

# How Pope Francis opened the Vatican to transgender sex workers

The outreach, reflecting the most radical stage of his papacy, has prompted backlash while also altering the lives of the nearly 100 people he has met.

By [Anthony Faiola](#) and [Stefano Pitrelli](#)

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Laura Esquivel prays inside the Church of the Immaculate Blessed Virgin in Torvaianica, Italy. She had lost her faith before her encounters with the pope. (Alessandro Penso for The Washington Post)

VATICAN CITY — Sea gulls soared over St. Peter’s Square as Laura Esquivel, clad in tight leather pants, aimed herself toward the high walls of the Holy See. “It’s not too much? My makeup?” she asked, self-consciously touching a rouged cheek. “I don’t care what people think. But this is *the pope*.”

She hurried into the Vatican’s cavernous Paul VI Audience Hall and was ushered to the front row. Before her, a 23-foot-tall bronze sculpture of Jesus gazed down. Behind her, the faithful flashed curious looks.

It was the third papal meeting for Laura, 57, a saucy Paraguayan sex worker who, in her realest moments, described herself as “una travesti,” outdated Spanish slang for “a transgender woman.” She lived by a code: Tough girls don’t cry. But the first time Pope Francis had blessed her, she couldn’t suppress her tears. On their second meeting, they chatted over lunch. He came to know her well enough to ask about her health.

On top of her longtime HIV, she’d had a recent cancer diagnosis. During treatment, the church sourced her a comfortable hotel room in the shadow of the Colosseum and provided food, money, medicine and tests.

The outreach reflected an unconventional pope in the most radical stage of his papacy. From his early days in 2013, when he famously declared, “Who am I to judge,” Francis has urged the Catholic Church to embrace all comers, including those living in conflict with its teachings. Now, his unprecedented opening to the LGBTQ+ community has reached its zenith — and ballooned into the most explosive issue of his tenure, fueling a bitter clash with senior conservative clerics, who have denounced him in remarkably harsh terms.



Pope Francis's unprecedented opening to the LGBTQ+ community has fueled a bitter clash with senior conservative clerics. (Andreas Solaro/AFP/Getty Images)

In recent months, Francis has given explicit approval for transgender godparents and blessings of same-sex couples. He penned a defense of secular civil unions — once described by his predecessor as “contrary to the common good.” His

pronouncements have sometimes seemed contradictory or in tension — authorizing baptisms for transgender people one day, while warning of the moral risks of “sex-change intervention” on another. He has said “being homosexual is not a crime” but hasn’t altered church teaching that homosexual acts are “intrinsically disordered.”

Nevertheless, as the 87-year-old pontiff moves to cement his legacy, he has been emphatic about his overarching vision: the open door.

Nothing made that point more vividly than his decision over the past two years to welcome nearly 100 transgender women, many of them sex workers, into the sacred spaces of the Vatican.

These were imperfect people who had lived through rejection, vice and violence, some losing faith along the way. Like Laura.



Laura Esquivel, in pink, poses as part of a group attending Pope Francis's public audience on June 22, 2022. (Andrea Conocchia)

She'd worked the streets on two continents, starting at age 15. She did time in an Italian jail for cutting another trans woman in a fight. "Soy hecho de hierro," she'd say. I'm made of iron. She apologized to no one for her life, up to and including the pope. Yet through once unimaginable encounters with the supreme pontiff of 1.4 billion Catholics, and with the support of a local priest and nun, she'd begun to soften. For the first time in years, she'd started to pray. If she beat her cancer, she knew she faced a decision: return to prostitution or, as her supporters hoped, forge a new life. From the front row, on the last papal audience before Easter, she kept her eyes on the pope as he approached in his wheelchair.

"Pope Francis!" she said, reaching for his hand.

"Laura!" beamed the pope.



The Rev. Andrea Conocchia met Laura when he was passing out food to migrants early in the pandemic.  
(Alessandro Penso for The Washington Post)

Laura's connection to Pope Francis was set in motion on a brisk March evening at the start of the pandemic, when a small priest with a high voice pulled his copper-colored Fiat Panda up to her dingy apartment building in Torvaianica.

Twenty-four miles south of Rome, near a gay beach and a military barracks, the working-class town was a hub for transgender sex workers, many of them undocumented Latin Americans. Like others, Laura worked a wooded grove. Clients would identify her in their headlights and then accompany her to a shack with a mattress.

But Italy's emergence as a global hot spot for the coronavirus stifled that business. Laura was in a panic. No clients meant no food.

It was through other trans women who worked in the woods that she heard about “Don Andrea.”

The Rev. Andrea Conocchia, a liberal priest originally from Rome, was doling out food to migrants from the inner courtyard of the boxy Church of the Immaculate Blessed Virgin. Among those who came were cooks, maids and dishwashers who'd lost off-the-books jobs. An Argentine named Paola was the first trans woman to show up. “Padrecito,” she asked with trepidation behind oversized black shades, speaking half-Spanish, half-Italian. “Can you help me like you're doing with the others?”

The next day, Paola returned with a friend. Then again, with more.

“Padrecito,” one of them ventured while in the priest's office another day, “you may or may not have figured this out, but we are sex workers.”

He raised an eyebrow. He hadn't realized — his innocence sometimes verging on comical. But his door, he told them, was open to all.

Laura arrived on foot. She had no car, so she walked the mile and a half, armed with a grocery bag and hope. Don Andrea asked for her phone number and encouraged her to go home.

A few hours later, at 7 p.m., her cellphone rang. It was Don Andrea. He was outside. “I swear, he brought everything: pasta, rice, sugar, pâté, olives,” she recalled.

“Everything in boxes. It was 400, 500 euros' worth of food. He told me to call him whenever I needed anything.”



Daisy Spitaglieri, Laura Esquivel and Claudia Victoria Salas chat with the owner of the Somoa while in the courtyard of the Church of the Immaculate Blessed Virgin. (Alessandro Penso for The Washington Post)

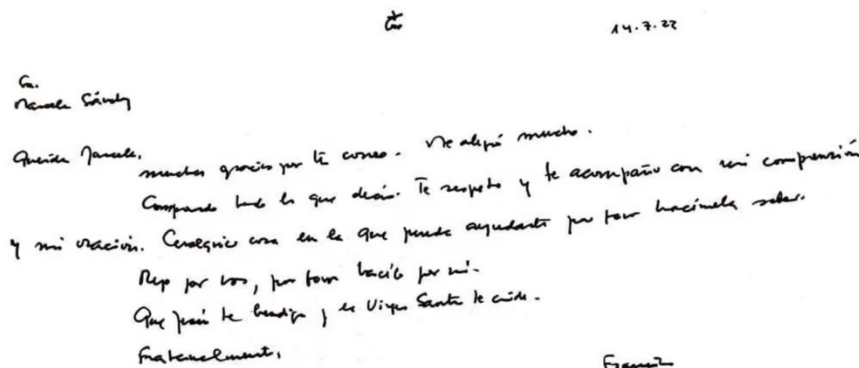
Writing to Pope Francis was Don Andrea's suggestion. Some of the food he'd been distributing to the trans women of Torvaianica was from the Vatican's Office of Papal Charities. They could thank the pope, he told them, and articulate their needs.

And so one evening, Marcela Sanchez finished a dinner of gnocchi with chicken, put on pajamas, shut off the lights and began to compose a note to the pope in the glow of her Samsung mobile.

Marcela was a sex worker in her late 40s who, like Francis, hailed from Argentina. She opened up to the pope about the police officers back home who'd held her down, beat her and raped her. She wrote of shopping for groceries there by night out of fear of being seen, and bashed, by day.

At 1 a.m., she sent the text to Don Andrea, who forwarded it to Francis. The pope wrote back.

In a handwritten letter, he addressed her using the feminine in Spanish: "My dear Marcela, thank you very much for your email. ... I respect you and accompany you with my compassion and my prayer. Anything I can help you with, please let me know."



The image shows a handwritten note on a piece of paper. At the top right, it is dated "14.7.22". The text is written in Spanish and is addressed to "Querida Marcela". The handwriting is cursive and somewhat informal. The note expresses gratitude for an email, offers respect and accompaniment with compassion and prayer, and offers help with anything needed. It ends with "Fraternamente:" and a signature that appears to be "Francisco".

Querida Marcela,  
muchos gracias por tu correo. Me alegró mucho.  
Comprendo todo lo que deseas. Te respeto y te acompaño con mi compasión  
y mi oración. Cualquier cosa en la que pueda ayudarte por favor házmelo saber.  
Rezamos por ti, por tu familia y por mí.  
Que Jesús te bendiga y la Virgen Santa te ayude.  
Fraternamente:  
Francisco

The pope responded to Marcela with a handwritten note, emailed as a PDF attachment on July 14, 2022.  
(Marcela Sanchez)

The pope's charity office began sending money to Torvaianica, in addition to the food. Not fortunes — a hundred euros here, two hundred there. But in the pandemic, it was manna from heaven.

When vaccines were approved, the Office of Papal Charities offered appointments. People without residency papers weren't eligible for jobs through Italy's National Health Service. So the Torvaianica contingent was led to into the vastness of the Paul VI Hall to get shots from Vatican stores.

"They saved our lives," Laura said.



Laura receives the ceremonial washing of the feet at the Church of the Immaculate Blessed Virgin in March.  
(Alessandro Penso for The Washington Post)

Laura picked a hot pink blouse, jeans and white sandals for her first encounter with the pope, on a summer morning in 2022. She mugged for photos in the colonnades of St. Peter's, along with other trans women and a same-sex couple Don Andrea had brought along. She had cried on the phone with the priest the night before. What would she say? How should she act? "Just be yourself," he said.

Francis, who had been dealing with knee pain, sat in a high-backed chair during his open-air audience that day. When it was her turn, Laura strode up and looked him in the eyes.

"I'm a transsexual from Paraguay," she blurted out in Italian.

He smiled and replied, "You are also a child of God."

She asked for his blessing, and he touched both her shoulders. "God bless you," the pope said.

"You, too," Laura responded.

When Francis laughed, she asked him why. “We should speak Spanish, we’re South American,” he said, linking their identities. As he moved away, she felt hot tears and adjusted her sunglasses to hide them.

The meetings between the pope and the trans women had started two months earlier, in April 2022. Sister Geneviève Jeanningros, an elderly French nun who ministered outside Rome and knew the pope, had taken an interest in the Torvaianica group. She wrote to the papal household asking if she could bring four of them to one of the regular Wednesday audiences. No one responded. So she submitted a standard ticket request and, together with Don Andrea, brought them unannounced.



Claudia Victoria Salas feeds her dog in her apartment, which is filled with papal memorabilia. (Alessandro Penso for The Washington Post)

One in the first group was Claudia Victoria Salas. She was a 60-year-old Argentine who had aged out of prostitution and was cooking and cleaning at the Samoa, a honky-tonk boardinghouse and nightclub where several of the women lived. On the night Francis was named pope, Claudia had dashed to St. Peter’s Square to wave their national flag. On the day she was to meet him, she rose at 3 a.m. to make him empanadas.

At the Vatican, Don Andrea sensed some of the pope’s aides shrinking from their group. But Francis appeared to be delighted. Claudia cried as he blessed her. “You don’t know the feeling,” she said, crying again during a retelling in her small

apartment — filled with snapshots, calendars and books about Francis. “To be like this, who we are, looked down upon, with all our troubles, and to have the pope see you as a person. The pope! To bless you. To treat you humanely. To accept you. I’m telling you. You have no idea.”

The pope’s receptiveness prompted Sister Geneviève to ask: Could more of the “girls” come? He replied, “I want to see them — they must all, all, all come.” “You know, when he repeats something three times, it’s because he really means it,” the nun said.



The Rev. Don Andrea Conocchia waves alongside a group of transgender women he accompanied to a lunch with Pope Francis on Nov. 19. (Andrew Medichini/AP)

The visits became a regular occurrence, with people coming from Torvaianica and across central Italy. “Groups of trans come all the time,” Francis told fellow Jesuits in Lisbon last August. “The first time they came, they were crying. I was asking them why. One of them told me, ‘I didn’t think the pope would receive me!’ Then, after the first surprise, they made a habit of coming back. Some write to me, and I email them back. Everyone is invited! I realized these people feel rejected.”

Those visits were hardly hush-hush, but neither were they big media events — until November, when the Vatican agreed to let Don Andrea bring a literal bus load of transgender women to lunch with the pope, with journalists invited along for the ride. They drove past the umbrella pines of the Lazio countryside. Several of the trans women clutched rosaries and prayed. Others told off-color jokes. Claudia, in a gray

turtleneck, giggled as she opened her purse to reveal a smuggled beer. “I won’t drink it in front of the pope,” she promised.

There was chatter about Francis’s recent gestures toward the LGBTQ+ community. Ten days earlier, the Vatican had released its guidance that transgender people could be baptized and serve as godparents. Before that came the letter signaling the pope’s openness to blessings for same-sex couples.

Church traditionalists were fuming. At a historic synod on the future of the church in October, held in the same Vatican hall where Laura would meet the pope again before Easter, a cluster of conservative bishops — from Poland, Hungary, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Australia — had railed against the blessings and described homosexuality as “disgusting” and “unnatural.”

Claudia defended the pontiff.

“The pope is a person who believes in equality for everyone,” she said. “He does not discriminate; he welcomes. He sees us, he is open to us.”

Those on the bus basked in the glow of what felt like acceptance. Laura marveled: They were about to dine with the pope.

“Lunch” that day was a loose term. It was a Vatican event for a thousand underprivileged and homeless people of Rome. But Laura and Claudia were guests of honor, seated directly across from the pope. Laura reached past a centerpiece of daisies and bottles of Fanta and Coca-Cola to hand him a gift: a vessel and straw for maté, the herbal tea popular in both their countries.

Over plates of cannelloni, they talked of South American food and other lighthearted things. The pope refrained from probing questions or pointed advice.

“Pope Francis never criticized me or told me to change my life,” Laura said.



Three of the trans women who rode the bus pose for selfies at the Vatican. (Anthony Faiola/The Washington Post)

Video footage of the bus ride, however, was like catnip for the pope’s critics. Laura — who could be seen in one clip standing in the aisle, sunglasses tucked into the neckline of a form-fitting magenta top — said she received missives via Facebook questioning why a trans woman should be allowed to share a meal with a pope. In an op-ed published soon after, Héctor Aguer, the bishop emeritus of La Plata, Argentina, denounced the church for succumbing to what he called “inclusive mania” and accused Francis’s pontificate, with its reluctance to condemn anyone, of promoting “bad theology.”

Vitriol swirled on social media. “Another 20 years and they will be having transgender drag queen arch bishops probably,” wrote X user Evan Dyer, who describes himself as a “God fearing” Texas Republican.

John-Henry Westen, co-founder of the conservative U.S. religious news outlet LifeSite, questioned the seeming hypocrisy of a pontiff who in 2015 compared gender theory to nuclear weapons.

“So how do we square Pope Francis saying that gender ideology is one of the most dangerous ideological colonization and then the same Pope Francis blesses the behavior of transgender individuals?” Westen wrote.

The pope would say he was not blessing the behavior but the individuals. A Vatican document in April would repeat Francis’s criticism of gender theory, as well as a call “to acknowledge the fundamental dignity inherent in every person.” In a recent clarification to an American nun who worked in LGBTQ+ ministry, Francis said his criticism of gender theory should not be read as contradicting his basic belief that “transgender people must be accepted and integrated into society.”

In an interview with The Washington Post, one of the pope’s leading critics, Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller, accused Francis of playing to the “digital culture” of our times, of knowing that the images of trans women at a high-profile papal event would cause a stir.

“It’s absolutely clear that Jesus excluded nobody, but it was also the call of his to conversion against our sins,” Mueller said. The trans women, he noted, “had spoken out publicly, [saying] that this encounter with the pope was a justification of their own behavior. And this cannot be.”



Claudia keeps a photo in her apartment of her friend Naomi Cabral meeting with Pope Francis. (Alessandro Penso for The Washington Post)

Papal contact was certainly no guarantee of an epiphany, or a Hallmark Channel ending.

On an October morning in 2022, Claudia opened an iron gate to an apartment block at the Samoa. For two days, her friend Naomi Cabral hadn't responded to calls or texts, and Claudia was anxious. She climbed a staircase to Naomi's unit and knocked. No one answered. She knocked harder, pushing open the unlocked door with her fist. She was stunned. The naked body of the 47-year-old, 6-foot-3 Argentine was facedown on the bed.

Only a few months earlier, Naomi had met Pope Francis. Now she was dead. Investigators swooped in. They reconstructed the crime, analyzed her phone records, implemented a wiretap and, within a month, arrested a man they identified as the last client to see her and whom they overheard admitting to killing someone. Had it not been for Naomi's connections with the pope, her friends insisted, the police never would have pursued a suspect with such zeal.

Naomi's family in Argentina refused her remains, so Don Andrea held a funeral for her at his church.

Then a second trans woman who had met the pope died — of complications from HIV. Giuliana's friends said she'd let herself go, given up. Don Andrea said Masses in honor of Naomi and Giuliana.

The services brought the trans community of Torvaianica together — and gave them an additional reason to attend Mass.



Laura and Claudia are seated across from Pope Francis during a Vatican lunch in November. (Stefano Pitrelli/The Washington Post)

In one of those services, in late March, 17 trans women sat among 50 or so other parishioners. Laura spirited from pew to pew during liturgies and readings. Daisy

Spitaglieri, 61, a Bolivian who danced in Italian nightclubs in her heyday and met the pope in 2022, wore Jackie O sunglasses and sat reverently with her Chihuahua, Rolando, by her side. In another pew, Claudia whispered to a friend and sneaked sips of Peroni beer from her purse. The trans worshipers drew stares as they chatted through the service and a later catechism session.

“Shush!” Don Andrea said, quieting the din.

At times, getting his trans congregants to focus was like “trying to herd cats,” he said. He welcomed them at Mass and ministered to them — sometimes covering his ears with a cry of “mamma mia” when their talk turned racy. But he dissuaded several of them who wanted to regularly volunteer at the parish, worrying that a more frequent presence could prove disruptive.

“Their threshold is not mine,” he said of some of his parishioners.



Volunteers prepare olive branches for Easter at the church in Torvaianica. (Alessandro Penso for The Washington Post)

Several days later, a few longtime parishioners were cleaning the church.

“Some people here are wary [of the trans women], especially the elderly,” said Maria Concetta Tranchina, 65. “They will grumble. They won’t [outright criticize] them, but they will shoot dirty looks.”

Giuseppina Cerqua, 65, chimed in. “I think most [of the elderly here] are like that. They’ll say things like: ‘Don Andrea shouldn’t be doing this,’ that [the trans women] should stay out of the church.”

A man in his 80s with a walking stick, who declined to give his name, muttered: Don Andrea “has done good things and things that are less than good. A priest should be called to a higher standard. That’s all I’m saying.”

Asked later about the mood, Don Andrea said: “Some of my parishioners will ask me whether being homosexual is a sin, whether the girls that we have helped are praying, whether they’re coming to confession, or to Mass. Some of them, many of them, will inquire whether [my transgender parishioners] mean to change their lives. I respond that some indeed told me they were meaning to. But not all of them. Because that’s the only life they’ve known.”



Laura speaks with Don Andrea after Mass on March 13. (Alessandro Penso for The Washington Post)

Laura’s allies in the church offered support without conditions.

After Laura’s colon cancer diagnosis in June, Don Andrea found a pro bono lawyer to legalize her residency in Italy — where she’d lived undocumented since 1993 — then helped register her with the National Health Service. A medical clinic run by the Office of Papal Charities offered tests and medicines. Sister Geneviève identified a three-star hotel where management was willing to let her stay free, including in-room meals,

during six weeks of chemotherapy. Later, the French nun secured her a private room in a Rome shelter not far from the Vatican, while the papal charity office continued to provide occasional cash stipends.

Several times, the pope asked Don Andrea about Laura's health. "It's almost like Laura has become a friend of the pope," the priest reflected.

Laura thanked the pope for his concern by bringing homemade empanadas to the papal household. When the guards let her in, she turned to Don Andrea. "I feel like someone," she said. "Laura, you *aresomeone*," he replied.

Her faith over the years had fluctuated. Somewhere between her father forcing her to shave her long locks as a teen and the violence in the vice-filled woods on the Italian coast, she'd stopped believing. She found reprieve in cocaine, liquor, the company of clients.

She'd returned to prayer in 2020, prompted, she said, by Don Andrea's kindness. Every week or two, she'd cross the cobblestone of Torvaianica's main square and kneel in the well-worn pews of his sienna-hued church.

Her friends in Paraguay were "shocked" by her newfound faith. "They couldn't believe it," she said.



Laura, pictured overlooking a beach in Torvaianica, is unsure whether she will return to sex work. (Alessandro Penso for The Washington Post)

Her encounters with the pope, and the help from the church during her cancer treatments, strengthened her connection. She was still dishing dirty stories when the priests weren't around, and sometimes when they were. But when she felt well enough, she went to Sunday Mass. Sometimes she'd pop a clonazepam to chase away overwhelming thoughts of cancer, her uncertain future. But more often, she prayed. Acceptance, not proselytizing, had lured her back to faith. The pope, Don Andrea, Sister Geneviève and the Catholic church had become comforting figures and her unlikely allies.

None of this affected her thinking on gender. For Laura and the other trans women of Torvaianica, that was a long settled question. But sex work was something she wavered on. At times she talked about returning to it if her cancer treatments were a success. "I like life. I like prostitution. I like men," she said in February. "I don't have to explain myself to anyone."

But just before her Holy Week meeting with the pope, she felt less certain. Nervously lighting a cigarette at a cafe off St. Peter's Square, she said Don Andrea and the pope's almoner, a Polish cardinal, were trying to change her mind. She inhaled the smoke. Let it out. She didn't want to let them down. Maybe, she mused, she'd go back to Paraguay. Retire.

"I'm getting too old for this anyway," she said.



Laura buys medication with the help of financial support from the church. (Alessandro Penso for The Washington Post)

On Holy Wednesday, Laura was anxious and exhausted. She was awaiting biopsy results, unsure if she'd beaten her cancer. She hadn't been sleeping. Her legs hurt from her treatments. Her mind raced, jumping from thought to thought. In the Vatican hall, she fidgeted in her chair.

She was sitting with Don Andrea, Sister Geneviève and a trans man who wanted to be a priest. When Francis arrived, pushed by aides in his wheelchair, he made his way along the front row, grasping hands and sharing words with each guest.

To the trans man, he was kind, if noncommittal, opening no door, nor closing one. “Keep talking to Jesus, because that’s the safe way forward,” he said.

Francis arrived at Laura. How was she? And by the way, he loved those empanadas she’d made.

“I’ll make more whenever you want,” Laura said.

“Please,” she said. “Bless me.”

The pope lifted his fingers to her forehead and made the sign of the cross.

“Thank you, Pope Francis,” she said. “Thank you.”



Laura meets Pope Francis for the third time during the March 27 papal audience at the Vatican. (Stefano Pitrelli/The Washington Post)

*Ana Vanessa Herrero in Caracas, Venezuela, contributed to this report.*



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<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/05/05/pope-francis-transgender-sex-workers/>