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Pope Francis opened the door for queer Africans

— will Pope Leo XIV keep it open?

The cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church have elected a new Pontiff to succeed Pope Francis, the Argentine reformer who died last month after a 12-year papacy. On 8 May 2025, Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost – now known as Pope Leo XIV – became the first American Pope following a two-day conclave.

Mounting the Chair of Saint Peter at a most complex turning point in history, with the global stage riven by conflict amidst the rise of ultra-nationalism, the new Pontiff faces urgent and difficult tasks. One is to unite the 1.4 billion Catholic faithful and move the Church beyond the numerous sexual and financial scandals that have rocked it in recent times. Another is to leverage the Church's moral authority to tackle the most pressing issues of our time. This includes the war in Ukraine, the Israeli-Gaza war and the global tariff war, just to name a few.

Perhaps his most challenging task, however, will be how to deal with the legacy of his predecessor, Pope Francis, whose pontificate changed the face of the Catholic Church in ways never previously imagined.

African queer's most beloved ally

Under Pope Francis, the Vatican championed greater inclusion and openness to change. When asked just weeks into his papacy in 2013 whether gay people had a place in the Church, the late Pontiff simply answered: 'If a person is gay and seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge?' With those words, he spoke of the longing of millions of queer people around the world who had been cast out, condemned and silenced by centuries of religious doctrine and social stigma.

His words also reverberated across Africa, a continent that accounts for 20 per cent of the global Catholic population and where culture and religion have for decades served as powerful tools to reinforce the most virulent forms of homophobic stigma. Despite recent progress, African

countries harbour some of the harshest and most discriminatory LGBTQ+ policies in the world. At least 31 of Africa's 54 countries outlaw homosexuality and no fewer than 11 countries prescribe the death penalty for same-sex acts. This barrage of anti-gay legislation, mostly remnants of colonial rule, is often the cause of arbitrary arrests and detention of same-sex individuals and activists while stoking homophobic hate and violence.

It was this kind of compassion, mirrored by Christ, that came to define the legacy of Pope Francis and marked him out as African queer's most beloved ally on the global stage.

Pope Francis became the first Pontiff to publicly oppose anti-gay laws, stressing that they are 'neither good nor just'. In an interview with the *Associated Press* in January 2023, the late Pontiff argued that even if homosexuality is considered a sin according to Catholic doctrine, it is certainly not a crime, while urging church members, including bishops, to show 'tenderness' as God does with each of his children. More than pastoral advice, his appreciation of this contentious prism resonated as a reflection of Christ's own example, who, when faced with a crowd ready to stone a woman accused of adultery, responded not with condemnation, but with a challenge: 'Let the one without sin cast the first stone.'

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'He kicked open the door for an inclusive path for queer participation in religious spaces across the continent', says Adélard Kananira, a social development advocate and founder of Gay Christian Africa. According to him, Pope Francis changed the tone and broke the silence allowing Catholic communities to open up space to finally talk about queer reality. 'His approach addressed the elephant in the room, which had been impossible for decades', Kananira adds.

In the years that followed, and throughout much of his pontificate, the late Pope would return to this refusal to judge, again and again, reaffirming that LGBTQ+ people have dignity and a right to benefit from God's great love, even as he called for the Church to apologise for how it had treated them. On 18 December 2023, Pope Francis went further by establishing the *Fiducia Supplicans*, a declaration permitting priests to offer non-liturgical blessings to same-sex couples, drawing furious outbursts from the Catholic Church in Africa. In a statement, the

Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) said such unions were 'contrary to the will of God' and a violation of 'the cultural ethos of African communities'. But while the conservative hierarchy of the Church in Africa railed, the Pope's understanding gesture was a soothing balm to the wounded hearts of many LGBTQ+ African believers.

Between tradition and revolution

In many ways, Pope Francis was a contradiction. He was both part of the system and against it. He wore the garments of an institution historically complicit in colonialism, patriarchy, sexual abuse and class oppression. Yet he leveraged the power of the institution to speak out against injustices. He raised his voice against the rise of harmful nationalism – a force that has surged in recent times with the reactionary politics and hostile unpredictability of global figures like Trump – even as he decried the persistence of war as a permanent feature of the global order. He condemned the idolatry of money, called capitalism a new tyranny and championed the rights of workers, migrants and the poor. In his *Fratelli Tutti* of 2020, he denounced neoliberalism as a failure and challenged the state of global fraternity in what he described as a 'throwaway world' that devalues human life by treating individuals as disposable once they are no longer considered productive or useful, marking him as one of the few global leaders willing to challenge the dogma of profit over people.

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Sharp as his sound bites were, they never quite overturned the heavy weight of the Church's entrenched heteronormative traditions. But, at the very least, they created space — and sometimes, space is the most revolutionary gift one can offer. Even now, his legacy weighs heavily on his successor, who will have to navigate gingerly the bitter divisions that the reforms have caused within the Body of Christ. Interestingly, the new Pope has wasted no time in pledging to continue Pope Francis' mission. In his first speech when he appeared on the balcony of St. Basilica, Pope Leo said 'We have to be a church that works together to build bridges and to keep our arms open, like this very piazza, welcoming.'

But gestures of unity are not the same as transformation. Unlike the more radical Pope Francis, who sought to reform the Church no matter how high the cost, the more cautious Pope Leo XIV walks the middle

path, embracing both conservative and progressive sentiments. His centrist instincts may likely lead him to tread cautiously and conciliatorily, careful not to widen more than necessary the chasm between the progressive and traditionalist wings in the Catholic Church that disagreed with his predecessor on doctrinal ambiguities. This can result in painful trade-offs to the detriment of those on the margins of society, the existential peripheries, for whom Pope Francis' pontificate served as a voice of hope and reason and sought to redirect the Church's gaze.

If the space for inclusion is once again sealed, if the Church retreats into itself and sidesteps the hard truths it momentarily faced, history will not forget. It will record not only who the Church welcomed and who it refused, but also the choice of a successor who opted not for reckoning, but for retreat.



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