

Pope Francis and Health: 10 years on

Sima Barmania and Revd Michael Reiss report.

When a little-known Argentinean Bishop, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, was voted in as the new Pope on the 13th March 2013, he was seen as a Pope of 'firsts'. The first Pope of the Jesuit order and the first from a South American country to head the Catholic Church which has a 1.3 billion following globally. Bergoglio assumed the papal name of Francis, in tribute to Saint Francis of Assisi, who was noted for his simplicity, humility and environmental advocacy. In contrast to his predecessors, Pope Francis was seen as inclusive, progressive, a reformer, even a 'disruptor Pope'.

Pope Francis's more all-encompassing stance was indicated early on in his papacy, when in 2013 he stated: "If someone is gay and searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?". At that time his words reverberated around the Catholic Church. In subsequent years, he has been more welcoming to LGBT Catholics who have been marginalised, inviting prominent American LGBT Catholics to the Vatican.

Nevertheless, his comments last month were seen as more progressive when, in response to a question referring to anti-LGBT legislation, returning from a two-day papal visit to the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan, Pope Francis said: "This is not right. Persons with homosexual tendencies are children of God. God loves them. God accompanies them ... condemning a person like this is a sin. Criminalising people with homosexual tendencies is an injustice".

His statement captured widespread media attention and was saluted by members of the Catholic LGBT community, such as Alex Sparrowhawk: "As someone who has been open about my sexual orientation for almost twenty years, the news was welcomed, but there is an undeniable frustration with how far we have to go, and the slow pace with which religious leaders and institutions are catching up with wider social norm". Sparrowhawk who works for the UK-based HIV charity Terrence Higgins Trust and has been living with HIV for 13 years, tells *The Lancet*: "We can hope the statement will go some way to improve the health of people at risk of HIV, especially those within the LGBT+ communities in countries which still implement and criminalise against this population, on religious grounds".

For Ugandan activist Richard Lusimbo, National Coordinator at the Uganda Key Populations Consortium, Pope Francis's comments come at a critical time, when anti-LGBT sentiment is rising. Lusimbo tells *The Lancet* that any impact "will take a while, because in Uganda, the priests and bishops have not come out to echo the words of the Pope". Uganda is in the midst of tabling a new Anti-Homosexuality Bill where even identifying as LGBT would be punishable. Lusimbo believes that "if [Catholic clergy] were following the direction of the Pope, they would have made comments to discourage the government".

The widespread discussions and sentiment about the proposed Ugandan legislation is negatively impacting the health of LGBT communities in Uganda, says Lusimbo. He points to

a recent example, where a major general in the army cautioned people “to not treat homosexuals in our hospitals”; such statements push the community further away, which makes them more vulnerable to acquiring HIV. Lusimbo points out that “community members are afraid to receive treatment, scared to be ‘outed’, which makes accessing key services challenging”. In addition, there are “pockets of medical personnel who are anti-LGBT, who have allegedly been involved in conversion therapy and when people are perceived to be LGBT, they are arrested by the police and subjected to humiliating anal tests. Given the power of the Catholic Church in Uganda and their ability to influence policy, their support and protection of the LGBT community would be a game changer”.

For Neela Ghoshal, Senior Director of Law, Policy and Research at Outright International, Pope Francis speaking out about LGBT criminalisation does have some merit: “The more allies we have who are encouraging decriminalisation, the better. There are ways in which this kind of messaging can be helpful, at least in ending outright discrimination in the health sector. Because there’s a kind of advocacy that we are ourselves do in challenging country contexts where if we need to speak to political leaders in very LGBTQI phobic countries we go to them and say ‘we know that we are not going to agree on the fundamental elements of LGBTQI equality, but can we agree that if someone is sick and shows up at a health centre that they should be treated?’”.

However, Ghoshal believes Pope Francis’s recent comments advances non-discrimination in the healthcare sector for “gay people and not for trans people”, who often shy away from services, adding: “The Pope is sending messages saying ‘sure, accept people, but don’t treat them according to their gender identity’. For our communities, that is not what acceptance looks like”.

For other communities, the thorny issue is condoms, historically a contentious topic within Catholicism, laments Sparrowhawk: “Unfortunately, there is still a long way to go to thaw relations between the Catholic Church and HIV advocates, largely because of the Church’s stance on condom use, which has likely led to millions of people dying from AIDS”.

Contraception

During his term, Pope Francis has largely circumvented questions around condom usage. The Vatican considers any form of contraception, including the IUD and ‘the pill’, as ‘artificial’, except for so-called natural family planning. However, Pope Francis has talked about family planning within the context of ‘responsible parenting’. Following a trip from the Philippines, Pope Francis commented: “some people think that – excuse my expression here – that in order to be good Catholics we have to be like rabbits ... No. Parenthood is about being responsible”.

During the Zika virus outbreak in Brazil in 2016, Pope Francis spoke about avoiding pregnancy, while emphatically stating that abortion “is a crime” that cannot be justified, but that avoiding pregnancy was not an “absolute evil”, recalling a historical exception of nuns in the Belgian Congo in the 1960s: “Paul VI, a great man, in a difficult situation in Africa,

permitted nuns to use contraceptives in cases of rape”. Some commentators took this as a softening of the Vatican’s stance on family planning and a potential window of opportunity for policy change. There is also some indication that Pope Francis is steering towards a ‘one policy doesn’t fit all’ approach with respect to family planning to reflect the heterogeneity of the Catholic church, referencing his encyclical *Amoris Laetitia* which focuses on the family: “Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs ... not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium”.

Planetary Health

Like his namesake, Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology, Francis has made threats to the environment part of his mission, publishing his lengthy encyclical *Laudato Si* in 2015. This spans interconnecting problems, including air pollution, migration, water, climate change and biodiversity loss. “The exploitation of the planet has already exceeded acceptable limits”, says Pope Francis. Tony Capon, Director of the Monash Sustainable Development Institute at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, and member of the Rockefeller-Lancet Commission on Planetary Health, believes that initiatives such as *Laudato Si* should be encouraged, since religious figures can offer much needed guidance on how to relate to both people and planet. For Capon, the crux of the problem, in a planetary health sense, is changing the current dominant human ethos of high consumption and consumerism evident in many parts of the world: “changing that culture is the only solution”. Nevertheless, discussions around more sensitive topics such as family planning also need to be addressed, says Capon: “it’s not unreasonable for any faith organisation whose mission is engaging on conversations about planetary health issues, that human population and access to family planning for women should be on the table as part of it; we haven’t seen it yet, in this context. It is a valid criticism”.

Wael Al-Delaimy is a professor of public health at the University of California San Diego, USA and thinks that one of the strengths of the encyclical *Laudato Si* is that it was able to communicate to the general public, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, “health and poverty; health equity was all over the encyclical and that really resonated with people”. Al-Delaimy, with members of the Pontifical Academy of Science, produced the book *Health of People, Health of Planet and Our Responsibility*, which draws on the encyclical from a health perspective. “The Pontifical Academy brings scientists through that umbrella. I think we are making a movement, and a change, but it’s slow”, says Al-Delaimy, who also admits that it is difficult to ascertain whether the encyclical has had a direct impact on public health, as change takes time. According to Al-Delaimy, the hierarchical structure within the Catholic Church is strongest compared to other religions, which brings with it gravitas and moral authority that can be leveraged.

For some, Pope Francis is a spiritual figurehead, a reformer who engages with people and addresses the major issues of our time. For others, he is a symbol of an antiquated

institution out of step with the modern world. There are questions regarding the waning influence of the Catholic Church in some countries, though it is increasing in others. Although there has been speculation about Francis's possible retirement, he has quashed such rumours and seems to be set on continuing his papacy for the foreseeable future.

Links

[Health of People, Health of Planet and Our Responsibility: Climate Change, Air Pollution and Health | SpringerLink](#)

[*Laudato Si*](#)

[Safeguarding human health in the Anthropocene epoch: report of The Rockefeller Foundation–Lancet Commission on planetary health \(thelancet.com\)](#)

[Tony Capon: the world's first professor of planetary health - The Lancet](#)

[Associations between punitive policies and legal barriers to consensual same-sex sexual acts and HIV among gay men and other men who have sex with men in sub-Saharan Africa: a multicountry, respondent-driven sampling survey - The Lancet HIV](#)