

Cautions on Pope Francis and recognition of gay unions

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 20, 2013 NCR Today

Pope Francis

Rome

As the world comes to know more about Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the man who is now Pope Francis, new details about his background in Argentina are emerging. On Wednesday, *The New York Times* reported that ahead of a fractious debate in his country over gay marriage, then-Cardinal Bergoglio floated civil recognition of same-sex unions as a possible compromise.

Pressed by CNN for additional details, I reached out to sources who have followed Bergoglio's career and say the broad picture painted in the *Times* report is accurate. The pope has been a staunch opponent of gay marriage but open to legal arrangements to protect the rights of same-sex couples on matters such as health benefits and inheritance.

It should be noted that this is hardly the first time a senior church official has said such a thing, though doing so generally invites a degree of blowback. Earlier in the year, Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia of the Pontifical Council for the Family gave an interview to an Italian newspaper in which he basically said the church opposes gay marriage, but is open to other legal arrangements for protecting peoples' rights.

In a subsequent interview with *NCR*, Paglia insisted what he said was "nothing new."

"Facing the explosion in various forms of living together today, I simply called on states to find solutions which help people and avoid abuses," he said.

Before drawing a straight line between then-Cardinal Bergoglio's position and its impact on Vatican policy, two cautions are in order.

First, popes often distinguish between their previous positions and their new responsibilities.

Then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, for instance, once took a strong position against Turkey's admission to the European Union on the basis it might compromise the Christian identity of Europe. As pope, however, he upheld the official Vatican line, which is neutrality on Turkey's candidacy as long as certain human rights standards are met, especially religious freedom.

Second, as Mark Movsesian of the Center for Law and Religion at St. John's University [points out](#) [1] Wednesday on the First Things website, "in political terms civil unions seems to be an idea whose time has passed -- it's doubtful that gay rights supporters would settle for anything less than marriage at this point."

On that score, we know that Pope Francis has a robustly negative position.

With regard to Argentina's press for gay marriage, he said in 2010: "This is not simply a political struggle, but an attempt to destroy God's plan. It is not just a bill but a move of the Father of Lies, who seeks to confuse and

deceive the children of God."

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[1] <http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2013/03/20/report-as-cardinal-pope-supported-civil-unions-as-alternative-to-same-sex-marriage/>

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