



March 21, 2014

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20502

Dear President Obama:

Your audience with Pope Francis I later this month will be an important opportunity to address critical moral issues confronting the global community. We write to urge you to use this meeting—and the joint statement following it—to reinforce Pope Francis’ positive statements on the inherent dignity of LGBT people and to amplify the shared opposition of the United States and the Catholic Church to laws criminalizing LGBT people which have sparked violence against this vulnerable minority around the world.

Thanks to your leadership, in particular your December 6, 2011 Presidential Memorandum, respect for the human rights of LGBT people is becoming better integrated into U.S. foreign policy. Your continued leadership on this issue is critical. Although there have been important strides toward equality in many places, egregious intolerance and violence against LGBT people persists—and in some cases is exacerbated—where laws criminalizing homosexuality or the activities of people who happen to be LGBT or restricting the human rights of those organizing in the LGBT community are in place or under consideration. In Nigeria, for example, men have been publicly whipped for homosexuality. In Russia, even with the eyes of the world on the Sochi Olympics, there were incidents of police brutality against LGBT activists.

Pope Francis is leading a major shift in tone for the Catholic Church on a range of issues, and his statement last year, “If someone is gay and seeks the Lord with good will, who am I to judge?” may open a pathway for tangible improvement in Catholic communities where LGBT people are trying to live openly and with dignity. For instance, Cardinal Gracias of India recently stated, “The Catholic Church has never been opposed to the decriminalization of homosexuality, because we have never considered gay people criminals.” Cardinal Turkson of Ghana, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, said that “homosexuals are not criminals...and shouldn’t be sentenced to life in prison.” Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, leader of the Pontifical Council for the Family asserted that the Catholic Church believes that gay people “have the same dignity as all of God’s children” and that he “would like the church to fight against [criminalization].” Pope Francis has called for a special Synod for the Family in October 2014; we hope that the Catholic Church will use this gathering to adopt pastoral approaches to the LGBT community that reinforce this tone.

We know that public leadership from the United States on this issue is sometimes—often cynically—dismissed as “Western cultural imperialism.” But as you know, there are LGBT persons—along with human rights defenders—in every country in the world who are standing up for their basic human rights, often at great risk. A powerful public statement from you and Pope Francis would signal solidarity with them, help to promote greater tolerance and, most importantly, condemn violence regardless of differing views about sexuality.

At a time when members of the LGBT community are being arrested, attacked, and “outed” in situations that make them vulnerable to violence, there is a real urgency for U.S. leadership. Pope Francis’ expected trip to Uganda this year provides a concrete opportunity for him to address these issues directly with the political, religious, and cultural leadership of a country where criminalization and violence are central issues. There is particular value for Pope Francis to raise this issue publicly in Uganda because his words will reverberate throughout Africa and worldwide at this time, and we hope he would raise these issues consistently.

Your meeting with Pope Francis is a rare opportunity to join with another influential moral leader to lay down a marker on the universal value of human dignity. There can be no better outcome of your meeting with Pope Francis than a public demonstration of your shared respect for human dignity, as embodied by the universal values of human rights, and especially our LGBT brothers and sisters at this crucial time. We wish you much success in your trip.

With respect,



Elisa Massimino
President and CEO
Human Rights First



Kerry Kennedy
President
RFK Center for Justice and Human Rights

CC:

Mr. Denis R. McDonough, Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff

Mr. Antony J. Blinken, Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor

Ms. Valerie B. Jarrett, Senior Advisor and Assistant to the President for Intergovernmental Affairs and Public Engagement

Ms. Uzra S. Zeya, Acting Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of African Affairs

Ambassador Kenneth F. Hackett, U.S. Ambassador to The Holy See

Ms. Melissa Rogers, Special Assistant to the President and Executive Director, Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships

Mr. Gautam Raghavan, Public Engagement Advisor, Office of Public Engagement