Vatican
Vatican News



Andrea Mattei, holding a cross, arrives with other members of the LGBTQ+ community to attend a vigil prayer in the Church of the Gesu' in central Rome, Friday, Sept. 5, 2025. (AP photo/Andrew Medichini)



by Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

View Author Profile

jmclellan@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @m/McLellan_Js

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Vatican City — September 5, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Nearly every weekend this year, the Vatican's official Jubilee calendar for major events features pilgrimages dedicated to specific groups like families, athletes or social media influencers.

Without a place on that agenda, more than 1,200 LGBTQ+ Catholics gathered in Rome for a pilgrimage of their own Sept. 5-7 to bear witness to lives of faith that have struggled to find a place within their church.

"Every other group seemed to have a jubilee. During the conclave, there was a jubilee for marching bands," Jesuit Fr. James Martin said in an interview with the National Catholic Reporter in Rome. "So if marching bands can have a jubilee, why not LGBTQ Catholics? They're certainly as much a part of the church."

Martin, the founder of Outreach — a virtual resource for LGBTQ Catholics and those who minister to them — met privately with Pope Leo XIV Sept. 1. He told NCR that in their half-hour meeting the new pope said he "wants to continue Pope Francis' message of inclusion and welcome, and above all, openness to LGBTQ Catholics."

While the LGBTQ+ pilgrimage is not explicitly endorsed by the Vatican — nor will participants receive a dedicated papal audience as other groups have — organizers and attendees say the event nevertheless represents a historic form of ecclesial engagement with a long-marginalized group of Catholics.

"You could say it's semi-official," said Martin, who traveled to Rome with a group of some 40 pilgrims with Outreach. "I think it's pretty historic. I can't imagine this happening before Pope Francis or before Pope Leo."

The pilgrimage opened with a panel discussion on the experiences of LGBTQ Catholics, held at the Jesuit headquarters near St. Peter's Square, followed by a vigil service at the Church of the Gesù, the mother church of the Society of Jesus. On

Sept. 6, Bishop Francesco Savino of Cassano all'Jonio, Italy, and vice president of the Italian bishops' conference, was scheduled to celebrate Mass with the pilgrims before they processed through the Holy Door at St. Peter's Basilica, the spiritual heart of every Jubilee pilgrimage.



Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry (NCR photo/Justin McLellan)

"Not only are LGBTQ people marching and walking to say that they're part of the church, but official church institutions are welcoming them and helping them to tell their stories," said Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry, a Catholic ministry seeking justice and reconciliation between LGBTQ+ people and the church.

"The fact that [Leo] has not clamped down on this pilgrimage, which I think previous popes might have done, is really a sign of great welcome," he said.

For many LGBTQ Catholics in Rome over the weekend, their pilgrimage is a testament to how far the church has come in accepting them as bona fide members of their own spiritual home.

"Maybe 25 years ago, the challenges and pushbacks were real for many people who came here as LGBT," said Ruby Almeida, a board member of the Global Network of Rainbow Catholics. "Now it's almost the flip. We're being told: 'Come in, you're welcome, please join us, you are at the table with us.' "

Advertisement

Several participants pointed to Francis as having laid the groundwork for this cultural and pastoral shift within the church.

"What Pope Francis did is that he taught church leaders how to welcome LGBTQ people, and he set a good example for that welcoming," DeBernardo said. "But he also taught LGBTQ people to stand up and be proud and to take ownership of the church which is rightfully theirs, and I think what we're seeing now in this pilgrimage is LGBTQ people claiming their rightful place in the church."

For Victoria Rodriguez, a transgender Catholic woman and mother of three from Spain, that recognition is both spiritual and deeply personal. She recalled a moment of prayer eight years ago when she encountered the parable of the talents: "God was telling me that he had given me the talent of my identity and I had buried it out of fear. He was saying: 'Don't bury it, live it. I will protect you.' "

Rodriguez told NCR that the Jubilee pilgrimage is now a collective recognition of what she realized in that moment of prayer: "We don't have to choose. We can live our sexuality and our spirituality. God made us this way, and God loves us this way."

Rodriguez organized an assembly for the Global Network of Rainbow Catholics in Madrid before departing for the Jubilee pilgrimage; Cardinal José Cobo Cano of Madrid sent the group a letter of support and a representative to the assembly.



Ana Flavia Chávez Pedraza (NCR photo/Justin McLellan)

Yet she recognized that the church's size means it cannot move at the same pace everywhere. "The church is very big, it advances at its own rhythm," Rodriguez said. "Sometimes we would like it to move faster, but it has to move together without breaking."

For some pilgrims, that uneven reality makes Leo's next steps all the more critical. Ana Flavia Chávez Pedraza, a Peruvian transgender Catholic woman who coordinates pastoral outreach to transgender women in Arequipa, Peru, said she hopes Leo will follow through on Francis' example by meeting personally with transgender Catholics.

"The meeting with Fr. James Martin showed continuity," she told NCR. "But there cannot be a pastor without the sheep. We hope the Holy Father will meet us too."

Francis developed a relationship with a group of transgender women outside of Rome, primarily from Latin America, offering them financial support, providing vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic and hosting them at the Vatican for lunch with the poor.



Nancy Bouchier (NCR photo/Justin McLellan)

Chávez said the late pope "created moments with trans people" by tending to them pastorally, and she expressed her hope that Leo will follow in his footsteps.

"If we are not listened to, if we do not have those synodal moments of encounter, then we will not even be the last, not even on the margins, but outside of the church," she said.

Nancy Bouchier, a retired historian from Canada who is taking part in the pilgrimage, said the change she's witnessed within the church, and the strength of the community that has formed from it, is unmistakable, even if incomplete.

"Synodality is everything: It's this notion of community that we're working with, of getting the LGBT community together," she said. "There is nothing more joyous than to be in community. I thank God that I lived this long to witness this."

Read this next: LGBTQ+ Catholics make Holy Year pilgrimage to Rome and celebrate a new sense of acceptance

The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.

This story appears in the **2025 Holy Year** feature series. View the full series.
A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 26-Oct 9, 2025** print issue under the headline: ‘Semi-official’ LGBTQ+ Jubilee.