

# Pope Francis changes Catholic Church's tone on homosexuality

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This article appears in the [August 21, 2013](#) issue.

With his open and easygoing manner, Pope Francis charmed the media as much as the faithful during his visit to Brazil, the first international pilgrimage of his pontificate.

But it was the pope's remarks about gay priests, made during a freewheeling press conference on the return trip to Rome, that drew the most headlines, raising questions about whether the pontiff was signaling a change in the church's approach to this volatile issue.

When asked by reporters about rumors of a "gay lobby" of clergy in the Vatican who were exposing the Holy See to blackmail schemes and scandal, Francis at first joked that while there's a lot of talk about such a lobby, "I have yet to find on a Vatican identity card the word gay. "

Then, in a more serious vein, he added: "I think that when we encounter a gay person, we must make the distinction between the fact of a person being gay and the fact of a lobby, because lobbies are not good . . . . If a person is gay and seeks the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge that person?"

Francis also cited church teaching to argue that gays should never be marginalized: "The problem is not that one has this tendency (to homosexuality); no, we must be brothers. This is the first matter."

Blogs and social media immediately exploded with commentary that either hailed or lamented the pope's words as signaling a shift in Catholic teaching on the role of gays and lesbians in the church.

The pope said nothing that would indicate any change in the tenet that homosexuality is, as the Catholic catechism states, "objectively disordered." Church teaching holds that because same-sex relations cannot lead to children they are against the natural moral law and that homosexuality is condemned in scripture.

What the pope did appear to do, however, was to push back against a 2005 policy instituted by Pope Benedict XVI, his immediate predecessor, which stated that men with "deep-seated homosexual tendencies" could not be ordained. In a 2010 interview, Benedict underscored that view, saying that

“homosexuality is incompatible with the priestly vocation.”

Francis took a different tack in his remarks on July 28.

“Pope Francis seems to feel that as long as a gay priest is not acting out sexually, he should not be judged,” said Richard Gaillardetz of Boston College, president of the Catholic Theological Society of America. “And he apparently sees no impediment to that priest serving the church well.”

It was also notable that during his news conference Francis defended one of his first major appointments, that of Monsignor Battista Ricca to help oversee the scandal-plagued Vatican Bank. Since his promotion, Ricca has been the target of an intense whispering campaign that accuses him of having had at least one gay affair years ago.

Francis denounced such witch hunts and added that “if a person, or . . . priest or a nun, has committed a sin and then that person experienced conversion, the Lord forgives and when the Lord forgives, the Lord forgets.”

Perhaps the biggest message that Francis sent, and the most substantial change he made, was in tone.

He did not refer to talk of gays and lesbians as “objectively disordered,” nor did he say, as Benedict did, that homosexuality “is one of the miseries of the church.”

As James Martin noted, Francis even used the word *gay*, and in a positive sense, whereas *homosexuals* has been the term used by popes and Vatican officials. “This is a sea change,” said Martin, a U.S. Jesuit and popular author.

“This may be a matter of ‘style’ in some sense, but in this case style matters,” Gaillardetz said. “One can appeal to our doctrinal tradition in order to justify moral rigidity and exclusionary attitudes or one can appeal to our doctrinal tradition as a call to be instruments of mercy and compassion. Francis has chosen the latter course and it has made all the difference!”

Observers have already detected an effort by Vatican officials to soft-pedal the pope’s comments, while some Catholics on the right were trying to explain them away—a campaign that Ross Douthat, a conservative and Catholic columnist for the *New York Times*, rejected as undermining the pope’s clear intention.

“Conservative Catholics suggesting there’s no news in the pope’s remarks are parsing the words, downplaying their context and spirit,” Douthat tweeted.

Francis’s openness with the media marks another difference from his predecessor, who answered only scripted questions by the Vatican’s chief spokesman, Federico Lombardi. During the 80-minute

conversation, Francis touched on other issues of Catholic doctrine:

- He reaffirmed the church's ban on ordaining women to the priesthood, saying the issue had been definitively resolved by Pope John Paul II. "That door is closed," he said, adding that Catholic theologians needed to reflect more on the role of women in the church.
- On the other hand, the pope advocated "mercy" for divorced and remarried Catholics, who are currently banned from receiving communion if they have not obtained a church annulment. —RNS

*This article was edited on August 8, 2013.*