

# How does Pope Francis's support for same-sex civil unions, demonstrating the revolutionized attitude toward sexual minorities of the Vatican, promote the acceptance of LGBTQ+ groups by the public in general, and the Catholics in particular?

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**Abstract.** This paper evaluates actions that have been taken by Pope Francis to include people of the LGBTQ+ community into the Catholic Church, and the opportunities and risks of such actions as well as the problems arising from them. The work utilizes the theoretical framework developed by Max Weber to describe the context of these transformations. Pope Francis's liberal views as showcased from his 2013 statement on endorsing same-sex civil unions can be identified as a shift in the Church's attitude towards LGBTQ+ people. These actions have therefore promoted an atmosphere of acceptance among LGBTQ+ Catholics and have also provoked the rest of the Catholic society to change its perception towards the LGBTQ+. Public opinion has also changed to be more liberal concerning the Catholic Church under Francis's papacy as indicated by polls. Nevertheless, criticism persists in the sense that there have been no doctrinal changes and there are still conservatives within the church who are opposed to change. This paper employs a qualitative synthesis of the current literature to examine the multifaceted effects of Pope Francis's stance on LGBTQ+ acceptance and employs Weber's sociology to explain the connection between religious institutions and social change.

## 1 Introduction

With the evolution of human civilization, people have become more understanding and open-minded toward differences in thoughts, habits, and behaviours. One important trend is the increasing tolerance towards various minority groups. The modern homosexuality rights movement, as a prominent example signalling inclusiveness, started in the late 1960s, demonstrating the greater visibility of sexual minorities among the public. With the homosexuality rights movement, over the past sixty years, there has been a growing awareness and advocacy for inclusivity and equal rights for homosexual communities among the general public. However, as far as religious groups are concerned, there are constant

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conservative voices against the rise of sexual minorities, especially firmly asserted by religious leaders such as bishops and cardinals [1]. Nevertheless, the recent remarks made by the current Pope towards homosexual Catholics indicate a more lenient attitude.

From the collapse of the Roman Empire to the Middle Ages, and later during the critique of capitalism, the popes, the highest leaders in the religious world, representing the stances of the Catholic Church, had significant societal influence that steered or impeded progress and advancements. The current Pope, Francis, holds the most significant position in the Catholic Church and is recognized for his distinct leadership style. His tenure has been marked by subversive approaches and controversial actions, which have sparked admiration and criticism within and outside the Church [2]. In 2013, he made his famous claim, "Who am I to Judge," which demonstrates his attitude toward gay Catholics. In his May 9, 2022, interview, he asserted that "God does not disown any of his children" [3], suggesting inclusivity to LGBTQ+ communities. This behaviour has undoubtedly shaken the world and has provoked extensive discussion on the Catholic Church's opinion toward sexual minorities.

Countless investigations can be accessed on mainstream search engines by researching the topic of Pope Francis and homosexuality. The opinions toward the Pope's act are controversial. These studies, whether narrative or analytical, primarily focus on the theoretical implications of his remark, "Who am I to judge?" Researchers unanimously acknowledge the unchanged doctrine of the Catholic Church on homosexuality; however, opinions diverge on its impact. Some argue it fosters inclusivity in the Catholic Church, which improves the acceptability of same-sex couples, while others see no significant change. Here, it is observed that past researchers have made subjective interpretations of the same sentence made by the Pope. The ambiguity in the Pope's actions has allowed for diverse analyses from various perspectives and lenses.

Given the extensive volume of analysis, it is evident that the remark "Who am I to judge" has had a profound and widespread impact on the Catholic world. Therefore, this paper aims to offer a nuanced review of different voices. This research is inspired by Max Weber's analysis of how Protestantism promotes the development of capitalism, which is explained in great detail in the following theoretical framework.

This paper aims to analyse the perceptions regarding Francis' actions and statements on homosexuality, especially his "Who am I to judge?" statement. Accordingly, this research uses qualitative analysis of current literature to examine the possible changes in perception within and outside the Catholic Church. The paper will consider the views of homosexuals, Catholics, and the general public to establish the diverse impacts of the Pope's position on inclusion. This approach draws its methodological underpinnings from Max Weber's sociology, where the focus is on the relationship between religious systems and social transformation.

This raises the question: How does Pope Francis's support for same-sex civil unions, demonstrating the revolutionized attitude toward sexual minorities of the Vatican, promote the acceptance of LGBTQ+ groups by the public in general and the Catholics in particular? Considering different parties, the following analysis will focus on the potential impact of Pope Francis' remarks.

## **2 Theoretical Framework**

Max Weber, a prominent sociologist, is renowned for his contributions to the fields of religion, economics, and law[4]. His pivotal work, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," articulates his influential theory that culture and religion are pivotal forces in societal development. There, he identified the doctrine of Protestantism as the significant factor that advocates the capitalism modality in the European world. Specifically, Weber highlights the predestination theory, which posits that some people are destined to go to hell

while a minority are elected to go to heaven, although no one knows their fate of going to heaven or not. This uncertainty, combined with the belief that "idleness is potentially evil," fosters a work ethic conducive to the primitive accumulation of capital and its subsequent expansion [5].

### **3 The Effect on LGBTQ+ Catholics**

Pope Francis's leadership has brought changes to the Catholic Church, which is relatively conservative when it comes to LGBTQ+ issues. His statement in 2013, "Who am I to judge?" marked a shift. "Evolve (2018)" explains that this change in tone has given many LGBTQ+ Catholics a feeling of acceptance and approval they had never felt before. Pope Francis continued this more inclusive trend in 2020, supporting civil unions for same-sex partners and stating that homosexual people have the right to a family and should be protected by law [6].

Such actions have impacted the lives of LGBTQ+ Catholics in various ways. For many, the Pope's words and actions have provided the support and acknowledgment they need from the church. This is evident in surveys showing that approval of homosexuality within the Catholic Church is partly due to the change in attitude from Pope Francis. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2018, 67% of U.S. Catholics deemed homosexual orientation as acceptable within society, compared to 54% in 2007. The Vatican's recent permission for priests to bless same-sex unions, although restricted and non-sacramental, is another formal acknowledgment and, therefore, affirmation of LGBTQ+ Catholics [7].

However, the outcomes of these actions are not limited to acceptance alone. This change brought about by Pope Francis has enabled LGBTQ+ Catholics to embrace their faith more than they used to. It has fostered a more welcoming community where the rights of the LGBTQ+ are upheld, enabling them to participate in religious matters without discrimination or exclusion [8]. This change has also led to greater involvement of gay Catholics in the church.

### **4 Effects on Non-Sexual Minority Catholics**

Pope Francis's actions have greatly impacted the straight Catholic community. Instead of focusing solely on moralizing sexual issues, he has encouraged the Church to embrace social justice concerns, thereby creating a more tolerant and humane culture. His encyclical 'Fratelli Tutti' enshrines the principle of universal solidarity and affirms the Church's role in providing care and support to the excluded and oppressed, including LGBTQ+ persons [6]. This approach has helped many straight Catholics to become more understanding towards members of the LGBTQ+ community, in line with the Pope's vision of justice and the Church's mercy [6, 7].

Moreover, Pope Francis's practical approach to justice, evident in the fight against sexual abuse within the Church and environmental pollution, underscores this point. These actions further support the assertion that the Church's role extends beyond the moral well-being of individuals to the social and ecological well-being of the world [7, 9]. This broader vision of justice and inclusivity has resonated with many Catholics, who have been encouraged to embrace queer individuals within their communities [10].

Additionally, this shift in focus has allowed the Church to rally under a common banner on certain social justice issues, uniting various groups within the Church. This unity has been crucial in fostering acceptance and support for LGBTQ+ people, as it promotes a culture of tolerance and acceptance throughout the Church [8].

## 5 The Effect on the General Public

The general public has now changed its perception of the Catholic Church due to the progressive nature of Pope Francis. Before the election of Pope Francis, the Vatican was perceived and labelled as conservative by the general public [11]. However, the church is now considered to be taking a more liberal stance, especially after the Pope's actions concerning the LGBTQ+ community and video games [12]. His inclusive messages have helped change society's attitude towards the acceptance and tolerance of LGBTQ+ citizens. Statements such as "God does not cast out any of his children" have been received positively, advancing the cause of acceptance for homosexuality [7].

The general public has changed the way it perceives the Catholic Church, shifting towards a more liberal view under Pope Francis. This change is reflected in the growing acceptance of homosexuality in various parts of the world. For instance, a Pew Research Center poll conducted in 2019 showed a higher percentage of people accepting homosexuality compared to the previous year, indicating a shift in the culture of tolerance and inclusion due to Pope Francis's leadership [6]. This is due to the ongoing campaigns by Pope Francis to ensure that the church embraces all people, regardless of their sexual orientation [10].

Additionally, the Pope's actions have a domino effect, leading other religious and secular leaders to change their attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community. Pope Francis's messages have been highly visible, and his remarks have helped change societal norms by raising awareness of the need for acceptance and tolerance among different groups of people. This influence is not only within the Catholic Church but also part of a global shift in raising awareness and providing equal rights for the LGBTQ+ community [13].

## 6 Criticisms and Challenges

However, these positive changes have not been without criticism of Pope Francis's style. Some have claimed that his declarations and practices do not amount to the positive reform of doctrine. At the same time, the Church's official position on homosexuality, as outlined in the Catechism, still deems homosexual acts as "intrinsically disordered" [8,9]. Sceptics argue that, although the current Pontiff is much more welcoming in his language, the Catholic Church's position on queer matters remains unchanged [7,8].

Furthermore, there is also a counteracting force, which is the Church's traditionalists who are against any move that may favor the LGBTQ+ community. This tension is well captured in the synodal discussions where LGBTQ+ concerns are presented more as issues of catechesis than of inclusion [13,14]. These debates present the problems confronting Pope Francis in the process of managing reformative changes while maintaining doctrinal orthodoxy [15].

As for the liberal actions of Pope Francis, it can be inferred that they are in sync with the increasing tolerance of society towards the LGBTQ+ community to gain more followers. Before his election, the general perception of society towards the LGBTQ+ community had improved and was on the rise, especially in North and South America, Western Europe, and Australia [16]. The Council on Foreign Relations noted advancements in the rights of the LGBTQ+ community and social acceptance of the community where many countries have implemented laws that protect the community [17]. This cultural change impacted Pope Francis's openness, allowing the Church to embrace the progressive culture to attract more people. Moreover, the provision of social support has been found to have a positive effect on the mental health of the LGBTQ+ population, which emphasizes the benefits of increased acceptance [18].

Accordingly, although Pope Francis has taken some progressive steps, critics claim that his actions do not entail significant doctrinal changes because the Church's position on

homosexuality has not changed. Opponents of these changes within the Church view LGBTQ+ issues as catechetical rather than inclusive. This resistance, coupled with the decreasing power of the Vatican, means that the Pope's words may have less potential for bringing about actual change. However, his actions are consistent with the growing social acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community, which is a sign of positive change.

## 7 Evaluation

The attempts of Pope Francis to open the Catholic Church for members of the LGBTQ+ community have raised concern and received diverse responses from the members of the Church as well as the society. This evaluation seeks to assess the efficiency and consequences of these endeavors about the benefits, the negative remarks, and the existing difficulties.

Among the most positive changes that have occurred on the papacy of Pope Francis, is the improved embracing of the LGBTQ+ Catholics. In the same way, what has been said by Pope Francis, including the famous "Who am I to judge?" and the recent approval of the civil unions, have been very helpful for the LGBTQ+ people who have been suffering in the Church for a long time, as pointed out by Evolvi [7]. The above actions have not only helped in the fight against discrimination of the gay community within the Catholic Church but also helped gay Catholics feel more comfortable practicing their faith. The limited permission to bless same-sex unions has strengthened this feeling of acceptance further, proving that the Church is ready to accept and endorse same-sex relationships to some extent [7,9].

Furthermore, the general concern with social justice and belonging to marginalized groups as expressed by Pope Francis has impacted the non-LGBTQ+ Catholics' attitudes. Instead of concentrating on moral condemnation of sexual concerns, he has provided more attention to compassionate subjects like solidarity at the global level and support for oppressed groups. This has helped many Catholics to change their attitude towards LGBTQ+ persons to be more accepting in line with the Pope's vision of justice and mercy [7,9].

However, as much as there is this positive development, there are immense criticisms and challenges that cannot be ignored. Some have it that while the Pope has employed rhetoric in making changes within the church, he has not gone far enough in making doctrinal changes. The Church's official position as stated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church regarding homosexuality is that homosexual acts are immoral and intrinsically disordered [9]. It sets a doctrinal contradiction between the Pope's inclusive words and the Church's exclusionary preaching, thus challenging the efficacy of his approach in realizing the actual inclusion [7].

Moreover, there are many opponents from the most conservative parts of the Church. As mentioned in the synodal talks, issues affecting the LGBTQ+ community are presented as issues of catechesis instead of inclusion, thus showing how much resistance there is to change [14]. This resistance is a major problem for Pope Francis mainly because it shows that a part of the Church's hierarchy and congregations are still against any shifts that would allow for more tolerance and inclusion of LGBTQ+ people [15].

However, some of the LGBTQ+ activists and scholars criticized that with no policy shift, Francis's more welcoming rhetoric is not enough. However, his words have assured the queer people symbolically, the fact that the Church has not changed its doctrine fundamentally means that many queer Catholics remain restricted in their participation in the Church [10]. This view explains why there is a need to keep on fighting and raising awareness about the problems that hinder the integration of minorities into society.

In this case, by using Weber's theory, one can say that the liberal actions of Pope Francis may be viewed as efforts to change the teachings of the Catholic Church through the changes in the cultural and social environment. This adaptation corresponds with the growing social tolerance of the representation of LGBTQ+ characters, which may be an attempt to gain more supporters through the integration of modern values. This view is in line with the increasing

global acceptance of LGBTQ+ people before the time of Pope Francis's papacy. Research has also indicated that the social integration of LGBTQ+ people has improved in many countries across the world especially in the Americas, Europe, and Australia since the 1980s [16]. The Council on Foreign Relations highlighted the improvement in the recognition of the rights of the LGBTQ+ community and social acceptance stating that many countries have enacted laws to protect them [17]. This cultural shift might have played a role in Pope Francis's approach which enabled the Church to embrace progressive values to gain more followers. Also, the level of social support has been found to enhance positive mental health among the LGBTQ+ population, which is a positive impact of increased social acceptance [18]

Thus, applying Weber's theory to the analysis of Pope Francis's actions, one can conclude that his attempts to create a more tolerant and open church are not a series of random changes but a part of a larger plan to adapt the Church to the changing world and attract more people. This alignment depicts the relationship between religion, culture, and society, with the ability of religious organizations to adapt to cultural shifts as the key message..

## **8 Conclusion**

Pope Francis has unquestionably changed the position of the Catholic Church towards LGBTQ+ people and made society more tolerant. Some of the supportive measures that he has taken include coming out in support of same-sex civil unions and allowing priests to bless same-sex unions; these have offered support and recognition to LGBTQ+ Catholics. These efforts have also affected the non-LGBTQ+ Catholics and made them change their perception towards the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ people which is in line with the Pope's vision of justice and mercy.

Nevertheless, certain negative aspects and issues hinder the efficiency of Pope Francis's strategy. The fact that there were not many doctrinal shifts, the opposition from the conservative elements within the Church, and the fact that he was more of a figurehead show that integration is not as simple. Homophobia and the Church's negative attitude towards homosexuality are still a significant hindrance to the recognition of LGBTQ+ people. Without policies, the change under Pope Francis might be limited to mere tokenism.

However, the actions of Pope Francis are important steps towards the liberalization of the Catholic Church and its humanity. His leadership has posed many issues and provided a foundation for further advancement. Thus, further engagement and advocacy are required to overcome structural challenges that prevent the Church and, thus, the society from fully accepting and protecting its LGBTQ+ members, including the promotion of their rights.

The following assessment reveals the effectiveness of Pope Francis's actions in transforming the Catholic Church's stance on the LGBTQ+ community. It helps in explaining the relationship between religious authority and public approval, as well as how the culture affects the institutions. However, the following could be considered as the study's weaknesses: lack of attention to the doctrinal changes that result from the symbolic measures; and the opposition from the conservative elements within the Church.

Further studies should be conducted on the impact of Pope Francis's actions on the doctrinal development of the Church and the lives of the LGBTQ+ faithful. Also, future research could examine the part played by grassroots organizations and lobbying within the Church in promoting additional change. These areas will help in expanding the knowledge of the relationship between religious organizations and cultural values, to support the process of change towards equality and fairness within the Catholic Church.

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