

Father James Martin: Pope Leo wants to continue Pope Francis' approach to LGBTQ Catholics

The American Jesuit writes a report in his recent meeting with Pope Francis for the magazine America

I don't think that I expected Pope Leo XIV to be as warm, relaxed and serene (and funny) as he was during my **30-minute audience** with him in the Apostolic Palace on Monday. As I knew from spending two weeks at his table at the Synod of Bishops last year, the new pope is a kind, friendly and intelligent man. But perhaps because he no longer must juggle two jobs at once (synod delegate and prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops) or perhaps because of the grace of office, I found Pope Leo to be tremendously at ease, even jovial, during our meeting. It reminds me of something a friend said shortly after the pope's election, when he spoke to the College of Cardinals, *"It seems like he was born for this!"* A papal audience is a big deal for anyone, unless perhaps you are a cardinal, bishop or Vatican official who sees the Holy Father regularly. So even though I've had the privilege of meeting with a pope before, it's nonetheless still exciting to be ushered by the Swiss guards past the Vatican's Porta Sant'Anna entrance, through a warren of buildings, up a marble staircase, into the San Damaso courtyard and then through a series of throne rooms in the Apostolic Palace, before you are seated in a quiet room, awaiting an archbishop who ushers you into the *Biblioteca*, a library that doubles as an office and meeting space for the pope.

It was a new experience, however, to talk with a pope in English, something that Leo acknowledged people were still getting used to. In a sense, I had two or three times the time for conversation with Pope Leo than I had with Francis, because everything that Francis said had to be translated into English, and everything I said had to be translated into Spanish, a laborious process. Also, I never knew if Francis understood any idioms I might use. Obviously, with Leo that is not a problem! But let me address what many people want to know: Pope Leo's approach to L.G.B.T.Q. Catholic ministry. The message I received from him, loud and clear, was that he wanted to continue with the same approach that Pope Francis had advanced, which was one of openness and welcome. So, it was very much a hopeful message of continuity.

This is, in Pope Leo's mind, naturally tied to "synodality," the idea that the church must listen to people from all walks of life (including L.G.B.T.Q. people) to become more open, more listening, more welcoming and more inclusive. Again, this is very much in line with Pope Francis' desires and his famous words *"todos, todos, todos"* to describe the church. This is also in line with Leo's public embrace of synodality, not simply as a synod delegate, but as a pope whose very first speech after his election mentioned what is now a *"constitutive dimension"* of the church.

At the same time, the Holy Father has a great many issues on his plate. In terms of Pope Leo's priorities, there is his fervent desire to help the process of peace and unity in places like Ukraine, Gaza and Myanmar, among others. He sees peace and unity as paramount in his ministry. So while L.G.B.T.Q. issues are on his radar, other things may be more pressing for the time being. And even when addressing L.G.B.T.Q. issues, he may not move as fast as some might like. By the same token, he may move far too fast for others. (In this, he would be like Francis as well.) But my overall sense is that he "gets it" and that he is ready to continue

Francis' legacy of openness, and that is surely good news. For my part, I offered him some suggestions of what dioceses and parishes might do in terms of welcoming L.G.B.T.Q. Catholics, which I framed in terms of five steps, aware that in some dioceses and churches we are still at the first or second step:

- 1) *Acknowledge* (that L.G.B.T.Q. people exist at all and exist in the church)
- 2) *Listen* (at all levels of the church, as part of synodality)
- 3) *Welcome* (with pastoral outreach programs designed for L.G.B.T.Q. Catholics)
- 4) *Include* (in parish and other ministries)
- 5) *Advocate* (whenever there are incidents of violence, bullying or harassment in the community)

Again, in some dioceses worldwide, we are still at step one. By the same token, a church leader can move directly to step five and advocate for at-risk L.G.B.T.Q. people without challenging any church teaching. There is more that I wish I could share about our meeting, but these meetings are "off the record" so that the two people can speak freely. I can share, however, that I presented him with a few gifts, including two of my books and copies of two icons that hung in the Jesuit novitiate in Boston, which mean a great deal to me: "*Christ the Lifegiver*" and "*Mary, Quick to Hear*," from the Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Brookline, Massachusetts.

After he encouraged me to continue with my ministry, and our half hour was up, I asked for his blessing and knelt before him to receive it. I know that not everyone can meet with the pope (I'm still amazed I have), or receive a blessing from Pope Leo, but I tried to bring in as many concerns of L.G.B.T.Q. people before him as I could.

Overall, though, I hope that hearing about his desire to continue Pope Francis' legacy of openness will itself be a blessing to all L.G.B.T.Q. Catholics and to their families and friends. Finally, don't forget to pray for our friend Pope Leo!



Pope Leo XIV meeting with James Martin, S.J., at the Vatican on Sept. 1, 2025.