Vatican

Vatican News



Members of the LGBTQ+ community, with T-shirts reading "God does not reject anyone" in Spanish, arrive to attend a vigil prayer in the Church of the Gesu in central Rome Sept. 5. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

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Vatican City — September 6, 2025

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Hundreds of LGBTQ+ Catholics and their families participated in a Holy Year pilgrimage to Rome on Saturday (Sept. 6), celebrating a new level of acceptance in the Catholic Church after long feeling shunned and crediting Pope Francis with the change.

The vice president of the Italian bishops conference, Bishop Franceseco Savino, celebrated Mass for the pilgrims in a packed Chiesa del Gesu, the main Jesuit church in Rome. He received a sustained standing ovation in the middle of his homily when he recalled that Jubilee celebrations historically were meant to restore hope to those on the margins.

"The Jubilee was the time to free the oppressed and restore dignity to those who had been denied it," he said. "Brothers and sisters, I say this with emotion: It is time to restore dignity to everyone, especially to those who have been denied it."

Several LGBTQ+ groups participated in the pilgrimage, which was listed in the Vatican's official calendar of events for the Holy Year, the once-every-quarter century celebration of Catholicism. Vatican organizers stressed that the listing in the calendar didn't signal endorsement or sponsorship.

> 'Brothers and sisters, I say this with emotion: It is time to restore dignity to everyone, especially to those who have been denied it.'
> —Bishop Franceseco Savino
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The main organizer of the pilgrimage was an Italian LGBTQ+ advocacy organization, "Jonathan's Tent," but other groups participated, including DignityUSA and Outreach, another U.S. group.

"I was here 25 years ago at the last Holy Year with a contingent of LGBTQ people from the U.S. and we were actually detained as a threat to the Holy Year programs," said DignityUSA's Marianne Duddy-Burke.

To now be invited to walk through the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica "fully recognized as who we are and the gifts we bring to the church, and that we have both our faith and our identities combined, is a day of great celebration and hope," she said.



Justin Del Rosario, left, and John Capozzi attend a vigil prayer for members of the LGBTQ+ community in the Church of the Gesu in central Rome Sept. 5. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

Pope Leo XIV celebrated a special Jubilee audience Saturday at the Vatican for all pilgrim groups in Rome this weekend, but made no special mention of the LGBTQ+ Catholics.

A legacy of LGBTQ+ acceptance

Many of the pilgrims attributed their feeling of welcome to Francis. More than any of his predecessors, Francis distinguished himself with a message of welcome, from his 2013 quip, "Who am I to judge?" about a purportedly gay priest, to his decision to allow priests to bless same-sex couples.

Francis never changed church teaching saying homosexual acts are "intrinsically disordered." But during his 12-year papacy from 2013 to 2025, Francis met with LGBTQ+ advocates, ministered to a community of trans women and, in a 2023 interview with The Associated Press, declared that "being homosexual is not a crime."

John Capozzi of Washington D.C., who was participating in the pilgrimage with his husband, Justin del Rosario, said Francis' attitude brought him back to the church after he left it in the 1980s, at the height of the AIDS crisis. Then, he said, he felt shunned by his fellow Catholics.

"There was that feeling like I wasn't welcome in the church," he said. "Not because I was doing anything, just because I was who I was," he said. "It was this fear of going back in because of the judgment."

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But Francis, who insisted that the Catholic Church was open to everyone, "todos, todos, todos," changed all that, he said.

"I was a closeted Catholic," Capozzi said. "With Pope Francis, I was able to come out and say, 'Hey, you know, I am Catholic and I'm proud of it and I want to be part of the church."

A message of welcome and hope

Capozzi spoke during a standing room-only vigil service for the pilgrims Sept. 5 at the Jesuit church. The service featured testimonies from gay couples, the mother of

a trans child and a moving reflection by an Italian priest, Fr. Fausto Focosi.



Members of the LGBTQ+ community attend a vigil prayer in the Church of the Gesu in central Rome Sept. 5. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

"Our eyes have known the tears of rejection, of hiding. They have known the tears of shame. And perhaps sometimes those tears still spring from our eyes," Focosi said. "Today, however, there are other tears, new tears. They wash away the old ones."

"And so today these tears are tears of hope," he said.

Leo's position comes into focus

Leo's position on LGBTQ+ Catholics had been something of a question. Soon after he was elected in May, remarks surfaced from 2012 in which the future pope, then known as Fr. Robert Prevost, criticized the "homosexual lifestyle" and the role of mass media in promoting acceptance of same-sex relationships that conflicted with Catholic doctrine.

When he became a cardinal in 2023, Catholic News Service asked Prevost if his views had changed. He acknowledged Francis' call for a more inclusive church, saying Francis "made it very clear that he doesn't want people to be excluded simply on the basis of choices that they make, whether it be lifestyle, work, way to dress, or whatever."\

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Leo met Sept. 1 with Fr. James Martin, an American Jesuit who has advocated for greater welcome for LGBTQ+ Catholics. Martin emerged saying Leo told him he intended to continue Pope Francis' policy of LGBTQ+ acceptance in the church and encouraged him to keep up his advocacy.

"I heard the same message from Pope Leo that I heard from Pope Francis, which is the desire to welcome all people, including LGBTQ people," Martin told The Associated Press after the audience.

Savino said he, too, had received Leo's blessing to celebrate the Mass for the LGBTQ+ pilgrims.

Del Rosario, Capozzi's husband, said he now felt welcome after long staying away from the faith he was raised in.

"Pope Francis influenced me to return back to church. Pope Leo only strengthened my faith," he said.

This story appears in the **2025 Holy Year** feature series. View the full series.