

## Request for Clarification on *Fiducia Supplicans* from the Oriental Orthodox Churches

December 23, 2023

We, the representatives of the Oriental Orthodox Churches, write to Your Eminence today to express our deep concern for the December 18th Declaration “*Fiducia Supplicans*” (hereinafter, *FS*). There are three specific items which we require clarification.

### 1) “The Union”

The *FS* refers to “a union that cannot be compared in any way to a marriage,” (30) or “couples in irregular situations” (FS 31) and “couples of the same sex” (FS 31). Moreover, it recognizes that there may be some “imperfections and frailties” (FS 31) within those individuals that require grace, help and healing. On a couple occasions, *FS* acknowledge that all are sinners (cf. Rom 5:8) and acknowledges the greatness of the sin in the world. But at no point does it define this relationship as sinful, or outside of God’s plan.

Equally necessary and helpful alongside clarification of the doctrine of marriage and the liturgical rites associated, is the clarification about same-sex unions that they are immoral, against natural moral law, and in no way similar to God’s plan for marriage and family. We wonder whether such statements, which were published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in 2003, are still valid and binding.<sup>1</sup> We also wonder whether there is any substantial change to the 2021 declaration, as many have interpreted, including Catholic priests who immediately have begun to bless same-sex “couples.”<sup>2</sup> That Responsum categorically rejected the possibility of blessing these “unions,” both in public blessings and private blessings for people living in sinful conditions. What has changed? How do you reconcile these two statements?

How does a “same sex couple” differ from a “married couple”? What is the “union” that takes place here, and how does that differ from the union of marriage? The use of the word “couple” necessitates there is some type of “union.” Allowing “couples” to be blessed but not the “union” appears to be a distinction without a difference.

*FS* invents a new category of blessings associated with a sacrament that seems to compromise evangelic doctrine and contradict moral norms, biblical principles, and Catholic doctrine.<sup>3</sup> Under this criteria, could a priest bless a polyamorous relationship involving more than two people? What if an individual periodically comes with a new partner seeking a blessing? What if one of the individuals is underage (or incapable of consent), married, or already in another “blessed relationship?”

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<sup>1</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “*Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons*,” (Vatican: June 3, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Fr. James Martin, S.J. for example acknowledged on public media that “It is also a marked shift from ‘God does not and cannot bless sin’ from just two years ago. The declaration opens the door to non-liturgical blessings for same-sex couples, something that has been previously off limits for all bishops, priests and deacons. Along with many Catholic priests, I will not be delighted to bless my friends in same sex marriages.”

<sup>3</sup> Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller, “The Only Blessing of Mother Church is the Truth That Will Set Us Free. Note on the Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans*,” *The Pillar*, December 21, 2023.

## 2) “The Blessing”

As stated by the prefect in the *Presentation of FS*, *FS* 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.” *FS* rightly states that the Church would not and could not confer a liturgical blessing to such a union because it would “offer a form of moral legitimacy to a union that presumes to be a marriage or to an extra-marital sexual practice” (FS 11). It also admits that a liturgical blessing cannot “contradict the law or the spirit of the Gospel” (FS 10).<sup>4</sup>

However, *FS* does not clarify how liturgical blessings are different from non-liturgical blessings, which are conducted by clergy. *FS* is unclear and ambiguous on this point. In one sections, *FS* states that “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” (FS 25). How ought clergy to discern what is to be blessed? Ought not some moral analysis be implemented? In fact, it seems that *FS* suggests a non-liturgical blessing *can* in fact contradict the gospel and legitimize extra-marital sexual practice.

### (a) How can blessings be separated from Christ’s life-giving sacrifice?

If Christ is essentially the blessing (FS 1), how can one truly be blessed in a non-liturgical or non-sacramental fashion, or “external to the celebration of the Eucharist and of other sacraments” (FS 24)? In our Orthodox tradition, all blessings point to and flow from the Eucharist. Blessings do ascend and descend—much like the angels which ascend and descend upon Jacob’s ladder. These movements of ascension and descension both point to the Mystery of the Incarnation—the divine descent of our Lord in the incarnation, and His glorious ascension into heaven. These mysteries are revealed through the Eucharist, and so the blessings proceed in the same way. That is why fathers like St. Cyril of Alexandria most commonly referred to the Eucharist as “Life-Giving Blessing” or “Mystical Blessing” (μυστικῆς εὐλογίας). Blessing is from Christ, through the liturgical life of the Church. How can a non-liturgical blessing function within this theology? How can it be practical or possible? How can it be detached from the Eucharist?

As mentioned in *FS*, Scripture records many examples of blessings. Yet the majority mentioned in *FS* are types of Christ’s priestly blessing, and thus do not adequately support non-liturgical blessing by an ordained minister. Instead, they directly point to the priestly blessing active in the Church today. Melchizedek’s blessing of Abraham, for example, represents Christ’s blessing and superiority to the Old Testament. The blessing of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are

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<sup>4</sup> FRANCIS, *Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei*, «Responsum» ad «dubium» de benedictione unionem personarum eiusdem sexus et Nota esplicativa (15 March 2021): AAS 113 (2021), 431-434, no. 13: “Semper ergo et ubique occasio praebetur Deum per Christum in Spiritu Sancto laudandi, invocandi eique gratias reddendi, dummodo agatur de rebus, locis, vel adiunctis quae normae vel spiritui Evangelii non contradicant.”

understood through the coming of Christ and His Incarnation. They are blessed because He will come from them.

**(b) How can blessings be separated from those things that should not be blessed?**

While *FS* undertakes an expansive definition of blessing, it includes no discussion of a case in which something should *not* be blessed. In Scripture, blessing is typically explained in contrast with cursing. In the book of Genesis we see the curse of Adam and his descendants (Gen 3:16-19). God's blessing to Abram, also includes a curse to those who dishonor Abram (Gen 12:1-3). Deuteronomy goes in extensive detail as to those blessings and curses.

In the New Testament, St. Paul emphasizes how the lack of faithfulness and obedience to the law make them cursed (Gal 3). And St Luke emphasizes not only the beatitudes and blessings, but also the woes to those who fail to embrace Christ (Lk 6:20-23). Blessing is due to God's love and man's obedience, yet in the state of sin and disobedience there is an absence or loss of blessing.

Pharaoh was plagued severely because of Sarai (Gen 12:17). Likewise, God did not allow Abimelech to sin against Him by touching Sarai, but instead had Abraham to pray for Abimelech so he could live (Gen 20:6-7). God did not bless the union, but warned, rebuked, and instructed against such a union. He even closed the womb of Abimelech's wife as a result (Gen 20:18). But, *after* Abimelech was informed of the situation, and *after* Abraham prayed for him, God healed Abimelech and his wife so that they bore children (Gen 20:17). This is analogous to the Church's blessing upon a non-believer *after* they recognized the grace of God, and have avoided sin, especially a sinful relationship outside of God's plan.

We await the time of our Lord's Second Coming, in which there shall be no more curse (Rev 22:3). Yet we can neither pretend nor assume that no curse is present today. *FS* gives the impression that clergy can bless that which God would not bless. There is no blessing, not only in public but also in private, for sinful living conditions that objectively contradict God's holy will.<sup>5</sup>

**(c) How can blessings be separated from repentance and confession?**

*FS* speaks much about blessing, and hints to an acknowledgment by the individual and/or "couple" of a desire to respond to the will of God, "move forward" or "live better." Yet, *FS* says nothing of confession, or of pastorally guiding a sinner to repentance. In fact, language of sin and repentance is specifically avoided. This is very different from the statements a few years ago that God "does not and cannot bless sin,"<sup>6</sup> and that "...the Church does not have, and cannot have, the power to bless unions of persons of the same sex."<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, blessings typically follow repentance and confession in the liturgical tradition. The priestly blessing recorded in Numbers 6 has become the standard benediction within

<sup>5</sup> Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller, "The Only Blessing of Mother Church is the Truth That Will Set Us Free. Note on the Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans*," *The Pillar*, December 21, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> FRANCIS, General Audience of December 2, 2020, Catechesis on Prayer, "*The Blessing*."

<sup>7</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "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," (Vatican: March 15, 2021).

Oriental Orthodox liturgical worship. In the Coptic Orthodox Church, this benediction and blessing takes place after the congregation has confessed their sin by saying “I have sinned. I have sinned. Behold the metanoia; forgive me. Say the blessing.” Thus, blessing follows an offering of repentance. And in the Orthodox tradition, blessing is typically done with the bowing of the head, which reflects humble and penitent submission to God and Church. It is more than simply a liturgical blessing, but it is a matter of Christian life. This is why the final proclamation of the blessing is the Name of Christ our God, which is then followed by the Coptic Orthodox adaptation of the Aaronic Blessing from Deuteronomy.

**(d) How can blessings be synonymous with supplication?**

*FS* mentions that the blessing expresses a supplication for “actual grace” (FS 31), yet is not a *blessing* different from a *supplication*? In the Oriental Orthodox tradition, blessing follows supplication and repentance, as explained above.

**(e) How can blessings be administered without condoning the practice?**

*FS* clearly states that “rites and prayers that could create confusion between what constitutes marriage—which is the ‘exclusive, stable, and indissoluble union between a man and a woman, naturally open to the generation of children’—and what contradicts it are inadmissible” (FS 4). It seems that a blessing, pronounced by a member of the clergy, specifically because he is a member of the clergy and not just a holy layperson, would create such a confusion.

More practically, why do couples come to the church seeking a blessing, whether liturgical or non-liturgical? Is it to offer repentance? to ask for help? to receive guidance? Or, is it to seek validation from the Church? And how can a priest give these blessings without acting in the name of Christ and the Church?

*FS* affirms that there is no problem for the priest to join in the prayer of those who find themselves in a situation contrary to the Gospel (FS 30), but in this blessing the priest does not simply join in their prayer, but rather invokes the descent of God's gifts upon the relationship itself. Insofar as the priest acts as a priest, he acts in the name of Christ and the Church.<sup>8</sup>

Our Oriental Orthodox clergy daily offer up blessings and prayers for the faithful freely and spontaneously (not mentioned in the *Book of Blessings* or any liturgical book for that matter). Clergy bless events and situations first by their presence and also by their words. Any blessing he may pronounce for a same-sex couple would directly “convey an erroneous conception of marriage.”<sup>9</sup> His blessing would most certainly lead to a confusion of the church’s position. And unfortunately *FS* has also added to this confusion among our Orthodox faithful. It is a grave concern for us that such a blessing (whether liturgical or non-liturgical) condones a sinful and unacceptable situation—one that naturally leads to confusion and scandal.

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<sup>8</sup> Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller, “The Only Blessing of Mother Church is the Truth That Will Set Us Free. Note on the Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans*,” *The Pillar*, December 21, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> FRANCIS, *Respuestas a los Dubia propuestos por dos Cardenales*, ad dubium 2, e.

### 3) “Pastoral Care”

It is imperative to extend pastoral care to all, since God’s mercy is to all people, particularly sinners. However, the primary objective of pastoral care is to lead them to repentance. Will blessing a same sex couple direct them to repentance, or will it direct them to remain in their sinful relationship? If a man comes with his girlfriend or male-partner to the church, asking for a blessing, if the priest blesses this “couple,” is the Church leading them to repentance, or is the Church leading them to remain in their sin, endorsing their choices and behavior that is contradictory to the Scriptures?

We believe the focus of pastoral care towards such couples should not be focused upon “blessing,” but instead calling them to repentance and change. Thus, the role of the priest is to “convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” (2 Tim 4:2), to teach and convict in all wisdom and prudence (Titus 1:9, Eph 1:8), to restore in a spirit of gentleness (Gal 6:1-2), and to correct “in humility...those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth” (2 Tim 2:25).

The danger of a priest blessing a same-sex couple is not only in condoning a sinful and unacceptable situation, it is in his lack of exercising his duty to call and guide to repentance. In His brief meeting with the Samaritan Woman, our Lord Jesus Christ insisted on exposing her past marriages and her current extra-marital relationship (Jn 4:15-17) so that she would be guided to repentance, and acknowledge Him as her Love and Truth. Her desire to avoid the discussion of her past and present was met with stark confrontation. Christ did not bless, but exposed, corrected, and directed to repentance. Similarly, St. John the Baptist, the evangelist and forerunner of repentance, rebuked Herod for his unlawful relationship with Herodias (Mt 14:4, Mk 6:18). No blessing was given to Herod, and St. John publicly denounced the relationship to the point of being martyred for the truth. Were both our Lord and St. John being unpastoral? How would their witness be understood or translated to the scenarios envisioned by FS?

### Conclusion

We sincerely regret this declaration, which has created much confusion and division. Renewal is important and helpful for pastoral care, when it is based on Scripture and the living Tradition of the Church. But when this is lacking, it becomes an innovation, invention, or deviation because it goes beyond what was revealed in Scripture and the life of the Church (*Dei verbum* 8).

“Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge—by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith” (1 Tim 6:20-21).