

Plot thickens over origins of pope's civil union endorsement

by [Nicole Winfield](#) in the [November 18, 2020](#) issue



A shared kiss outside the Vatican during a candlelit demonstration for gay rights on December 6, 2008. (AP Photo / Alessandra Tarantino)

In mid-October, questions swirled about the origins of Pope Francis's bombshell comments endorsing same-sex civil unions, with all evidence suggesting he made them in a 2019 interview that was never broadcast in its entirety.

The Vatican refused to comment on whether it cut the remarks from its own broadcast or if the Mexican broadcaster that conducted the interview did. And it didn't respond to questions about why it allowed the comments to be aired now in the documentary *Francesco*, which premiered on October 21 at the Rome Film Festival.

In the movie, Francis says gay people have the right to be in a family since they are "children of God."

“You can’t kick someone out of a family, nor make their life miserable for this,” the pope says. “What we have to have is a civil union law; that way they are legally covered.”

Those comments caused a firestorm, thrilling progressives and alarming conservatives, given that official Vatican teaching prohibits church approval of same-sex unions.

While serving as archbishop of Buenos Aires, Francis had endorsed civil unions for gay couples as an alternative to same-sex marriages. But this is the first time any sitting pope has come out publicly in favor of legal protections for civil unions.

One of Francis’s top communications advisers, Antonio Spadaro, insisted the pope’s comments were old news, saying they were made during a May 2019 interview with Mexican broadcaster Televisa.

“There’s nothing new because it’s a part of that interview,” Spadaro said as he exited the premiere. “It seems strange that you don’t remember.”

But Televisa didn’t air those comments when it broadcast the interview—nor did the Vatican when it put out its recordings of the interview.

The Vatican frequently edits the pope in official transcripts and videos, especially when he speaks on sensitive issues. Yet some version of the footage was apparently available in the Vatican archives, which were opened to filmmaker Evgeny Afineevsky.

In the interview aired by Televisa, the pope insisted that he “always defended doctrine,” in opposing same-sex marriage in Argentina. The interview cuts there.

The official 2019 Vatican News transcript of that interview contains no comment on the need for legal protections for civil unions; nor does the official Vatican edit.

But the scene in the documentary is identical to the Televisa interview, including the yellow background, a chair in the corner, and the slightly off-center placement of the chain of Francis’s pectoral cross.

Further muddying the waters is the fact that Afineevsky, when pressed by reporters, said the pope made the comments to him directly, through a translator, but declined to say when.

When interviewed by reporters on October 14, the director was asked if he realized at the time that Francis's comments were going to grab headlines. Afineevsky dodged the question about the origin of the quote and seemed not to appreciate its significance. But he said that he hoped journalists would take more away from the film.

"If journalists will be focusing on this movie only on that, then it will be a pity," he said. "But I think that's one of the issues that our world needs to understand, that we're all equal."

The head of the Vatican communications branch, Paolo Ruffini, refused to speak to reporters who attended an award ceremony in the Vatican gardens for Afineevsky, and the director himself kept his distance.

The Catholic Church teaches that gay people must be treated with dignity and respect but that homosexual acts are "intrinsically disordered." A 2003 document from the Vatican's doctrine office stated that the church's respect for gay people "cannot lead in any way to approval of homosexual behavior or to legal recognition of homosexual unions."

Doing so, the Vatican reasoned, would not only condone "deviant behavior" but also create an equivalence to marriage, which the church holds is an indissoluble union between man and woman.

Afineevsky, who is gay, had expressed surprise after the premiere that the pope's comments had created such a stir, saying Francis wasn't trying to change doctrine but was merely expressing his belief that gay people should enjoy the same rights as others do.

During the October 14 interview, Afineevsky declined to take any further questions and sought to put attention on the main issues dealt with in the film: climate change, refugees, and poverty.

"I am so proud that finally Francesco is on its way to the road to change hearts and minds," he said at the prize ceremony in the Vatican gardens. "Finally, I am happy that I can bring voices from the Rohingya refugees, refugees from Syria, the voices of victims of sexual abuse, voices from different points from different corners of the world."—Associated Press journalist Trisha Thomas contributed.