

Pope Francis reveals romantic crush during seminary days

by [David Gibson](#)

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(RNS) Pope Francis was once "dazzled" by a young woman he met as a seminarian and even considered abandoning his vocation, adding that it would be "abnormal" for such things not to happen to priests. And he seemed to hold open the possibility that church law on priestly celibacy could be changed.

During a conversation last year while he was still Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, the new pope also advocated a zero-tolerance approach to clergy abusers, saying the way abusers were shuffled around to different parishes to protect the institutional church was "a stupid idea."

The book-length dialogue with a rabbi, which will be published in English in May, showed how Francis' personal experiences might inform his policies on hot-button topics like celibacy and sex abuse. The passage was translated by Aleteia, a website promoting Catholic evangelization.

"You cannot be in a position of power and destroy the life of another person," Bergoglio told Rabbi Abraham Skorka, rector of the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary. Their conversation was held in 2012 while Bergoglio was archbishop of Buenos Aires.

He told Skorka that when a bishop once asked him what he should do with priests suspected to molesting children: "I told him to take away the priests' licenses, not to allow them to exercise the priesthood any more, and to begin a canonical trial in that diocese's court."

"I think that's the attitude to have. I do not believe in taking positions that uphold a certain corporative spirit in order to avoid damaging the image of the institution."

Bergoglio, who was elected Pope Francis last week, also advocated a "zero tolerance" policy but did not say whether accused abusers should be automatically reported to criminal authorities.

Bergoglio also reflected on his own romantic experiences, noting that when he was a seminarian he was "dazzled" by a woman he met at an uncle's wedding.

"I was surprised by her beauty, her intellectual brilliance...and, well, I was bowled over for quite a while. I kept thinking and thinking about her. When I returned to the seminary after the wedding, I could not pray for over a week because when I tried to do so, the girl appeared in my head. I had to rethink what I was doing."

He decided to continue the path to the priesthood, but said "it would be abnormal for this kind of thing not to happen."

The future pope said that if a seminarian -- or a priest -- falls in love or has a child with a woman, he counsels them to leave and support his family, to "go in peace to be a good Christian and not a bad priest."

Bergoglio also said that if a priest got a woman pregnant, he advises the man to leave the priesthood so he can take care of the mother and child, even if the couple do not marry. "For just as that child has the right to have a mother, he has a right to the face of a father," he said. He added that if it is a one-time affair with no children, then he tries to help the priest do penance and "get on track again."

Bergoglio also spoke highly of Eastern-rite Catholic churches with married priests.

Still, the future pope said, "For now, the discipline of celibacy stands firm." He added, however, that while he favors maintain celibacy for priests, "with all its pros and cons," celibacy is "a matter of discipline, not of faith. It can change."

The Rev. Thomas Reese, a Jesuit -- like Pope Francis -- and an analyst for the National Catholic Reporter, wrote that Bergoglio's conditional language on priestly celibacy is "remarkable."

Reese said phrases like "for the moment" and "for now" are "not the kind of qualifications one normally hears when bishops and cardinals discuss celibacy."

The conversation between Bergoglio and Skorpa will be published by Image Books and will be titled "On Heaven and Earth." In it the two men discuss topics such as fundamentalism, atheism, the Holocaust, abortion and homosexuality.