

Vatican denies papal 'opening' on same-sex unions

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 5, 2014 NCR Today

A Vatican spokesman has denied that Pope Francis intended to express an "opening" to legal recognition of same-sex unions in recent remarks to leaders of religious orders in which he spoke about educating the children of same-sex couples.

Several Italian media outlets linked the pope's comments to a recent announcement by Matteo Renzi, the new leader of Italy's center-left Democratic Party, that a "civil partnerships" law would be an element of the party's electoral platform.

Italy has twice before had a national debate over legalizing same-sex unions, in 2002 and 2007, and both times the push foundered in part because of strong opposition from both the Vatican and the Italian bishops.

Francis' remarks to religious superiors on Nov. 29, a full transcript of which was [published last week](#) [1], has led some observers to wonder if the Vatican's response may be different under Francis.

Reflecting on educational challenges he'd faced as the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, the pope mentioned a situation involving the child of a lesbian couple as an example of "new challenges which sometimes are difficult for us to understand."

Francis said it's important in reaching out to these children "not to administer a vaccine against faith."

In the wake of Italian headlines styling that remark as an "opening" to gay couples, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, gave a statement to Vatican Radio denying that Francis meant to take a new position on same-sex unions.

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The text of Lombardi's statement follows:

"In his conversation with religious superiors, the pope offered the consideration that the situation in which education of children takes place today is very different than in the past, because [these children] live in many difficult family situations, such as parents who are separated, anomalous new unions, sometimes including homosexual unions, and so on. Education and the proclamation of the faith naturally can't ignore that reality and must be attentive to the good of the new generations, accompanying them with affection starting from their concrete situation, in order not to provoke negative reactions contrary to openness to the faith.

"This point about the educational responsibilities of the church, which in a sense is fairly obvious, was made on Nov. 29 in entirely general terms, [but] has been placed by various Italian media outlets in the context of the question raised in recent days of recognition of civil unions of homosexual couples.

"The stretch is completely self-evident, so much so that in some cases it seems the pope's remark is being instrumentalized. To speak of an "opening to gay couples" is paradoxical, because the pope's comment is

completely general and because even the small concrete example made by the pope in this regard (a young girl who was sad because the female fiancé of her mother doesn't love her) alludes to the suffering of the child ?

"The pope absolutely did not express himself on the debate that reopened in Italy only a month later, and whoever recalls the positions manifested by him in precedence in Argentina on the occasion of analogous debates knows well that they were completely different from those that some now seek surreptitiously to attribute to him.?"

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Two notes on the story.

First, the line of the Italian bishops on Renzi's push for civil unions appears to be: "No" to legal recognition of same-sex couples, "Yes" to the protection of individual rights, including, if necessary, revisions to Italy's civil code.

That was the position staked out in various media interviews by Bishop Enrico Salmi of Parma, who serves as president of the Italian bishops' commission on the family.

Salmi's line will likely be seen by political observers as encouraging Catholics and social moderates within the center-left coalition to seek ways to protect the rights of persons within same-sex relationships without formal legal recognition of those unions.

Second, Lombardi's reference to the pope's position in the past during "analogous debates" in Argentina begs the question of what, exactly, that position really was.

When Argentina became the first Latin American nation to approve gay marriage in 2010, then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio expressed strong opposition. However, former officials of the Argentine bishops' conference, friends of Bergoglio, and journalists who covered the debate all say that behind the scenes, Bergoglio expressed openness to some form of civil partnership as an alternative to full marriage rights.

It remains to be seen what position Francis might express as pope, and how strongly he might express it, should the Italian debate over same-sex unions heat up.

While Renzi has vowed to press the case, Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta, who also belongs to the Democratic Party, has said that its platform shouldn't be a "book of dreams," raising questions about how politically realistic the call for civil partnerships may be.

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