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At the Vatican's Casa Santa Marta Oct. 17, from left: Matthew Myers, New Ways Ministry's staff associate; Francis DeBernardo, New Ways Ministry's executive director; Pope Francis; Loretto Sr. Jeannine Gramick, New Ways Ministry's co-founder; and Robert Shine, New Ways Ministry's associate director (Courtesy of New Ways Ministry)



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Vatican City — October 17, 2023
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Pope Francis on Oct. 17 held a meeting with an American Catholic sister who had previously been reprimanded by the Vatican and several U.S. bishops for her decadeslong ministry to LGBTQ Catholics.

Loretto Sr. Jeannine Gramick, co-founder of the Maryland-based LGBTQ Catholic advocacy group New Ways Ministry, met with Francis for about 50 minutes at the Vatican's Casa Santa Marta, where the pope lives.

In a statement shared with National Catholic Reporter following the encounter, New Ways Ministry said the meeting "is remarkable because it reflects the steady acceptance of Catholic officials to LGBTQ+ issues and ministry."

"Previous popes and church leaders have opposed Sister Jeannine and New Ways Ministry," said the statement. "This meeting now represents a new openness to the pastorally-motivated, justice-seeking approach which Sister Jeannine and her organization have long practiced."

Said Gramick: "The meeting was very emotional for me. From the day he was elected, I have loved and admired Pope Francis because of his humility, his love for the poor and for those shunned by society. He is the human face of Jesus in our era. Pope Francis looks into your heart and his eyes say that God loves you."

Gramick flew to Rome specifically for the meeting with Francis. She was accompanied by three New Ways staffers, whom the pope also included in the meeting. Two of the staff were already in town to follow Francis' ongoing Oct. 4-29 Synod of Bishops, which is discussing a range of issues confronting the Catholic Church, including its ministry to LGBTQ members.

The papal meeting is the latest in a stunning turnaround of doctrinal fortunes for New Ways, which was co-founded by Gramick and the late Salvatorian Fr. Robert Nugent in 1977 and had previously attracted the ire of Vatican and American Catholic officials for decades.

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In 1984, at then-Washington Archbishop James Hickey's urging, the Vatican ordered Gramick and Nugent to end their association with New Ways. In 1999, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the head of the Vatican's doctrinal office and the future Pope Benedict XVI, prohibited Gramick and Nugent from any pastoral work with LGBTQ persons, due to alleged "errors and ambiguities" in their work.

Francis has taken a different approach. He is known to have exchanged letters with Gramick and New Ways staffers in recent years, thanking them for their ministry. "I know how much she has suffered," the pope wrote in one letter to executive director Francis DeBernardo, about Gramick. "She is a valiant woman who makes her decisions in prayer."

In the Oct. 17 statement, DeBernardo, who was part of the papal meeting, said it "was an affirmation not only of Sister Jeannine and New Ways Ministry but of the thousands upon thousands of LGBTQ+ people, parishes, schools, pastoral ministers, and religious communities who have been tirelessly working for equality, and who often experienced the great disapproval and ostracization that New Ways Ministry had experienced."

"Meeting with Pope Francis is a great encouragement for Sister Jeannine and New Ways Ministry to continue our work in the Catholic Church," said DeBernardo.

Francis' meeting with Gramick and the New Ways staff is the latest of a series of papal events focused on LGBTQ Catholics in recent weeks.

Francis previously met on Sept. 29 with Jesuit Fr. James Martin, editor of the LGBTQ Catholic publication Outreach, and indicated in a letter released on Oct. 2 that he is open to allowing Catholic blessing ceremonies for same-sex couples.

In their Oct. 17 statement, New Ways said Gramick personally thanked Francis "for his openness to blessing same-sex unions."

Whether Catholic ministries can be expanded to better include LGBTQ persons has also been the subject of emotional debates inside the ongoing synod, several participants have told NCR. Francis has been attending most of the synod sessions.

[NCR Vatican correspondent Christopher White contributed to this story.]

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