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Loretto Sr. Jeannine Gramick in Rome in October 2023 (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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There are many ways in which the Catholic Church of 2023, now more than 10 years into Pope Francis' papacy, looks very different from the Catholic Church of 2013.

A church prone to secret investigations of theologians and unjustified crackdowns on Catholic sisters has become a proponent of the open door and a "culture of encounter." A church where Synods of Bishops had become so predetermined that most prelates, quite literally, slept through the proceedings has become one of *parrhesia*, and of no subject being left off the table.

And a church once left with little to say to the wider political realm now leads the charge globally to save humanity from itself, and the coming world of "debris, desolation and filth" caused by our shameful exploitation of the planet.

But this year we have seen extraordinary, if tentative, movement in one area in particular: how the Catholic Church includes and ministers to its LGBTQ members. Things have happened in the past 12 months that would have once seemed the work of a novelist untethered from reality.

In February, days before a trip to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan, Francis condemned the continuing criminalization of homosexuality in some African countries.

In October, he expressed openness to Catholic blessings for same-sex couples, at least on a case-by-case basis.

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And in November, the pope signed off on a note from the Vatican's powerful doctrinal office clarifying that trans persons, even those who have undergone gender-affirming surgery, can be baptized and can serve as godparents.

Contrast all this with Pope Benedict XVI's March 2012 request to U.S. bishops from states then considering whether to legalize same-sex marriage that the prelates should resist "the powerful political and cultural currents seeking to alter the legal

definition of marriage." Or Benedict's earlier instruction prohibiting nearly any gay man from even enrolling at a Catholic seminary.

The church of 2023 is certainly not the church of 2013.

The steps forward have been cautious, to be sure. And there are many, many disappointments. The 2023 synod assembly's inability to even acknowledge its discussions about LGBTQ issues in its final document was particularly discouraging. And the raft of so-called gender policies being imposed by U.S. bishops on American Catholic educational institutions are generally shameful, and possibly even dangerous for students already vulnerable to stigmatization, depression or dysmorphia.

But Francis certainly deserves credit for the steps he has taken. And so do the countless number of LGBTQ persons and advocates who have been praying, pushing and pleading for the global institution to at least live up to its teachings on the inherent dignity of all human beings, and, perhaps more, to see grace in all stable and loving relationships.

On this front, the American church has been gifted with an incredible litany of saints.

Persons such as Marianne Duddy-Burke, who because of her uncompromising ministry with LGBTQ Catholics as part of DignityUSA had not even been invited to speak at a Catholic parish over a period of some three decades. And Francis DeBernardo, who has dealt with his own share of disinvitations as part of New Ways Ministry. And Jesuit Fr. James Martin, who in 2022 launched the LGBTQ Catholic publication Outreach. And Juan Carlos Cruz, a Chilean clergy abuse survivor living in the U.S. who has developed an influential friendship with Francis. And many, many of our parents, sisters, brothers, children and grandchildren.

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But over the past five decades of American Catholic experience, perhaps no single person has had the kind of impact for our LGBTQ community members as Loretto Sr. Jeannine Gramick.

Ever since launching New Ways Ministry with the late Salvatorian Fr. Robert Nugent in 1977, she has been a tireless, persistent and effective advocate. She has borne

the scars of abuse by church authorities with uncommon dignity.

In 1999, when then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future Benedict XVI, prohibited her and Nugent from any pastoral work with LGBTQ persons, Gramick kept at it quietly, and went to Rome to see about having that order reversed.

When the Vatican in 2000 pressured Gramick's first religious congregation, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, to order her to cease speaking publicly about her LGBTQ ministry, she simply moved to another congregation, and, again, kept going.

Tireless is the word, certainly. Another descriptor would be *successful*. Another, perhaps more important, would be *cunning*. Sensing a change in Roman winds, Gramick and her New Ways colleagues started a direct correspondence with Francis in early 2021.

Stunningly, the pope wrote back. He called Gramick "a valiant woman," who had suffered for her ministry. He also thanked the group as a whole for their "neighborly work."

This October, Francis and Gramick met in person at the Vatican, for a historic 50-minute encounter at the pope's residence. Ever the practitioner of persistent relationship-building, Gramick made sure to alter the arrangement of the room, in order to slide her chair a little closer to the pope's.

We cannot say exactly what has made Francis more open and aware this year to the needs of LGBTQ Catholics. But certainly, that sister scooching her chair forward has had an outsized impact. For her 50 years of successful advocacy, ministry and influence, Loretto Sr. Jeannine Gramick is NCR's Newsmaker of 2023.

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