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by Francis DeBernardo

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Pope Francis' endorsement of civil unions for same-gender couples opens up a brand-new chapter in the Catholic Church's discussion of LGBTQ issues. Though the pope's words were personal comments, not official church teaching, their impact will likely be immense on a variety of issues in the church and secular society.

When a pope speaks, even non-doctrinally, he sends forth ripples that have an effect on how policy and pastoral ministry is carried out on all levels of the church. Francis' latest words are more than a ripple: They are a tidal wave.

Here are just a few ways that church life might change:

In over 70 countries around the globe, couples in same-sex relationships have been criminalized, and, if found out, can face extreme punishments including caning, long prison sentences and even the death

penalty. Shamefully, such laws have often been passed with the support of Catholic bishops and politicians. These leaders now have explicit statements from the pope that point out that these couples deserve not punishment, but legal protection. Will this change the cruel homophobia that underlies their support for such laws?

In a few countries, however, Catholic bishops have spoken out *against* such laws. How will they be affected by the pope's statements about couples? It is likely that they — and, hopefully, others — will be emboldened by his example and speak out more frequently and forcefully.

Catholics have been denied Communion because of their support for same-gender couples' right to legal protections. Bishops have issued diocesan policies supporting the Communion prohibition, especially against Catholic politicians. In one case, a Catholic politician was told he was excommunicated for supporting such rights.

While these practices were disgraceful and erroneous before the pope's recent comments, how are bishops and pastors going to support such policy now that the pope himself would be a potential candidate for Communion denial?

In the last decade, over 100 people have lost jobs in church institutions either because they have supported legal recognition and protections of same-gender couples or because they have availed themselves and their spouses of such recognition and protections. These are just the cases that have become public. Many, many more exist where the employee has been shunned publicity.

The pope has now declared support for such couples. How will that affect policy and practice in future cases? What will happen to the morality clauses that dioceses have been adding to employment contracts saying that opposition to same-sex relationships is required for church work?

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The U.S. Supreme Court will soon be hearing arguments in the case of *Fulton* v. *City of Philadelphia*. At the heart of this dispute is a Catholic adoption agency claiming,

on the basis of its faith's instructions, that they have the right to refuse to place children with legally married lesbian and gay couples. How will the agency, and so many others like it, defend such a position now that the pope has expressed a faith statement saying that these couples deserve respect, legal protection and the right to be a family? How will the Supreme Court justices perceive the plaintiff's arguments that their opposition to these couples is based in Catholic principles when the pope himself is urging Catholics to support these same couples?

In Germany, Austria and Switzerland, bishops, theologians and priests have been calling for the church to recognize and bless same-sex couples for several years now. In Germany, the Synodal Way process that has been occurring is poised to make an official recommendation to dioceses in favor of same-gender relationships. The pope's statement may influence these discussions and perhaps pave the way for a remarkable precedent of support for such couples *within the church.*

In a number of high-profile cases, children of lesbian and gay couples have been denied admission to Catholic elementary schools because of their parents' relationship status. At least one school suggested that the parents sign an oath that they would acknowledge to their children that their relationship is censured by the church. Will the pope's support for such couples end these kind of discriminatory and pastorally harmful kinds of policies in Catholic schools?

On the pastoral level, what are Catholic parishes going to do in terms of their parish ministry with same-gender couples? One particularly vexing pastoral situation has been policies that deny funerals to people in same-sex unions. For far too-long, even when LGBTQ people are welcomed in parishes, they have been excluded from ministries that have been set up for heterosexual couples and families: marriage preparation, bereavement groups, family activities.

The pope's words can usher in a new era of welcome for lesbian and gay couples in parish life. Since 2015, when marriage equality became the law of the land in the U.S., New Ways Ministry has been encouraging Catholic parishes to provide outreach to these newly-married people in a variety of ways. While a few parishes have done so, that number is sure to increase with the pope's newly-stated support.

Francis' words may not have the force of doctrine, but they can be a major force in terms of church practice. Change in church doctrine is always proceeded by a change in practice. I'm hopeful that Pope Francis' simple words will cause church

practice to change in mighty and new ways.

[Francis DeBernardo is executive director of New Ways Ministry.]