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FILE - Pope Francis arrives for his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square, at the Vatican, Wednesday, May 22, 2024. Pope Francis apologized Tuesday, May 28, 2024, after he was quoted using a vulgar term about gays to reaffirm the Catholic Church's ban on gay priests. Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni issued a statement acknowledging the media storm that erupted about Francis's comments, which were delivered behind closed doors to Italian bishops on May 20. (AP/Andrew Medichini, File)

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Vatican City May 28, 2024

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Pope Francis apologized Tuesday after he was quoted using a vulgar and derogatory term about gay men to reaffirm the Catholic Church's ban on gay priests.

Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni issued a statement acknowledging the media storm that erupted about Francis' comments, which were delivered behind closed doors to Italian bishops on May 20.

Italian media on Monday had quoted unnamed Italian bishops in reporting that Francis jokingly used the term "faggotness" while speaking in Italian during the encounter. He had used the term in reaffirming the Vatican's ban on allowing gay men to enter seminaries and be ordained priests.

Bruni said Francis was aware of the reports and recalled that the Argentine pope, who has made outreach to LGBTQ+ Catholics a hallmark of his papacy, has long insisted there was "room for everyone" in the Catholic Church.

"The pope never intended to offend or express himself in homophobic terms, and he extends his apologies to those who were offended by the use of a term that was reported by others," Bruni said.

With the statement, Bruni carefully avoided an outright confirmation that the pope had indeed used the term, in keeping with the Vatican's tradition of not revealing what the pope says behind closed doors. But Bruni also didn't deny that Francis had used the term and acknowledged that some people had been offended by it.

Francis was addressing an assembly of the Italian bishops conference, which recently approved a new document outlining training for Italian seminarians. The document, which hasn't been published pending review by the Holy See, reportedly sought to open some wiggle room in the Vatican's absolute ban on gay priests by introducing the issue of celibacy as the primary requirement for priests, gay or straight.

The Vatican ban was articulated in a 2005 document from the Congregation for Catholic Education, and later repeated in a subsequent document in 2016, which said the church cannot admit to seminaries or ordain men who "practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called gay culture."

The position has long been criticized as homophobic and hypocritical for an institution that certainly counts gay priests in its ranks. The late psychotherapist Richard Sipe, a onetime Benedictine monk who taught in U.S. seminaries, estimated in the early 2000s that as many as 30% of the U.S. clergy was homosexually oriented.

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The late Rev. Donald Cozzens, a seminary rector, said the percentage was even higher, and asserted in his book "The Changing Face of The Priesthood" that the U.S. priesthood was increasingly becoming a gay profession since so many heterosexual men had left the priesthood to marry and have families.

Priests in the Latin rite Catholic Church cannot marry, while those in eastern rite churches may.

Francis strongly reaffirmed the Vatican ban on gay priests in his May 20 meeting with the Italian bishops, joking that "there is already an air of faggotness" in seminaries, the Italian media reported, after initial reporting from gossip site Dagospia.

Italian is not Francis' mother tongue language, and the Argentine pope has made linguistic gaffes in the past that raised eyebrows. The 87-year-old Argentine pope often speaks informally, jokes using slang and even curses in private.

He has been known for his outreach to LGBTQ+ Catholics, however, starting from his famous "Who am I to judge " comment in 2013 about a priest who purportedly had a gay lover in his past. He has ministered to transgender Catholics, allowed priests to bless same-sex couples and called for an end to anti-gay legislation, saying in a 2023 interview with The Associated Press that "Being homosexual is not a crime. "

However, he has occasionally offended LGBTQ+ people and their advocates, including in that same interview where he implied that while homosexuality wasn't a crime, it was a sin. He later clarified that he was referring to sexual activity, and that any sex outside marriage between a man and a woman was sinful in the eyes of the church.

And most recently, he signed off on a Vatican document asserting that gender-affirming surgery was a grave violation of human dignity.

New Ways Ministry, which advocates for LGBTQ+ Catholics, welcomed Francis' apology Tuesday and said it confirmed that the "use of the slur was a careless colloquialism." But the group's director Francis DeBernardo questioned the underlying content of the pope's comments and the overall ban on gays in the priesthood.

"Without a clarification, his words will be interpreted as a blanket ban on accepting any gay man to a seminary," DeBernardo said in a release, asking for a clearer statement on Francis' views about gay priests "so many of whom faithfully serve the people of God each day."

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