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Catholics Will Convert to Orthodoxy Over Pope's LGBT Support, Russian Church Predicts

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Pope Francis is the first pontiff to voice support for same-sex couples. **Riccardo Antimiani / EPA / TASS**

Pope Francis' endorsement of same-sex civil unions will lead the Catholic faithful to convert en masse to Orthodox Christianity and Protestantism, a senior Russian Orthodox Church official said Thursday.

Francis became the first pontiff to voice support for same-sex couples in a documentary that premiered in Rome on Wednesday. His stance marks a departure from the Vatican doctrine office's 2003 document opposing the "legal recognition of homosexual unions."

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Roman Silantyev, the head of human rights at the Orthodox Church's World Russian People's Council, called Pope Francis' comments "a strong step toward degradation."

“People will run to the Orthodox and Protestants after that,” Silantyev told the Podyom news website. “This might cause some kind of split since many Catholics are quite conservative.”

His comments come amid Russia’s increasing embrace of conservative values, with persisting intolerance toward the LGBT community and criticism of the liberal West. A majority of Russians voted this summer in favor of constitutional changes which, in addition to allowing President Vladimir Putin to extend his rule, added language defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman to the Constitution.

Russia decriminalized homosexuality in 1993. Twenty years later, it banned “homosexual propaganda toward minors,” which activists say the authorities use to prevent them from displaying LGBT flags and holding gay pride events.

Silantyev mocked Pope Francis’ comments on gay civil unions, saying “perhaps people with those proclivities will get into priesthood… considering the rather massive nature of homosexuality among the clergy there.”

Referencing the sex abuse scandals that have plagued the Catholic Church for over a decade, he told Podyom: “Since nothing is threatening them, they will use their status to seduce boys.”

“Our Church doesn’t compromise, that’s not its style, so to speak,” Silantyev said.

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