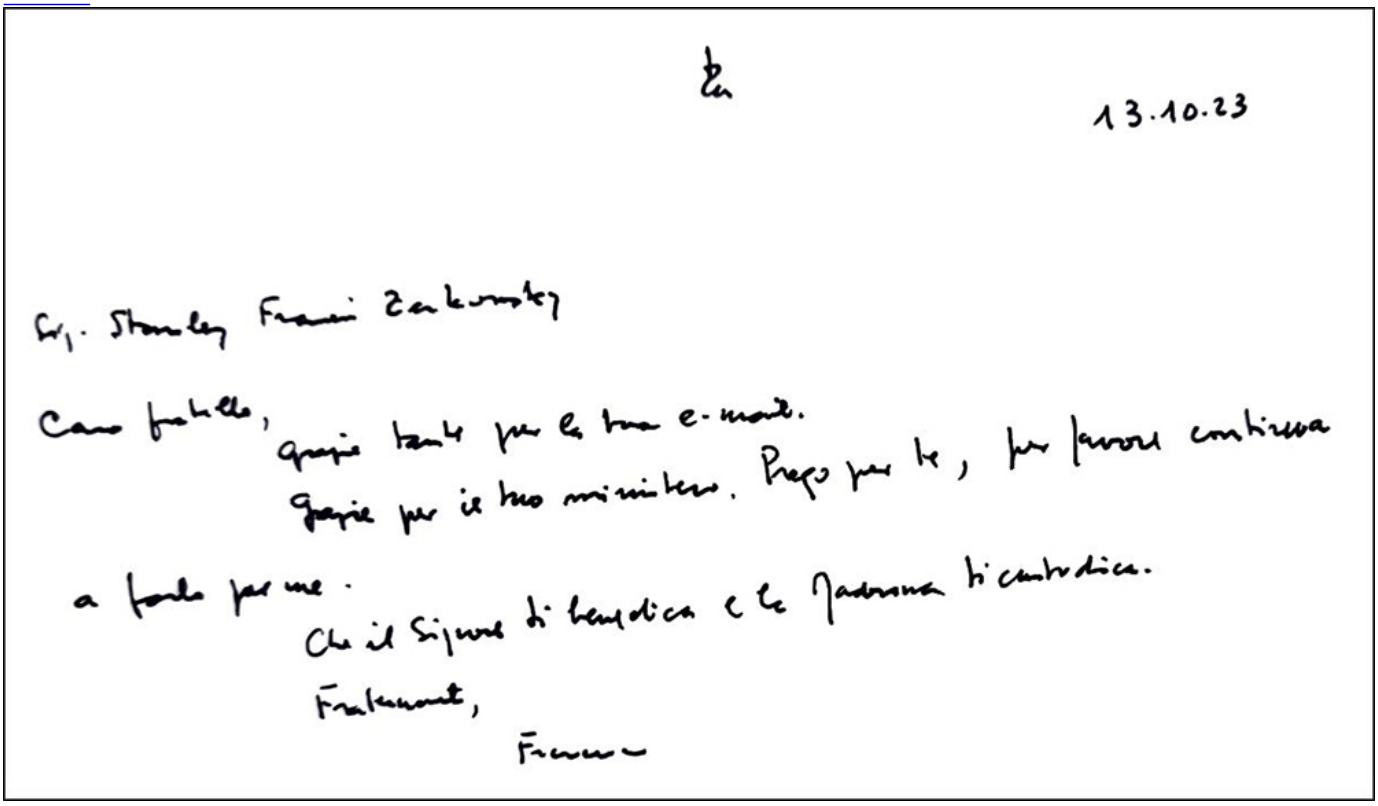


Pope Francis' handwritten note that Stan Zerkowski, executive director of Fortunate Families, received by email Oct. 13 (Courtesy of Stan Zerkowski)



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Stan "JR" Zerkowski said he did not expect to see a message from a Vatican email address in his inbox early in the morning on Oct. 13. Opening the email, he was also surprised to find an attached personal note from Pope Francis.

"I was just incredulous that there was a handwritten note from Pope Francis himself. I was shocked," said Zerkowski, the executive director of Fortunate Families, a Lexington, Kentucky-based Catholic ministry for the LGBTQ community.

The four-sentence note was handwritten in *Italian and accompanied with a translation in English. Francis thanked Zerkowski for an email that Zerkowski had sent the pope three days earlier, sharing his insights and experiences from his work in LGBTQ ministry.



Stan "JR" Zerkowski, executive director of Fortunate Families (Courtesy of Stan Zerkowski)

"Thank you for your ministry. I pray for you, please continue to do so for me. May the Lord bless you and the Madonna watch over you. Fraternally, Francis," the pope wrote in the letter, which Zerkowski posted on Facebook.

A week after receiving the pontiff's message, Zerkowski told NCR that he still found himself moved at the pope's gesture.

"It shows that this is an important ministry and worthy of the time he took to write a note and to have it sent out, and to do it so quickly with everything else that's going on in the synod. It's just astounding to me," said Zerkowski, who is also the chairman of the Lexington Diocese's LGBT Outreach Commission and director of LGBT ministry at St. Paul Church in Lexington.

Zerkowski was unable to be in Rome this year during the first assembly of the Synod of Bishops on synodality, in which delegates are, among other topics, discussing how the Catholic Church can be more welcoming to the LGBTQ community. But he said he still wanted to contribute his insights as a gay Catholic layman who has been involved in LGBTQ ministry for years and who participated in the synod's diocesan and continental consultation phases.

On Oct. 10, Zerkowski said, he wrote an email, addressed to Francis, where he discussed the experience and difficulties of his ministry while also thanking the pontiff for his personal outreach toward the LGBTQ community over the years.

Zerkowski noted Francis' warm letter in December 2021 to Loretto Sr. Jeannine Gramick, in which the pontiff thanked Gramick for her 50 years of LGBTQ ministry. In a historic, 50-minute encounter, Francis met with Gramick in person Oct. 17.

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"I told him those actions and those encounters, they save lives," Zerkowski said, "And I know they save lives firsthand because I deal with people all around the United States, especially young people who can be very caught up with the thought

that 'God doesn't love me. The church doesn't love me, but this is the way I am.'

"I wanted the pope to know that those gestures, those words, those encounters, were life-giving, and they helped me in my ministry and others who work with me in ministry," said Zerkowski. He also told Francis that he was praying for him while asking the pope to pray for his ministry.

Having written his email during the first week of the synod's Oct. 4-29 assembly, Zerkowski said he hoped that his letter would perhaps make it into one of the synodal working groups' reports. Zerkowski said he would have been ecstatic if a Vatican official had responded to him with a form letter.

"I mean, who am I to expect something from the Holy Father?" said Zerkowski, who added that he was not trying to strike a note of "false humility" in believing that the pope's letter was not really about him.

Said Zerkowski, "It's about all of those people who for so long have supported this ministry in the face of incredible and insurmountable obstacles. And it was an affirmation that the ministry is important to the heart of the church and, I believe, is being embraced with great affection at the heart of our church."

**This story was updated to correct the language of Pope Francis' handwritten note.*

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