

**VATICAN'S APPROVAL OF SAME SEX MARRIAGE
AND THE RESPONSE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
IN NIGERIA: AN APPRAISAL ON THE SACRAMENT
OF MATRIMONY**

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Abstract

As part of reforms to make the Catholic church more welcoming to all persons, Pope Francis permitted priests to look kindly on queer couples seeking favours from God. The Vatican however, clarified that such blessings should not be conducted with any church rites that offer the impression of a marriage. This alteration in the church's orthodox practice generated mixed reactions amongst the widespread of Catholic faithful in

various Catholic communities especially in the Catholic church in Nigeria. The announcement, in the form of a papal declaration titled “Fiducia Supplicans on the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings”, appears to overturn a 2021 ruling issued by the same office of the Vatican, the main reason why such blessings were impermissible by the Bishops conference of Nigeria on the ground that the church “cannot bless sin”. The researchers, based on the Vatican’s declaration conducted an appraisal on the response of the Catholic church in Nigeria in regards to the sacrament of matrimony which makes it clear that the church’s teaching on same-sex and other nontraditional relationships are barred from the sacrament of marriage and has remained unchanged. The researchers in executing the research adopted the analytical method of data analysis with the primary and secondary sources of data collection.

Introduction

Welcomed in many circles, condemned in others is the response that followed the *Fiducia Supplicans*, the Declaration issued on behalf of Pope Francis by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith on December 18, 2023 regarding blessing of couples in “irregular situations” and same-sex unions. The text has entirely been rejected in many circles especially in the Catholic Church in Nigeria. A careful appraisal of the declaration will reveal whether it alters the church doctrine on the sacrament of marriage or not.

From the start *Fiducia* stresses that marriage is the “exclusive, stable, and indissoluble union between a man and a woman, naturally open to the generation of children” (p.6) and that “the church does not have the power to impart blessings on unions of persons of the same sex” (p.7). It then proceeds to reflect upon the theology of blessings in general, Blessings as sacramentals which was given as that “which leads us to grasp God’s presence in all the events of life and which reminds us that, even in the use of created things, human beings are invited to seek God, to love him, and to serve him faithfully. 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 (p.8).

The church has long taught that sexual relations between the people of the same sex are inherently sinful and should be avoided, and many centuries after, the Papacy approved same sex blessing and claimed that such blessing does not rise to the level of what the church considers a sacrament and should not be considered a replacement for or alternative to the sacrament of marriage. However, the Vatican calls upon Catholics to exercise “pastoral charity” in their treatment of Catholics in relationships the church does not otherwise condone. The declaration says that the change “implies a real development” in the church’s thinking , offering “a broadening and enrichment of the classical understanding of blessings” based on the pastoral vision of Pope Francis. Pope Francis has been slowly expanding the church’s acceptance of LGBTQ people. In 2013, he surprised many Catholics by appearing to allow the possibility that men who are sexually attracted to other men could serve as priests. (Davis, 2015). In his exact words according to Cologne (2013), the Pope said, “If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?”(p.8)

The declaration underscores the Vatican's distinction between same-sex unions and marriage, which the church teaches that can only be a union between a man and a woman. The Vatican has published guidelines for priests blessing same-sex relationships, permitting such ceremonies but stressing that they must not imply that the unions are the equivalent of the heterosexual marriage. The eight page document from the Vatican's doctrinal office confirms and elaborates on a letter by Pope Francis released in October, 2023, which ended the Vatican's ban on blessing of same-sex couples. The Vatican instructs priests to refuse the blessing in connection with a ceremony of a civil union, or with any "clothing, gestures or words" that are associated with weddings. Instead, the proper settings for such a blessing could be in a meeting with a priest or a visit to a shrine, the Vatican suggests:

Blessing may be granted to same-sex couples and other couples "in irregular situations" (such as divorced and remarried couples who were not granted annulments for the previous marriages) who 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. (p.64).

However, the position of the Catholic church in Nigeria has remained that the blessing of gay in whatever form should never be imparted in concurrence with the ceremonies of a civil union, not even in connection with them. Kaigama (2023) asserts 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 and activities. That would go against God's law, the teaching of the church, the laws of our nation, and the cultural sensibilities of the people" (p.5).

By implication, there is no place for same sex within the context of a Christian worldview. Jesus, when expressing his understanding of the scriptural foundation for the divine purpose for marriage, referred to its origin in the creation account. "From the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. (Gen. 2:24).

Appraisal of the Response of the Catholic Church in Nigeria

The Catholic Bishops Conference in response to the Vatican's approval of Same-sex unions has said that there was no possibility for the church to bless same-sex unions and their activities. The body said such actions would

contradict God's law, the teachings of the church, the laws of Nigeria, and the cultural sensibilities of the Nigerian people. The bishop's position was contained in a Thursday's communiqué issued after their January 26 plenary in Lagos. This position contravenes the Vatican's declaration that permitted Catholic church, a blessing in a prayer or plea, asking God to look favourably at same-sex unions. The Nigerian bishops, however, urged the priests to continue in their efforts to uphold the sanctity of holy matrimony and never to do anything that would detract from this sacrament's sacredness.

From the response of the Catholic church in Nigeria over the Vatican's approval of Same-sex blessing that "the Church cannot bless sin" implies a total rejection of the declaration. This reaction appears that the church in Nigeria has overturned the Vatican's declaration. For the Catholic church in Nigeria, the church's teachings on sexuality in the catechism has remained sacrosanct as regards to the sacrament of matrimony. Elucidating on the essence of a blessing, the Catholic Sectariate in Nigeria maintained that the essence of a blessing is to foster people's trust in God, irrespective of their circumstances.

Another area of conflict over the declaration is as it concerns the African culture. Same-sex unions is contrary to and does not exist in African culture.

Ugwu (2023) in response to the declaration said; “But, if am to say what is on my mind, I will say that this whole thing is just unnecessary. The document did not even give a clear-cut direction on how the blessing should be. Usually in the Catholic church, there are rituals for every blessing, even the blessing of pets, but the declaration did not stipulate or provide how the same-sex blessing would be carried out, this is quite confusing. I find it totally wrong to refer to the people in question as “same-sex couples because there is nothing like same-sex couple”.

Another respondent, U.K. Ugwoke (Personal communication February 8, 2024) a Nigerian Catholic Priest who has maintained that there are certain laws and regulations in the Catholic church which indicates that the church has limited powers as regards some basic doctrines of faith. One of the doctrinal regulations has to do with the sacrament of matrimony. The church has no power to change the sacrament of marriage as a union between man and a woman. As a natural moral law, this teaching is universal, unchanging, and unchangeable. Over such laws, the Catholic church headed by the Pope, has no authority other than reiterating them to the end of time.

The law in Nigeria today is that marriage under the act, whether it is conducted or contracted in the church or in registry, it is between a man and a woman. In fact, same-sex marriage has been criminalized in Nigeria for a decade and based on that, the Catholic Bishop's association has said that the Pope's declaration has created a confusion among the Catholic faithful in parts of Africa, as well as in Nigeria where many within the Catholic church think it is evil while a few others are more liberal.

On the streets of Lagos, a few residents reacted strongly to the Pope's message; A.G. Esezobor (personal communication, January 8, 2024), reacted thus; "God did not make a mistake by creating Adam and Eve". He felt it was imperfect to endorse same-sex marriage. He reasoned that when God was asking Noah to choose two animals into the ark, he would have told him same-sex, but instead he said two, meaning different sex. He concluded that the main purpose of creation was for procreation, to multiply. Further reacting, the Catholic bishops in Nigeria through Ugorji (2024) said it is disappointing that statements or declarations from the Holy See which ought to foster unity and communion on matters of doctrine, morals and liturgy, have done otherwise and succeeded in hurting the unity and catholicity of the church. In the Bishops exact words through Ugorji their president maintained thus;

We must sincerely admit that the Declaration, *Fiducia Supplicans* (on the pastoral meaning of blessings), issued on 18th December, 2023, by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, has added to our pains. Given the ambiguities in the declaration, the document quickly aroused mixed reactions of acceptance, skeptical reserve and outright rejection from episcopal conferences and individual Bishops across the world(p.4).

The Catholic bishops noted that with the media hype that ambushed the text, its publication generated shock, outrage and disbelief among the faithful in Nigeria, in Africa and other parts of the world , with many devout Catholics in the communities wondering how a priest could bless same-sex couples who “live permanently in a sinful union” without causing confusion and scandal. The ambiguity of this declaration, which lends itself to many interpretations and manipulations, is causing much perplexity among the faithful.

An Appraisal from the Purview of the Sacrament of Matrimony

Among the liturgical actions of the Church, the *sacramental* have a singular importance: “these are sacred

signs that resemble the sacraments; they signify effects, particularly of a spiritual kind, which are obtained through the Church's intercession. By them men are disposed to receive the chief effects of the sacraments, and various occasions of life are sanctified. The Catechism of the Catholic church specifies, then, that sacramentals do not confer grace of the Holy Spirit in the way that the sacraments do, but by the Church's prayer, they prepare the faithful to receive grace and dispose them to cooperate with it (Davis, 2015).

Blessings belong to the category of the sacramentals, whereby the church calls us to praise God, encourages us to implore his protection, and exhorts us to speak his mercy by our holiness of life. In addition, they have been established as a kind of imitation of the sacraments, blessing are signs above all of spiritual effects that are achieved through the church's intercession.

Consequently, in order to conform with the nature of sacramentals, when a blessing is invoked on particular human relationships, in addition to the right intension of those who participate, it is necessary that what is blessed be objectively and positively ordered to receive and express and fully revealed by Christ the Lord. Therefore, only those realities which are in themselves ordered to

serve those ends are congruent with the essence of the blessing imparted by the church.

For this reason, it is not licit to impart a blessing on relationships, or partnerships, even stable, that involve sexual activity outside of marriage (i.e. outside the indissoluble union of a man and a woman open in itself to the transmission of life), as in the case of the unions between persons of the same sex. The presence in such relationships of positive elements, which are in themselves to be valued and appreciated, cannot justify these relationships and render them legitimate objects of an ecclesial blessing, since the positive elements exist within the context of a union not ordered to the Creator's plan.

Furthermore, since blessings on persons are in relationship with sacraments, the blessing of homosexual unions cannot be considered licit. This is because they would constitute a certain limitation or analogue of the nuptial blessing invoked on a man and a woman united in the sacrament of matrimony, while in fact, there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogues to God's plan for marriage and family.

The declaration of the unlawfulness of blessing unions between persons of the same sex is not therefore and is not intended to be, a form of unjust discrimination, but rather a reminder of the truth of the liturgical rite and of the very nature of the sacramentals as the church understands them. The declaration calls on the Christian community and its pastors to welcome with respect and sensitivity persons with homosexual inclinations, and will know how to find the most appropriate ways consistent with church teaching, to proclaim to them the gospel in its fullness. At the same time, they should recognize the genuine nearness of the church-which prays for them, accompanies them and shares their journey of Christian faith-and receive the teachings with sincere openness. This, however, is totally against the plan of God in creation.

In appraising the declaration for the blessing of those in “irregular unions” which does not preclude same sex inclinations who manifest the will to live in fidelity to the revealed plans of God as proposed by church teachings. Rather, it declares illicit any form of blessing that tends to acknowledge their unions as such. In this case, in fact, the blessing would, manifest not the intention to entrust such individual persons to the protection and help of God, in the sense mentioned above, but to approve and encourage

a choice and a way of life that cannot be recognized as objectively ordered to be revealed plans of God.

At the same time, the church recalls that God himself never ceases to bless his people but he does not and cannot bless sin. Same-sex unions is totally against the scripture and cannot in any way condoned, though, God blesses sinful man, so that he may recognize that he is part of his plan of love and allows him to be changed by him. He in fact takes us as we are, but never leaves us as we are. For the above mentioned reasons, the church does not have, and, cannot have the power to bless unions of persons of the same sex in the sense intended above.

Conclusion

The Bible is very clear that marriage is between a man and a woman. That is the position of the church from its inception and such position formed the sacrament of matrimony. A sacrament which is a physical sign, instituted by Christ has sanctioned marriage as an indissoluble union between a man and a woman. This is an obvious fact that cannot be contradicted and it is based on that fact that this study is concluded. In the midst of this confusion and pushback, the faithful Christians who uphold the orthodox faith should rise up with the task of safeguarding the deposit of faith in its purity and

integrity, uphold the teaching of the church based on Holy Scripture and tradition. Moreover, the Catholic church in Nigeria has clarified that blessings for same-sex couples should not be equated with the sacrament of marriage, nor should they form part of any civil union or wedding ceremonies.

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