

MULTIFACETED THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF FIDUCIA SUPPLICANS

Toochukwu S. Agha, C.S.Sp

Spiritan International School of Theology (SIST), Attakwu,
Enugu

Email: odinakasta@yahoo.com

Abstract

The pressure of legitimizing illicit unions (divorced and remarried, and especially same-sex) over the years has prompted Pope Francis to engage publicly with various questions surrounding the blessing of those in irregular unions, especially in recent times. This papal engagement culminated in the publication of the Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans: On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings (FS)* by the CDF on December 18, 2023. The document distinguishes between liturgical and ritualized blessings on the one hand, and non-liturgical blessings of a more pastoral and spontaneous nature on the other, which can be given to couples in non-sacramental unions. Its reception by many Catholics and clergy (including non-Catholics) has been unprecedentedly contentious, with many wondering whether Pope Francis is not subverting traditional Catholic teaching on both marriage and the rite of blessings. There is no gainsaying that *FS* presents a veritable challenge for every ordained minister, and indeed every Catholic (and Christian!) today. This paper will critically examine the document against a multidimensional theological backdrop: biblical, pastoral, ethical, liturgical, ecumenical, and related Church pronouncements. It will be

argued that *FS* contains significant ambiguities that may create confusion and possibly lead to error if implemented as it stands.

Keywords: Pope Francis, *Fiducia Supplicans*, irregular unions, liturgical blessing, non-liturgical blessing, sacraments, sacramentals, church documents, biblical excerpts, ecumenism.

Introduction

Three consecutive years (2021–2023) witnessed Pope Francis engaging publicly with various questions surrounding the blessing of those in irregular unions, that is, the divorced and remarried, and those in same-sex unions. The culmination of this papal engagement is the promulgation of the Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* on December 18, 2023, which proposes a “more pastoral approach” to these questions. Indeed, the full title already captures what the document seeks to address: *Fiducia Supplicans: On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings*.¹ It emphasizes a distinction between liturgical and ritualized blessings on the one hand, and non-liturgical blessings of a more pastoral and spontaneous nature on the other, which can be given to couples in non-sacramental unions. Following its publication, the document generated an unprecedented wave of controversies and wide-ranging protests among various bishops’ conferences, the clergy, theologians and lay faithful, with many people wondering whether Pope Francis is not undermining the traditional Catholic teaching on both marriage and the rite of blessings.

A Quick Survey of the Background of *FS*

The move to gain ecclesiastical support for the blessing of same-sex unions has become a concerning trend in recent times. On February 22, 2021, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* on the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings,” (December 18, 2023), Holy See.

(hereafter CDF) issued a *Responsum ad dubium* to the following question: “Does the Church have the power to give the blessing to unions of persons of the same sex?”² Apparently, some ecclesial contexts were already advancing plans and proposals for such blessings, thus necessitating the question. The response of the CDF, with the approval of the supreme Pontiff, was unambiguously in the negative, which it then proceeded to explain.

Inasmuch as blessings belong to the category of sacramentals, which themselves have been established as a kind of imitation of the sacraments, blessings become signs of spiritual effects achieved through the intercession of the Church. This implies certain dispositions on the part of the recipient(s): (a) the right intention; (b) what is blessed must “be objectively and positively ordered to receive and express grace, according to the designs of God inscribed in creation, and fully revealed by Christ the Lord.”³ Against this backdrop, the *Responsum* emphasizes that homosexual unions are diametrically opposed to the indissoluble union of man and woman open to the transmission of life as ordered in the Creator’s plan. Consequently, any blessing of such union is not only *illicit*, but would also constitute an imitation or analogue of nuptial blessing in contradiction to God’s plan for marriage and family. Here though, a significant caveat was added: this does not preclude the blessing of individuals with homosexual tendencies, who manifest the will to live in fidelity to God’s revealed truth. The *Responsum* then ends with a powerful statement: God *cannot and does not bless sin*, rather “he blesses sinful man, so that he may recognize that he is part of his

² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Responsum to a dubium regarding the blessing of the unions of persons of the same sex,” February 22, 2021, accessed February 24, 2023, from https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20210222_responsum-dubium-unioni_en.html.

³ CDF, “Responsum to a dubium”

plan of love and allow himself to be changed by him.”⁴ This is precisely why “the Church *does not have, and cannot have*, the power to bless unions of persons the same sex in the sense intended above.”⁵

Meanwhile, it is instructive to note that the cardinal prefect in charge of the CDF at the time this *Responsum* was issued was a Spanish Jesuit, Luis F. Card. Ladaria. One would think that this unequivocal response that is solidly based on Scripture and Tradition would put a definitive end to the stirrings concerning the controversial question of the right pastoral approach towards people living in homosexual unions. On the contrary, the matter only gained steam with the publication of the *Responsum* by the CDF; apparently some quarters were not satisfied with it. This is such that two years later, when the Pope convened the Synod on Synodality (which was to hold October 4 to 29, 2023), it has become once again an urgent concern for renewed discussion.

On October 2, 2023, the eve of the Synod, Pope Francis’ response to five *dubia* submitted by two cardinals (supported by three others) were published on the website of the CDF, now under the Argentine Jesuit, Victor Manuel Card. Fernandez, who was appointed to the position by the Pope on July 1, 2023. The second *dubium* is directly related to our subject matter and concerns “the assertion that the widespread practice of blessing same-sex unions is in accordance with Revelation and Magisterium (CCC 2357).”⁶ The cardinals’ query was based on Gen 1:27–28, Rom 1:24–32, and *Veritatis Splendor*, 103. They sought to know if the Church can deviate from the perennial teaching of Scripture as a mere ideal, while accepting “as a “possible good” objectively

⁴ CDF, “Responsum to a dubium”

⁵ CDF, “Responsum to a dubium”. Emphasis mine.

⁶ “Pope Francis Responds to dubia submitted by five cardinals on October 2, 2023,” accessed October 3, 2024, from <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-10/pope-francis-responds-to-dubia-of-five-cardinals.html>.

sinful situations, such as unions with persons of the same sex, without departing from the revealed doctrine?” (Pope Francis, 2023).⁷

Curiously, the Pope’s response was elastic, paving the way for the full-blown development one finds in *FS* two months later. He begins by restating the Church’s perennial doctrine on marriage as “an exclusive, stable, and indissoluble union between a man and a woman, naturally open to procreation.”⁸ This is why the Church avoids any rite or sacramental that may distort this conviction in any way. However, he evokes “pastoral charity” as the pivot on which decisions and attitudes towards people should rest so that we do not become “judges who only deny, reject, and exclude.”⁹ Next, Francis opens the door for the possibility of blessing one or more persons who request for it, but in a manner that does not convey a mistaken conception of marriage. According to him, such request expresses “a plea to God for help, a supplication to live better, a trust in a Father who can help us live better.”¹⁰ By way of conclusion, the Pope cautions against elevating such discrete cases to a norm through the creation of procedures or rituals for them by dioceses or Bishops’ Conferences. As we will see below, this flexibility would become the foundation for the extensive reflection in *FS*.

A Brief Review of the Declaration

On December 18, 2023, the CDF, with the approval and signature of Pope Francis, published the Declaration *FS*, which proffers a “more pastoral approach” to the blessing of those in irregular unions, that is, the divorced and remarried, and those in same-sex unions. It underscores a distinction between two kinds of

⁷ “Pope Francis Responds to dubia”

⁸ “Pope Francis Responds to dubia”

⁹ “Pope Francis Responds to dubia”

¹⁰ “Pope Francis Responds to dubia”

blessings, namely liturgical and ritualized blessings, and non-liturgical blessings of a more pastoral and spontaneous nature. This latter category is what *FS* recommends can be given to couples in non-sacramental unions if they ask for it.

In the *Presentation*, the CDF indicated that the present Declaration is based on the Pope's response to the second *dubium* of the two cardinals, published on October 2, 2023, and is actually a further elaboration on it. It also signaled the intention behind the production of *FS* namely, to advance a more pastoral approach to the meaning of blessings, "permitting a *broadening and enrichment* of the classical understanding of blessings, which is closely linked to a liturgical perspective."¹¹ From this perspective then, the stage is set for "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."¹² The CDF considers this pastoral approach that both *broadens* and *enriches* the meaning of blessings as so significant that it lays much emphasis on it throughout *FS*. Moreover, the *Introduction* gives another curious reason behind *FS*: the Pope's *Responsum* of February 2021 have elicited ambivalent reactions, and the negative ones have necessitated a 'charitable' review of that very *Responsum*!

Invoking Pope Francis' response to the second *dubium* of October 2, 2023, *FS* reiterates its fidelity to the Church's traditional teaching on marriage on the one hand, but also the need to "broaden and enrich" the meaning of blessings from a more pastoral viewpoint on the other (*FS*, 4, 7). Delving into the theology of blessings as sacramentals, it begins by restating what the *Responsum* of 2021 has earlier indicated. That is, since a liturgical blessing requires that what is blessed be conformed to God's will, be ordered to the praise of God and to the spiritual

¹¹ CDF, "Fiducia Supplicans," sec. 3.

¹² CDF, "Fiducia Supplicans," sec. 4.

benefit of the faithful, the Church has no power to confer such on any union that presumes to be a marriage or to an extramarital sexual practice not conformed to God's will (*FS*, 9–11). However, *FS* observes that limiting the meaning of blessings to this strictly liturgical perspective would imply subjecting a popular pastoral gesture to a multiplicity of moral prerequisites which could overshadow the overflow of God's unconditional love, thus necessitating a 'broader' understanding of blessings (*FS*, 12–13). In other words, is there a pathway for blessings that can flow from 'pastoral charity', without any moral preconditions attached to its reception? To address this, *FS* takes the big leap of considering blessings outside a strictly liturgical framework.

In the first place, *FS* reflects on a variety of blessings in Scripture: the ones that *descend* from God upon humans; the ones that *ascend* from humans to God in worship for God's graciousness; the many instances where humans *extend* blessings to one another and, finally, the ultimate act of Jesus blessing his disciples at the ascension, communicating to the Church the power to bless (*FS*, 14–19). Secondly, *FS* uses the Pope's response to the second *dubium* of October 2, 2023, to develop its "more pastoral approach" to blessings and actually cites the Pontiff's assertion that in asking "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." (*FS*, 21). People who request such blessing recognize their weakness and "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." (*FS*, 31). Against the backdrop of popular piety and pastoral care, *FS* argues that such spontaneous expressions of faith as the request for blessings should be seen as acts of devotion, but which are external to the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist (*FS*, 23–24). Within this framework, *FS* makes a bold claim: Pope Francis' response

to the second *dubium* of October 2, 2023, actually expands the *Responsum* of 2021! (*FS*, 26).

Next, *FS* makes specific recommendations for the imparting of these pastoral blessings should couples in irregular unions or same-sex couples approach an ordained minister together at any given place and request for them, again insisting that care should be taken to ensure they do not become liturgical or semi-liturgical acts:

- (a) The blessing should be given spontaneously and freely, without the use of any prescribed rites of blessings that may create confusion with the rites proper to the sacrament of marriage (*FS*, 28, 30–31, 37).
- (b) While care should be taken to neither provide nor promote any ritual whatsoever for such blessings, the ordained minister could say a simple and brief prayer for them (*FS*, 38)
- (c) To avoid confusion or scandal, *FS* further recommends that the blessing should never be imparted in connection with a civil union, nor must “it be performed with any clothing, gestures, or words that are proper to a wedding.” (*FS*, 39).

Practical Reception

Following its publication, the document generated an unprecedented wave of controversies and wide-ranging protests among various Bishops’ Conferences, the clergy, theologians and lay faithful, including members of other faith confessions. Many people questioned whether Pope Francis is not subverting the traditional Catholic teaching on both marriage and the rite of blessings.

The Position of African Episcopal Conferences

In view of the “shockwave, misconceptions and unrest” caused by the Declaration *FS* on people of diverse status in Africa, the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar joined their voices in unanimity to respond to it. They outlined their points under four distinct headings. First, they unambiguously reiterate Church teaching on marriage and insist that the distinction made by *FS* between liturgical blessings and pastoral ones should in no way “mandate that there be blessings for couples in irregular situations and same-sex couples...”¹³ Second, the Bishops reaffirm their continuing pastoral care of all members of the African Church, including couples in irregular situations, but firmly reject any blessing of same-sex unions since such partnerships contradict the will of God. Third, they prefer not to offer any blessing to same-sex couples, without prejudice to each bishop’s freedom in his own diocese. Citing some Church documents and Scriptural evidence of denunciation of same-sex relations, they assert that “the cultural context in Africa, deeply rooted in the values of the natural law regarding marriage and family, further complicates the acceptance of unions of persons of the same sex.”¹⁴ In conclusion, the Episcopal Conferences reaffirm their communion with Pope Francis, but reject the extra-liturgical blessing of same-sex couples proposed in *FS*, not only to avoid scandal and confusion, but also to insist on the unchanging position of the Church on Christian marriage and sexuality.

Impact on Ecumenism

In their own reaction to the promulgation of *FS*, the Coptic Orthodox Church, Egypt’s main Christian community,

¹³ Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, “All Africa responds unanimously to Rome: No blessing of same-sex couples,” January 11, 2024, accessed June 1, 2024, from <https://zenit.org>

¹⁴ “All Africa responds unanimously to Rome”

suspended the ecumenical dialogue it has pursued with the Roman Catholic Church for the past twenty years. This decision was reached at the end of the General Assembly of the Coptic Orthodox Church (SICO) presided over by its Pope, Tawadros II, and held on March 7, 2024, at Wadi El-Natrum, Egypt. Among the issues addressed at the assembly was homosexuality and, specifically, the Declaration *FS* concerning which they declared their own stand. Accordingly, they reject “all forms of homosexual relationships, because they violate Sacred Scripture and the law by which God created man as man and woman, and the Church considers that *any blessing of such relationships, of whatever kind, is a blessing of sin* and this is unacceptable.”¹⁵ In declaring the unacceptability of any manner of blessing of homosexual unions, precisely because it “is a blessing of sin,” the Coptic Orthodox Church echoes Pope Francis’ unequivocal statement in his *Responsum* of February 2021 on the same matter.

But this is not all, SICO further indicates the consequence of the publication of *FS*: suspension of the theological dialogue pursued with the Catholic Church for the past twenty years! Although the Coptic Orthodox is not in communion with the Roman Pontiff, yet it is one of the Christian communities closest to the Catholic Church. But SICO is not the only Church to react negatively to *FS*. The Russian Orthodox Church, the most numerous Orthodox denomination, created a commission to study the document. At the end of their study, the members of the commission unanimously pronounced *FS* “as a sharp deviation from Christian moral teaching.”¹⁶ Although neither of these two Orthodox churches are in communion with Rome, yet their scathing critique

¹⁵ “Gay Blessings”: Twenty Years of Ecumenism Lost; Copts Suspend Theological Dialogue with the Catholic Church, March 10, 2024, accessed March 13, 2024 from <https://zenit.org>. Emphasis mine.

¹⁶ “Russian Orthodox Church calls *Fiducia Supplicans* “Deviation from Christian Morality,” February 26, 2024, accessed August 31, 2024 from <https://www.romereports.com>

of *FS* is an indication of the significant strain caused by the document on ecumenism.

Two Spiritan Reactions

Fr. Paulinus Odozor CSSp, professor of moral theology at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA considers *FS* as a “casuistry of blessings.” Among some important questions raised by Odozor, it suffices to mention two significant ones. Firstly, while *FS* recognizes same-sex unions as irregular, do those living in such unions consider themselves as such, especially in today’s world where same-sex marriages are viewed an equally valid form of marriage as heterosexual ones? In this regard, the blessing which a homosexual couple requests from a priest is sought precisely as a romantically linked couple, which implies “seeking a validation of their relationship.”¹⁷ Secondly, when a same-sex couple openly known to be living in such union approaches a priest for a non-liturgical blessing, they are not seeking for help in ending such relationship, but rather for God to help them live a fulfilled marital life! In that case, would the priest, aware of this reality “not be cooperating in sin if he goes on to give the blessing the couple seeks, precisely as a couple?” In raising these concerns, Odozor reiterates some issues already discussed above.

Fr. Chimaobi Clement Emefu CSSp, a canonist and professor at Spiritan International School of Theology, Enugu, Nigeria, analyzes *FS* from the perspective of Canon Law in his “Fiducia Supplicans and Same-Sex Union: A Canonical Appraisal.”¹⁸ His approach is more of an appraisal and thus somewhat more elastic. On the one hand, he raises the question of whether a “spontaneous

¹⁷ Paulinus Odozor, “Fiducia Supplicans and the Casuistry of Blessings,” accessed January 20, 2024 from churchlifejournal.nd.edu

¹⁸ Clement Chimaobi Emefu, “Fiducia Supplicans and Same-Sex Union: A Canonical Appraisal,” *SIST Journal of Religion and Humanities* 4 (2024): 97–108.

“blessing” imparted on those in unions considered irregular by the Church does not amount to arrogating canonical status to such relationship, if not giving it an outright sacramental form of marriage. On the other hand, citing Fr James Martin’s viral blessing of a gay couple in his church the day after the publication of *FS*, Emefu makes a distinction between “blessing same sex couples” and “blessing same-sex unions.”¹⁹ He argues that *FS* describes the legitimacy of blessing same-sex couples but not their unions, and that James Martin blessed the persons of the gay couple but not their union. Yet, Emefu also called to question the claim of *FS* regarding the request for a blessing as expressing openness to the “transcendence, mercy and closeness of God” namely, “in what manner do same-sex couples anticipate God’s mercy in “a state of life they do not find sinful?”²⁰

Among the observations made by Emefu, we will draw attention to the example of Fr James Martin that he evoked. James Martin, a Jesuit priest well-known for his strong LGBTQ+ advocacy, welcomed the Declaration and praised it as a significant step forward from the *Responsum* of 2021. The very day following the publication of *FS*, James Martin quickly posted a picture of himself blessing a gay couple on his X handle with the following note: “*Dear friends: I was honored to bless my friends Jason and Damian this morning in our Jesuit residence, according to the new guidelines laid out by the Vatican for same-sex couples. But before this, I’ve been blessed by their friendship and support.*”²¹ The query for James Martin and all advocates of blessing couples in forbidden unions is twofold: does this ‘blessing’ legitimize their relationship before God? Can persons who receive it validly

¹⁹ Emefu, “Fiducia Supplicans and Same-Sex Union,” 102.

²⁰ Emefu, “Fiducia Supplicans and Same-Sex Union,” 102.

²¹ James Martin, (@JamesMartinSJ), “Dear friends: I was honored to bless my friends Jason and Damian this morning in our Jesuit residence,” X, December 19, 2023, accessed September 2, 2024, from <https://x.com/JamesMartinSJ/status/1737269909476790568?lang=en>

partake of the most Holy Eucharist, the source and summit of Christian life, according to *Sacrosanctum Concilium* of Vatican II.

Authors' Response to the Contentious Reception of *FS*

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the reception of *FS* has been particularly contentious, provoking more dispute than any other Vatican document in recent times as to its fidelity to Church doctrine as well as its applicability. On January 4, 2024, Victor Manuel Cardinal Fernández, the prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, who oversaw the preparation of *FS* issued a press release in the wake of its raucous reception. While pointing to the Declaration's firm stand on the Church's teaching on marriage and sexuality, he acknowledges that it "may require more or less time for [its] application depending on local contexts and the discernment of each diocesan Bishop with his Diocese."²² Fernandez reiterates the document's repeated emphasis on the distinction between liturgical blessings and pastoral blessings of a simplified nature that can be given to couples in irregular situations, but which does not sanction their unions.

Fernandez insists that no Episcopal Conference should exempt itself from a Declaration approved and signed by the Pope, "given that it is perennial doctrine, but rather that they recommend the need for study and discernment so as to act with pastoral prudence in such a context."²³ For him, the repeated emphasis in *FS* that the non-ritualized blessing proposed therein for two people in illicit union who request it from a priest is neither an approval nor a justification of their partnership, but rather is a pastoral response towards two persons requesting for God's help.

²² Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Press Release Concerning the Reception of Fiducia Supplicans," accessed January 7, 2024, from https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20240104_comunicato-fiducia-supplicans_en.html.

²³ DDF, "Press Release," n. 3.

Fernandez also responds to the question of the content of such pastoral blessing by proposing a simplified and brief formula: *“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.”*²⁴ And this brief prayer is concluded with a “sign of the cross on each of the two persons.”

Pope Francis also made some public attempts to offer some explanations concerning the upheaval raised by *FS*. While addressing the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith on January 26, 2024, as its annual plenary assembly drew to a close, Francis indicated that the purpose of the “pastoral and spontaneous blessings” discussed in *FS* is to “concretely show the closeness of the Lord and the Church to all those who, finding themselves in different situations, ask for help to continue—sometimes to begin—a journey of faith.”²⁵ The Pope reiterated this position in a subsequent interview with Nora O’Donnell of CBS News on May 19, 2024, and which aired the next day.²⁶ But have these attempts to clarify the content and purpose of *FS* and thus mitigate the tumultuous reactions to it addressed the major issues?

Four Critical Questions

There is no gainsaying that the outcry ignited by *FS* owes in large part to the ambiguity of its content. The authors leave some inevitable questions unresolved:

- (i) Can Roman Catholic clergy bless any same-sex union or even a civilly divorced and remarried ‘couple’ in

²⁴ DDF, “Press Release,” n. 5. Emphasis in the original.

²⁵ “Pope Francis on Fiducia Supplicans: Bless the persons, but NOT the union” accessed January 31, 2024, from <https://www.thecatholicnetwork.co.uk/9883>.

²⁶ CBS News, 60 Minutes with Nora O’Donnell, May 19, 2024, accessed August 27, 2024. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/pope-francis-interview-60-minutes-transcript/>.

- any part of the world without undermining the very act of blessing and jeopardizing the sacrament of marriage?
- (ii) Why is *FS* so insistent on separating liturgical blessings from non-liturgical, more spontaneous ones, and why the repeated emphasis that the latter be imparted in a manner that does not in any way resemble liturgical blessings if both should be given by a *priest*?
 - (iii) Can ‘couples’ (divorced and remarried, or same-sex) partake of the most Holy Eucharist after receiving such a “pastoral and non-liturgical” blessing at the hands of an ordained minister?
 - (iv) If they can, does the ‘blessing’ then take the place of sacramental confession for such people?

These urgent questions, by no means exhaustive, will be addressed in the subsequent analyses in view of advancing possible solutions to the conundrum.

***FS*, The Ordained Minister, and the Sacraments**

FS presents a big challenge for every ordained minister in our contemporary society because of the sensitivity of the issues it purports to address, namely the questions of marriage and blessings. With regard to marriage, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is very clear in §2360: “Sexuality is ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman. In marriage the physical intimacy of the spouses becomes a sign and pledge of spiritual communion. Marriage bonds between baptized persons are sanctified by the sacrament.” By the way, since the so-called ‘transgender’ people can legally contract marriages in some countries, a trend that is becoming more popular by the day, the definition of Christian marriage as the sacramental union of man and woman should now be qualified as one between a *biological*

man and a *biological* woman. On the question of blessings, the *Roman Ritual* clearly indicates that they confer supernatural grace to the recipient through the action of the Church in the name of Christ and constitute the object thus blessed into a sacramental, though not on the same level as the sacraments. It goes on to emphasize on page 209 that although:

the sacramentals derive their efficacy chiefly from the intercessory power of the Church, we may not minimize the role played by man's own subjective dispositions. The sacraments, too, for that matter, demand something of the individual recipient--at the very least that the subject place no obstacle in the way of grace. But in the case of the sacramentals man's cooperation has a very large part to play if they are to attain their full purpose.²⁷

The first question then is, can Roman Catholic clergy bless any same-sex union or a civilly divorced and remarried 'couple' in any part of the world without undermining the very act of blessing and jeopardizing the sacrament of marriage? To be sure, *FS* begins by reiterating Pope Francis' response to the second *dubium* of October 2, 2023, that pastoral sensitivity must avoid legitimizing something which is not marriage when considering a form of blessing for homosexual couples. The problem begins when *FS* uses Pope Francis' response to this second *dubium* of October 2, 2023, as pivot to propose a more "pastoral approach" that *broadens and enriches* the classical meaning of blessings, thus creating the possibility of blessing couples in irregular situations and same-sex couples without validating their union or altering the Church's perennial teaching on marriage. In arguing its case, *FS* admits some basic requirements of liturgical blessings, namely that what is blessed be conformed to God's will and be ordered to the praise of God and the spiritual benefit of the faithful. Thus, the Church has no power to confer such on any

²⁷ Philip T. Weller, *Rituale Romanum*, (1964), <https://sensusfidelium.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Roman-Rite.pdf>.

union that presumes to be a marriage or to an extramarital sexual practice *not conformed to God's will* (*FS*, 9–11). But then, it elicits Scripture to expand this strictly liturgical understanding of blessings in order to distinguish them from non-liturgical blessings that are freed from moral prerequisites, from which precisely couples living in “unions not conformed to God's will” may benefit! We now examine the document's use of Scripture to back up its claim to see if it is sustainable.

While considering blessings in Scripture, *FS* begins with the ones that have a descending character and cites the priestly blessing in Num 6:24–26. While the document rightly sees this as a blessing from God to humans, its ultimate purpose for giving this biblical backdrop is to widen the understanding of blessings in order to accommodate the possibility of a “pastoral” blessing of couples in illicit unions. However, the background to this priestly blessing in Num 6:24–26 is noteworthy. After the ordination of Aaron and his sons as priests (Exod 28–29; Lev 8), they had to assume their sacerdotal duties by performing the required sacrificial rituals which is their primary ministry. Having offered all the necessary sacrifices, Aaron lifted his hand and *blessed* (“barak”) the people alongside Moses (Lev 8:22–24). To show the power and efficacy of priestly blessing, the divine approval of this action manifested itself through the glory of the Lord appearing before the people and fire coming forth and consuming all the sacrificial offerings.²⁸ All the people witnessed this awesome phenomenon and reacted by shouting and falling on their faces! This is precisely the prelude and background to the priestly formula of blessing in Num 6:24–26. And if the priestly blessing of the Old Covenant was so powerful, how much more is the blessing of Christ through his priest (Lk 24:50–53). Should this highly

²⁸ Toochukwu S. Odinakachukwu Agha, *Ta parole, Seigneur, la lampe de ma route!* (Dakar: les Éditions Edisal, 2014), 126.

efficacious spiritual benefit be imparted on people living in forbidden unions clearly condemned in many passages of Scripture and not produce an adverse effect?

Moreover, it is curious that in its reflection on the variety of blessings in Scripture, *FS* omits the very first act of blessing that signified the divine approval of the first *man* and *woman* as couple: “And God *blessed* (“barak”) them; and God said to them: ‘Be fruitful, and multiply...’” (Gen 1:28). Is the omission of this first nuptial blessing described with *barak* that constituted Adam and Eve into a sacramental couple intentional or not? The *Responsum* of February 2021 stresses that same-sex unions are in stark contradiction to the indissoluble union of male and female open to the transmission of life as ordained by the Creator. Accordingly, blessing of such relationship is both unwarranted and analogous to the nuptial blessing in contradiction to God’s plan for marriage and family. In blessing the first *male* and *female* (not two men or two women!) in Gen 1:27–28, God united them as couple and ordered them to procreate. To this extent, the 2021 *Responsum* accords with Gen 1:27–28 over against *FS*. Again, the second *dubium* of the two cardinals published on October 2, 2023, explicitly cites Gen 1:27–28 as one of the texts for their query regarding whether the “widespread practice of blessing same-sex unions is in accordance with Revelation and Magisterium (CCC 2357).”²⁹

Finally, *Persona Humana*, a 1975 Declaration by the CDF, is unambiguous with reference to the pastoral care of homosexuals. While admitting that such people should be treated with understanding and sustained in the hope of overcoming their unwholesome inclinations, it insists that “*no pastoral method can be employed* which would give moral justification to these acts on the grounds that they would be consonant with the condition

²⁹ “Pope Francis Responds to dubia”

of such people.”³⁰ (§8, emphasis mine). This is precisely because both on the objective moral order and in Sacred Scripture, homosexual relations are considered a serious depravity and intrinsically disordered and thus cannot be endorsed by any means. Is this prohibition not precisely what *FS* has loosened up by proposing non-liturgical blessings for same-sex couples under the guise of ‘pastoral charity’?

As regards the second question above, *FS* insists that liturgical blessings be separated from non-liturgical, more spontaneous ones, and repeatedly emphasizes that the latter be administered in a manner that does not even remotely resemble liturgical blessings. This non-ritualized blessing that flows from “pastoral charity” is open to all, yet both types should be given by an “ordained minister” (*FS*, 28, 30, 35, 41). *FS* cites the *Book of Blessings* on the moral disposition of the recipient and admits that these conditions pertain to the liturgical understanding of blessings “insofar as they are rites officially proposed by the Church.” (*FS*, 10). And that is why it proposes the pastoral, non-liturgical blessings as a leeway for people who may not meet the moral prerequisite for receiving the liturgical one. We have already enumerated the specifications provided by *FS* on such pastoral blessing when requested by couples in irregular unions and have also highlighted a brief prayer formula suggested for such “pastoral” blessing by Card. Fernandez in his press release of January 4, 2024.

But here lies the problem: if both liturgical and non-liturgical blessings are to be administered by a priest—as *FS* requires they should—would the pastoral blessings not depend as much on the

³⁰ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona Humana: Declaration on certain questions concerning sexual ethics*. December 29, 1975, accessed June 7, 2024, from https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19751229_persona-humana_en.html.

moral dispositions of the recipients as the liturgical ones? Regardless of whether the blessing is liturgical or “pastoral”, the ordained minister does not act of his own accord but invokes the intercessory power of the Church on the subject(s) in administering it, as indicated in the *Book of Blessings*. Even *FS* acknowledges that God communicates to his Church the power to bless, through Christ (*FS*, 19); a fact we already underscored while discussing the blessing of a priest in its Old Testament context. Again, irrespective of the words used in blessing such people, the spontaneity and freedom of it, and how the priest is clad, the effect is still the same, provided they approach an ordained minister together as people consciously living in a forbidden union. The *Book of Blessings* emphasizes that, as sacramentals (to which blessings belong) “we may not minimize the role played by man’s own *subjective dispositions*...if they are to attain their full purpose.”³¹ Thus, any homosexual duo (or divorced and remarried) that approach a priest as a couple for blessing without first renouncing their illicit union have placed an obstacle in the way of receiving grace, no matter how that blessing is dispensed.

The third query is: can ‘couples’ (divorced and remarried, or same-sex) receive the Most Holy Eucharist after obtaining such a “pastoral, non-ritualized” blessing at the hands of an ordained minister? Recall that the promulgation of Pope Francis’ Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* (hereafter *AL*) in April 2016 had ignited a heated dispute that may have reached its climax with the published rejoinder of four cardinals (Raymond Burke, Walter Brandmüller, Carlo Caffara and Joachim Meisner) by way of *dubia*, on November 14, 2016, which they had earlier sent to the Pontiff, but to which the latter made no response. In *AL*, Pope Francis reflects on various pastoral approaches the Church should have towards lay faithful who are living in

³¹ Weller, *Rituale Romanum*, 209.

irregular unions. Card. Burke argues that the document as a whole, and especially chapter eight, which concentrates on the situation of divorced and remarried people, contains many ambiguities and gravely erroneous defects which “confuse people and can lead them into error and grave sin.”³² Among the many ambiguities in *AL* is footnote 351 added by the Pope, where he suggests the help of the sacraments as one “pastoral approach” the Church could provide for such people! Reflecting on the five *dubia* they sent to the Pope, Cardinal Burke observes that the point at issue is not just about whether divorced and remarried people should receive the Eucharist in certain circumstances (an idea that has become a widespread interpretation of *AL*). It is rather “about *sexually active but not validly married* couples receiving Holy Communion.”³³

While Pope Francis never responded to this vital question directly since 2016, the most recent recommendation of blessing those in prohibited unions (divorced and remarried, and same-sex) has only made it to resurge. *FS* (22–24) considers the possibility of “pastoral” blessing for people in such unions within the framework of popular piety and devotional practices and as external to the celebration of the Holy Eucharist and the other sacraments, as indicated in the *Directory on the Popular Piety and the Liturgy. Principles and Guidelines*. But the same *Directory* (p. 12) clearly points to the Gospel as “the measure against which all expressions of Christian piety - both old and new - must be measured”³⁴ Accordingly, devotional exercises

³² “Exclusive Interview: Cardinal Burke Explains Plea to Pope for Clarity,” November 14, 2016, accessed March 3, 2017, www.catholicaction.org/interview_with_cardinal_burke_about_the_dubia.

³³ “Cardinal Burke Explains Plea to Pope for Clarity”

³⁴ Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. “Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines,” December 2001, accessed August 10, 2024, from

and practices must be constantly evaluated and purified against this criterion to ensure their proper relationship with the Christian mystery as expressed in the liturgy; here sexual connotations are listed among the things forbidden in popular devotions. Consequently, as to the possibility of ‘couples’ in irregular unions receiving the most Holy Eucharist after obtaining a “pastoral” blessing, the answer is obviously in the negative since they are *sexually active* in an *illicit* union.

Our fourth question naturally follows from the third: they cannot partake of the most Holy Eucharist, since the ‘blessing’ does not replace sacramental confession. It is curious that *FS* makes no explicit mention of the need for such non-sacramental couples to repent and seek the path of conversion and amendment of life anywhere in the document. The closest it came to this was in numbers 31–34. In 31–32, it sees those who request for such blessing as people who do not claim any righteousness of their own, but who recognize their sinfulness and need of God’s help and “beg that all that is true, good, and humanly valid in their lives and their relationship be enriched, healed, and elevated by the presence of the Holy Spirit.” And since God never turns away anyone who approaches him, the pastoral blessing of such people “expresses and nurtures openness to the transcendence, mercy, and closeness to God in a thousand concrete circumstances of life...” (*FS*, 33).

FS rightly noted that they need the help of God’s mercy in their sinful situation, which leads them to express confidence in a God who turns no sinner away by coming to the priest. Is this not precisely why they need to renounce their illicit union and then approach God’s throne of grace in the confessional where they will obtain the *blessing of forgiveness* which is what they need? In his press release of January 4, 2024, part of Card. Fernandez’s

suggested brief prayer formula for such people reads: “Free them from everything that contradicts your Gospel and allow them to live according to your will.” Here then is the problem! If the ordained minister is simply to ask God to free them from everything that contradicts his will in their lives, should they then go back to sodomy (or non-sacramental union) that opposes God’s will after such a ‘blessing’? Is it coincidental that penitents, having renounced their iniquitous ways, come to the confessional and begin their acknowledgment of sins by “Father, *bless* me for I have sinned against you”? The Lord Jesus welcomed all the sinners that came to him, but he would also invite them: “From now on, *go and sin no more*” (Jn 8:11), precisely because God has no pleasure in the death of the sinner, but that they repent from their evil ways and live! (Ezek 18:32).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The pressure of legitimizing illicit unions (divorced and remarried, and especially same-sex) over the years has culminated in the publication of the Declaration *FS* by the CDF on December 18, 2023. The document distinguishes between liturgical and ritualized blessings on the one hand, and non-liturgical blessings of a more pastoral and spontaneous nature on the other, which can be given to couples in irregular unions. Its reception by many Catholics and clergy (including non-Catholics) has been unprecedentedly contentious, with many wondering whether Pope Francis is not subverting traditional Catholic teaching on both marriage and the rite of blessings. There is no gainsaying that *FS* presents a veritable challenge for every ordained minister today.

In view of the critical insights reached in the course of this investigation, we conclude this study with the following recommendations: (a) Roman Catholic clergy must not bless any ‘couple’ who approach them together as people living in same-

sex union nor as a civilly divorced and remarried 'couple' anywhere in the world without undermining the very act of blessing and jeopardizing the sacrament of marriage. However, individuals who approach a priest for blessing should receive it; (b) If both liturgical and 'pastoral' blessings are to be administered by an *ordained minister* according to *FS*, then both depend on the moral disposition of the recipients and in both cases, the priest acts in the name of the Church no matter how the blessing is imparted. No priest should ever trivialize the power of blessing in the name of Christ; (c) Since 'couples' in forbidden unions cannot receive the most Holy Eucharist which is the source and summit of Christian life after obtaining *FS*'s 'pastoral' blessing, then the priest cannot impart any blessing on them when they request for it as couple; (d) What couples in illicit unions need from ordained ministers is charitable pastoral accompaniment that will prepare them sufficiently to renounce their gravely sinful partnership and return to God through sacramental confession where they will obtain the *blessing of forgiveness*! Finally, this study does not claim to have exhausted all the pertinent issues surrounding this controversial document, but should only be considered one more contribution to the ongoing debate.