

The first gay pope

The real reasons why Pope Francis is pushing Catholics to become more welcoming and less judgmental of gays and lesbians



Pope Francis carries his crosier as he arrives in procession for an evening prayer service at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls in Rome Jan. 25, 2022. (Photo by Haring/Vatican Pool/EIDON/MaxPPP)

By [Robert Mickens](#) | [Vatican City](#)

Bill Clinton has often been called the United States' "first Black president", even by many African-Americans.

During his eight years in the White House (1993-2001), his policies and appointments were seen as promoting issues vital to the Black community and -- just as importantly -- helping to transcend the ugly racial divide that, unfortunately, still exists in "America".

Toni Morrison, the writer who initially pinned the "first Black president" label to Clinton back in 1998, did not mean it as a compliment, however.

She was not talking about the popularity that the former president, now 75, enjoyed with Blacks. Rather, she was describing how he was being pursued in the public arena while in office, especially during the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal.

"I said he was being treated like a Black on the street -- already guilty, already a perp," Morrison said years later.

The first gay pope

For many of the same reasons that Clinton has been called the "first Black president", one could argue that Pope Francis deserves to be known as the "first gay pope".

That's not because more and more gay Catholics are starting to believe that he has our backs.

And it's certainly not because he -- who famously said, "Who am I to judge?" -- has changed the Church's teaching on **homosexuality**. He has not.

The Vatican's official position on homosexuality, found in the notorious **document** the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued in 1986, still stands.

And so does its description of homosexuality as "an objective disorder" that is "more or less a strong tendency towards an intrinsic moral evil".

But that's not the sort of language Francis uses.

A style of openness and acceptance

First of all, he is not afraid to use words like gay and lesbian, rather than the pseudo-clinical "persons with a same-sex attraction" term that's used by many in the Church (especially those who appear doctrinally rigid and fixated on the sins of the flesh).

And second of all, he's not afraid to be seen as someone who is accepting of and friendly towards gay people.

So while the pope has changed nothing in terms of official law or teaching, he has -- in a real sense -- changed everything in terms of attitude and ethos, just by his own personal approach to gay people.

Francis has done more than any pope since the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s -- when people started to begin identifying more openly as homosexuals -- to promote the rights and dignity of gays and lesbians within the Catholic Church.

And this has freed more priests and bishops who would have been careful to appear as "gay friendly", even up to a few years ago, to imitate the pope's style of openness and acceptance.

That's not to say our Jesuit pope been "sympathetic" towards all the categories of people that are part of the alphabet soup known as the LGBTQ+ community.

For instance, he's actually said -- even if unintentionally -- some rather hurtful things about people who identify as trans-gender. Nonetheless, he's had private meetings and shared correspondence with at least one or two transgender persons.

Not judging gay priests

A lot of very good and informative articles have written about how Francis has begun changing the way the Church sees and treats homosexuals, exclusively by his own positive example.

It is really quite remarkable when you think of it. Not every day does an 85-year-old Catholic bishop from Latin America say, "Who I am to judge?" in reference to gays.

Ok, he was actually a mere 76 when he made that remark back in July 2013.

But even as he's grown older he's continued to stick by it. And expand on it.

What many people seem to have forgotten, however, he was speaking specifically about gay clerics.

The question he was asked concerned one of his close Vatican aides, a priest who had been discovered to be in a homosexual liaison (or stable relationship) during service at the papal nunciature in Uruguay, and whether there was a "gay lobby" in the Vatican.

"You must distinguish between the fact of a person being gay and the fact of someone forming a lobby, because not all lobbies are good. This one (alleged to be at the Vatican) is not good," Francis said.

Answering with emotional intelligence

Then he made perhaps the best-known and most-quoted comment of his pontificate.

"If someone is gay and is searching for the Lord and has good will, then who am I to judge him?" he asked.

Previous popes have largely avoided speaking about homosexuality in public. But when they have done so they've displayed an embarrassing lack of emotional intelligence, certainly on this issue.

That is obviously not the case with Francis.

And there is a logical explanation for this. He knows that there's a large percentage of homosexuals among Catholic priests and bishops. And like the rest of us, he also knows there are (and always have been) homosexual cardinals (and even past popes).

How could such a perceptive man not know? He spent much of his life educating young priests and seminarians. And almost all of it in the clerical club that he largely rejects.

Reassuring those who struggle, while challenging the hypocrites

Though it's still considered a tabu to speak of homosexuality among the Church's ordained ministers, Francis has begun -- even just a little -- to break the silence.

And there are likely two reasons he's done so.

First of all, to ease the consciences of those clerics who have admitted they are gay and want to continue faithfully serving God's people.

The attitude the pope has displayed towards gay people can only be a strong affirmation for these men whose very Church has told them they are seriously and fundamentally screwed up.

And, secondly, to challenge the hypocrisy of the self-loathing, homophobic homosexuals in ordained ministry.

The pope's attitude unmasks their judgmentalism and, hopefully, it can lead at least some of them to deeper reflection, greater self-honesty and conversion -- to accept themselves and others they now condemn.

The United States' "first Black president" was eventually succeeded in the White House by a real African-American.

The Church, on the other hand, has been led at times -- even in relatively recent history -- by popes who would surely be considered homosexuals by today's understanding of the term.

But none of them ever dared to say the things the "first gay pope" has been saying these past several years. He still has a way's to go, but many LGBTQ+ Catholics are ready to accompany him on the journey.