

The Vatican in 1999 barred Sr. Jeannine Gramick and Fr. Robert Nugent from ministry involving homosexual people. The two had been involved in gay ministry in the United States for more than 30 years. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)



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In two letters to New Ways Ministry this year, Pope Francis commended the organization for its outreach to the LGBTQ community and referred to one of its co-founders, Loretto Sr. Jeannine Gramick, as "a valiant woman" who had suffered much for her ministry.

Written in Spanish on official Vatican stationery, Francis' letters mention that the pope is aware that New Ways Ministry's "history has not been an easy one," but that loving one's neighbor is still the second commandment, tied "necessarily" to the first commandment to love God.

"Thank you for your neighborly work," Francis wrote in a June 17 letter addressed to Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry, which is based in Mount. Rainier, Maryland.

"Despite what some church leaders might say or think of us, it appears that Pope Francis is happy that we're reaching out and helping to bring LGBTQ people into the church, and helping those who are here to stay," DeBernardo told NCR.

DeBernardo said he decided to publicly disclose the correspondence between New Ways Ministry and the pope in response to the Vatican's General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops removing a New Ways Ministry webinar video from a resources website for the 2021-2023 synod on synodality.

Reports in conservative Catholic media outlets indicated that the secretariat removed the video on Dec. 7 after learning that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops had censured New Ways Ministry in 2010 for its support of civil marriage for same-sex couples. A spokesman for the secretariat has not returned requests for comment from NCR.

"We weren't planning on making the correspondence public," DeBernardo said, "but given this situation, it's important for people to know. We do believe [Francis] wants

LGBTQ people speaking, and we think it'd be helpful for him and helpful for his message and his invitation of inclusion, that people know that he has been corresponding with us."

Francis' correspondence with New Ways Ministry – an organization that has often drawn the ire of church authorities who doubt the group's adherence to Catholic doctrine on homosexuality - is one more example of Francis striking a more conciliatory posture than his more conservative predecessors and the U.S. Catholic bishops.

"The Holy Father's warm letter to New Ways Ministry is not only another step in his outreach to LGBTQ people, but the beginning of a kind of rehabilitation for New Ways, and for [New Ways cofounder] Sister Jeannine [Gramick] as well, in recognition of their important ministry in our church," said Jesuit Fr. James Martin, editor-at-large of America Media who called for the Catholic Church to be more welcoming to LGBTQ people in his book, *Building a Bridge*.

On May 3, Francis wrote in response to a letter that DeBernardo had sent him on April 21 that he read DeBernardo's letter from an "attitude of shepherd closeness," and that the letter helped him to better understand New Ways Ministry's history.

"It helped me a lot to know the full story you tell me," Francis wrote. "Sometimes we receive partial information about people and organizations, and this doesn't help. Your letter, as it narrates with objectivity its history, gives me light to better understand certain situations."

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In his second letter, which was handwritten and dated June 17, Francis thanked DeBernardo for his "heart, open to your neighbor." He also sent Sr. Jeannine Gramick his cordial regards.

"I know how much she has suffered," the pope wrote. "She is a valiant woman who makes her decisions in prayer."

In May 1999, the Vatican's Congregation of the Doctrine for the Faith declared that Gramick and fellow New Ways Ministry co-founder Fr. Robert Nugent were to be prohibited from pastoral work with homosexual people because of the "ambiguities

and errors" of their approach. The notification was signed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the congregation's prefect who later became Pope Benedict XVI.

Since its founding in 1977, New Ways has run afoul of church authorities. In 1984, Archbishop James Hickey of Washington denied the organization any official authorization or approval of its activities. The late Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, then the president of the U.S. bishops' conference, issued a statement in 2010 declaring that New Ways Ministry had no approval or recognition from the Catholic Church.

Some church officials in recent years have spoken at New Ways Ministry's events, including Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky. But the organization's strained history with the Catholic hierarchy reportedly caused its webinar video to be scrubbed from the synod secretariat's resources website.

The 75-minute video, entitled "From the Margins to the Center: LGBTQ Catholics & Synodality," features a webinar presentation by Fordham theologian Robert Choiniere, who is also the director of adult formation at St. Francis Xavier Church in Manhattan.

Martin, a consultor for the Vatican's Secretariat for Communications, told NCR that he was disappointed to see New Ways Ministry's video removed from the synod resources website "after some people complained."

"At the beginning of the synod, the Holy Father asked, 'Do we allow people to express themselves, to walk in faith even though they have had difficulties in life, and to be part of the life of the community without being hindered, rejected or judged?' " said Martin. "For LGBTQ Catholics, that is still an open question."

On Dec. 6, Martin tweeted a link to the New Ways Ministry video, which was then still on a website that the General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops created to share resources for the synod on synodality. Martin hailed it as a "small but historic step forward" in the church's relationship with LGBTQ people."

Tweet from Jesuit Fr. James Martin

A day later, however, the video had been removed. Martin, who has more than 303,000 Twitter followers and often enrages Catholics on the right for his ministry to

the LGBTQ community, said the removal of the video raises questions of how LGBTQ Catholic voices will be heard at the synod.

"There is no Vatican Dicastery for LGBTQ People or USCCB Office for LGBTQ People, so official channels are more or less nonexistent," Martin said.

DeBernardo argued that the General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops "made a big mistake" in taking down the video.

"Having our video up there was a way of showing that the Vatican was serious about reaching out to marginalized people, LGBTQ people in particular," said DeBernardo, who added that New Ways Ministry will continue to promote LGBTQ participation in the synod.

"We at New Ways Ministry have made a commitment to promote the synod experience," he said, "and we're going to continue to do so, but it just makes our work, which we believe is in service to the pope's mission, that much harder to do."

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