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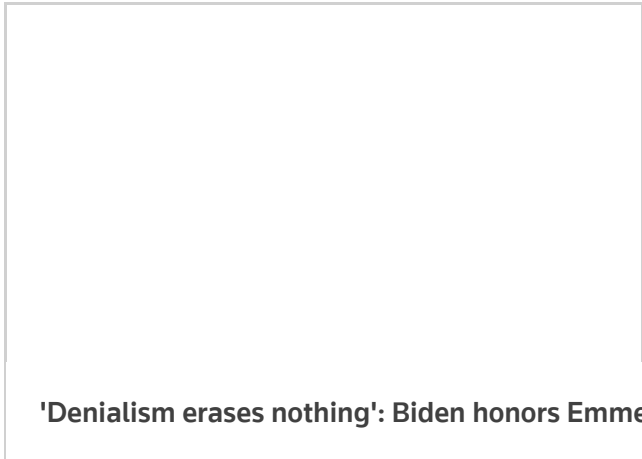
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# Pope tells transgender person: 'God loves us as we are'

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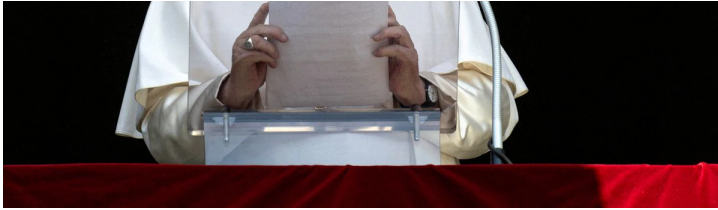
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Pope Francis leads the Angelus prayer from his window at the Vatican, July 9, 2023. Vatican Media/Handout via REUTERS/File Photo

VATICAN CITY, July 25 (Reuters) - Pope Francis has told a young transgender person that "God loves us as we are", his latest outreach gesture towards the LGBT community.

His comments, released by Vatican media on Tuesday, were in a podcast in which Francis listened and responded to audio messages from young people ahead of a Catholic youth festival which he will attend in Portugal next week.

One of the young people was Giona, an Italian in their early 20s who said they were "torn by the dichotomy between (their Catholic) faith and transgender identity".

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Francis replied that "the Lord always walks with us ... Even if we are sinners, he draws near to help us. The Lord loves us as we are, this is God's crazy love."

The Catholic Church teaches that members of the LGBT community should be treated with respect, compassion and sensitivity, and their human rights respected.

Whether the Church can and should be more welcoming towards LGBT people, for example by offering blessings for same-sex unions, is a particularly sensitive topic.

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Francis has famously said "who am I to judge" in an answer to a question specifically about homosexuals, and has condemned laws criminalising members of the LGBT community as a sin and an injustice.

At the same time, the 86-year-old pontiff has reaffirmed that marriage can only be understood as a life-long union between a man and a woman. He backs civil laws giving same-sex couples rights in bureaucratic matters such as pensions and health care.

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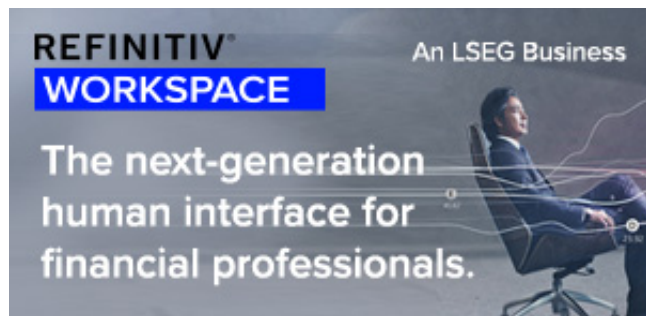
Conservatives have contested Francis' more welcoming and less judgmental attitude towards the LGBT community, although he consistently refers to traditional Catholic teaching that says same-sex attraction is not sinful but same-sex acts are.

An upcoming world summit of bishops, due to convene this October and in 2024, is expected to discuss the Church's stance towards LGBT people, women and Catholics who have divorced and remarried outside the Church.

Reporting by Alvis Armellini; editing by Philip Pullella and Mark Heinrich

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