

DICASTERY

Vatican publishes doctrinal note to praise monogamy

ECCLESIA

26_11_2025



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While we wait for Pope Leo to unveil his first encyclical, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith has released its second doctrinal note in a few weeks. Following the still controversial *Mater Populi Fidelis*, *Una Caro* ('One Flesh') has now been approved by the

Pope and published. The note is a eulogy to monogamy, as the subtitle states, and its 'fundamentally proactive' intention is evident from the outset: 'To draw from Sacred Scripture, the history of Christian thought, philosophy, and even poetry reasons and motivations that encourage the choice of a unique and exclusive union of love and rich, all-encompassing mutual belonging.'

Consisting of seven chapters and 156 paragraphs, it is a text worthy of a papal document in terms of length, but it is well known that, under the leadership of Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, the Dicastery has become extraordinarily prolific. This long text (*Mater populi fidelium* had "only" 80 paragraphs) examines one of the two key words in relation to marriage, "unity", since there is already "an abundant bibliography" in Catholic literature on "indissolubility". However, aware that although the harvest of ecclesial documents is abundant, readers are few, the Prefect anticipates that 'if one wishes to grasp a brief reflective summary to motivate the choice of an exclusive union between one woman and one man, it will suffice to read the last chapter and the conclusion of this Note, which focus on the mutual belonging of spouses and conjugal charity'.

Among the reasons behind the Note, St John Paul II's invitation in Kinshasa in 1980 to explore monogamy is cited, as are the various dialogues with bishops from Africa and other continents on the issue of polygamy during their *ad limina* visits, and the observation of the spread of polyamorous unions in the West. The latter are, however, subordinate to the former because, when properly understood, monogamy is not simply the opposite of polygamy. The question is also intimately linked to the unitive purpose of sexuality, which is not merely about ensuring procreation but also about enriching and strengthening the unique and exclusive union and the feeling of mutual belonging. Two separate chapters discuss Wojtyla, both as Pope and as the author of *Love and Responsibility*.

The theme is traced from Genesis to Leo XIII, passing through the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, as well as Tagore, Montale, and Neruda. There is also an emphasis on non-Christian cultures, with a focus on India, where, despite monogamy usually being the norm and considered the ideal in married life, polygamy has persisted over the centuries. Nevertheless, ancient texts exhort men to have 'only one wife' and to remain faithful to her. Incidentally, the absence of references to Islamic culture is notable. Moving to the present day, despite 'the proliferation of divorce, the fragility of unions, the trivialisation of adultery and the promotion of polyamory', great collective narratives such as novels, films and songs continue to extol the myth of unique and

exclusive 'great love', revealing that 'the desire for monogamous love remains deeply ingrained in human beings, even when their behaviour seems to contradict it'. In summary, 'the development of Christian thought on marriage', as retraced in the note, shows that 'of its two essential properties — unity and indissolubility — unity is the founding property', from which the other derives.

During the press conference presenting the document, the Cardinal Prefect repeatedly clarified that 'This is not a document on polygamy, but on monogamy.' Nevertheless, polygamy inevitably resurfaced in the questions asked by the journalists present. Fernández refers to the need to 'motivate' young people to enter into exclusive unions, as requested by the African bishops themselves, who raised the issue of polygamy at the Synod and submitted a partial report on it. However, what approach does the Note suggest for priests working in mission lands where those being evangelised have multiple wives? Fernández acknowledges the diversity of African countries and contexts, and the consequent greater or lesser prevalence of polygamy in rural and urban areas, meaning the solution must be found by those familiar with the local situation. The Dicastery is responsible for providing the 'motivations' (the verb 'motivate' is used several times by the Prefect).

One question refers specifically to note 3 of the text, which states that in-depth studies of African cultures show that different traditions attach special importance to the first marriage between a man and a woman, and to the role of the first wife in relation to subsequent marriages. This is potentially contradictory to the Church's teaching that a person must be willing to have only one wife at the time of conversion. Fernández replies that, while canon law remains unchanged, there have been cases where this has led to violence against 'unchosen' wives who have been abandoned and left to die in the desert. Perhaps it would be worth adding that this tragic outcome should not be attributed to canon law and monogamous marriage, but rather to the former polygamist who clearly was not fully converted.

The cardinal is also asked whether the note applies to 'same-sex monogamists'. Fernández replies that, in the Catholic conception, marriage is "an exclusive and indissoluble union between a man and a woman" — "if one wants to talk about marriage". 'If it is cohabitation, it is not a union; if it is not between a man and a woman, it is not precisely a marriage; if it is not exclusive, if there are four or five people involved, it is not a marriage; and if it is not indissoluble and is only for a limited time, it is not a marriage.' However, he adds that this does not mean that there are no values in other contexts, or that what is said here cannot also apply to other forms of union,

including, he clarifies, 'even a relationship between friends'.

Fernández said that the text was 'already almost ready several months ago', but they waited until now so as not to precede Pope Leo's *Dilexi te*. It is the secretary of the Dicastery, Monsignor Armando Matteo, who offers further clarification on the context and origin of the document. 'Together with the Note on Marian Titles and this one on Monogamy, the Dicastery is currently conducting another study on the Transmission of the Faith, and will then continue its work in relation to the Synod of the famous Group 5, which focuses on women's participation in the life and leadership of the Church. These four documents conclude the mandate given to us by Pope Francis two years ago, and the Dicastery now awaits an official and comprehensive meeting with Pope Leo in January to receive instructions for the next documents. Six months after the election of Leo XIV, therefore, the Dicastery is completing the tasks assigned to it by Pope Francis.