

'Who am I to judge?' Pope signals more tolerant stance on homosexuality

- **Previous Pope had signed document saying gay men should not be priests**
- **But Pope Francis says gay clergymen should be forgiven and sins forgotten**
- **Comments came as he returned from wildly successful tour of Brazil**

By Hannah Roberts and Steve Doughty

Pope Francis yesterday signalled a more tolerant era of Vatican thinking after he spoke out in defence of homosexuals.

In remarks at odds with traditional rhetoric, the Pontiff refused to condemn homosexuality, saying: 'We must be brothers.'

In the most conciliatory words yet from the Vatican on the subject of gay priests, he added: 'If a person is gay and seeks God and has goodwill, who am I to judge him?'

The new Pope used a talk with journalists covering his visit to Brazil to emphasise Roman Catholic teaching that says those who have gay orientation should be accepted.

A modern Pope? The Pope was funny and candid during a news conference that lasted almost an hour and a half, during which he did not attempt to dodge any difficult questions fielded by the reporters present

He stressed that the official position of the Church is that homosexual acts are sinful, but homosexual urges and thoughts are not.

The message that gay people should be 'integrated' into society rather than marginalised marks a clear departure for the Papacy.

In recent years the pronouncements of Francis's predecessor Pope Benedict have fiercely condemned gay rights and at one point the former Pope described gay relationships as 'evil'. Speaking on his flight back to Rome from Rio, the Pontiff saved his criticism for gay pressure groups and lobbies. 'The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains this very well,' he said.

'It says they should not be marginalised because of this orientation but that they must be integrated into society. 'The problem is not having this orientation. We must be brothers. The problem is lobbying by this orientation, or lobbies of greedy people, political lobbies, Masonic lobbies, so many lobbies. This is the worse problem.'

Accepting: His statements marked a dramatic turnaround from his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, who signed a document in 2005 that said men with deep-rooted homosexual tendencies should not be priests

But he deflected questions about a gay lobby active in the Vatican, said last month to have been the subject of complaints by the Pope.

'You see a lot written about the gay lobby. I still have not seen anyone in the Vatican with an identity card saying they are gay,' he added. Nothing said during the 80-minute in-flight interview alters the strong Vatican opposition to gay relationships or marriage, or the Church ban on actively gay priests. But his words mark an entirely different emphasis since the retirement of Benedict in the spring. Before he became Pope Benedict, the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger said gay relationships were 'evil' and 'contrary to natural order'.

He underlined rules that prevent active gays from becoming priests, and he repeatedly condemned gay equality laws, saying they 'violate the natural law upon which the equality of all human beings is grounded'. In further evidence of a softening of attitudes, Pope Francis said women should be able to take more important roles in the Church – but not as priests.

'We cannot limit the role of women in the Church to altar girls or the president of a charity, there must be more,' he said in his first public statement on campaigns in the Catholic church for women priests.

Ministering to the faithful: Pope Francis is seen on a large screen as he celebrates the World Youth Day's concluding Mass on Copacabana beach, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, yesterday

Pope Francis also today suggested that he wanted a greater role for women in the Church, but he insisted they could not be Priests

All this devotion is tiring: Sun worshippers top up their tan or nap as devout Catholics listen intently

Pope Francis : Who am I to judge gays?

'But with regard to the ordination of women, the Church has spoken and says no.

'Pope John Paul said so with a formula that was definitive.' The change of tone from the Vatican on homosexuality comes three weeks after the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Reverend Justin Welby, said in a key speech on gay rights that criticism of the Church of England's attitudes may be justified and 'pretending that nothing has changed is absurd and impossible'. Archbishop Welby told Anglicans that the Parliamentary debate on same-sex marriage showed the Church was out of touch with majority thinking.

He told General Synod that 'the cultural and political ground is changing. Anyone who listened to the Same Sex Marriage Bill second reading debate in the House of Lords could not fail to be struck by the overwhelming change of cultural hinterland. Predictable attitudes were no longer there.' He added: 'We may or may not like it but we must accept there is a revolution in the area of sexuality.'

BENEDICT 'LIKE HAVING GRANDDAD IN THE HOUSE'

His shock resignation in February threw the Catholic Church into turmoil, at the notion there could be 'two Popes' living side by side in Rome.

But Pope Benedict's presence in the Vatican has been dismissed by his successor as 'like having granddad in the house.'

Francis said that he does not feel 'encumbered' by his predecessor, but likes having him there to ask for advice. Benedict has now taken up residence in a convent close to St Peter's Square, where his presence so close to the heart of power poses the threat that Francis' authority could be undermined. But Francis claimed that he is not intimidated by the former leader of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics. He told journalists on his flight returning from a week-long visit to Brazil: 'Some say, "Do you not feel encumbered? Doesn't it make you want to rebel?"'

'I replied that it is like having your wise old grandfather in the house. When granddad is in the house he is venerated and listened to.' He added: 'Benedict does not meddle '

Once he stepped down as Pope and it emerged that for security reasons he would have to live within the Holy See, there was deep concern over Benedict's role.

The Vatican went out of its way to emphasise that retirement meant just that: retirement. Temporarily it was gripped by confusion over what name and title Benedict should have after retirement.

To add to the sense of finality his papal ring and other powerful emblems of authority were destroyed— just as they are after a papal death.

When he said goodbye to the cardinals in February Benedict promised not to interfere saying 'among you is the new Pope that from now on I promise my obedience.'

But he continues to wear Papal white and is known as Pope Emeritus. And his continuing influence was evident earlier this month Francis published an encyclical or document of Catholic doctrine begun by Benedict, calling it the work of four hands.'