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January 13, 2024

Letter: Analysis and Commentary on *Fiducia supplicans*

Dear Parish Family,

I have received from many of you, my brothers and sisters in our parish family, an onslaught of questions and concerns, so I write to you today to address the declaration *Fiducia supplicans* of the Dicastery of the Doctrine of the Faith and approved by Pope Francis, and the clarification issued by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith in its *Press Release Concerning the Reception of Fiducia supplicans* issued on January 4, 2024, concerning the blessing of couples in irregular marriages and same-sex couples. There are very few more divisive topics in par lance and that is why it is under the umbrella of our special holy year for “Peace and Joy” in our parish that I wish to approach this issue and I exhort everyone to read the following and discuss the following with the orientation toward unity, peace, and joy and not in a manner that further contributes to divisions and discord amongst us all.

What the declaration states is:

1. A priest cannot in any way ritualize, liturgize, or give any form of ecclesial recognition with a blessing of gay "marriages" or civil unions, or those of people in irregular marriages (i.e. the civilly divorced and remarried outside of the Catholic Church). Furthermore, blessings are not permitted in connection with civil union ceremonies. (See *Fiducia supplicans* 39) The blessing is to be a spontaneous, *ad libitum* blessing given to those who spontaneously request assistance from God. (See *Fiducia supplicans* 21, 23, 28, 33-40) These blessings are of a new species: “pastoral blessings”, which are separate and distinct from ritual, liturgical, etc...blessings. (See *Press Release Concerning the Reception of Fiducia supplicans* 4 and 5, January 4, 2024) Lastly, these “pastoral blessings” are not to occur in prominent places or with the priest vested with a stole, etc.: “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. (See *Press Release Concerning the Reception of Fiducia supplicans* 5)”
2. A priest can bless people, any person for that matter, who is a sinner. After all, aren’t we all sinners? There is no requirement of moral certitude on the part of the priest that the person requesting a blessing is in a state of grace to receive a blessing. Thus, a priest can bless people who are gay - even gay couples. (See *Fiducia supplicans* 25; this will be further nuanced below.) The blessing cannot affirm their sinful ways but is given to



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strengthen their moral resolve against sin. In fact, the clarification issued by the Dicastery of the Doctrine of the Faith states: “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. (*Press Release Concerning the Reception of Fiducia supplicans* 5)” Thus, this blessing needs to ask God to remove everything from their lives that is not in accord with the Gospel.

3. The blessing given to a same-sex couple or couple in an irregular marriage has “no intention to legitimize anything, but rather to open one’s life to God, to ask for his help to live better, and also to invoke the Holy Spirit so that the values of the Gospel may be lived with greater faithfulness. (*Fiducia supplicans* 40)” An example I came up with of such a blessing: *May almighty God bless and sanctify you, strengthening you in purity of heart, mind, body, and soul and help you to follow “the way” that is Jesus Christ, “the truth” that is Jesus Christ and taught by His Church, and “the life” that is offered to us all who join ourselves to the Paschal Mystery through prayer, penance, self-denial, and virtue. Thus, may almighty God strengthen your hearts to seek to know and love Him above all else, and to conform your lives to His holy will. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.* Since I began drafting this analysis and commentary, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith also offered an example of such a pastoral blessing: “*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.*” (*Press Release Concerning the Reception of Fiducia supplicans* 5)”

The abovementioned is what the declaration creates concerning these new “pastoral blessings”, however the act of blessing people in an irregular relationship still needs to fit within the broader context of previous Church teachings. Seeing that, contrary to the public presentation of the content of this document in the media, the blessing of a same-sex couple or couple in an irregular marriage is not a recognition or approval of their relationship, the issue that is still arising amongst many theologians and canon lawyers is the reality that if someone is held culpable for their freely and deliberately chosen mortal sin, such as a sex act committed outside of a legitimate or sacramental marriage¹ in the eyes of the Church, whether heterosexual or homosexual, is, due to

¹A sacramental marriage exists whenever two validly baptized persons, free from any prior bonds (marriage, ordination, or solemn vows), and not prohibited by the law, freely and deliberately exchange consent to be married. A legitimate marriage is whenever a person (meaning one person is baptized, the other is not) or persons (both are unbaptized) are validly married in the eyes of God and the Church. See *CIC*, cc. 1055 §2, 1058, 1059, 1060, 1073, 1083-1094.



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the effect of their sin(s), incapable of receiving grace until they are sacramentally reconciled through penance. Thus, how can such a person receive a blessing?

Central to placing these “pastoral blessings” within the context of the teachings of the Church are what follows:

4. Doctrine: concerning divine and Catholic faith: *Grace, but not faith, is lost by every mortal sin*: “It must be asserted, against the subtle modes of thinking of certain people, who by fair and flattering words deceive the hearts of the simple-minded, that the grace of justification once received is lost not only by apostasy, by which faith itself is lost, but also by any other mortal sin, though faith is not lost. Thus, is defended the teaching of the divine law which excludes from God’s kingdom not only unbelievers, but also the faithful if they are guilty of fornication, adultery, wantonness, sodomy, theft, avarice, drunkenness, slander, plundering, and all others who commit mortal sins from which, with the help of divine grace, they can refrain, and because of which they are severed from the grace of Christ. (Council of Trent, Session VI, “Decree on Justification”, ch. 15) Thus, it is a doctrine of our faith that we must hold that mortal sin “severs” us from the grace of Christ. This leads us to examine what constitutes mortal sin.
5. It must also be stated that a gravely disordered act alone does not constitute mortal sin. A mortal sin is committed when the conditions of: knowledge; deliberation/intention; and freedom, which must include potentially mitigating or exempting psychological conditions and habits, are all present. Thus, the mere act of a homosexual act or heterosexual act outside of marriage does not necessarily constitute mortal sin, although they are always gravely disordered acts and injurious of our relationship with God and the Church. (See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1750-1754, 1857-1861) This leads us to inquire whether homosexual acts and heterosexual acts outside of marriage, that is fornication or adultery, constitute the condition of grave matter needed for a sin to be mortal.
6. Homosexual acts are acts that constitute matter for a possible mortal sin. However, being homosexual is not in itself a sin. (See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2357) Furthermore, fornication and adultery are also grave matter for a possible mortal sin. (See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2353 and 2380-2381) *Note: Homosexual acts, fornication, and adultery are only one condition of what constitutes mortal sin. All the conditions need to be present for the sin to be mortal.* This leads us to, now, examine what heals us from mortal sin and restores us to a life of grace.
7. “Mortal sin, by attacking the vital principle within us - that is, charity - necessitates a new initiative of God’s mercy and a conversion of heart which is normally accomplished within the setting of the sacrament of reconciliation. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*,



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1856)” And, from the Council of Trent, Session VI, “Decree on Justification”, chapter fourteen, which must be held with divine and catholic faith: “Those who fall away by sin from the grace of justification which they had received, can again be justified when at God’s prompting, they have made the effort through the sacrament of penance to recover, by the merits of Christ, the grace which was lost. . . It was for the sake of those who fall into sin after Baptism that Jesus Christ instituted the sacrament of penance, when he said: *Receive the holy Spirit; if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; and if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*” The Sacrament of Reconciliation is the normative way for us to be restored to a life of grace after having culpably committed an act(s) of mortal sin after our Baptism.

Note that points one to three are analysis of the declaration and what it does, whereas points four through seven are necessary foundations for authentic commentary on the issue. These seven points will, now, be further elaborated upon.

So, what is the point of this declaration? What it does is speak to the Belgian and German bishops and express the length and breadth that is acceptable and what is unacceptable because the respective episcopal conferences of Belgium and Germany have been sanctioning such blessings and, in some case, liturgies. Hence, the Apostolic See felt it was necessary to express what is and what isn’t legitimate. In fact, this declaration creates more boundaries/limits than it opens to something new. For instance, it makes clear that gay marriage or blessings of civil unions are totally forbidden. They always have been, are, and will be, because the Church cannot do something contrary to the Divine and Natural laws and both, the Divine and Natural Laws, do not admit of same-sex marriage or the blessing of a person held by a prior bond (*ligamen*) of marriage to a new person. (See CCC, 1601-1605; see also CIC, 1055 – 1057, 1061 and 1085 §§1-2; and see *Fiducia supplicans* 4) This type of statement sets a clear limit rather than "open up" a possibility for something new and contrary to the Church’s teachings.

Yet, does this mean that the Church can bless gay couples? According to *Fiducia supplicans*: Yes, but with a lot of nuances, which renders this action potentially a moot act if the grace of the blessing is incapable of being received due to culpable mortal sin. In my third point, in italics, I gave an example of what the blessing would need to look like considering the incredibly long discourse in the declaration on the role and form of descending blessings, those which call down God's blessing upon something to sanctify and elevate. A blessing of a same-sex couple or couple in an irregular marriage could never bless them as such but would need to call God's blessing down upon the couple in a manner that exhorts virtue and holiness of life. Which raises the question: Do we need to ask God to end the irregularity of the relationship in the blessing when giving it?



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The question thus becomes: ***Does a person who is not in a state of grace receive the grace of the blessing?*** Considering chapter 15 of the “Decree on Justification” from the Council of Trent, we must all hold with divine and catholic faith that no one can receive grace who is in a state of mortal sin. Thus, what is it that the “pastoral blessing” provided by *Fiducia supplicans* seeks to provide a person? As *Fiducia supplicans* states: “This is a blessing that, although not included in any liturgical rite, unites intercessory prayer with the invocation of God’s help by those who humbly turn to him. God never turns away anyone who approaches him! Ultimately, a blessing offers people a means to increase their trust in God. The request for a blessing, thus, expresses and nurtures openness to the transcendence, mercy, and closeness to God in a thousand concrete circumstances of life, which is no small thing in the world in which we live. It is a seed of the Holy Spirit that must be nurtured, not hindered. (par. 33)” The declaration *Fiducia supplicans* develops the teaching of the Church and states that the role of the blessing of a person who is in a state of mortal sin is to bestow cooperating grace (*gratia cooperans*) to cultivate the virtues of faith and humility that are present in a person who is returning to God and seeking greater communion with God. However, would it not be more appropriate, if persons in a state of mortal sin are approaching a priest for a blessing, to first invite and encourage them to go to the Sacrament of Penance before blessing any couples in irregular circumstances?

The underlying question that this declaration is addressing is: ***What is the appropriate pastoral care of persons in irregular relationships where they are, potentially, in a state of mortal sin?*** And this question was asked and answered by the Ecumenical Council of Trent on January 13, 1547, in the “Decree on Justification”, chapter fourteen. And the answer is: go to the Sacrament of Penance. If a person in an irregular relationship is humbly coming to a priest and asking them to bring them closer to Jesus and the Church, then the authentic pastoral action is to invite and encourage them to confess their sins, do penance, and be reconciled with God and the Church. Thus, the pastoral role of giving a blessing to such a person becomes moot since a blessing is not what heals one’s relationship with God and the Church, the Sacrament of Penance is.

As I have often taught: “beauty attracts” and thus the beginning of a life lived in Jesus Christ is an experience of Jesus Christ in love and holiness, beauty and truth. When a person experiences Jesus Christ, no one needs to tell them they need to go to confession because their experience of beauty and truth in Jesus Christ leads them to freely choose to confess their sins to receive the purifying light of God’s mercy and love. Thus, if a couple in an irregular relationship are coming to a priest for a blessing, they have already experienced Jesus Christ and thus do not need a blessing to create that experience, but what they need is the healing that comes from the Sacrament of Penance, and/or an annulment to establish their freedom to marry, and/or a convalidation to have their marriage blessed and regularized by God and the Church. The reality is that the Church is not absent the healing and restorative sacraments and canonical procedures to take what is irregular



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and make it regular, restore the person or persons to the life of grace. The problems are: a lack of knowledge of these proper pastoral options, poor pastoral care from priests to help people heal and return to the sacramental life of the Church, and negative stigmas because of people having had a difficult time with the Church to enjoy these healing and restorative pastoral acts. That's why my understanding of the priesthood is: "the priesthood exists to make crooked lines straight". Operating from this premise, I have always sought to restore unity, peace, and joy to people in irregular situations, not cause them more harm or to "run away" from the Church. This leads me to look specifically at the pastoral care that needs to occur for people in irregular relationships.

The pastoral situation of caring for persons in irregular relationships is challenging because no priest knows the state of the soul of any person who is not a notorious sinner coming before them. Thus, no priest can have moral certitude as to the state of another person's soul. Did the gay couple or couple in an irregular relationship go to the Sacrament of Confession before asking for the blessing? This is the parallel pastoral situation to the issue of worthy reception of Holy Communion. And, in that analogous situation, unless the sins of that person are notorious and/or gravely manifest it is not necessarily possible for a priest to be aware of the state of that person's soul. An illustrative example: the innumerable amount of people that skip a Sunday Mass or other Holy Day of Obligation but then present themselves for Holy Communion the next time they are at Mass. If they have not gone to confession and are culpable for their failure to attend Mass, they are in a state of mortal sin. Yet, a priest, has no ability to know whether they went to the Sacrament of Penance before presenting themselves for Holy Communion. Another example: a woman who has had an abortion or man who was a material cooperator in procuring an abortion for a woman. These people are not only in mortal sin but have incurred a *latae sententiae* (automatic) excommunication. Yet, a priest would not know, especially early on in a pregnancy, if an abortion was procured by the person presenting themselves for Holy Communion. Or, if they have received the Sacrament of Penance and the remittance of the penalty since all of that would occur in the internal sacramental forum. Thus, most priests are not going to deny such people Holy Communion, but we ought to exhort, teach, and preach to everyone the proper actions that the faithful must undertake to make a worthy act of reception of Holy Communion which also includes the raising of the awareness of such issues pastorally and making known to people the means to remedy and heal. Likewise, a priest does not know whether a gay couple has been to confession or whether they have committed a homosexual act, or if a couple who are dating are sexually active, and, in certain cases, if a couple are in an irregular marriage. Hence, the pastoral difficulty of having to address who can and cannot receive Holy Communion, or who should or should not come up for a blessing. This is why the declaration provides the situation of being on a retreat, pilgrimage, at a shrine, etc....as further context where such a blessing could be administered because there is the strong likelihood that the persons have gone to the Sacrament of Penance and are seeking reform and holiness of life. (See *Fiducia supplicans*, 40)



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Remember, blessings are minor exorcisms as they cast out evil by exhorting the holy and calling God down upon someone or something to make it holy, especially when previously "not holy" whether profane (re: secular, not designated for sacred use) or, in a more severe situation, having been debase and now, sanctified by God's grace (*gratia elevans/gratia sanctificans*). Thus, the blessing of a same-sex couple, as stated in my first point, which quotes from the declaration, can never "recognize", "sanction", or "approve" of the same-sex relationship. Yet, it can call upon God to sanctify the couple in authentic love, truth, holiness, etc. It's for this reason that I can never see a gay couple spontaneously coming up to me and saying: "could you bless us and ask God to make us holy because currently we are in this relationship that God considers unnatural and immoral?" This is what makes me think that the way that the media is portraying this declaration is utterly ridiculous. The declaration does more to address the theology of "blessings" than it does to create a new pastoral possibility of blessing gay couples. But, if a couple does come up to me in the aforementioned manner, I will bless, in accord with the example of the blessing given in point three at the beginning of this document, because I do not know the state of their soul.

I have already been hearing on TV and the internet fundamentalist Christian ministers claim that the Catholic Church no longer stands for the truth because of its acceptance of homosexual marriage. A falsehood that is now the general thought of some because they did not read the actual declaration, only the headlines of the secular media. This leads conservatives, especially amongst the lapsed Catholic crowd, to feel justified in their abandonment of the Catholic Church and make their way to the seemingly more "orthodox" fundamentalist Christian parishes. It also riles up an already present anti-Catholic sentiment among the fundamentalist Christian crowd. So, in a rather conservative area, it is incumbent upon us to address a loving welcome toward same-sex persons while maintaining a clear teaching on the Sacrament of Marriage only existing between one man and one woman. Permit me, now, to address the specific pastoral challenge of ministering to same-sex persons.

I feel bad for the same-sex persons who want to maintain practicing their Catholic faith because every few months, they are given a false hope that something is going to change in the Catholic Church just to come and realize that it's not what the sensational headlines would imply. However, my experience is that the average person in the same-sex persons' community isn't interested in a blessing or recognition by the Catholic Church, much less any Church. And, if they are committed to that way of life, they are certainly not interested in asking for God's blessing to change their ways. That's why the pastoral care that is needed in their regard needs to begin with the message that they are loved by God and have the same intrinsic human dignity that any of us have because God became human and died on the Cross for us all. Then, once they realize that our Christian message is a welcoming message, one can begin to talk to persons in irregular relationships about



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how, even though difficult, purity is what they are all called to just the way that purity is what every single Christian is called to. (See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2348-2350) Purity is no less a demand of God for heterosexuals than it is for homosexuals and that is why in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* homosexual acts are addressed in the same context as any other act of impurity. (See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Article 6. II: “The Vocation to Chastity”)

My real take-away is that the pope has told bishops and priests to not be hostile toward the same-sex persons. We must avoid all forms of unjust discrimination as the Catechism exhorts us in no. 2358. The only way we are going to have any hope to address the sexual culture that grips our society is with a welcoming disposition and a helping hand. If this welcome is not present, then, what will happen is the same-sex person will find a more comfortable “home” in that community to the detriment and, in some cases, even replacing their sense of belonging to their own family, Church, and God.

Many families experience varied degrees of difficulty due to a child “coming out”. The Church should do all that it can to help families maintain peace and the practices of our faith. It should also always present itself as the welcome refuge of sinners, as we are all sinners in need of the one true God and Savior: Jesus Christ. The teachings of our faith concerning marriage and human sexuality can never change because they are grounded in truth, the natural and divine laws. (See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2331-2336) This makes it difficult to address members of the same-sex persons community. I know, because of the many discussions I have had with a very close relative. I know that reading parts of this letter would probably upset them greatly as they would feel unaccepted by me. I have tried to make this letter something that conveys the truth but also expresses the great joy that I have whenever I see a gay person at Mass because it means that the door is still open in their life to God and the Church. Thus, attitudes that chase same-sex persons away from God, the Church, and disrupt the peace of our families must change. And we should all seek to help unite each other through prayer, evangelization, and charity, since we are all sinners and stray from full unity with God and the Church when we fail to carry the cross we have been given. True discipleship can be summarized in Matthew’s Gospel chapters five through seven and by living an active sacramental life. It is a challenge for us all and it is in embracing that challenge that living our faith becomes a great adventure.

In this special and holy year of “Peace and Joy” in our parish, let us all pray that those who find themselves identifying with the same-sex persons community will return to God and the Church and find peace with God and the demands of our faith. Likewise, let us pray that families that have been divided over this issue, will have peace and joy restored in their homes.



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As we do all things, we entrust all things to our Lady, Queen of Peace and are inspired and comforted with the confidence that She is always with us, as we pray:

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, or sought thine intercession was left unaided.

Inspired by this confidence, I fly unto thee, O Virgin of virgins, my mother; to thee do I come, before thee I stand, sinful and sorrowful. O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions, but in thy mercy hear and answer me.

Amen.

Yours in Christ,

Fr. Philip-Michael F. Tangorra