



NOTE OF BISHOP MARC AILLET CONCERNING THE DECLARATION *FIDUCIA* *SUPPLICANS*

Posted on January 1, 2024 by Bishop Marc Aillet



"The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF) has just published (December 18, 2023), with the approval of Pope Francis, the Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans*, On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings.

Hailed as a victory by the secular world, and in particular by LGBT lobbies who see in it at last a recognition by the Church of homosexual relationships, despite the many restrictions recalled by this Roman document, it is the subject of unprecedented public disapproval from entire bishops' conferences, particularly from Africa and Eastern Europe, as well as bishops from every continent. In addition, many of the faithful, including those renewing their faith, and many priests, who face complex pastoral situations in a society losing its bearings, demonstrating as much fidelity to the teaching of the Magisterium as pastoral charity, are all expressing their confusion and incomprehension.

In response to these reactions, and having taken the time to reflect, I would like to address a note to the priests and faithful of my diocese, as a bishop, to help them welcome this declaration in a spirit of communion with the Holy Apostolic See, by providing some keys to understanding, while respectfully questioning certain points of the declaration that may need clarification. Finally, I would like to invite the priests of my diocese to exercise prudence, the virtue par excellence of discernment. I am aware that this note is dense, but it seems important to me to treat the question with sufficient theological and pastoral depth.

Unchanged Doctrine on Marriage

Fiducia supplicans begins by recalling that the Church's teaching on marriage as a stable, exclusive and indissoluble union between a man and a woman, naturally open to the generation of new life, remains firm and unchanged (no. 4). This is why, the text insists, it is impossible to give a liturgical or ritual blessing to couples in an irregular situation or of the same sex, which would risk leading to serious confusion between marriage and *de facto* unions (no. 5). This is the reason why the former Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in an *ad dubium* response on February 22, 2021, concluded that it was impossible to give a blessing to same-sex "couples."

Distinction Between Liturgical and Pastoral Blessings

A whole biblical journey is then proposed as a basis for the distinction between liturgical blessings (no.

10) and what we might call pastoral blessings, with a view to clarifying the possibility of a blessing being granted to a person who, whatever his or her sinful condition, may ask a priest, outside the liturgical or ritual context, to express his or her trust in God and request for help to "live better" and better adjust his or her life to God's will (no. 20). This is, moreover, part of the Church's elementary and two-thousand-year-old pastoral practice, particularly in the context of popular devotion (no. 23-24), where it is never a question of exercising control over God's unconditional love for all, nor of demanding a certificate of morality, it being understood that we are dealing here with a sacramental, which does not act as a sacrament *ex opere operato*, but whose efficacy of grace depends on the good dispositions of the one who asks for and receives it. Thus far, the text adds nothing new to the Church's ordinary teaching on these matters.

A Pastoral Blessing Extended to Same-Sex Couples

From the centuries-old practice of spontaneous, informal blessings, which have never been ritualized by ecclesial authority, we move on to what was presented in the document's introduction as its proper object: "It is precisely in this context [that of Pope Francis's "pastoral vision] it is precisely in this context that one can understand the possibility of blessing couples in irregular situations and same-sex couples without officially validating their status or changing in any way the Church's perennial teaching on marriage" (Presentation). It is even specified that "a pastor's simple blessing, which does not claim to sanction or legitimize anything" (no. 34).

Thus, in the third part of the declaration, there is a surreptitious shift from the possibility of blessing a person, whatever their situation, to a blessing granted to an irregular or same-sex "couple."

Despite all the clarification of the non-liturgical nature of these blessings and the laudable intention "to entrust themselves to the Lord and his mercy, to invoke his help, and to be guided to a greater understanding of his plan of love and of truth" (no. 30), we are obliged to note that this has been received, almost unanimously by pro and contra alike, as a "recognition by the Church of homosexual relationships" themselves. Unfortunately, this is often how the practice—already in use in some local churches—of blessing same-sex "couples" is understood, particularly in Germany and Belgium, and in a very public way. It is to be feared that they will feel encouraged to do so, as a number of them have already testified.

Questions Requiring Clarification

We understand the Holy Father's legitimate desire to demonstrate the Church's closeness and compassion towards all situations, even the most marginal—is this not the attitude of Christ in the Gospel, "who welcomed publicans and sinners" (cf. Mt 9:11), and which constitutes a large part of our ordinary ministry? There are, however, a number of unanswered questions that need to be clarified, both doctrinally and pastorally.

Would not these blessings be in contradiction with the notion of "sacramental" that all blessings assume?

It is worth pointing out that the reason put forward by the Responsum ad dubium of 2021 placed less emphasis on the liturgical context of the blessing than on its nature as a "sacramental" which remains, no matter the context: "Consequently, in order to conform with the nature of sacramentals, when a blessing is invoked on particular human relationships, in addition to the right intention of those who participate, it is necessary that what is blessed be objectively and positively ordered to receive and express grace, according to the designs of God inscribed in creation, and fully revealed by Christ the Lord. Therefore, only those realities which are in themselves ordered to serve those ends are congruent with the essence of the blessing imparted by the Church" (Responsum Explanatory Note). This is why the former Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith declared illicit "every form of blessing" with regard to relationships that involve sexual practice outside marriage, as is the case with same-sex unions. While we must recognize and value the positive elements of these types of relationships, they are put at the service of a union that is not ordered to the Creator's Purpose.

Is There Not a Distinction to be Made between Blessing a Person and Blessing a "Couple?"

The Church has always held that "such blessings are meant for everyone; no one is to be excluded from them" (no. 28). However, if we refer to the Book of Blessings and the Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy, we see that they are essentially, if not exclusively, for individuals, even when gathered in groups, such as the elderly or catechists. But in these cases, the object of the blessing is not the relationship that unites them, which is merely extrinsic, but the person.

Here we come to the novelty of the *Fiducia supplicans* declaration, which lies not in the possibility of blessing one person in an irregular or homosexual situation, but of blessing two who present themselves as a "couple." It is therefore the "couple" entity that invokes the blessing upon itself. However, while the text is careful not to use the terms "union," "partnership," or "relationship"—used by

the former Congregation for its prohibition—it does not provide a definition of the notion of "couple," which has here become a new object of blessing.

This raises a semantic question that remains unresolved: can the term "couple" reasonably be applied to the relationship between two people of the same sex? Have we not hastily integrated the semantics that the world imposes on us, but which confuse the reality of the couple? In his apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* (2003), John Paul II wrote: "attempts are made to accept a definition of the couple in which difference of sex is not considered essential" (no. 90). In other words: is not sexual difference essential to the very constitution of a couple? This is an anthropological question that needs to be clarified to avoid confusion and ambiguity, for if the world has extended this notion to realities that do not enter into the Creator's Design, should not the magisterial word assume a certain rigor in its terminology to correspond as closely as possible to revealed truth, anthropological and theological?

What about Homosexual Relationships?

Granting a blessing to a homosexual "couple," rather than just to two individuals, seems to endorse the homosexual activity that links them, even if, once again, it is made clear that this union cannot be equated with marriage. This raises the question of the moral status of homosexual relationships, which is not addressed in this declaration. The Church's teaching, in line with Sacred Scripture and the constant teaching of the Magisterium, holds such relationships to be "intrinsically disordered" (Catechism of the Catholic Church no. 2357): if God is not averse to blessing the sinner, can He speak well of that which is not concretely in conformity with His Purpose? Would this not contradict God's original blessing when He created man in His own image: "Male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them: 'Be fruitful and multiply'" (Gn 1:28)?

Are There Not Acts which are Intrinsically Evil?

To put an end to the controversies that had agitated Catholic moralists since the 1970s, on the fundamental option and morality of human acts, Pope John Paul II published a magisterial encyclical, *Veritatis splendor* (1993), on some fundamental questions of the Church's moral teaching, whose 30th anniversary we celebrated in 2023. This encyclical, which confirms the Moral Part of the CCC and develops certain aspects of it, recalled in particular the Magisterium's constant teaching on the existence of intrinsically evil acts (no. 79-83) which remain forbidden *semper et pro semper*, i.e., in all circumstances. This teaching is far from optional, and provides a key to discerning the situations we

face in pastoral ministry. No doubt behavior that is objectively at odds with God's plan is not necessarily subjectively imputable—indeed, "who am I to judge?" to use Pope Francis's famous expression—but this does not make it morally good. The declaration *Fiducia supplicans* often refers to the sinner who asks for a blessing—"who acknowledge themselves humbly as sinners, like everyone else" (no. 32)—but is silent on the particular sin that characterizes these situations. Moreover, experience shows that the possibility of an "unconditional" blessing is not necessarily an aid to conversion.

Can the Exercise of Pastoral Charity be Disconnected from the Prophetic Mission of Reaching?

It is fortunate that this statement refers to the ministry of the priest, and we must give thanks to the Holy Father for creating all kinds of opportunities to enable people, far removed from the Church and its discipline, to meet a priest, as he expresses the wish in his apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (2016), to experience the closeness of a "tender and merciful God, slow to anger and full of love" (Ps 144:8). But then, there can be no question of two people of the same sex engaged in homosexual activity and presenting themselves as such, or of couples in an irregular situation, resorting to a blessing granted, even informally, without a pastoral dialogue to which Pope Francis precisely often encourages pastors.

In this sense, the exercise of pastoral charity cannot be separated from the priest's prophetic mission of teaching. And the heart of Jesus' preaching remains the call to conversion, which we regret is not mentioned in this statement. When Jesus shows compassion for the sinner, He always exhorts him to change his life, as we see, among other examples, in the story of the adulteress: "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more" (Jn 8:11). What would pastoral care be if it did not invite the faithful, without judging or condemning anyone, to evaluate their life and behavior in relation to the words of the Covenant and the Gospel? These words speak of God's benevolent plan for mankind, with a view to conforming their lives to it, with God's grace, and according to a path of growth, called by John Paul II: "'the law of gradualness' or step-by-step advance" (cf. *Familiaris Consortio* n. 34). Would not blessing two people in a homosexual relationship, or a couple in an irregular situation, lead them to believe that their union is a legitimate step in their journey? However, John Paul II was careful to point out: "And so what is known as 'the law of gradualness' or step-by-step advance cannot be identified with 'gradualness of the law,' as if there were different degrees or forms of precept in God's law for different individuals and situations. In God's plan, all husbands and wives are called in marriage to holiness, and this lofty vocation is fulfilled to the extent that the human person is able to respond to God's command with serene confidence in God's grace and in his or her own will" (*Ibid.*).

Can We Set Pastoral Care Against Doctrine?

Furthermore, can we oppose pastoral care against doctrinal teaching, as if intransigence were on the side of doctrine and principles, to the detriment of the compassion and tenderness we owe pastorally to sinners? Faced with the Pharisees who put Him to the test on the subject of divorce and the act of repudiation consented to by Moses, Jesus refers uncompromisingly to the "Truth of the beginning" (cf. Gen 1 and 2), asserting that if Moses consented to their weakness, it was because of "the hardness of their hearts" (cf. Mt 19:3-9). Jesus is even the most intransigent. It has to be said that the old law did not make us righteous: but with Jesus, we are now under the regime of the New Law, which St Thomas Aquinas defined, drawing inspiration from St Paul, as "the grace of the Holy Spirit given to those who believe in Christ" (Summa Theologica I-II 106, 1). Every act of ministry, including blessings, should therefore be placed under the regime of the new law, in which we are all called to holiness, whatever our sinful condition.

As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, stated in a letter to the bishops of the Catholic Church on pastoral care for homosexuals (1986): "But we wish to make it clear that departure from the Church's teaching, or silence about it, in an effort to provide pastoral care is neither caring nor pastoral. Only what is true can ultimately be pastoral. The neglect of the Church's position prevents homosexual men and women from receiving the care they need and deserve" (no. 15).

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And St. John Paul II warns: "The Church's teaching, and in particular her firmness in defending the universal and permanent validity of the precepts prohibiting intrinsically evil acts, is not infrequently seen as the sign of an intolerable intransigence, particularly with regard to the enormously complex and conflict-filled situations present in the moral life of individuals and of society today; this intransigence is said to be in contrast with the Church's motherhood. The Church, one hears, is lacking in understanding and compassion. But the Church's motherhood can never in fact be separated from

her teaching mission, which she must always carry out as the faithful Bride of Christ, who is the Truth in person... In fact, genuine understanding and compassion must mean love for the person, for his true good, for his authentic freedom. And this does not result, certainly, from concealing or weakening moral truth, but rather from proposing it in its most profound meaning as an outpouring of God's eternal Wisdom, which we have received in Christ, and as a service to man, to the growth of his freedom and to the attainment of his happiness" (*Veritatis splendor*, no. 95). At the same time, the clear and vigorous presentation of moral truth can never disregard the deep and sincere respect, inspired by patient and trusting love, that man always needs on his moral journey, often made painful by difficulties, weaknesses and painful situations. The Church, which can never renounce the principle of "truth and consistency, whereby the church does not agree to call good evil and evil good" (*Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, no. 34), must always be careful not to break the bruised reed or quench the dimly burning wick (cf. *Is 42:3*). Paul VI wrote: " Now it is an outstanding manifestation of charity toward souls to omit nothing from the saving doctrine of Christ; but this must always be joined with tolerance and charity, as Christ Himself showed in His conversations and dealings with men. For when He came, not to judge, but to save the world, (cf. *Jn 3:17*) was He not bitterly severe toward sin, but patient and abounding in mercy toward sinners?" (*Humanae vitae*, no. 29)," (*Veritatis splendor*, no. 95).

"Do Not Be Conformed to this World"

I am well aware that this is a delicate issue, and I fully endorse the Holy Father's insistence on the pastoral charity of the priest, called to bring God's unconditional love close to every human being, even to the existential peripheries of today's wounded humanity. But I am thinking of the luminous words of the Apostle Paul to Titus, which we hear proclaimed in the Christmas Eve liturgy, and which sum up the whole Economy of Salvation: " For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly... He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds" (*Titus 2:11-12, 14*).

The pastoral charity that urges us—"Caritas Christi urget nos" (*2 Cor 5:14*)—to reach out to all people to show them how much they are loved by God—the proof of which is that Christ died and rose for all—also urges us, inseparably, to proclaim to them the Truth of the Gospel of Salvation. And the Truth is stated by Jesus to all those who wish to become his disciples: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (*Mt 16:24-25*). Saint Luke makes it clear

that he was saying this "to all" (Lk 9:23), and not just to an elite.

The words of St. Paul still resonate within me to illuminate our pastoral attitude: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2). All people, including irregular or same-sex couples, aspire to the best, because the inclination to the good, the true and the beautiful is inscribed by God in the heart of every human being—to recognize this is to respect their dignity and fundamental freedom. And it is worth "sticking your neck out" to help everyone, whatever their situation of sin or contradiction with God's plan, as revealed in the Decalogue and the Gospel, to discover it and, through processes of growth and the help of God's grace, to move towards it. And this cannot be done without the Cross.

Practical Pastoral Approaches

Thus, in conclusion, and given the context of a secularized society in which we are experiencing an unprecedented anthropological crisis, which inevitably leads to stubborn ambiguities:

- I invite the priests of the diocese, when dealing with couples in an irregular situation or with people involved in a homosexual relationship, to demonstrate a welcome full of benevolence: people must not feel judged, but welcomed by a look and a listening ear that speak of God's love for them.
- I then invite them to establish a pastoral dialogue and to have the courage, for the good of the people and with the appropriate delicacy, without judging them and involving themselves personally in the pastoral relationship, to tell them clearly the Truth that the Church teaches about their situation.
- Finally, I invite them, if the people ask for it, to give them a blessing, provided it is to each person individually, calling them to conversion and inviting them to ask for the help of the grace that the Lord grants to all those who ask Him to conform their lives to God's Will.

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Feast of Saint John the Apostle

The original version may be read [here](#).
