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Pope Francis arrives for his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square, at the Vatican, Wednesday, Nov. 8, 2023. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)

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In the United States, the national conference of Catholic bishops rejects the concept of gender transition, leaving many transgender Catholics feeling excluded. On Nov. 8, the Vatican made public a sharply contrasting statement, saying it's permissible, under certain circumstances, for trans Catholics to be baptized and serve as godparents.

"It is a major step for trans inclusion ... it is big and good news," said Francis DeBernardo, executive director of Maryland-based New Ways Ministry, which advocates for greater LGBTQ acceptance in the church.

The document was signed Oct. 21 by Pope Francis and Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, who heads the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. It was posted Nov. 8 on that office's website.

If it did not cause scandal or "disorientation" among other Catholics, a transgender person "may receive baptism under the same conditions as other faithful," the document said.

Similarly, the document said trans adults — even if they had undergone gender-transition surgery — could serve as godfathers or godmothers under certain conditions.

DeBernardo said this seemed to be a reversal of a 2015 Vatican decision to bar a trans man in Spain from becoming a godparent.

During his papacy, Francis has frequently expressed an interest in making the Catholic Church more welcoming to LGBTQ people, even though doctrines rejecting same-sex marriage and sexual activity remain firmly in place.

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A small but growing number of U.S. parishes have formed LGBTQ support groups and welcome transgender people on their own terms. Yet several Catholic dioceses have issued guidelines targeting trans people with restrictions and refusing to recognize their gender identity.

Fr. James Martin, a Jesuit priest who has advocated for years for greater LGBTQ inclusion in the church, welcomed the new document.

"In many dioceses and parishes, including in the US, transgender Catholics have been severely restricted from participating in the life of the church, not because of any canon law, but stemming from the decisions of bishops, priests and pastoral associates," he said via email.

"So the Vatican's statement is a clear recognition not only of their personhood, but of their place in their own church," he said. "I hope that it helps the Catholic church treat them less as problems and more as people."

According to the Vatican, the document was a response to a letter submitted in July by a Brazilian bishop asking about LGBTQ people's possible participation in baptisms and weddings.

DeBernardo said the document "proves that the Catholic Church can — and does — change its mind about certain practices and policies," and he suggested that some diocesan anti-trans policies might now have to be rescinded. But he expressed disappointment that the document maintained a ban on same-sex couples serving as godparents.