

TIME

The Pope's Baby Step on Gays

Francis' encouraging words show how far the Roman Catholic Church still has to go

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http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/09/19/pope-francis-church-cant-interfere-with-gays/?hpt=hp_t1

By Gene Robinson - Aug. 12, 2013

In July 2013, Pope Francis I traveled to Brazil, meeting with the poor and the dispossessed, engaging the throngs with little regard for his security and even pleasing the crowd with his offer of a song on the guitar. This is no formal and aloof bishop but rather a man of and for the people. Justice is on his mind and his lips.

But it was a question he was asked on the flight back to Rome, about homosexuality, that has come to define the trip and has brought up the conversation about whether the Roman Catholic Church might be softening its stance on being gay. (Even using the word gay, which Francis did in English while otherwise speaking Italian, is unprecedented for a Pope.)

Is there anything new in what he had to say? Well, yes, in terms of tone. And this is no small thing. Francis' immediate predecessors called homosexuality an "intrinsic moral evil" and branded homosexuals as "intrinsically disordered." Instead of mirroring those blanket condemnations, Francis offered kindness and compassion. Then, in an act of genuine humility, he asked, "Who am I to judge?"

"If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has goodwill, who am I to judge?" he told reporters on the flight back to Rome after his trip to Brazil.

It is telling that this rhetorical question got so much attention, since Jesus, who Christians believe was the perfect revelation of God, warned, "Judge not, that you be not judged." Yet previous Popes have shown no hesitation in being judgmental about homosexuality. This change in tone is significant.

Pope Francis explained his comments further days later in Rome: "The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains this very well. It says [gay people] should not be marginalized because of this but that they must be integrated into society."

What did it mean? Was he changing church teaching? And how might it affect 1.2 billion Roman Catholics worldwide?

A closer look at the Pope's statement reveals little change in the church's stance on being gay. When Francis says gay people should be forgiven for their sins like other people, he means that acting on their feelings for someone of the same gender is still a sin that requires forgiveness--a point the Vatican made clear shortly after his remarks. He reaffirmed the Roman Catholic Church's position that homosexual acts were sinful, but homosexual orientation was not.

Francis' more open tone may mean the most for gay Catholic priests. Rather than calling for them to be expelled from the church, Francis is preaching compassion--so long as they are true to their vows of celibacy. Most encouraging of all is the separation of gay priests from the sexual-abuse scandals of the past. Both Benedict XVI and John Paul II thought they would solve the scandals by ridding the church of gay priests--a wholly unfair linking of homosexuality with pedophilia that has been thoroughly debunked by science. This is enormously positive for gay priests, who have been living under a cloud of suspicion for years.

But what about gay parishioners sitting in the pews of Catholic churches, trying to reconcile their faith with the condemnation of their love as disordered, evil and sinful? Not much has changed, I'm afraid, even with the Pope's recent remarks.

In September 2013, Pope Francis expanded on his views on homosexuality in an interview with Rev. Antonio Spadaro, editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, a Jesuit journal based in Rome. Pope Francis said the church has the right to express its opinions but not to "interfere spiritually" in the lives of gays and lesbians.

Moreover, he said that if the church fails to find a "new balance" between its spiritual and political missions, the pope warned, its moral foundation will "fall like a house of cards." Pope Francis said, "The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials."

"Religion has the right to express its opinion in the service of the people, but God in creation has set us free: it is not possible to interfere spiritually in the life of a person."

Francis said that someone once asked him if he "approved" of homosexuality.

"I replied with another question," he said. "'Tell me, when God looks at a gay person, does he endorse the existence of this person with love, or reject and condemn this person?' We must always consider the person."

The pope's comments don't break with Catholic doctrine or policy, but instead show a shift in approach, moving from censure to engagement.

Francis' softening in tone is being reflected elsewhere in the Christian church. Mainline denominations are taking an ever more tolerant approach to homosexuality. Conservative evangelicals, especially younger ones, are looking for a way to affirm gay Christians and the love they come to know with other people. Fuller Theological Seminary, the U.S.'s largest evangelical seminary, has a new OneTable group exploring a biblical way forward in how its members can more deeply accept their gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender brothers and sisters

in Christ. Even evangelicals understand that changing their stance on this issue may be key to attracting young people, whether gay or straight, to the church and keeping them.

Pope: Leave gays alone



Church gets locked up in 'small-minded rules'

Pope Francis says the church shouldn't "interfere spiritually" in the lives of gays and lesbians. He also says women must play a key role in the church. [FULL STORY](#)

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CNN.com headline (Sept. 19, 2013)