

CATHOLIC CHURCH

Müller: Blessings for gay couples are blasphemous

ECCLESIA

21_12_2023



**Gerhard
Müller***



We publish the document with which Cardinal Gerhard L. Müller, Prefect Emeritus of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, takes a clear position, a radical criticism of the declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* with which the newly appointed Prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Victor M. Fernández, opened up the possibility of blessing irregular couples, including those composed of persons of the same sex.

THE ONLY BLESSING FROM MOTHER CHURCH IS THE TRUTH THAT WILL SET US FREE

With the Declaration *Fiducia supplicans* (FS) on the Pastoral Significance of Blessings, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF) has made an affirmation that has no precedent in the teaching of the Catholic Church. In fact, this document affirms that it is possible for a priest to bless (not liturgically, but privately) couples who live in a sexual relationship outside of marriage, including same-sex couples. The many questions raised by bishops, priests, and laity in response to these statements deserve a clear and unequivocal response.

Does this statement not clearly contradict Catholic teaching? Are the faithful obliged to accept this new teaching? May the priest perform such new practices that have just been invented? And can the diocesan bishop forbid them if they were to take place in his diocese? To answer these questions, let us see what exactly the document teaches and what arguments it relies on.

The document, which was neither discussed nor approved by the General Assembly of Cardinals and Bishops of this Dicastery, acknowledges that the hypothesis (or teaching?) it proposes is new and that it is based primarily on the pastoral magisterium of Pope Francis.

According to the Catholic faith, the pope and the bishops can set certain pastoral accents and creatively relate the truth of Revelation to the new challenges of each age, as for example in the field of social doctrine or of bioethics, while respecting the fundamental principles of Christian anthropology. But these innovations cannot go beyond what was revealed to them once and for all by the apostles as the word of God (*Dei verbum* 8). In fact, there are no biblical texts or texts of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church or previous documents of the magisterium to support the conclusions of FS. Moreover, what we see is not a development but a doctrinal leap. For one can speak of a doctrinal development only if the new explanation is contained, at least implicitly, in Revelation and, above all, does not contradict the dogmatic definitions. And a doctrinal

development that reaches a deeper meaning of the doctrine must have occurred gradually, through a long period of maturation. In point of fact, the last magisterial pronouncement on this matter was issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in a *responsum* published in March 2021, less than three years ago, and it categorically rejected the possibility of blessing these unions. This applies both to public blessings and to private blessings for people living in sinful conditions.

How does FS justify proposing a new doctrine without contradicting the previous 2021 document?

First of all, FS recognizes that both the CDF *Responsum* of 2021 and the traditional, valid, and binding teaching on blessings do not permit blessings in situations that are contrary to God's law, as in the case of sexual unions outside of marriage. This is clear for the sacraments, but also for other blessings which FS calls "liturgical." These "liturgical" blessings belong to what the Church has called "sacramentals," as witnessed by the *Rituale Romanum*. In these two types of blessings, there must be an agreement between the blessing and the Church's teaching (FS 9-11).

Therefore, in order to accept the blessing of situations that are contrary to the Gospel, the DDF proposes an original solution: to broaden the concept of a blessing (FS 7; FS 12). This is justified as follows: "One must also avoid the risk of reducing the meaning of blessings to this point of view alone [i.e., to the 'liturgical' blessings of the sacraments and sacramentals], for it would lead us to expect the same moral conditions for a simple blessing that are called for in the reception of the sacraments" (FS 12). That is, a new concept of blessing is needed, one that goes beyond sacramental blessings in order to accompany pastorally the journey of those who live in sin.

Now, in reality, this extension beyond the sacraments already takes place through the other blessings approved in the *Rituale Romanum*. The Church does not require the same moral conditions for a blessing as for receiving a sacrament. This happens, for example, in the case of a penitent who does not want to abandon a sinful situation, but who can humbly ask for a personal blessing so that the Lord may give him light and strength to understand and follow the teachings of the Gospel. This case does not require a new kind of "pastoral" blessing.

Why, then, is it necessary to broaden the meaning of "blessing," if the blessing as understood in the *Roman Ritual* already goes beyond the blessing given in a sacrament? The reason is that blessings contemplated by the *Roman Ritual* are only possible over "things, places, or circumstances that do not contradict the law or the spirit of the

Gospel" (FS 10, quoting the *Roman Ritual*). And this is the point that the DDF wants to overcome, since it wants to bless couples in circumstances, such as same-sex relationships, that contradict the law and the spirit of the Gospel. It is true that the Church can add "new sacramentals" to existing ones (Vatican II: *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 79), but she cannot change their meaning in such a way as to trivialize sin, especially in an ideologically charged cultural situation that also misleads the faithful. And this change of meaning is precisely what happens in FS, which invents a new category of blessings beyond those associated with either a sacrament or a blessing as the Church has understood them.

FS says that these are non-liturgical blessings that belong to popular piety. So there would be three kinds of blessings:

a) Prayers associated with the sacraments, asking that the person be in the proper state to receive the sacraments, or asking that the person receive the strength to turn from sin.

b) Blessings, as contained in the *Roman Ritual* and as Catholic doctrine has always understood them, which can be addressed to persons, even if they live in sin, but not to "things, places, or circumstances that ... contradict the law or the spirit of the Gospel" (FS 10, quoting the *Roman Ritual*). Thus, for example, a woman who has had an abortion could be blessed, but not an abortion clinic.

c) The new blessings proposed by FS would be pastoral blessings, not liturgical or ritual blessings. Therefore, they would no longer have the limitation of "ritual" or type "b" blessings. They could be applied not only to persons in sin, as in "ritual" blessings, but also to things, places, or circumstances that are contrary to the Gospel.

These "c" type blessings, or "pastoral" blessings are a novelty. Not being liturgical but rather of "popular piety," they would supposedly not compromise evangelical doctrine and would not have to be consistent with either moral norms or Catholic doctrine. What can be said about this new category of blessing?

A first observation is that there is no basis for this new usage in the biblical texts cited by FS, nor in any previous statement of the Magisterium. Nor do the texts offered by Pope Francis provide a basis for this new type of blessing. For already the blessing according to the *Roman Ritual* (type "b") allows a priest to bless someone who lives in sin. And this type "of blessing can easily be applied to someone who is in prison or in a rehabilitation group, as Francis says (quoted in FS 27). The innovative "pastoral"

blessing (type “c”), in contrast, goes beyond what Francis says, because one could give such a blessing to a reality that is contrary to God's law, such as an extramarital relationship. In fact, according to the criterion of this type of blessings, one could even bless an abortion clinic or a mafia group.

This leads to a second observation: it is hazardous to invent new terms that go against the traditional usage of language. Such procedure can give rise to arbitrary exercises of power. In the case at hand, the fact is that a blessing has an objective reality of its own and thus cannot be redefined at will to fit a subjective intention that is contrary to the nature of a blessing. Here Humpty Dumpty's famous line from *Alice in Wonderland* comes to mind: “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.” Alice replies, “The question is whether you can make words mean so many different things.” And Humpty Dumpty says: “The question is which is to be master; that's all.”

The third observation relates to the very concept of a “non-liturgical blessing” which is not intended to sanction anything (FS 34), that is, a “pastoral” blessing (type “c”). How does it differ from the blessing contemplated by the *Roman Ritual* (type “b”)? The difference is not in the spontaneous nature of the blessing, which is already possible in type “b” blessings, since they do not need to be regulated or approved in the *Roman Ritual*. Nor is the difference in popular piety, since the blessings according to the *Roman Ritual* are already adapted to popular piety, which asks for the blessing of objects, places, and people. It seems that the innovative “pastoral” blessing is created ad hoc to bless situations that are contrary to the law or spirit of the gospel.

This brings us to a fourth observation concerning the object of this “pastoral” blessing, which distinguishes it from a “ritual” blessing of the *Roman Ritual*. A “pastoral” blessing can include situations that are contrary to the Gospel. Notice that not only sinful persons are blessed here, but that by blessing the couple, it is the sinful relationship itself that is blessed. Now, God cannot send his grace upon a relationship that is directly opposed to him and cannot be ordered toward him. Sexual intercourse outside of marriage, qua sexual intercourse, cannot bring people closer to God and therefore cannot open itself to God's blessing. Therefore, if this blessing were given, its only effect would be to confuse the people who receive it or who attend it. They would think that God has blessed what He cannot bless. This “pastoral” blessing would be neither pastoral nor a blessing. It is true that Cardinal Fernandez, in later statements to *Infovaticana*, said that it is not the union that is blessed, but the couple. However, this is emptying a word of its meaning, since what defines a couple as couple is precisely their

being a union.

The difficulty of blessing a union or couple is especially evident in the case of homosexuality. For in the Bible, a blessing has to do with the order that God has created and that he has declared to be good. This order is based on the sexual difference of male and female, called to be one flesh. Blessing a reality that is contrary to creation is not only impossible, it is blasphemy. Once again, it is not a question of blessing persons who “live in a union that cannot be compared in any way to marriage” (FS, n. 30), but of blessing the very union that cannot be compared to marriage. It is precisely for this purpose that a new kind of blessing is created (FS 7, 12).

Several arguments appear in the text that attempt to justify these blessings.

First, the possibility of conditions that reduce the imputability of the sinner. However, these conditions refer to the person, not to the relationship itself. It is also said that asking for the blessing is the possible good that these persons can realize in their present conditions, as if asking for a blessing already constituted an opening to God and to conversion. This may be true for those who ask for a blessing for themselves, but not for those who ask for a blessing as a couple. The latter, in asking for a blessing, implicitly or explicitly seek to justify their relationship itself before God, without realizing that it is precisely their relationship that distances them from God. Finally, it is claimed that there are positive elements in the relationship and that these can be blessed, but these positive elements (for example, that one helps the other in an illness) are secondary to the relationship itself—whose defining characteristic is the sharing of sexual activity—and these elements do not change the nature of this relationship, which in no case can be directed towards God, as already noted in the 2021 *Responsum* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Even in an abortion clinic there are positive elements, from the anesthesiologists who prevent physical pain, to the desire of the doctors to protect the life project of the woman who is having an abortion.

A fifth observation concerns the internal inconsistency of this innovative “pastoral” blessing. Is it even possible to give a non-liturgical blessing, a blessing, that is, which does not officially represent the teaching of Christ and of the Church? The key to answering this question is not whether the rites are officially approved or rather spontaneously improvised. The question is whether the one giving the blessing is a priest, a representative 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. Now to claim that one can separate the meaning of this blessing from the teaching of Christ is to postulate a dualism between what the Church does and what the Church says. But as the Second Vatican Council teaches, revelation is given to us by deeds and words, which are inseparable (Dei Verbum 2), and the Church's proclamation cannot separate deeds from words. It is precisely the simple people, whom the document wishes to favor by promoting popular piety, who are most susceptible to being deceived by a symbolic deed that contradicts doctrine, since they intuitively grasp the doctrinal content of the deed.

In light of this, can a faithful Catholic accept the teaching of FS? Given the unity of deeds and words in the Christian faith, one can only accept that it is good to bless these unions, even in a pastoral way, if one believes that such unions are not objectively contrary to the law of God. It follows that as long as Pope Francis continues to affirm that homosexual unions are always contrary to God's law, he is implicitly affirming that such blessings cannot be given. The teaching of FS is therefore self-contradictory and thus requires further clarification. The Church cannot celebrate one thing and teach another because, as St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote, Christ was the Teacher “who spoke and it was done” (Ephesians 15:1), and one cannot separate his flesh from his word.

The other question we asked was whether a priest could agree to bless these unions, some of which coexist with a legitimate marriage or in which it is not uncommon for partners to change. According to FS, he could do so with a non-liturgical, non-official “pastoral” blessing. This would mean that the priest would have to give these blessings without acting in the name of Christ and the Church. But this would mean that he would not be acting as a priest. In fact, he would have to give these blessings not as a priest of Christ, but as one who has rejected Christ. In fact, by his actions, the priest who blesses these unions presents them as a path to the Creator. Therefore, he commits a sacrilegious and blasphemous act against the Creator's plan and against Christ's death for us, which meant to fulfill the Creator's plan. The diocesan bishop is concerned as well. As pastor of his local church, he is obliged to prevent these sacrilegious acts, otherwise he would become an accomplice to them and would deny the mandate given to him by Christ to confirm his brethren in the faith.

Priests should proclaim God's love and goodness to all people and also help sinners and those who are weak and have difficulty in conversion with counsel and prayer. This is very different from pointing out to them with self-invented but misleading signs and words that God is not so demanding about sin, thus hiding the fact that sin in

thought, word and deed distances us from God. There is no blessing, not only in public but also in private, for sinful living conditions that objectively contradict God's holy will. And it is no evidence of a healthy hermeneutic that the courageous defenders of Christian doctrine are branded as rigorists, more interested in the legalistic fulfillment of their moral norms than in the salvation of concrete persons. For this is what Jesus says to ordinary people: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light." (Mt 11:28-30). And the apostle explains it this way: "And his commandments are not burdensome, for whoever is begotten by God conquers the world. And the victory that conquers the world is our faith. Who [indeed] is the victor over the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 Jn 5:3-5). At a time when a false anthropology is undermining the divine institution of marriage between a man and a woman, with the family and its children, the Church should remember the words of her Lord and Head: ""Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and those who enter through it are many. How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life. And those who find it are few" (Mt 7:13-14).

**** Cardinal, Prefect Emeritus of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith***