News



Fr. Andrea Conocchia stands on the beach of Torvaianica, Italy, Nov. 16, 2023. As part of his ministry to the LGBTQ community, Conocchia coordinated visits between transgender people and Pope Francis. (AP/Andrew Medichini)



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Less than an hour outside Rome, in the little seaside town of Torvaianica, a middle aged priest speaks softly, lives humbly — and makes history. Fr. Andrea Conocchia, pastor of Parrocchia Beata Vergine Immacolata (Parish of the Blessed Virgin Immaculate) sees ministry to the local LGBTQ+ as part of his vocation. In 2021 he had a hand in getting COVID-19 vaccines for his transgender community at the Vatican, and in 2022 he facilitated multiple meetings between the community and Pope Francis.

"I'm the first minister in the Catholic Church's history who was able to make this amazing encounter happen and I'm so grateful for it," Conocchia told the National Catholic Reporter. "Pope Francis was the first pontiff who was open to greet LGBTQ+ people, shake their hands and speak to them in public, without any shame."

Two months ago, Conocchia participated in another landmark event: a queer pilgrimage during the Jubilee on Sept. 5-6.

Conocchia spoke with NCR about his ministry and thoughts on the church's future.

***NCR*: Would you describe this year's pilgrimage as a turning point for LGBTQ+ Catholics?**

Conocchia: It was very powerful. Cheerful and moving at the same time. Seeing almost 1.400 people praying, walking together and sharing their journeys really made me feel a strong sense of community. I truly hope that we can just move forward, with courage. We can continue this path embracing each of our unique qualities and differences, even regarding Pope Leo's ones.

Pope Leo XIV remained silent during and after the event. What do you think about this?

He is at the beginning of his pontificate and maybe there are also other urgencies. I'd say that I'm faithful: actually, I am full of hope. I listen, I observe and I pray a lot. We need — at least in my view — a pope with a heart as big, big, big as God's. Maybe for him, just being able to have the pilgrimage celebrated already seems like something. Let's not forget that the Mass was officiated by a very prominent figure, Bishop Francesco Savino, vice president of the Italian Episcopal Conference. It could be a good start. We'll see how things develop from here. I wish for continuity amid diversity.



Hundreds of LGBTQ+ Catholics and their families joined a Holy Year pilgrimage to Rome walk through the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Sept. 6 (AP/Andrew Medichini)

What are Pope Leo's priorities, in your opinion?

He became pope in a very tense moment, so I'd say stopping wars. The situation in Europe is a source of concern. I always preach to my parish community: Let us take seriously Pope Leo's call and appeal for prayers for peace. He has also been talking about migrants, so I think he will be working to create truly welcoming communities — hospitable, sharing and full of solidarity. In the same way, his experience in Latin America may have made him particularly attentive to the poor, who are present in the Scriptures and always around us. This willingness to serve them is a great thing; it feels right and just — it is deeply human as well as in the spirit of the Gospel.



Martha Marvel (third from left), Christine Zuba, Maureen Rasmussen and Lynn Discenza pose in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican with Fr. Andrea Conocchia and Sr. Geneviève Jeanningros, on Sept. 18. Conocchia coordinated the women's meeting with the pope, and Jenningros has coordinated similar meetings. (Camillo Barone)

Are you planning to bring the trans women in your community to meet Pope Leo, as you did with Pope Francis?

I'm praying about it; let's see if we can come to think practically about it; and then let's see if we can actually live it. But I'm praying about it a lot because, of course, more than one girl and more than once, has already asked for it. There is a desire to meet, confide, listen, hug and be hugged. Many of them also come from Peru, where transphobia is still very strong.

How did the opportunity come up for the trans women in your community to meet Pope Francis in 2022?

Everything started from a simple request from my parishioners; they wanted to thank him personally. I just took it seriously and asked my friend Sr. Geneviève Jeanningros, who was also a dear friend of the pontiff, to be our intermediary. The pope not only met them but always had encouraging words from then on. They cried on his shoulder. From April 27, 2022, to February 12, 2025, two days before he was hospitalized, he hugged LGBTQ+ believers once a week. He was a brave, revolutionary and prophetic pastor, a real shepherd of souls who didn't fear the left out and cared for them all: queer, ill, old, detained, homeless, unmarried couples, divorced. He loved everyone so much: He said and practiced "*todos, todos, todos*." The experience with his holiness Pope Francis was unique, unparalleled, wonderful and astonishing.

Sr. Geneviève Jeanningros greets Pope Francis.

Sr. Geneviève Jeanningros, a member of the Little Sisters of Jesus, greets Pope Francis at the end of his weekly general audience March 27, 2024, in the Vatican audience hall. The French sister facilitated meetings between transgender people and Francis. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Do you find that LGBTQ+ people are still rejected or unrecognized by Catholic communities?

Absolutely. Even if there have been many progresses, we need to do a lot more to integrate these people into our parishes and value them. I think they are still discriminated [against], and, for trans people, I'd dare say it's an emergency.

Many trans girls in my community are sex workers and some of them are addicted to substances, things they confided to me slowly. Some even live in literal huts in the pine forest, without electricity or running water, threatened by wild boars. They are invisible, ignored. In such harsh conditions, they'd still offer me a meal every time I go visit. They are forced in these conditions to survive. … Someone said to me that they're sinners and shouldn't be admitted to the sacraments. With deep regret and sadness I've to say that this hostility feels, in some way, like persecution. I really don't understand why the focus has to be only on identity, affection, orientation and sexuality, instead of recognizing the person as a whole.

Read this next: 4 trans Catholic women call meeting pope a step toward healing and inclusion

What would you say to Christians who can't accept trans people?

Until five years ago I wasn't accustomed to queer people. The first trans girl came to my door during the pandemic. She waited until anyone else went away, sometimes there were even 500 in line, and quietly asked: "Would you help me?" I welcomed her and treated her normally, like a human being; no questions, judgments or assumptions. Now my community counts 150 trans women.

These encounters changed my life: Meetings are life's teachers. We sometimes don't welcome the encounter as we should. When we lack firsthand knowledge and the ability to listen, we could miss that reality is much bigger than ideas. These people taught me hospitality, sharing, simplicity, understanding situations and showing respect. I experienced unconditional love, freely given and undeserved.

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