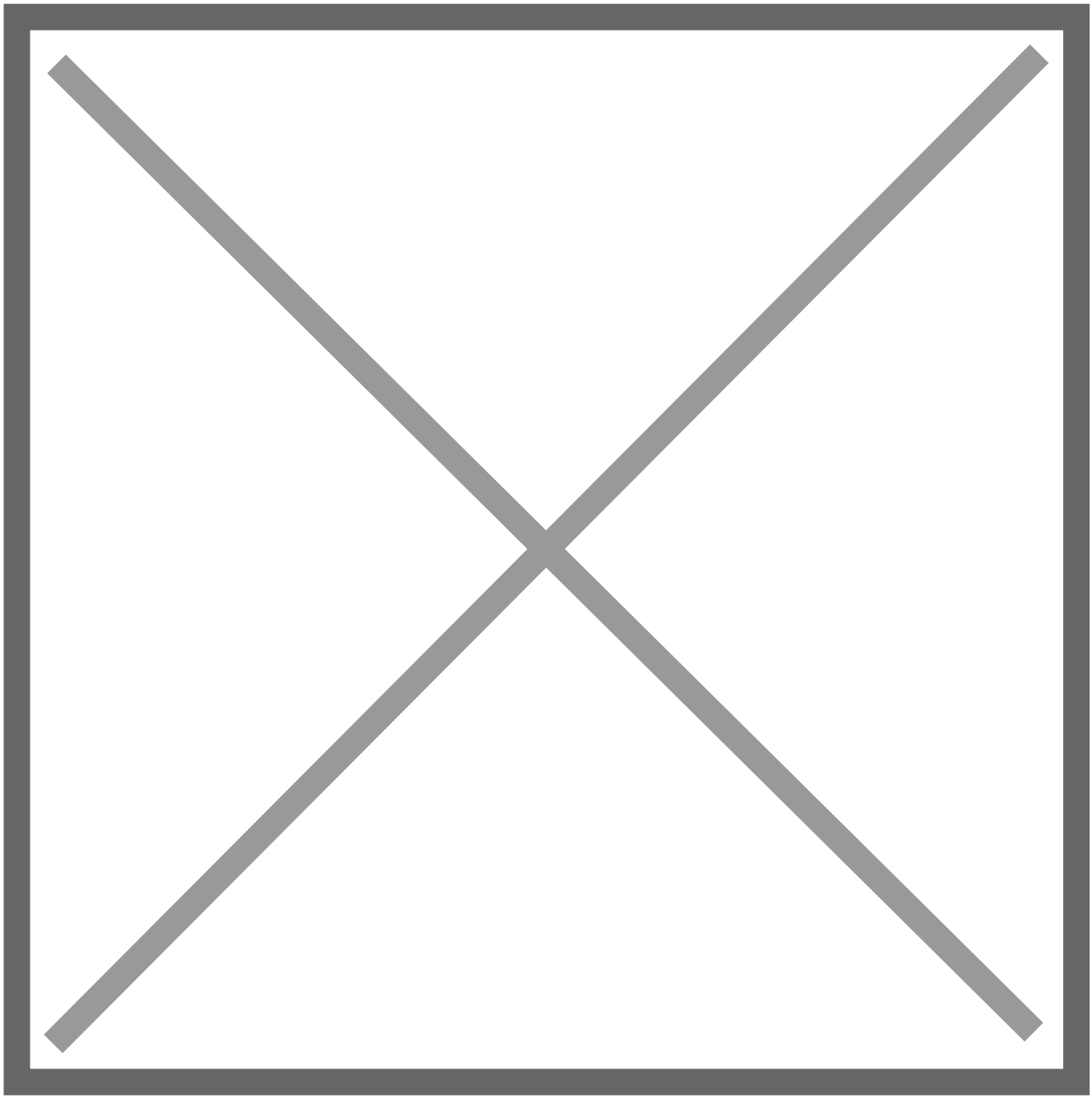
Vatican
Guest Voices



Pope Francis smiles during a private meeting with Jesuit Fr. James Martin at the Vatican Sept. 30, 2019. (CNS/Vatican Media)



by James Martin

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Two years ago yesterday, Sept. 30, I met with Pope Francis at the Vatican to speak about my work with LGBTQ Catholics. During that meeting, the Holy Father asked me to continue my ministry "in peace." This was one of many steps that Francis has taken in reaching out to LGBTQ Catholics. But often people overlook the small steps Francis has taken in this area, which, taken together, add up to a sea change for the Catholic Church.

As I tweeted yesterday, I see 11 important steps Francis has taken since his election as pope in 2012. Let's look at them chronologically.

1. When asked about gay priests in 2013, Francis uttered perhaps the five most famous words of his papacy: "Who am I to judge?" With those words, he also became the first pope to use the word "gay" so publicly. It was a "revolution of tenderness," to quote the pope, contained in one question.
2. During his pastoral visit to the United States in 2015, Francis met with his former student, Yayo Grassi, and Mr. Grassi's same-sex partner. The affectionate greeting to not only Mr. Grassi but also his partner spoke volumes about the pope's pastoral approach to same-sex couples.
3. In his 2016 apostolic exhortation "Amoris Laetitia" ("The Joy of Love"), Francis wrote that when ministering to LGBTQ people, we should "before all else" affirm their human dignity and the church's desire to oppose violence against them.

4. In 2016, on an in-flight press conference returning from Azerbaijan, Francis encouraged a ministry of "accompaniment," saying that Jesus would never tell a gay person, "Go away from me because you are homosexual."
5. During an in-flight press conference in 2018, returning from the World Meeting of Families in Dublin, Ireland, Francis said that LGBTQ children should never be kicked out of their families. "Don't condemn. Dialogue, Understand," he said, summarizing what he would tell parents. "Give the child space so he or she can express themselves." The pope's comments may have saved many young lives, and prevented many young people from becoming homeless.
6. His 30-minute meeting with me in the Apostolic Palace in 2019, was listed on his official public schedule and accompanied by photographs from the Holy See's Press Office, a sign of his support for LGBTQ ministry.
7. In 2020, while defending traditional church teaching on marriage as between a man and woman, Francis nonetheless signaled his support for legal protections for civil unions in a documentary film called "Francesco."
8. Also last year, he offered his support for Sr. Mónica Astorga, an Argentine who had worked with transgender people for 14 years, saying, "God, who did not go to seminary or study theology, will repay you abundantly."
9. In March, he appointed Juan Carlos Cruz, an openly gay man and a clergy abuse survivor and advocate, to a high-level Vatican commission. In 2018, Mr. Cruz had reported that Francis had told him "God made you this way." (Francis had said the same thing publicly during his in-flight press conference returning from Dublin that same year: "There have always been gay people and people with homosexual tendencies.")
10. In June, he wrote a warm letter on the occasion of the Outreach LGBTQ Catholic Ministry webinar, and also affirmed his prayers for this "flock" of LGBTQ people."God's heart," he said, "is open to each and every person."
11. In a conversation last month in Slovakia, he encouraged Jesuits in that country to reach out pastorally to "homosexual couples," not just individuals. That marks a significant change in the Vatican's approach.

Taken together, we can see how Francis's approach to LGBTQ people is one of pastoral accompaniment, moving slowly, with certain limits, avoiding the dramatic statements that some people may crave. His focus has always been on the pastoral care of individuals, defending them against violence and supporting those who minister with them, in ways that would have not been countenanced by his predecessors.

Since his election in 2013, Francis has demonstrated himself to be a pastor to LGBTQ Catholics and their families.

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