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Dicastery for Doctrine of the Faith clarifies application of 'Fiducia supplicans'

In a statement signed by the Cardinal prefect and the secretary, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith clarifies that 'Fiducia supplicans' does not change the doctrine on marriage; that bishops are able to discern the application of the document according to context; and that pastoral blessings are not comparable to liturgical and ritualized blessings. The full text of the statement is presented below.

Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith

Press release concerning the reception of *Fiducia supplicans*

4 January 2024

We are writing this Press Release to help clarify the reception of *Fiducia supplicans*, while recommending at the same time a full and calm reading of the *Declaration* so as to better understand its meaning and purpose.

1. Doctrine

The understandable statements of some Episcopal Conferences regarding the document *Fiducia supplicans* have the value of highlighting the need for a more extended period of pastoral reflection. What is expressed by these Episcopal Conferences cannot be interpreted as doctrinal opposition, because the document is clear and definitive about marriage and sexuality. There are several indisputable phrases in the *Declaration* that leave this in no doubt:

«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». One acts in these situations of couples in irregular situations «without officially validating their status or changing in any way the Church's perennial teaching on marriage» (*Presentation*).

«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).

«Such is also the meaning of the *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).

«For this reason, 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).

Evidently, there is no room to distance ourselves doctrinally from this *Declaration* or to consider it heretical, contrary to the Tradition of the Church or blasphemous.

2. Practical reception

Some Bishops, however, express themselves in particular regarding a practical aspect: the possible blessings of couples in irregular situations. The Declaration contains a proposal for short and simple pastoral blessings (neither liturgical nor ritualised) of couples in irregular situations (but not of their unions), underlining that these are blessings without a liturgical format which neither approve nor justify the situation in which these people find themselves.

Documents of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith such as *Fiducia supplicans*, in their practical aspects, may require more or less time for their application depending on local contexts and the discernment of each diocesan Bishop with his Diocese. In some places no difficulties arise for their immediate application, while in others it will be necessary not to introduce them, while taking the time necessary for reading and interpretation.

Some Bishops, for example, have established that each priest must carry out the work of discernment and that he may, however, perform these blessings only in private. None of this is problematic if it is expressed with due respect for a text signed and approved by the Supreme Pontiff himself, while attempting in some way to accommodate the reflection contained in it.

Each local Bishop, by virtue of his own ministry, always has the power of discernment *in loco*, that is, in that concrete place that he knows better than others precisely because it is his own flock. Prudence and attention to the ecclesial context and to the local culture could allow for different methods of application, but not a total or definitive denial of this path that is proposed to priests.

3. The delicate situation of some countries

The cases of some Episcopal Conferences must be understood in their contexts. In several countries there are strong cultural and even legal issues that require time and pastoral strategies that go beyond the short term.

If there are laws that condemn the mere act of declaring oneself as a homosexual with prison and in some cases with torture and even death, it goes without saying that a blessing would be imprudent. It is clear that the Bishops do not wish to expose homosexual persons to violence. It remains vital that these Episcopal Conferences do not support a doctrine different from that of the Declaration signed by the Pope, given that it is perennial doctrine, but rather that they recommend the need for study and discernment so as to act with pastoral prudence in such a context.

In truth, there are not a few countries that, to varying degrees, condemn, prohibit and criminalize homosexuality. In these cases, apart from the question of blessings, there exists a great and wide-ranging pastoral responsibility that includes training, the defense of human dignity, the teaching of the Social Doctrine of the Church and various strategies that do not admit of a rushed response.

4. The real novelty of the document

The real novelty of this *Declaration*, the one that requires a generous effort of reception and from which no one should declare themselves excluded, is not the possibility of blessing couples in irregular situations. It is the invitation to distinguish between two different forms of blessings: “liturgical or ritualized” and “spontaneous or pastoral”. The Presentation clearly explains that «the value of this document [...] is that it offers a specific and innovative contribution to the pastoral meaning of blessings, permitting a broadening and enrichment of the classical understanding of blessings, which is closely linked to a liturgical perspective». This «theological reflection, based on the pastoral vision of Pope Francis, implies a real development from what has been said about blessings in the Magisterium and the official texts of the Church».

In the background is found the positive evaluation of “popular pastoral care” which appears in many of the Holy Father’s texts. In this context, the Holy Father invites us to value the simple faith of the People of God who, even in the midst of their sins, emerge from their everyday lives and open their hearts to ask for God’s help.

For this reason, rather than the blessing of couples in irregular unions, the text of the Dicastery has adopted the other profile of a “Declaration”, which is much more than a *responsum* or a letter. The central theme, which invites us especially to a deeper pastoral practice which enriches our pastoral praxis, is to have a broader understanding of blessings and of the proposal that these pastoral blessings, which do not require the same conditions as blessings in a liturgical or ritual context, flourish. Consequently, leaving polemics aside, the text requires an effort to reflect serenely, with the heart of shepherds, free from all ideology.

Although some Bishops consider it prudent not to impart these blessings for the moment, we all need to grow equally in the conviction that: non-ritualized blessings are not a consecration of the person nor of the couple who receives them, they are not a justification of all their actions, and they are not an endorsement of the life that they lead. When the Pope asked us to grow in a broader understanding of pastoral blessings, he proposed that we think of a way of blessing that does not require the placing of so many conditions to carry out this simple gesture of pastoral closeness, which is a means of promoting openness to God in the midst of the most diverse circumstances.

5. How do these “pastoral blessings” present themselves in concrete terms?

To be clearly distinguished from liturgical or ritualized blessings, “pastoral blessings” must above all be very short (see n. 38). These are blessings lasting a few seconds, without an approved ritual and without a book of blessings. If two people approach together to seek the blessing, one simply asks the Lord for peace, health and other good things for these two people who request it. At the same time, one asks that they may live the Gospel of Christ in full fidelity and so that the Holy Spirit can free these two people from everything that does not correspond to his divine will and from everything that requires purification.

This non-ritualized form of blessing, with the simplicity and brevity of its form, does not intend to justify anything that is not morally acceptable. Obviously it is not a marriage, but equally it is not an “approval” or ratification of anything either. It is solely the response of a pastor towards two persons who ask for God’s help. Therefore, in this case, the pastor does not impose conditions and does not enquire about the intimate lives of these people.

Since some have raised the question of what these blessings might look like, let us look at a concrete example: let us imagine that among a large number making a pilgrimage a couple of divorced people, now in a new union, say to the priest: “Please give us a blessing, we cannot find work, he is very ill, we do not have a home and life is becoming very difficult: may God help us!”.

In this case, the priest can recite a simple prayer like this: *“Lord, look at these children of yours, grant them health, work, peace and mutual help. Free them from everything that contradicts your Gospel and allow them to live according to your will. Amen”*. Then it concludes with the sign of the cross on each of the two persons.

We are talking about something that lasts about 10 or 15 seconds. Does it make sense to deny these kinds of blessings to these two people who ask for them? Is it not more appropriate to support their faith, whether it be small or great, to assist them in their weaknesses with a divine blessing, and to channel that openness to transcendence which could lead them to be more faithful to the Gospel?

In order to avoid any doubt, the *Declaration* adds that, when the blessing is requested by a couple in an irregular situation, «even though it is expressed outside the rites prescribed by the liturgical books, 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. The same applies when the blessing is requested by a same-sex couple» (n. 39). It remains clear, therefore, that the blessing must not take place in a prominent place within a sacred building, or in front of an altar, as this also would create confusion.

For this reason, every Bishop in his Diocese is authorized by the Declaration *Fiducia supplicans* to make this type of simple blessing available, bearing in mind the need for prudence and care, but in no way is he authorized to propose or make blessings available that may resemble a liturgical rite.

6. Catechesis

In some places, perhaps, some catechesis will be necessary that can help everyone to understand that these types of blessings are not an endorsement of the life led by those who request them. Even less are they an absolution, as these gestures are far from being a sacrament or a rite. They are simple expressions of pastoral closeness that do not impose the same requirements as a sacrament or a formal rite. We will all have to become accustomed to accepting the fact that, if a priest gives this type of simple blessings, he is not a heretic, he is not ratifying anything nor is he denying Catholic doctrine.

We can help God's People to discover that these kinds of blessings are just simple pastoral channels that help people give expression to their faith, even if they are great sinners. For this reason, in giving a blessing to two people who come together to ask for it spontaneously, we are not consecrating them nor are we congratulating them nor indeed are we approving that type of union. In reality the same happens when individuals are blessed, as the individual who asks for a blessing – not absolution – could be a great sinner, but this does not mean we deny him this paternal gesture in the midst of his struggle to survive.

If this is clarified as a result of good catechesis, we can free ourselves from the fear that these blessings of ours may express something inadequate. We can be freer and perhaps closer and more fruitful ministers, with a ministry that is full of gestures of fatherhood and hospitality, without fear of being misunderstood.

We ask the newly-born Lord to shower a generous and gracious blessing upon everyone so that we can live a holy and happy 2024.

Víctor Manuel Card. Fernández

Prefect

Mons. Armando Matteo

Secretary for the Doctrinal Section

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