

PERIPHERIES IN DISPUTE

Africa builds “cracked” wall against gay blessings

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As a whole, Africa represents a free zone with respect to *Fiducia Supplicans*. This is the substance of the public letter that Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo Besungu, Archbishop of Kinshasa and President of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) released last 11 January (here is a summary). While emphatically reaffirming their communion with Pope Francis, the African bishops believe that the

extra-liturgical blessings cleared by FS should not be approved.

The letter summarising the judgement that, day after day, the various African Bishops' Conferences have expressed on the possibility of blessing same-sex couples states: "The Bishops' Conferences generally prefer - each bishop remaining free in his diocese - not to impart blessings to same-sex couples. This decision stems from concern about potential confusion and scandal within the ecclesial community".

Cardinal Ambongo pointed out the inappropriateness of such blessings, because, he explained, "in our context, this would cause confusion and be in direct contradiction with the cultural ethics of African communities". The prelate also reiterated the Church's constant teaching that "describes homosexual acts as 'intrinsically disordered' (...) and contrary to natural law".

The first, obvious, consideration. This letter from the President of SECAM further highlights the curious haste with which Pope Francis and Fernández decided to publish a document on such a sensitive issue. When one considers that an entire continent reacted immediately, highlighting the confusion and scandal that an implementation of the Declaration would entail in its own pastoral territories, one can understand how much the publication of the Declaration on 18 December went against all common sense and all norms of prudence. But it is not only Africa that has pointed out the problem: the bishops of Kazakhstan, Poland, Ukraine, Hungary, Haiti and other individual bishops have banned FS implementation from their areas for similar reasons.

This situation lays bare what the Pope really thinks about synodality in the Church: it is a cloak with which to give the impression of wanting to be attentive to the voice of all, but only when this is functional to question what has already been defined and established in the Church. If, on the other hand, one has the feeling that synodality is not moving in the right direction, that the people of God have not yet been reached and forged by the 'spirit', then one acts impulsively, without even bothering to check the bishops' sentiments first. Or perhaps it is precisely because this unfavourable feeling is well known. FS is therefore an act of imperium, the imposition of an arbitrary will, without any basis in Revelation, authentically interpreted by the Magisterium, a will that, in defiance of the 'synodality of the Church', emerged like a thunderbolt.

A second reflection concerns the arguments in Cardinal Ambongo's letter; it is basically a matter of justifying one's position by referring to the 'cultural ethics' of African communities or the subtle language of the Declaration. As for the latter, it should be pointed out that if subtleties are to be spoken of, then they are sophistical

subtleties, artfully prepared precisely to confuse readers.

The most important issue, however, remains the claim that FS cannot be accepted because it is incompatible with African culture. A strategy similar to that of the Major Archbishop of Kyiv, His Beatitude Sviatoslav Shevchuk (see [here](#)), who appealed to the particularity of the Law of the Eastern Churches and the significance of blessings for them. An understandable choice from the point of view of territorial strategy, but one that has the not-so-indirect effect of framing resistance to FS on the basis of a kind of ecclesial federalism, rather than opposition on the unacceptable principle of blessing couples living *more uxorio* or homosexual couples.

With this strategy, Cardinal Ambongo chooses to remain within the perimeters of freedom granted by Cardinal Fernández in the Press Release of 4 January: "Prudence and attention to the ecclesial context and local culture could admit different ways of application, but not a total or definitive denial of this path proposed to priests".

Moreover, this appeal to African culture appears weak. If one day African culture, under the impetus of rainbow ideology, were to be more "open", what would happen then? Or if a request should come from the Pope to promote initiatives in the Church of Africa to be more actively 'welcoming' towards same-sex cohabitation and gradually promote the acceptance of FS? But above all: why should it only be a matter of African culture? When Ivorian faithful witness the blessing of two cohabiting homosexuals, do they see something different from what a French believer sees? They understand that sacramental sign exactly as a European Catholic understands it. And, precisely because of this, both are scandalised, which is not - it is good to remember - a simple act of indignation (which one might have and the other might not, depending precisely on the cultural contexts), but the fact of being faced with a behaviour that in itself constitutes an incentive to evil, to do it or to approve of it.

If someone holds a knife to another person's throat, that gesture means the same thing in Cameroon, India, or China; and it would be ridiculous to protest that there is in fact no trace of a death threat, due to the fact that someone has written a document full of subtleties to explain that that gesture is in fact an act of blessing. The gesture of blessing, as a couple, those who live their sexuality outside of marriage or even against nature, is not acceptable in itself, because of the objective meaning of the blessing and of the couple, and not because the document supporting it uses language that is 'too subtle for simple people to understand'.

That statement in the letter, 'each bishop remaining free in his diocese',

dangerously sets the stage for the beginning of an internal crumbling even on the African continent, and above all misses the central point of the issue, whereby no bishop, not even the bishop of Rome, can authorise what is expressed in the FS. The Declaration, insofar as it affirms the possibility of blessing 'irregular' couples or homosexual cohabitants, is therefore inadmissible, as Cardinal Robert Sarah ([here](#)) and Cardinal Gerhard Müller ([here](#)) have clearly expressed.