THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH
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On the Orthodox Attitude to the New Practice of Blessing “Couples in Irregular Situations and Same-Sex Couples” in the Roman Catholic Church

With the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus', the Synodal Biblical-Theological Commission put together a document *On the Orthodox Attitude to the New Practice of Blessing “Couples in Irregular Situations and Same-Sex Couples” in the Roman Catholic Church.*

Introduction

A new practice of blessings “for couples in irregular situations and for couples of the same sex”**[1]** is presented in the document *Fiducia supplicans* (Latin for “supplicating trust”) adopted by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith of the Roman Catholic Church. Published by the Vatican’s official resources on 18th December 2023, the document had been signed by the Dicastery Prefect, Cardinal Manuel Fernández, and the Secretary for the Doctrinal Section, Armando Matteo, and approved and signed by Pope Francis.

The Declaration *Fiducia supplicans* responds to the questions from the Catholic public concerning a document of 22nd February 2021 entitled *Responsum of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a dubium regarding the blessing of the unions of persons of the same sex***[2]**, which unequivocally pointed out the impossibility of blessing “unions between persons of the same sex.” That unambiguous viewpoint has undergone changes in the new document of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, approved by the Pope, which suggests acknowledging a possibility for blessing couples “in irregular situations” and “unions of persons of the same sex” under certain conditions.

The ideas expressed in *Fiducia supplicans* constitute a considerable deviation from Christian moral teaching and require theological analysis.

1. On “classical” and “broadening” understanding of blessings in *Fiducia supplicans*

According to the Declaration, the key attribute of a blessing is that it has as its aim “the praise of God and the spiritual benefit of his people”**[3]**. The “classical”**[4]** understanding of blessings “requires that what is blessed be conformed to God’s will, as expressed in the teachings of the Church”**[5]**.

However, as is unfolded further, the logic behind the document is aimed at “broadening” and “enriching” the classical understanding of blessings. As the document points out, the new understanding is based on Pope Francis’s opinion regarding a possibility of the “forms of blessing, requested by one or more persons, that do not convey an erroneous conception of marriage”**[6]**. That opinion was expressed in the Responses to the *Dubia* Presented by the Two Cardinals published on the Vatican’s official website in 2023**[7]**. It contained a call not to “lose pastoral charity” and avoid being ‘judges who only deny, reject, and exclude’”**[8]**, which prompted the Dicastery to offer “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”**[9]**.

The “broadening” of the understanding of blessings is based on a single thesis – that manifold moral guidelines “could overshadow the unconditional power of God’s love that forms the basis for the gesture of blessing”**[10]**. Based on this thesis, the authors of the Declaration suggest avoiding the situations requiring “the same moral conditions for a simple blessing that are called for in the reception of the sacraments”**[11]**.

No moral requirements are set for recipients of blessings, which is justified by a desire not to overshadow the love of God. However, God’s love for man cannot serve as a basis for blessing the couples who are in sinful cohabitation. God loves a person, but also calls him/her to perfection: *Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect* (Mt 5:48). The Divine love urges people to renounce the life-destroying sin. Accordingly, pastoral care must harmoniously combine a clear message of the impermissibility of a sinful way of life with love leading to repentance.

The document does not make it clear what an “irregular situation” means. Since “same-sex couples” make a separate category in the Declaration, we may presume that the “irregular situation” implies such cohabitation of a man and a woman which is not sanctified by the Sacrament of Marriage.

Fiducia supplicans says nothing about the need to canonically “regulate” such relationships before receiving a blessing. Therefore, the document is introducing a certain form of indirect legitimization for what is, in essence, illegitimate, despite its stipulation that when asking for such a blessing persons in

the “irregular” cohabitation allegedly intend not “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”**[12]**.

The notion of sin is mentioned in the Declaration several times, but solely in the context of God’s love, forgiveness and blessing: “The sin of the world is great but not infinite”**[13]**; “so we are more important to God than all the sins we can commit”**[14]**; “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”**[15]**; “the Church’s liturgy itself invites us to adopt this trusting attitude, even in the midst of our sins”**[16]**; “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”**[17]**.

The Declaration says nothing about the fighting against sin, about renouncing a sinful way of life, or about providing pastoral help to a believer in overcoming sin. The way it is written, the text leads us to the conclusion that a sinful lifestyle is not an obstacle to communion with God. The Declaration fails to mention the Sacrament of Repentance as an essential source of the Divine grace for all those who would like to rectify everything in their life that is inconsonant with the will of God.

The opinion of Pope Francis on people’s motives for requesting a blessing deserves special attention. The Declaration reads: “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”**[18]**. As applied to couples living in sinful unions, it is impossible to agree that all those asking for a blessing are guided by that very motive. For people who are mindful of the spiritual danger of their condition and wish to appeal to God for help it may be more natural and proper to ask for a blessing and spiritual help individually rather than as a couple, in order to strengthen their resolve to break with a sinful way of life. It is likely that a couple requesting a blessing while demonstrating no desire to renounce their sinful way of life would actually like to receive legitimization of their relationship which does not correspond to the norms of Christian life, and to salve their conscience.

2. On the blessing of “same-sex couples”

According to the authors of the Declaration, the Roman Catholic Church views marriage as an “exclusive, stable, and indissoluble union between a man and a woman, naturally open to the generation

of children”**[19]**. Such understanding agrees with the Orthodox teaching expressed, in particular, in the document of the Russian Orthodox Church on the Canonical Aspects of Church Marriage, which says: “The Church is adamant in that it does not and never will recognize unions between persons of the same sex as marriage regardless of their recognition or non-recognition by civil law, as well as other forms of cohabitation that contravene the definition, given above, of marriage as a union between a man and a woman”**[20]**.

However, while pointing out the inviolability of the understanding of marriage as a union between a man and a woman blessed by the Church, *Fiducia supplicans* proclaims the possibility for blessing “couples of the same sex.” The entire section of the document dedicated to such blessings is in stark contrast with Christian moral teaching.

The document, in fact, equates cohabitation of same-sex persons to extramarital heterosexual cohabitation. Meanwhile, extramarital cohabitation between persons of different sexes is reflected in the canonical law of the Roman Catholic Church, while the blessing of “same-sex couples” is a new phenomenon.

According to the document, persons in such cohabitation do not need to change the way they live in order to receive a blessing. Without any prerequisites, those “who – recognizing themselves to be destitute and in need of his help – do not claim a legitimation 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”**[21]** may receive a blessing, which is granted “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”**[22]**.

In relation to the blessing of “same-sex couples,” the aforementioned “broadening” understanding causes fundamental disagreement. If the blessing is intended to heal human relationships by the presence of the Holy Spirit, in this case the healing can only mean breaking off sinful relations. In order to “mature and grow in fidelity to the Gospel,” such a couple must abandon the relationships that are not true to the Gospel message. Otherwise, the blessing becomes a justification for sin. Therefore, the logic of the Declaration can be regarded as running counter to Christian moral teaching.

It should also be noted that persons in sinful unions are called “destitute”**[23]** as if moral imperfection does not imply their conscious and free choice. The emphasis shifts from reflecting on a sinner’s moral decision to his/her desperate plight.

In *Fiducia supplicans*, there is no definition of same-sex cohabitation as sinful one. In contrast, the

Russian Orthodox Church, which reflects on same-sex relationships in its document entitled “The Basis of the Social Concept,” explicitly and unequivocally calls homosexuality “a sinful distortion of human nature, which is overcome by spiritual effort leading to the healing and personal growth of the individual”**[24]**.

Fiducia supplicans equates the blessing of “same-sex couples” to that of “couples in irregular situations.” In both cases, the blessing is considered outside the framework of the Sacrament of Marriage or established liturgical rites. That said, practical recommendations contained in the document are as ambiguous as the theological tenets underlying them.

According to the document, “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”**[25]**. The form of blessings for “couples in irregular situations and for couples of the same sex… should not be fixed ritually by ecclesial authorities to avoid producing confusion with the blessing proper to the Sacrament of Marriage**[26]**.

In other words, the authors of the Declaration see the danger not in the “irregular situation” itself or in same-sex cohabitation, but in the temptation or confusion that might arise among believers if a priestly blessing will have an outward resemblance to the Sacrament of Marriage. To avoid the same consequences, the Declarations states that the blessing of such couples is “not included in any liturgical rite”**[27]**.

To resolve the conflict between the church teaching on marriage as a union between a man and a woman, on the one hand, and the “innovative” practice of blessing “same-sex couples” introduced by the Declaration, on the other hand, its authors state that such blessings should be “spontaneous:” “The pastoral sensibility of ordained ministers should also be formed to perform blessings spontaneously that are not found in the Book of Blessings”**[28]**.

So, clergymen are directly encouraged to invent rites which cannot be found in the liturgical Book of Blessings (*De Benedictionibus*) containing the rites for blessing people from different social groups and statuses. The blessing of “same-sex couples” and couples in “irregular” relations is placed on a par with the blessing of various social groups. However, this approach also implies that there is no need for what is being blessed to agree with the will of God. Instead, priests are invited to “spontaneously”**[29]** bless couples who are in the cohabitation inconsistent with the moral teaching of the Church.

In various forms, the document repeatedly expresses concern that these “non-ritualized blessings…

should not become a liturgical or semi-liturgical act, similar to a sacrament"**[30]**. Yet, the reason for it is that "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"**[31]**.

Put another way, the danger, according to the document, is not that the blessing of such couples will look like an approval of the cohabitation which is unlawful from the point of view of the Church but only that, if resembling the established liturgical forms, it will make the act intended to be "spontaneous" excessively formal.

For this very reason, the authors of the document believe that "one should neither provide for nor promote a ritual for the blessings of couples in an irregular situation." Such a blessing "should never be imparted in concurrence with the ceremonies of a civil union, and not even in connection with them… The same applies when the blessing is requested by a same-sex couple." Instead, "such a blessing may 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"**[32]**.

All the aforementioned recommendations serve as an attempt to avoid defining "same-sex cohabitation" as sinful, to avoid pointing out the need for people to renounce a sinful way of life. Instead, they create an illusion that even a conscious choice in favour of the sinful lifestyle does not deprive a couple of God's blessing.

3. Reaction to the Declaration in the Catholic world

The Declaration *Fiducia supplicans* caused a large-scale reaction in the Catholic world. A positive response came from representatives of the liberal wing within the Roman Catholic Church and sexual minorities. At the same time, great many Catholics with traditional views are deeply disappointed. Various local bodies of the Catholic Church also express their disagreement with the document.

For example, on the 19th December 2023, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese in Astana issued a statement that reads, in particular: "Such a blessing directly and seriously contradicts Divine Revelation and the uninterrupted, bimillennial doctrine and practice of the Catholic Church. To bless couples in an irregular situation and same-sex couples is a serious abuse of the most Holy Name of God, since this name is invoked upon an objectively sinful union of adultery or of homosexual activity"**[33]**.

In its statement of 20th December 2023, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria emphasised that "the teaching of the Catholic Church on marriage remains the same. There is, therefore, no possibility in the Church of blessing same-sex unions"**[34]**.

According to the statement issued by the Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference on 27th December 2023, "the ordained ministers can bless all people individually, regardless of their gender identity and sexual orientation, but they should always avoid common blessing for couples who live together in a non-marital partnership or in a marriage that is not valid in the Church, or who live in a same-sex partnership"**[35]**.

On 1st February 2024, the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Belarus published a statement that reads: "The Catholic Church in Belarus does not intend to put into practice the possibility offered by the Declaration for blessing couples living in an irregular union and same-sex couples… An extra-liturgical blessing can be given to everyone who requests it. However, it is always necessary to avoid giving the blessing specifically to couples who live in a so-called 'civil marriage,' as well as to those who live in a canonically invalid marriage or same-sex couples. Such a blessing may be perceived by other believers as consent to sin"**[36]**.

A report on the LIX plenary meeting of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Russia (CCER), held on 28th – 29th February 2024, states: "Taking into account the misunderstandings that have arisen over the Declaration *Fiducia supplicans*, the CCER has considered it necessary to emphasise that the Catholic teaching on family and marriage remains unchanged… In order to avoid temptations and confusion, the CCER points out that it is impermissible to bless any kind of couples persisting in the relationships (cohabitation, second marriage, same-sex union) that are irregular from the point of view of Christian morality"**[37]**.

Conclusions

While formally declaring its adherence to the Christian understanding of the Sacrament of Marriage and the practice of blessings, the Declaration *Fiducia supplicans* actually postulates a sharp deviation from this commitment. As the analysis showed, this deviation marks a rejection of the Christian moral ideal.

In addition to the "classical" understanding of blessings as related to the fulfilment of God's will by

those who are being blessed, the document introduces the new interpretation which is not and cannot be substantiated by the Holy Scripture inasmuch as the practice of blessings introduced thereby is in radical conflict with the Biblical moral teaching.

The one-sided and incomplete understanding of God's love for man that the Declaration offers seems very dangerous from the theological standpoint. Based on this understanding, the notions of sin and repentance get practically removed from the relationship between God and man, which leads to such a paradoxical logic when people in sinful relations resort not to repentance and spiritual effort, but to some form of blessing in the hope of receiving "healing" and "elevation." At the same time, it is not articulated in the Declaration that prior to the "healing" and "elevation" a person must at least have the intention to renounce the sinful relationship.

In the context of the processes taking place in the Christian community, this document may be regarded as a step towards the full recognition of "same-sex unions" as a norm by the Roman Catholic Church, which has already occurred in many Protestant communities.

All believers, including those with homosexual inclinations, are in need of pastoral care which, however, should be aimed not at legitimizing a sinful way of life, but at healing the soul of an afflicted person, as is rightly written in the Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church: "Homosexual desires, just as other passions torturing fallen man, are healed by the Sacraments, prayer, fasting, repentance, reading of Holy Scriptures and patristic writings, as well as Christian fellowship with believers who are ready to give spiritual support. While treating people with homosexual inclinations with pastoral responsibility, the Church is resolutely against the attempts to present this sinful tendency as a 'norm'"**[38]**.

Despite the fact that the Declaration *Fiducia supplicans* is an internal document of the Catholic Church, the Russian Orthodox Church considers it its duty to respond to such radical innovations that reject the norm of Christian morality revealed by God. While accepting with maternal love and mercy every individual sinner who is asking for its blessing, the Church cannot bless "same-sex couples" in any form since it would mean the actual consent of the Church to a union, sinful in nature.

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[1] *Fiducia supplicans*, 31.

[2] Responsum ad dubium de benedictione unionem personarum eiusdem sexus et Nota esplicativa: AAS 113 (2021), 431-434.

[3] *Fiducia supplicans,* 10.

[4] *Fiducia supplicans,* Introduction.

[5] *Fiducia supplicans*, 9.

[6] *Fiducia supplicans*, 26.

[7] Pope Francis' Response to the 'Dubia' Presented to Him by Two Cardinals **https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_risposta-dubia-2023_en.html**.

[8] *Fiducia supplicans,* 13.

[9] *Fiducia supplicans,* Introduction.

[10] *Fiducia supplicans*, 12.

[11] *Fiducia supplicans*, 12.

[12] *Fiducia supplicans*, 40.

[13] *Fiducia supplicans*, 22.

[14] *Fiducia supplicans*, 27.

[15] *Fiducia supplicans*, 29.

[16] *Fiducia supplicans,* 34.

[17] *Fiducia supplicans*, 43.

[18] *Fiducia supplicans*, 21.

[19] *Fiducia supplicans,* 4.

[20] On the Canonical Aspects of Church Marriage, I.

[21] *Fiducia supplicans*, 31.

[22] *Fiducia supplicans,* 31.

[23] *Fiducia supplicans*, 31.

[24] The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church, XII, 9.

[25] *Fiducia supplicans,* 30.

[26] *Fiducia supplicans*, 31.

[27] *Fiducia supplicans*, 33.

[28] *Fiducia supplicans*, 35.

[29] *Fiducia supplicans,* 35.

[30] *Fiducia supplicans,* 36.

[31] *Fiducia supplicans*, 36.

[32] *Fiducia supplicans*, 40.

[33] Statement of the Archdiocese of Saint Mary in Astana regarding the Declaration *Fiducia supplicans*, published by the Dicastery of the Doctrine of Faith and approved by Pope Francis on December 18, 2023. **https://catholicherald.co.uk/archbishop-prohibits-priests-from-performing-any-form-of-blessing-of-same-sex-couples-in-response-to-new-vatican-declaration/**.

[34] https://www.africa.com/concerning-fiducia-supplicans-a-declaration-by-the-dicastery-for-the-propagation-of-the-faith-on-the-pastoral-meaning-of-blessings-in-the-church/.

[35] https://www.katolikus.hu/article/communication-14387939.

[36] Statement of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Belarus concerning the doctrinal Declaration *Fiducia supplicans*. **https://catholic.by/3/news/belarus/16874-pavedamlenne-kanferentsyi-katalitskikh-biskupa-u-belarusi-adnosna-daktrynalnaj-deklaratsyi-fiducia-supplicans**.

[37] Report on the LIX plenary meeting of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Russia (CCER). **https://catholic-russia.ru/2024/informaczionnoe-soobshhenie-o-lix-zasedanii-plenarnogo-sobraniya-konferenczii-katolicheskih-episkopov-rossii-kker/**.

[38]The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church, XII, 9.

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