

Declaration

Fiducia Supplicans

On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings

Presentation

This Declaration considers several questions that have come to this Dicastery in recent years. In preparing the document, the Dicastery, as is its practice, consulted experts, undertook a careful drafting process, and discussed the text in the *Congresso* of the Doctrinal Section of the Dicastery. During that time, the document was discussed with the Holy Father. Finally, the text of the Declaration was submitted to the Holy Father for his review, and he approved it with his signature.

While the subject matter of this document was being studied, the Holy Father's response to the *Dubia* of some Cardinals was made known. That response provided important clarifications for this reflection and represents a decisive element for the work of the Dicastery. Since "the Roman Curia is primarily an instrument at the service of the successor of Peter" (Ap. Const. *Praedicate Evangelium*, II, 1), our work must foster, along with an understanding of the Church's perennial doctrine, the reception of the Holy Father's teaching.

As with the Holy Father's above-mentioned response to the *Dubia* of two Cardinals, 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. The value of this document, however, 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. Such 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. This explains why this text has taken on the typology of a "Declaration."

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.

This Declaration is also intended as a tribute to the faithful People of God, who worship the Lord with so many gestures of deep trust in his mercy and who, with this confidence, constantly come to seek a blessing from Mother Church.

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Prefect

Introduction

1. The supplicating trust of the faithful People of God receives the gift of blessing that flows from the Heart of Christ through his Church. Pope Francis offers this timely reminder: "The

great blessing of God is Jesus Christ. He is the great gift of God, his own Son. He is a blessing for all humanity, a blessing that has saved us all. He is the Eternal Word, with whom the Father blessed us 'while we were still sinners' (Rom. 5:8), as St. Paul says. He is the Word made flesh, offered for us on the cross."^[1]

2. Encouraged by such a great and consoling truth, this Dicastery has considered several questions of both a formal and an informal nature about the possibility of blessing same-sex couples and—in light of Pope Francis' fatherly and pastoral approach—of offering new clarifications on the *Responsum ad dubium*^[2] that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published on 22 February 2021.

3. The above-mentioned *Responsum* elicited numerous and varied reactions: some welcomed the clarity of the document and its consistency with the Church's perennial teaching; others did not share the negative response it gave to the question or did not consider the formulation of its answer and the reasons provided in the attached *Explanatory Note* to be sufficiently clear. To meet the latter reaction with fraternal charity, it seems opportune to take up the theme again and offer a vision that draws together the doctrinal aspects with the pastoral ones in a coherent manner because "all religious teaching ultimately has to be reflected in the teacher's way of life, which awakens the assent of the heart by its nearness, love, and witness."^[3]

I. The Blessing in the Sacrament of Marriage

4. Pope Francis' recent response to the second of the five questions posed by two Cardinals^[4] offers an opportunity to explore this issue further, especially in its pastoral implications. It is a matter of avoiding that "something that is not marriage is being recognized as marriage."^[5] 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"^[6]—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.

5. This is also the understanding of marriage that is offered by the Gospel. For this reason, 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 *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.

6. It should be emphasized that in the Rite of the Sacrament of Marriage, this concerns not just any blessing but a gesture reserved to the ordained minister. In this case, the blessing given by the ordained minister is tied directly to the specific union of a man and a woman, who establish an exclusive and indissoluble covenant by their consent. This fact allows us to highlight the risk of confusing a blessing given to any other union with the Rite that is proper to the Sacrament of Marriage.

II. The Meaning of the Various Blessings

7. The Holy Father's above-mentioned response invites us to broaden and enrich the meaning of blessings.

8. Blessings are among the most widespread and evolving sacramentals. Indeed, they lead us to grasp God's presence in all the events of life and remind us that, even in the use of created things, human beings are invited to seek God, to love him, and to serve him faithfully.^[7] For this reason, blessings have as their recipients: people; objects of worship and devotion; sacred images; places of life, of work, and suffering; the fruits of the earth and human toil; and all created realities that refer back to the Creator, praising and blessing him by their beauty.

The Liturgical Meaning of the Rite of Blessing

9. From a strictly liturgical point of view, a blessing requires that what is blessed be conformed to God's will, as expressed in the teachings of the Church.

10. Indeed, blessings are celebrated by virtue of faith and are ordered to the praise of God and the spiritual benefit of his people. As the *Book of Blessings* explains, "so that this intent might become more apparent, by an ancient tradition, the formulas of blessing are primarily aimed at giving glory to God for his gifts, asking for his favors, and restraining the power of evil in the world."^[8] Therefore, those who invoke God's blessing through the Church are invited to "strengthen their dispositions through faith, for which all things are possible" and to trust in "the love that urges the observance of God's commandments."^[9] This is why, while "there is always and everywhere an opportunity to praise God through Christ, in the Holy Spirit," there is also a care to do so with "things, places, or circumstances that do not contradict the law or the spirit of the Gospel."^[10] This is a liturgical understanding of blessings insofar as they are rites officially proposed by the Church.

11. Basing itself on these considerations, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Explanatory Note* to its 2021 *Responsum* recalls that when a blessing is invoked on certain human relationships by a special liturgical rite, it is necessary that what is blessed corresponds with God's designs written in creation and fully revealed by Christ the Lord. 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. The Holy Father reiterated the substance of this Declaration in his *Respuestas* to the *Dubia* of two Cardinals.

12. One must also avoid the risk of reducing the meaning of blessings to this point of view alone, for it would lead us to expect the same moral conditions for a simple blessing that are called for in the reception of the sacraments. Such a risk requires that we broaden this perspective further. Indeed, there is the danger that a pastoral gesture that is so beloved and widespread will be subjected to too many moral prerequisites, which, under the claim of control, could overshadow the unconditional power of God's love that forms the basis for the gesture of blessing.

13. Precisely in this regard, Pope Francis urged us not to "lose pastoral charity, which should permeate all our decisions and attitudes" and to avoid being "judges who only deny, reject, and

exclude."^[11] Let us then respond to the Holy Father's proposal by developing a broader understanding of blessings.

Blessings in Sacred Scripture

14. To reflect on blessings by gathering different points of view, we first need to be enlightened by the voice of Scripture.

15. "May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace" (Num. 6:24-26). This "priestly blessing" we find in the Old Testament, specifically in the Book of Numbers, has a "descending" character since it represents the invocation of a blessing that descends from God upon man: it is one of the oldest texts of divine blessing. Then, there is a second type of blessing we find in the biblical pages: that which "ascends" from earth to heaven, toward God. Blessing in this sense amounts to praising, celebrating, and thanking God for his mercy and his faithfulness, for the wonders he has created, and for all that has come about by his will: "Bless the Lord, my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!" (Ps. 103:1).

16. To God who blesses, we also respond by blessing. Melchizedek, King of Salem, blesses Abram (cf. Gen. 14:19); Rebekah is blessed by family members just before she becomes the bride of Isaac (cf. Gen. 24:60), who, in turn, blesses his son, Jacob (cf. Gen. 27:27). Jacob blesses Pharaoh (cf. Gen. 47:10), his own grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh (cf. Gen. 48:20), and his twelve sons (cf. Gen. 49:28). Moses and Aaron bless the community (cf. Ex. 39:43; Lev. 9:22). The heads of households bless their children at weddings, before embarking on a journey, and in the imminence of death. These blessings, accordingly, appear to be a superabundant and unconditional gift.

17. The blessing found in the New Testament retains essentially the same meaning it had in the Old Testament. We find the divine gift that "descends," the human thanksgiving that "ascends," and the blessing imparted by man that "extends" toward others. Zechariah, having regained the use of speech, blesses the Lord for his wondrous works (cf. Lk. 1:64). Simeon, while holding the newborn Jesus in his arms, blesses God for granting him the grace to contemplate the saving Messiah, and then blesses the child's parents, Mary and Joseph (cf. Lk. 2:34). Jesus blesses the Father in the famous hymn of praise and exultation he addressed to him: "I praise you, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth" (Mt. 11:25).

18. In continuity with the Old Testament, in Jesus as well the blessing is not only ascending, referring to the Father, but is also descending, being poured out on others as a gesture of grace, protection, and goodness. Jesus himself implemented and promoted this practice. For example, he blessed children: "And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands upon them" (Mk. 10:16). And Jesus' earthly journey will end precisely with a final blessing reserved for the Eleven, shortly before he ascends to the Father: "And lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven" (Lk. 24:50-51). The last image of Jesus on earth is that of his hands being raised in the act of blessing.

19. In his mystery of love, through Christ, God communicates to his Church the power to bless. Granted by God to human beings and bestowed by them on their neighbors, the blessing is transformed into inclusion, solidarity, and peacemaking. It is a positive message of comfort, care, and encouragement. The blessing expresses God's merciful embrace and the Church's motherhood, which invites the faithful to have the same feelings as God toward their brothers and sisters.

A Theological-Pastoral Understanding of Blessings

20. One who asks for a blessing show himself to be in need of God's saving presence in his life and one who asks for a blessing from the Church recognizes the latter as a sacrament of the salvation that God offers. To seek a blessing in the Church is to acknowledge that the life of the Church springs from the womb of God's mercy and helps us to move forward, to live better, and to respond to the Lord's will.

21. In order to help us understand the value of a more pastoral approach to blessings, 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."^[12] This request should, in every way, be valued, accompanied, and received with gratitude. People who come spontaneously to ask for a blessing show by this request their sincere openness to transcendence, the confidence of their hearts that they do not trust in their own strength alone, their need for God, and their desire to break out of the narrow confines of this world, enclosed in its limitations.

22. As St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus teaches us, this confidence "is the sole path that leads us to the Love that grants everything. With confidence, the wellspring of grace overflows into our lives [...]. It is most fitting, then, that we should place heartfelt trust not in ourselves but in the infinite mercy of a God who loves us unconditionally [...]. The sin of the world is great but not infinite, whereas the merciful love of the Redeemer is indeed infinite."^[13]

23. When considered outside of a liturgical framework, these expressions of faith are found in a realm of greater spontaneity and freedom. Nevertheless, "the optional nature of pious exercises should in no way be taken to imply an under-estimation or even disrespect for such practices. The way forward in this area requires a correct and wise appreciation of the many riches of popular piety, [and] of the potentiality of these same riches."^[14] In this way, blessings become a pastoral resource to be valued rather than a risk or a problem.

24. From the point of view of pastoral care, blessings should be evaluated as acts of devotion that "are external to the celebration of the Holy Eucharist and of the other sacraments." Indeed, the "language, rhythm, course, and theological emphasis" of popular piety differ "from those of the corresponding liturgical action." For this reason, "pious practices must conserve their proper style, simplicity, and language, [and] attempts to impose forms of 'liturgical celebration' on them are always to be avoided."^[15]

25. The Church, moreover, must shy away from resting its pastoral praxis on the fixed nature of certain doctrinal or disciplinary schemes, especially when they lead to "a narcissistic and authoritarian elitism, whereby instead of evangelizing, one analyzes and classifies others, and instead of opening the door to grace, one exhausts his or her energies in inspecting and

verifying.”^[16] Thus, when people ask for a blessing, an exhaustive moral analysis should not be placed as a precondition for conferring it. For, those seeking a blessing should not be required to have prior moral perfection.

26. In this perspective, the Holy Father’s *Respuestas* aid in expanding the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s 2021 pronouncement from a pastoral point of view. For, the *Respuestas* invite discernment concerning the possibility of “forms of blessing, requested by one or more persons, that do not convey an erroneous conception of marriage”^[17] and, in situations that are morally unacceptable from an objective point of view, account for the fact that “pastoral charity requires us not to treat simply as ‘sinners’ those whose guilt or responsibility may be attenuated by various factors affecting subjective imputability.”^[18]

27. In the catechesis cited at the beginning of this Declaration, Pope Francis proposed a description of this kind of blessing that is offered to all without requiring anything. It is worth reading these words with an open heart, for they help us grasp the pastoral meaning of blessings offered without preconditions: “It is God who blesses. In the first pages of the Bible, there is a continual repetition of blessings. God blesses, but humans also give blessings, and soon it turns out that the blessing possesses a special power, which accompanies those who receive it throughout their lives, and disposes man’s heart to be changed by God. [...] So we are more important to God than all the sins we can commit because he is father, he is mother, he is pure love, he has blessed us forever. And he will never stop blessing us. It is a powerful experience to read these biblical texts of blessing in a prison or in a rehabilitation group. To make those people feel that they are still blessed, notwithstanding their serious mistakes, that their heavenly Father continues to will their good and to hope that they will ultimately open themselves to the good. Even if their closest relatives have abandoned them, because they now judge them to be irredeemable, God always sees them as his children.”^[19]

28. 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. By way of example, we can refer to the *Book of Blessings*, which provides several rites for blessing people, including the elderly, the sick, participants in a catechetical or prayer meeting, pilgrims, those embarking on a journey, volunteer groups and associations, and more. Such blessings are meant for everyone; no one is to be excluded from them. In the introduction to the *Order for the Blessing of Elderly People*, for example, it is stated that the purpose of this blessing is “so that the elderly themselves may receive from their brethren a testimony of respect and gratitude, while together with them, we give thanks to the Lord for the favors they received from him and for the good they did with his help.”^[20] In this case, the subject of the blessing is the elderly person, for whom and with whom thanks is being given to God for the good he has done and for the benefits received. No one can be prevented from this act of giving thanks, and each person—even if he or she lives in situations that are not ordered to the Creator’s plan—possesses positive elements for which we can praise the Lord.

29. From the perspective of the ascending dimension, when one becomes aware of the Lord’s gifts and his unconditional love, even in sinful situations—particularly when a prayer finds a hearing—the believer’s heart lifts its praise to God and blesses him. No one is precluded from this type of blessing. Everyone, individually or together with others, can lift their praise and gratitude to God.

30. The popular understanding of blessings, however, also values the importance of descending blessings. While “it is not appropriate for a Diocese, a Bishops’ Conference, or any other ecclesial structure to constantly and officially establish procedures or rituals for all kinds of matters,”^[21] pastoral prudence and wisdom—avoiding all serious forms of scandal and confusion among the faithful—may suggest that the ordained minister join in the prayer of those persons who, although in a union that cannot be compared in any way to a marriage, desire 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.

III. Blessings of Couples in Irregular Situations and of Couples of the Same Sex

31. Within the horizon outlined here appears the possibility of blessings for couples in irregular situations and for couples of the same sex, the form of which should not be fixed ritually by ecclesial authorities to avoid producing confusion with the blessing proper to the Sacrament of Marriage. In such cases, a blessing may be imparted that not only has an ascending value but also involves the invocation of a blessing that descends from God upon those who—recognizing themselves to be destitute and in need of his help—do not claim a legitimization of their own status, but who beg that all that is true, good, and humanly valid in their lives and their relationships be enriched, healed, and elevated by the presence of the Holy Spirit. These forms of blessing express a supplication that God may grant those aids that come from the impulses of his Spirit—what classical theology calls “actual grace”—so that human relationships may mature and grow in fidelity to the Gospel, that they may be freed from their imperfections and frailties, and that they may express themselves in the ever-increasing dimension of the divine love.

32. Indeed, the grace of God works in the lives of those who do not claim to be righteous but who acknowledge themselves humbly as sinners, like everyone else. This grace can orient everything according to the mysterious and unpredictable designs of God. Therefore, with its untiring wisdom and motherly care, the Church welcomes all who approach God with humble hearts, accompanying them with those spiritual aids that enable everyone to understand and realize God’s will fully in their existence.^[22]

33. This is a blessing that, although not included in any liturgical rite,^[23] 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.

34. The Church’s liturgy itself invites us to adopt this trusting attitude, even in the midst of our sins, lack of merits, weaknesses, and confusions, as witnessed by this beautiful Collect from the Roman Missal: “Almighty ever-living God, who in the abundance of your kindness surpass the merits and the desires of those who entreat you, pour out your mercy upon us to pardon what conscience dreads and to give what prayer does not dare to ask” (Collect for the Twenty-Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time). How often, through a pastor’s simple blessing, which does not claim to sanction or legitimize anything, can people experience the nearness of the Father, beyond all “merits” and “desires”?

35. Therefore, the pastoral sensibility of ordained ministers should also be formed to perform blessings spontaneously that are not found in the *Book of Blessings*.

36. In this sense, it is essential to grasp the Holy Father's concern that these non-ritualized blessings never cease being simple gestures that provide an effective means of increasing trust in God on the part of the people who ask for them, careful that they should not become a liturgical or semi-liturgical act, similar to a sacrament. Indeed, such a ritualization would constitute a serious impoverishment because it would subject a gesture of great value in popular piety to excessive control, depriving ministers of freedom and spontaneity in their pastoral accompaniment of people's lives.

37. In this regard, there come to mind the following words of the Holy Father, already quoted in part: "Decisions that may be part of pastoral prudence in certain circumstances should not necessarily become a norm. That is to say, it is not appropriate for a Diocese, a Bishops' Conference, or any other ecclesial structure to constantly and officially establish procedures or rituals for all kinds of matters [...]. Canon Law should not and cannot cover everything, nor should the Episcopal Conferences claim to do so with their various documents and protocols, since the life of the Church flows through many channels besides the normative ones."^[24] Thus Pope Francis recalled that "what is part of a practical discernment in particular circumstances cannot be elevated to the level of a rule" because this "would lead to an intolerable casuistry."^[25]

38. For this reason, one should neither provide for nor promote a ritual for the blessings of couples in an irregular situation. At the same time, one should not prevent or prohibit the Church's closeness to people in every situation in which they might seek God's help through a simple blessing. 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 fulfill his will completely.

39. In any case, precisely to avoid any form of confusion or scandal, when the prayer of 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.

40. Such a blessing may instead find its place in other contexts, such as a visit to a shrine, a meeting with a priest, a prayer recited in a group, or during a pilgrimage. Indeed, through these blessings that are given not through the ritual forms proper to the liturgy but as an expression of the Church's maternal heart—similar to those that emanate from the core of popular piety—there is 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.

41. What has been said in this Declaration regarding the blessings of same-sex couples is sufficient to guide the prudent and fatherly discernment of ordained ministers in this regard. Thus, beyond the guidance provided above, no further responses should be expected about possible ways to regulate details or practicalities regarding blessings of this type.^[26]

IV. The Church is the Sacrament of God's Infinite Love

42. The Church continues to lift up those prayers and supplications that Christ himself—with loud cries and tears—offered in his earthly life (cf. Heb. 5:7), and which enjoy a special efficacy for this reason. In this way, “not only by charity, example, and works of penance, but also by prayer does the ecclesial community exercise a true maternal function in bringing souls to Christ.”^[27]

43. The Church is thus the sacrament of God's infinite love. Therefore, even when a person's relationship with God is clouded by sin, he can always ask for a blessing, stretching out his hand to God, as Peter did in the storm when he cried out to Jesus, “Lord, save me!” (Mt. 14:30). Indeed, desiring and receiving a blessing can be the possible good in some situations. Pope Francis reminds us that “a small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties.”^[28] In this way, “*what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ, who died and rose from the dead.*”^[29]

44. Any blessing will be an opportunity for a renewed proclamation of the *kerygma*, an invitation to draw ever closer to the love of Christ. As Pope Benedict XVI taught, “Like Mary, the Church is the mediator of God's blessing for the world: she receives it in receiving Jesus and she transmits it in bearing Jesus. He is the mercy and the peace that the world, of itself, cannot give, and which it needs always, at least as much as bread.”^[30]

45. Taking the above points into account and following the authoritative teaching of Pope Francis, this Dicastery finally wishes to recall that “the root of Christian meekness” is “the ability to feel blessed and the ability to bless [...]. This world needs blessings, and we can give blessings and receive blessings. The Father loves us, and the only thing that remains for us is the joy of blessing him, and the joy of thanking him, and of learning from him [...] to bless.”^[31] In this way, every brother and every sister will be able to feel that, in the Church, they are always pilgrims, always beggars, always loved, and, despite everything, always blessed.