's behalf by a group of lay Catholics urged the justices to listen to Pope Francis as "the hierarchical leader of the Roman Catholic Church," whose "message of inclusion has been conspicuously disregarded by the Petitioners." The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' brief, by contrast, quoted the pope only to the effect that he had praised adoptive and foster parents.

But the lawyers neither for CSS nor for the city invoked the pope. And for the city at least, that was good legal strategy.

The city's omission might seem counterintuitive: if the Catholic Church's highest authority is now on record urging governments to provide secular benefits to same-sex couples, doesn't that undermine CSS's argument that it needs an exemption for its religious beliefs in order to participate in Philadelphia's foster-care program?

The likely reason the advocates for the city chose not to advance arguments of this sort is because they were doing everything they could to frame the case as a dispute between the city and one of

its many contractors, rather than as an existential battle between religious freedom and the rights of LGBTQ+ citizens and families. The city and its allies, on whose behalf the brilliant appellate lawyers Neal Kumar Katyal and Jeffrey Fisher argued, urged the justices to decide the case without wading into the deepest of constitutional waters. To have introduced the pope's words would have underscored how fractured the worldwide Catholic Church remains on issues of sexuality and gender. It also would have implicated the long-standing, honorable tradition that U.S. courts refuse on



constitutional grounds to be drawn into religious communities' internal doctrinal disputes.

And so Katyal and Fisher smartly kept the focus on CSS's status as a city contractor, even at the expense of being able to remind the justices that CSS's position is out of step with the majority of U.S. Catholics, even larger majorities

in other Western countries, and perhaps the pope himself. (Disclosure: In addition to the *amicus* brief from the lay Catholic group I referenced above, a different *amicus* brief that New Ways Ministry joined also laid out these facts, introducing the justices to the many Catholic heroes who have worked and are continuing to work for the full legal and religious dignity of LGBTQ+ individuals.)

Much more can and will be said about yesterday's arguments in *Fulton*. The justices debated whether the law should regard sexual orientation discrimination analogously to racial discrimination. They seemed disinclined to overturn *Employment Division v. Smith*, the controversial precedent in this area that Justice Antonin Scalia established back in 1990. Newly-minted Justice Amy Coney Barrett asked her first questions in a case about religion, seemingly signaling a desire to uphold *Smith* but find for CSS on narrower factual grounds. Justice Barrett also offered a jarring hypothetical—about whether a city could force Catholic hospitals to perform abortions—that suggested the topic occupies her mind.

It will likely be months before we learn the Court's judgment in *Fulton* and what it means for this country's ongoing disputes about religious freedom and discrimination. But for all yesterday's legal drama, the pope was not a player. +

**Patrick Hornbeck** who is professor of theology at Fordham University, where he is also a J.D. student in the School of Law.

## New Ways Ministry programs support LGBTQ sisters, educate congregation leaders

By Madeleine Davison

*GlobalSistersReport.org*

October 5, 2020

Sr. Mary Ann Zollmann strode in the dark toward her car. She had just finished speaking about church teachings on gay and lesbian sexuality at a Catholic college in Dubuque, Iowa, and she was reflecting on what had happened during the session.

As she walked, the Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary heard a voice behind her, saying, "Sister, Sister — wait up."

She turned to face a young man, whom she recognized from the audience of the discussion she'd just led. He asked if they could meet sometime for dinner, and she agreed.

"At the first meeting, he said to me, 'When I told my father I was gay, he disowned me,'" Zollmann recalled. "'And because I love my father, and equated him with God, I thought that God disowned me, too. And until the night I met you, no one officially connected with the Catholic Church told me that I was loved by God.'"

Zollmann, a former president of her congregation and of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, says that evening in the early 2000s stuck with her as she has advocated for acceptance of LGBTQ people within her congregation and in the church. In fact, years later, she told the story of the young man to a gathering of lesbian religious sisters at one of the annual conferences hosted by New Ways Ministry, which congregational leaders also attended.

For over four decades, New Ways Ministry has supported LGBTQ women religious and educated their congregational leaders and formation directors through a variety of means, including — over the years — support networks, retreats, conferences, a listserv and a newsletter called *Womanjourney Weavings*. Participants in New Ways' programs for lesbian, bisexual and queer nuns are cur-



Sister Jeannine Gramick, SL

rently working on a book about their experiences.

New Ways has worked toward justice and equality for LGBTQ Catholics and reconciliation with the larger church since its inception in 1977, according to its website. The group held its first retreat for lesbian nuns in 1979, said Sr. Jeannine Gramick, a Sister of Loretto and co-founder of New Ways with the late Fr. Robert Nugent. She said several sisters had requested a retreat specifically for lesbian women religious. The event drew fewer than a dozen attendees, but Gramick said it meant a lot to those present.

In those days, most lesbian sisters were afraid to disclose and openly discuss their identities with their community members, Gramick said. They feared being rejected by the communities they loved. The retreat eased their isolation. "It was very powerful and helpful for them — they felt so accepted, they felt so understood," she said.

Even before it happened, the retreat in 1979 caught the attention of the Vatican, which wrote a letter to Gramick's superiors. Gramick, who at the time was a School Sister of Notre Dame, said her superior was very supportive of her min-

istry to LGBTQ people.

"She said, 'Well, now Jeannine, I'm telling you what [the Vatican] told me. I'm not telling you to cancel it; I'm telling you what they told me,'" Gramick recalled. "So of course, we had the retreat."

In the mid-1980s, New Ways held a series of regional workshops for lesbian sisters, and conferences for leaders of



Sister Mary Ann Zollman, BVM

women's religious communities, according to a chapter Gramick wrote in the book *More than a Monologue: Sexual Diversity and the Catholic Church*. Also in the 1980s, Gramick said she started to connect lesbian sisters with others who lived in the same city to discuss their experiences.

Then, in 1990, New Ways started its *Womanjourney Weavings* newsletter, which reaches about 400 women religious across the country, according to Gramick's book chapter. Gramick said the newsletter started at the suggestion of Sr. Tobias Hagan, who conducted annual retreats for lesbian sisters at a center near St. Louis, Missouri. (Hagan died in 2009.)

Gramick said the retreats, networks, and newsletters helped lesbian sisters find support and community. "It's really trying to overcome that feeling of isolation — like, 'I'm not the only one. There are others,'" she said.

In 2005, New Ways held its first conference for both lesbian sisters as well as their leaders and formation directors in Racine, Wisconsin. Hagan spoke at the conference, which was titled "Lesbian Religious: Continuing the Conversation," and dealt with exploring sexual identity and educating other sisters about issues related to the LGBTQ community, Gramick said. Since then, conferences have dealt with topics such as coming out, dismantling heteronormativity, and dealing with homophobia in religious communities.

For lesbian sisters, the conferences were affirming and invigorating, Gramick said, quoting comments she received after a recent event.

"The weekend was a special time to be with others like me — so very enriching," said one sister, in a comment Gramick shared via email. "I felt very nurtured, affirmed, and supported — that there was a place for me in religious life. I was relaxed and felt safe in my identity."

Particularly in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, Gramick said, women faced homophobia within their communities as well as from the church and society. This pressure often frightened them into remaining silent, and concealing a significant part of their spiritual and personal identities.

The fear lesbian sisters had of coming out could sometimes limit their closeness with other sisters, in large ways and small. Lesbian sisters might feel pressured to keep their emotional lives and thoughts a secret, for fear that others might discover their identity and disapprove.

Some people wonder why it matters for women religious, who take vows of chastity, to disclose their sexual identi-

ties. But for many lesbian sisters, it matters a lot, wrote Sr. Fran Fasolka, a member of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, in a recent issue of *Womanjourney Weavings*. She attended a retreat for lesbian sisters and found immense joy in being open with other women who shared her experiences.

"The emptiness within me that has been created by distance and silence cried out for connection and nourishment," she wrote.

For the congregation leaders who attended, the conferences were educational, providing a safe space to learn and ask questions. Several leaders said they saw how painful the church's official anti-LGBT stance was for their lesbian sisters, and that they were moved by the faith the sisters showed.

"I was continually learning ... of their suffering and their great faithfulness to the church which was so harsh in its judgment of their orientation," said Sr. Helen Marie Burns, a Sister of Mercy who has served in various leadership roles in her community and is a former president of LCWR.

Sr. Susan Seeby, a Sister of St. Agnes, said she attended a recent conference in Racine as a congregational leader. She said there were people picketing outside the venue — who had stuck around after protesting a prior conference for gay priests — wielding "very offensive signs."

"I felt shaken by that," Seeby said. "But the sisters who were on retreat continued to allow themselves to be moved



Sister Susan Seeby, CSA

to a deep spiritual experience, and I didn't hear hatred, or anger, or resentment or anything — what I heard was, 'I wish we could have a dialogue!'"

Some of the leaders who attended conferences said they learned about the spectrum of human sexuality, terms to describe sexuality and gender identity, and diverse interpretations of church teaching and Scripture when it comes to sexuality and gender.

Burns said some Bible scholars contextualize rules in Leviticus — often used to position gay and lesbian sexualities as an "abomination" — as a product of a very different era. Other scholars, such as Sr. Margaret Farley, propose a "just love" model, that prioritizes the quality of human relationships over who is relating.

"There is much more room for a comfortable identity — Catholic and lesbian, Catholic and bisexual, Catholic and transgender," Burns said.

Zollmann said New Ways' work can be freeing both for LGBTQ sisters and for their fellow congregation members, because often, religious communities don't talk openly about sexuality at all. This can lead some heterosexual sisters to fear their lesbian counterparts.

"[Some worry], 'How can I live with a woman who has come out as lesbian and not be fearful of what she might desire of me as a woman?'" Zollmann said. "That's ... part of the fear that lesbian women have in coming out, that it will negatively impact their relationships with a community that they've come to know and love."

Congregational leaders said the conferences helped them better support members of their own congregations who

are discerning their identities or who have come out.

Gramick said the Vatican once looked on New Ways with deep suspicion. In part because of the pushback she and her community received from the Vatican over the years due to her work with New Ways, she transferred to the Sisters of Loretto in 2001. Under Pope Francis, she said, there have been "no letters from the Vatican." But the U.S. bishops, many of whom were appointed by previous popes, are still "much more anti-LGBT," she said.

Within religious communities, it's now easier for women to come out and live openly as LGBTQ sisters, she said.

Part of this is due to the work New Ways and other advocates have done within communities, creating a "ripple" effect as leaders learn from lesbian sisters and educate their congregations, Burns said. Gramick also attributed the more positive climate in the U.S. to shifts in public opinion. A majority of U.S. Catholics now support marriage equality for same-sex couples, according to the Pew Research Center.

"The main difference is the acceptance by the people — not by the hierarchy, but by the people," Gramick said. "That's the real church: the people of God, the people in the pew."

New Ways' work with LGBTQ sisters and congregation leaders has changed with the times. As sisters grow older and populations of sisters shrink, Gramick said, the local meet-ups for lesbian sisters are no longer held, replaced by conferences. And now, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ministry has evolved again: this year's conference — on gender identity — will be held online in December 2020.

As attitudes shift among laypeople, some congregational leaders said they hope the church hierarchy will become more inclusive of LGBTQ people. The church's hardline stance continues to inflict suffering on many LGBTQ Catholics — including religious sisters, Seeby said.

When she and her congregation prayed at a memorial vigil for the 49 mostly LGBTQ victims of the 2016 mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, a member of a local LGBTQ group expressed gratitude for their solidarity, but seemed surprised that Catholic sisters would show support, she said.

"One of the things I wish people would realize is the pain that is caused, especially in a spiritual religious tradition, when people are judged and found somehow lacking," Seeby said.

For other sisters, the support of laypeople and other sisters is what matters the most. Zollmann said it would be "freeing" if the Vatican would formally affirm LGBTQ Catholics. But in the meantime, she and other participants in



Sister Helen Marie Burns, RSM

the New Ways programs plan to continue educating and supporting their fellow sisters.

"In some ways, it's made no difference whatsoever in our community what some official church personnel believe about homosexuality," she said. "We continue to live our lives, and we continue to be loving and compassionate and inclusive, celebratory of the uniqueness of each person as we live each day." ♡

## Archbishop: "Nobody is kicked out of the house, much less for being homosexual"

By Carlos Navarro Fernández  
[www.CatolicosArcoiris.mx](http://www.CatolicosArcoiris.mx)  
 August 21, 2020

The leaders of REDCAM, Mexico's national association of Catholic LGBTQ groups, recently met via Zoom with the archbishop of Monterrey. The following is an English translation of their website's report of the meeting.

When we began our virtual meeting with Monsignor Rogelio Cabrera López, Archbishop of Monterrey, Nuevo León (one of Mexico's northernmost states, bordering Texas), our expectation was to be forced to "illustrate" him, to show him how little he knew about the LGBTIQ+ Catholic community. Our greatest responsibility, we thought, would be to remove the blindfold, to make him see!

There was no need to carry out such an effort or fulfill such a high endeavor. On August 12, 2020, Mons. Rogelio gave us a fraternal welcome and also made us see that he not only knows our community, but also highly appreciates it. He made it clear that he is willing to establish communication with us.

He spoke to us about being aware that "this reality is a challenge." Do we know this to be a fact! That is why, he explained, "he has always wanted priests to serve the LGBTIQ+ community with charity and respect", just as the Catechism of the Catholic Church requires. In broader terms, he expressed how difficult it is for many to assimilate this cultural change and this openness. "It is neither easy for the civil institutions nor for the ecclesiastical institution," he told us.

"I understand that after rejection, after injury, many decide to make their way apart," Mons. Rogelio told us, referring to the LGBTIQ+ community. With his attitude and through his words, we perceived a level of empathy very rarely shown by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Mexico. We were almost ready to grant him "honoris causa" membership to our beloved Mexico Network of Rainbow Catholics (REDCAM). He added: "Many live their Catholic faith in silence, few do so openly. We are on their side and we do not enter into the debate for the conversion of people." How comforting to hear him speak like this: "We want someone to be there to talk to with the respect that each one

deserves. Find a way to say everything that happens in life." Just what we at the REDCAM want to offer, not only to the Archdiocese of Monterrey but to the Church throughout Mexico. We believe that there must be positive, respectful, and truly spiritual options to replace the harmful "conversion therapies" that we have heard so much about recently.

So that not everything would remain as nice theoretical and philosophical concepts, he told us that he has appointed three priests from the Archdiocese of Monterrey to "serve diverse groups." What we call a work of Pastoral for Diversity. Fr. Edgar Alvarado confirmed that this would now be one of his responsibilities. Edgar was very happy to know

couples. It is our opinion that it is an appropriate decision for the times, although definitely not the ideal one just yet. It seems to be a good option that the institution can use to welcome LGBTIQ+ people as true Catholic faithful, particularly including their children, who should also be able to become Catholic.

Our time to speak had come. The archbishop listened carefully to our presentation and voiced his gratitude and congratulations for what the REDCAM does throughout Mexico. They are achievements that belong to all of our constituent groups, to their creativity, their courage and their many spiritual fruits. When we told him about them, we perceived Mons. Rogelio's joy in learning

that there are already lay people committed to this mission and - very important! - an organization, a structure, a method to implement these new pastoral efforts. In response to our presentation, he affirmed: "We have to go about this change institutionally. That is the task that priests have, above all, to help in achieving this goal. That there are no forgotten margins in the Church and in society."

Fr. Hernán Quintero spoke of the work he is carrying out in Villahermosa and his desire to offer true pastoral care to LGBTIQ+ Catholics in Mexico's southeast. He described young people who do not want to give up their Catholic evangelization but who often do not find the "official" channels to conduct it, to contribute

and to grow as they truly are. Mons. Rogelio told us about his time in the Diocese of Tapachula (Chiapas, on the Guatemalan border) and about the diverse cultural ways of the Mexican southeast. He agreed that there, too, it is necessary not to lose for the Church those many young LGBTIQ+ Catholics.

We certainly agree with Mons. Rogelio that there is much work to be done and that the institutional Church changes ever so slowly. He compared the joint work that we have pending to the construction of a large building: "It is a difficult terrain, but you have to move on.



From top left, clockwise: Carlos Navarro and Antonio Ortiz, REDCAM co-coordinators; Archbishop Cabrera; Fr. Hernán Quintero, Fr. Edgar Alvarado.

that he will have "experienced partners" who will help him understand - and to serve - the LGBTIQ+ Catholics in his archdiocese now "as God intended." That was a very special moment, very significant for us who have spent years working hard for this type of efforts to start, expand and become stronger.

"Nobody is kicked out of the house, much less for being homosexual." With these forceful words, Mons. Cabrera explained to us, for example, the decision he made six years ago to designate a specific chapel in which to extend the baptism to the children of homosexual

Like those who started the Gothic cathedrals; never sit back, never say it's not possible."

These are points with which the REDCAM agrees. We have experienced it firsthand and - as individuals and as groups - we know very well what we are talking about. When telling him about our preference for Saint Francis or Saint Theresa - who fought to change the Church rather than abandon it - Mons. Cabrera was very empathetic with our reasoning: "You have to start with the foundations at this time. Know how to be patient. The patience of the martyrs and the saints. We must not complain but move on. Patients do not fold their arms, they do not stop walking."

However, as a good shepherd, he did not cease to encourage our hope about today's world, so agile and so well communicated, where certain changes are already taking shape more quickly: "There are accelerators that we must favor: Pope Francis has set us at a different speed." We must learn to take advantage of these favorable current circumstances to achieve concrete and effective benefits for LGBTIQ+ Catholics. It is our turn to change the world and even through small steps, we will be persistent and we will keep the Holy Spirit on our side.

Mons. Rogelio thanked the REDCAM for the initiative to contact him to start the dialogue; it took him just a few hours to accept our invitation and open the doors to his archdiocese. He promised to meet us periodically and, eventually, to think about tools that can be adopted by the Mexican Conference of Catholic Bishops (CEM), which he is now presiding, to bring the institutional Church closer to LGBTIQ+ Catholics. In the spirit of an ongoing communication, cooperation and change, we said goodbye, certain that very positive signs will arrive in the near future.

At the end of the meeting, Hernán asked Mons. Rogelio for his blessing, which he happily gave us. We are full of hope and grateful to God for allowing this meeting to take place in which a lot of generosity - and a lot of openness - was shown by all the participants. A robust bridge of dialogue, understanding and Christian charity was crossed in both directions. May it happen again! ♣

## Transgender woman's role at Mass stirs controversy in Argentina

By Inés San Martín  
[CruxNow.com](http://CruxNow.com)  
 August 28, 2020

Marking an historical first in Pope Francis's home country, the Diocese of San Luis in northern Argentina invited a transgender woman Tuesday to read one of the prayer intentions at a public Mass celebrated by the local bishop.

The invitation was issued to Francia López by civil officials to recognize the work she does among the city's poor, daily feeding 400 people from a soup kitchen she runs. It came without the advance knowledge of the new bishop, Gabriel Barba, who took over the diocese July 11, and who chose a small village outside of the diocesan metropolitan area to celebrate his first Mass. Due to COVID-19 restrictions as well as the small size of the town, there were only a few souls in attendance in that first liturgy: on a good day, no more than 100 people live in San José del Morro.

At the end of Tuesday's Mass, López told the media she saw the invitation as a "historic moment" and regarded it as "very hopeful, because it will allow us to build a Church as human beings, where the life options of diverse families have always encountered many obstacles to living their spiritual life."

"The bishop's message was so pastoral, with his gaze fixed on the poor," López emphasized, adding that this constitutes "true hope."

"We need to be able to baptize our children, to count on the word of the shepherds in the face of death and not

continue to make children pay for decisions of which they are not part," said López, a professor of Legal and Accounting Sciences who is a school director, and a conductor of a radio program in a local station.

López praised the bishop, saying that her role during the Mass allowed her to "value" the Church to the which she belongs "by family mandate," as a "place of inclusion and love of neighbor."

Though Barba took much of the credit – and the heat – for having a transgender woman read an intention, Sister Monica Astorga, a friend of Pope Francis who for decades has ministered to transgender women in southern Argentina, told *Crux* that he actually didn't know about it beforehand.

"I talk a lot with the bishop there, so when I saw the news, I sent him a note saying 'great,'" she said Thursday by telephone. When Barba was the bishop of his previous diocese, Astorga said, she put him in touch with a local family that has a transgender girl, and the bishop "accompanied them a lot."

The sister said the bishop didn't know Lopez is transgendered before the Mass, and his gut reaction was that it was too early in his term in San Luis for such a controversial gesture. The diocese is known as being one of the most conservative in Argentina, where even including a guitar accompanying the choir at the Mass and allowing for applause at the end of the ceremony were considered sensitive.

Once Barba learned of the invitation, Astorga said, he didn't object, and he

might have issued one himself eventually. He was concerned that including a transgender woman would be seen as too big a step, too soon, she said, but Astorga said she reassured him.

"I told him that perhaps all this internal church fighting, all these criticisms, are something superficial," she said, adding that the question is "how it's impacted the trans community."

The news of Lopez reading at Mass was shared in several social media groups that Astorga monitors.

"The news generated a lot of joy," she said. "I told the bishop he should see it as something God allowed. Now the trans community of San Luis, at least, know that they can go into the cathedral church and pray, because someone who's like them was allowed to read during such an important Mass."

Father James Martin, editor at large of *America Magazine* and known for his outreach towards LGBTQ Catholics in the United States, applauded the news of Barba inviting López.

"It's essential to include all the faithful in the Prayers of the Faithful, and that includes LGBTQ people," he told *Crux*. "That means we pray for their needs and we also invite them to pray. Bishop Barba was acting as a true pastor in welcoming a transgender woman to pray in the cathedral."

Martin, who last year met with Pope Francis in the Vatican, when the pope reportedly encouraged him to continue with his ministry, said López is "a child of God, a baptized Catholic, and a full member of the church. And for anyone

who doubts this: it is surely not a sin simply to be a transgender person."

Yet not everyone saw the news as positive. A well-known conservative Catholic outlet, *InfoCatólica*, published an article that's drawn more than 50 comments, mostly negative, attacking the bishop, blaming the pope and condemning López.

"We are all sinners, but sin must not be defended and propagated," one commenter wrote. "It is quite regrettable and painful that the priest" can bless "mortal sin in the person of monstrous and unhappy transsexuals."

Another user, who identified herself as "Lourdes," wrote that perversion comes from the Devil and all those who sin against God and take Holy Communion "eat their own condemnation."

Several called the bishop and others in attendance "heretics," "apostates" and "blasphemers."

Pope Francis sent a letter in which he expressed his closeness to the diocese, written before news of López's participation in the Mass.

"The festivities are a meeting between the holy faithful people of God, the bishop and the patron saint," Francis wrote. "All come together on this day to meet the Lord, in a feast of prayer and joy, of peace and hope. I bless you and all the holy faithful people of God who will celebrate the patron saint festivities, and I ask the Virgin and Saint Louis the king, pilgrim, to take care of you during your path." ♣

## Bishops Respond Positively to Pope Francis' Civil Unions Support

The following are excerpts from comments by bishops around the U.S. and around the globe who responded positively by the pope's statements. You can find the full comments by going to [www.NewWaysMinistry.org/category/pope-francis/](http://www.NewWaysMinistry.org/category/pope-francis/)

**Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, Dublin,** said the pope's remarks were a sign "our [Catholics] attitude has to change." He continued :

"There are in other countries very strong homophobic tendencies even in church leaders. And what I find, even here ourselves, we have some people whose frustration with their own gay identity is leading them to be homophobic in ways. So, the first thing I'd say is that the Pope is clearing the air for a further discussion.

"After the same sex marriage referendum here in Ireland I talked about the idea of a reality check. And this again would be an opportunity for people to do a reality check within the church."

### Archbishop Paul Etienne, Seattle:

"When the Holy Father speaks and or teaches, he is almost always speaking to the Universal Church. The United States already recognizes civil unions of same-sex couples, who are able to marry and receive all the legal protections which that guarantees. However, in many other parts of the world, people with same-sex attraction face considerable oppression, including in some countries, death. . .

"The Holy Father is calling us as Church, as he has on numerous other occasions, to begin with the human person. Catechesis is important, but not the starting point. Building relationships comes first, then instruction, conversion, and integrating the faith ever more deeply into one's life. In a real way he is challenging the Church to expand the tent."

**Bishop Virgilio David, Kalookan, Philippines**, speaking as president of the national bishops conference :

"This is how we understand what Pope Francis is doing. He is not out to destroy our morals and orthodoxy. He

just wants to do as Jesus himself did. He valued being kind and compassionate

### Bishop Raúl Vera, Saltillo, Mexico:

"It makes me very happy that a new door is opening in the church for people who still don't have a place in it because God is going to ask about them," the 75-year-old Vera said, adding that those who suggest Francis' comments were misinterpreted just don't want to hear the message.

"It is very important that we initiate a new stage in the relationship of the Catholic Church with the LGBT family in the world,"

### Archbishop Bernard Hebda, St. Paul, Minnesota:

"The Pope seems to be emphasizing that we are called to find ways of extending a true sense of family to those who find themselves on the margins, so that they might experience the security of belonging and the joy of encountering the life-changing mercy of Jesus Christ."

### Bishop Oscar Cantú, San Jose, California:

"[The pope] seemed to be offering a pastoral response to the reality of same-sex couples living without legal protections and often subject to violations of their human dignity and even violence."

### Bishop David Zubik of Pittsburgh:

The pope's comments "reflect his pastoral approach to persons who may be on the peripheries of society," reflecting Jesus' call to "treat each other with fairness and dignity."

### Kerala Catholic Bishops Council, India:

"The church is considering adding those in [same-gender] relations to the flock."

*Not all bishops supported Pope Francis' supportive comments on civil unions. Some questioned their significance, context, and meaning. Their comments can also be found at [www.NewWaysMinistry.org/category/pope-francis/](http://www.NewWaysMinistry.org/category/pope-francis/)*

## Pope to Parents of LGBT Children: 'Church Loves Your Children as They Are'

By Robert Shine

*Bondings 2.0*  
[NewWaysMinistry.org/blog](http://NewWaysMinistry.org/blog)  
October 18, 2020

Pope Francis has received a group of Italian parents with LGBT children, who presented the pope with the Italian edition of a new book filled with the stories of such Catholic families. An English edition of the book is due to be released by New Ways Ministry in October.

The audience between Pope Francis and forty representatives from the Italian group Tenda di Gionata (Jonathan's Tent), which supports parents with LGBT children, occurred Wednesday at the Vatican. *Religión Digital* reported:

"Pope Francis greeted them warmly and, at the end of the audience, the vice president of the association, Mara Grassi, together with her husband gave [the]



Pope Francis with Maria Grassi

pope] a copy of *Genitori Fortunati* [Blessed Parents]. The volume synthesizes the ecclesial experiences, often very hard, that lesbian and gay Catholics have had to go through.

"Along with these testimonies, the association has also included letters with

specific requests and criticisms of the treatment [LGBT people] received by the Church, which has forgotten or stigmatized the LGBT community. 'The Church does not exclude them,' Francis replied. 'It loves your children as they are, because they are children of God.'"

"As Avvenire.it has published, the association gave the Pontiff a rain-

bow t-shirt with the words 'In love there is no fear' (1 Jn 4:18). Francisco smiled upon receiving it, a moment when Grassi highlighted the 'deep harmony that we will not forget.'"

One LGBT representative from Tenda di Gionata said they could not have

imagined ever meeting with Pope Francis given the "painful journey" that so many LGBT Catholics of faith have endured. Grassi told *Avvenire.it* further:

"Our association wants the Church and families with LGBT children to be in dialogue. Taking a cue from the title of the book we presented to him, I explained that we consider ourselves lucky because we have been forced to change the way we have always looked at our children. What we now have is a new gaze that has allowed us to see the beauty and love of God in them. We want to create a bridge with the Church. . . so that the Church too can change its gaze towards our children, no longer excluding them but welcoming them fully." +

## In Malta: Teachers must be employed by competence in faith schools

By Cynthia Chircop and Joe Grima

*MaltaToday.com*  
August 6, 2020

Readers may have noticed how every now and then, an occasional article or opinion piece pops up on their news feeds about an Equality Bill. These articles took various forms, discussing how parents are having their right to choosing a Catholic school for their children taken away, or how teachers will be censored and denied their right to be Catholic in class.

Worryingly, these articles have now taken the form of a push for a conscientious objection clause.

This strategy is nothing but an evolution of the divorce debate. Gone are the billboards and the in-your-face pictures condemning people to eternal damnation. Instead, the lobby has reorganised itself and launched subtler media and lobby campaigns, which caught even us by surprise. This does not make the lobby any less dangerous.

What is the Equality Bill then? Years in the making, the Bill seeks to gather together the equality provisions that already exist in Maltese law, in order to unequivocally protect characteristics such as age, belief, political opinion, nationality, language, gender expression or gender identity, and sexual orientation from any form of discrimination. This includes protections when accessing goods and services, in financial services, in employment and access to employee's associations amongst others.

In practice, a shop owner cannot choose not to serve a Jewish person, a business cannot demote an employee because of their political opinion, a gym owner cannot ask a black man to leave for no reason other than the colour of his skin, a pregnant woman cannot be denied

a promotion she deserves, and a trans person cannot be turned down when buying health insurance. It also means that a church school cannot refuse to employ a gay man, and it cannot make a trans employee redundant solely because of their sexual orientation and gender identity.

This last part does not seem to have gone down well with church schools.

We say this, because in recent articles, church schools have made it clear that they are pushing for a conscientious objection clause to be inserted in the Equality Bill. What that would do, is give church schools a very special provision in the law that would allow them to effectively become immune to the effects of this law – a license to discriminate. The effects could theoretically span from selecting teachers based on their religious beliefs, superseding competence and qualifications, to making teachers redundant if they were to start divorce proceedings against their ex-spouses.

This is all being sold to teachers and teachers' associations under claims that the current form of the Bill will prevent teachers from expressing their Catholic views in their lessons, turning the entire argument on its head and making it look like this entire push is being done to protect teachers themselves.

Interestingly, Article 6 of the Bill already states that church schools are allowed to enforce 'policies for teachers within educational establishments, the ethos of which is based on a belief, creed or religion, and the requirement for teachers to act in good faith and in line with the said policies'. Therefore, what the Bill does is to not allow a school to fire a teacher who is divorcing, but the teacher cannot actively promote divorce, on the basis that it goes against the ethos of the school. Incidentally, we have nothing against that particular clause.

The Catholic lobby is not seeking to develop Article 6. In the various articles that started appearing in the media, it was never mentioned that this clause was insufficient, or that it needed to be worded better. Instead, the push was unequivocally for a conscientious objection.

What is being forgotten is that the law cannot make a distinction between religions. The church schools' own proposal would give unlimited discriminatory powers to educational institutions set up by religious groups such as Komunita' Gesu Salvatur – which the Church previously endorsed – but from which it disassociated itself recently.

It would be unfair not to mention that, with a few exceptions, members of the LGBTIQ+ community are full of praise for Church schools. The law should, however, be forward-looking, and never fall victim to assumptions and a false sense of security.

It is dangerous to assume that such a clause would apply only to Catholic Schools; other religions do exist, and like Catholicism, they have various denominations including a few extremist ones that preach intolerance. Legislators should never assume that the moderate Roman Catholic ethos of current church schools will remain moderate forever. If a school with extreme religious beliefs is set up, it will be legally able to discriminate as it sees fit. Following that, if the law was rewritten to satisfy the discriminatory selectivity of Catholic schools, it would be discriminatory towards other religions.

This is not to mention the dangers of giving any schools the right to pick away at the National Curriculum Framework for other subjects to substitute with their values, even if they are potentially not factual or scientific, which will undo the holistic exposure that has been achieved

in schools.

It is also the very nature of conscientious objection clauses, away from the subject of church schools, that is dangerous. We have already seen the Medical Council try to sneak in a similar clause that allows a medical practitioner to 'register an objection' without fully safeguarding the rights of the patient.

What if, then, a health worker registers an objection when asked to treat a patient with disability because they believe that he is a burden on society? Should doctors who believe that sex should take place between married couples be allowed to refuse to treat an unmarried pregnant woman? Should a doctor refuse to give a referral for IVF treatment to a lesbian couple because they believe same sex couples should not have children? Can therefore a teacher be allowed to teach that evolution is a myth, or that the earth is flat?

More dangerously, should a teacher be allowed to suggest that women should never refuse their husbands' advances, and that rape between married couples does not exist?

Clearly, we do not expect Church and other faith schools to abandon their ethos. Church schools have a role in our education system, which is constructive and of importance to parents and students. Nevertheless, just like any other employer in Malta, educational and otherwise, the employment process is expected to be based solely on competence, qualifications and experience. Nothing more, and nothing less. +

Cynthia Chircop and Joe Grima are activists of the Malta LGBTIQ Rights Movement (MGRM)