

# *Pope Meets With the Poor and LGBTQI On Last Days in Paraguay*

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Asunción, July 13 (teleSUR-RHC)-- In the last days of his South American tour, Pope Francis visited Paraguay's poor and met with various civil society representatives, including a much-anticipated LGBTQI leader, emphasizing his commitment to reaching out to historically marginalized groups.

While the Pope did not explicitly refer to sexual and gender diversity in his meeting in *Asuncion* on Saturday, he did criticize the local church for their exclusionary practices and pointed at the need to accept and celebrate diversity and difference. "He (Pope Francis) gave a very harsh criticism of the local church and the local authorities, saying that you cannot exclude anyone, that the organizations that are here represent Paraguay's diversity," Simon Casal, the executive director of the LGBTI group SOMOSGAY, told BuzzFeed.

The Pope's meeting with Casal was the first time the religious authority figure held a public meeting with a gay activist. According to Casal's social media pages, the Pope said that "the richness of life is diversity" and that "the common good is lived by celebrating our differences." Casal further hopes that the local church hears and applies the words of the Pope, who allegedly said that "there is no person of first,

second, or third (rank); dignity is for everyone.”

The organization SOMOSGAY anticipated the visit of the Pope to Paraguay with a huge public anti-homophobia campaign by installing four big banners with same-gender couples in the streets that would be frequented by the Pope. The banner included a Pope Francis quote from 2013 on same-gender couples: “If they accept God and they have good faith, who am I to judge?”

Loyalty to the Poor In a move underlining his loyalty to the most marginalized, Pope Francis also visited *Bañado Norte*, a disenfranchised neighborhood, outside of Asuncion early Sunday and ended with a mass attended by nearly one million people. The Pontiff listened to the testimonies of its residents who denounced the state for its policies of neglect and exclusion. “The state doesn’t take care of us, nor does it regard us positively: it doesn’t see us as subjects with rights,” said María Adolfinia García, a coordinator in the suburb. García further criticized government plans to gentrify the area, saying they “are not made to favor us and are aimed to displace us.”

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