

***Fiducia Supplicans* – ‘On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings’**

The major news in the Church in recent weeks was the new document *Fiducia Supplicans* [FS] from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, approved by Pope Francis, stating that informal non-liturgical blessings may be given even to couples living in ‘irregular’ relationships (i.e. unions opposed to God’s law, whether opposite-sex or same-sex).

Some who want the Church to change her doctrines on marriage and morality welcomed the Declaration as a supposed first step in reversing Church doctrine on same-sex unions in particular. Others, who uphold those doctrines, feared the document might be misused or misunderstood such as to undermine them. Such criticisms, it is true, are of a different order from rejection of the *doctrinal correctness* of the Declaration – they concern the *prudence* of this papal action. Much discussion has focused on this: will its bad effects outweigh the good?

Issues of prudence and truth must be carefully kept distinct. The Holy Spirit does not guarantee the prudence of every papal decision (such as whether to promulgate a teaching at a given time). However, regarding our own first duty of faith, our primary focus is the question of *truth*.

Obviously this is not a proclamation infallible in itself, absolutely guaranteed by the Holy Spirit and forever binding on the Church. Yet teachings such as this Declaration are not without divine assistance: ‘To this ordinary teaching the faithful “are to adhere to it with religious assent” (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 25) which, though distinct from the assent of faith, is nonetheless an extension of it.’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 892) It is not enough to strongly promote sexual morality while violating this obligation connected with faith itself, or by incautious criticism leading others into this sin of dissent.

In fact, the Declaration’s actual text harmonises easily with past doctrines, indeed reaffirms them. It in no way authorises adulterous or same-sex unions, or says that what was sin yesterday is not sin today. (As we saw in October, other recent documents of the Holy See already indicate the moral teachings reaffirmed by *Fiducia Supplicans* as being infallibly taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium, and so unchangeable.)

A few quotes: ‘This Declaration remains firm on the traditional doctrine of the Church about marriage, not allowing any type of liturgical rite or blessing similar to a liturgical rite that can create confusion.’ (FS, *Introduction*) ‘Therefore, rites and prayers that could create confusion between what constitutes marriage – which is the “exclusive, stable, and indissoluble union between a man and a woman, naturally open to the generation of children” – and what contradicts it are inadmissible. This conviction is grounded in the perennial Catholic doctrine of marriage; it is only in this context that sexual relations find their natural, proper, and fully human meaning. The Church’s doctrine on this point remains firm.’ (4)

‘When it comes to blessings, the Church has the right and the duty to avoid any rite that might contradict this conviction or lead to confusion. Such is also the meaning of the [2021] *Responsum* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which states that the Church does not have the power to impart blessings on unions of persons of the same sex.’ (5) ‘Since the Church has always considered only those sexual relations that are lived out within marriage to be morally licit, the Church does not have the power to confer its liturgical blessing when that would somehow offer a form of moral legitimacy to a union that presumes to be a marriage or to an extra-marital sexual practice.’ (11) There is no ambiguity.

Neither does the document really authorise priests to do anything they could not do already. Rather, it gives deeper explanation of what is meant by these informal non-liturgical blessings that priests already give frequently. ‘There are several occasions when people spontaneously ask for a blessing, whether on pilgrimages, at shrines, or even on the street when they meet a priest...Such blessings are meant for everyone; no one is to be excluded from them.’ (28)

When priests bless one or more persons they are not pronouncing the Church’s approval on everything the recipients do. (cf. 25) The Church cannot bless sin, but she can bless *sinner*s – in the sense of praying for God’s grace in their lives. (cf. 31) This is the blessing of *persons*, not their sinful *unions*: a clear distinction. So the fact itself that they are a ‘couple’ in a sinful union is not blessed or endorsed (just as the fact itself that someone is a sinner is not blessed); yet this very fact is nevertheless a rightful *motive* for the priest’s pastoral action towards them.

*Fiducia Supplicans* suggests what such a prayer might contain: ‘In a brief prayer preceding this spontaneous blessing, the ordained minister could ask that the individuals have peace, health, a spirit of patience, dialogue, and mutual assistance – but also God’s light and strength to be able to fulfil his will completely.’ (38) This is for ‘those who – recognising themselves to be destitute and in need of his help – do not claim a legitimation of their own status...’ (31)

Obviously, if this prayer were completely fulfilled it would lead the individuals to cease their sinful behaviour. Yet the Church already prays for people who are not yet at the point of repentance but hopefully are moving in the right direction. They need the priest’s powerful prayer more than the virtuous. Our Lord says: ‘It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick.’ (*Mk* 2:17) ‘Pope Francis urges us to contemplate, with an attitude of faith and fatherly mercy, the fact that “when one asks for a blessing, one is expressing a petition for God’s assistance, a plea to live better, and confidence in a Father who can help us live better.”’ (21)

The Declaration warns: ‘One should neither provide for nor promote a ritual [*i.e. a formalised text*] for the blessings of couples in an irregular situation...To avoid any form of confusion or scandal, when the prayer of blessing is requested by a couple in an irregular situation...this blessing should never be imparted in concurrence with the ceremonies of a civil union, and not even in connection with them. Nor can it be performed with any clothing, gestures, or words that are proper to a wedding.’ (38-39)

Critics fear that since most people will not read the text but just go by media summaries, confusion and error will still result. Disobedient priests might illicitly bless the sinful union itself, deceptively using the Declaration as a ‘cover’ but actually contradicting it – doing grave harm to those in the sinful situation, who urgently need conversion.

Again, these criticisms concern papal prudence. Our own call in the end is to accept the Church’s teachings and rulings in their actual contents, and not waste energy investigating and fixing blame on countless matters of prudence. We have quite enough to do, discerning how God wants us personally to act, without worrying about what was the prudent course for every other person as well – popes and others. We are not papal advisors or bishops; and our opinion of things, accurate or not, will have no effect on decisions in Rome. Some papal decisions across history have been prudent, others not; and whichever way, each one is ‘water under the bridge’.

We affirm the Church’s outreach and welcome to the ‘lost sheep’ who are in ongoing situations of sin yet reach out for God’s help. If we meet someone who is confused about Church teaching, we give guidance. And amidst our prayerful concern for the Church and the world, we serenely entrust everything to the ultimate care of God’s providence: he is in control.