

The Catholic Church approves the possibility of blessing homosexual couples. New wine in old wineskins?

[«Fiducia supplicans»](#) (2023) does not change the doctrine of the Catholic Church either about marriage or about homosexual unions. What changes is the interpretation regarding the meaning attributed to the blessing of couples in irregular situations or same-sex couples: *«there is no intention to legitimize anything, but rather to open one's life to God, to ask for his help to live better, and also to invoke the Holy Spirit so that the values of the Gospel may be lived with greater faithfulness»* (par. 40). Only two years ago, the [Responsum](#) (2021) of the same Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a *dubium* was totally contrary: *«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»*.

It is a clear change of direction, also due to one of the Pope Francis' [Respuestas](#) to five cardinals. Furthermore, the form of the document - a "Declaration" - proves the importance of the issue on a doctrinal level, implying *«a real development from what has been said about blessings in the Magisterium and the official texts of the Church»* (Presentation).

#### PASTORAL VISION OVERCOMES THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

This document highlights the "ascending" dimension of the blessing: *«no one can be prevented from this act of giving thanks, and each person - even if he or she lives in situations that are not ordered to the Creator's plan - possesses positive elements for which we can praise the Lord»* (par. 28). Therefore, the Pope's [phrase](#): "who am I to judge?", pronounced in 2013 returning from World Youth Day held in Rio de Janeiro, has a concrete application. It predicted the advent of an ecclesial season of discernment, accompaniment and pastoral availability for homosexual people and unions. Two years later, the exhortation [«Amoris Laetitia»](#) (2015) reiterated what emerged in the Synod of Bishops on the family: *«every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity and treated with consideration»* ( par. 250).

«Fiducia supplicans» is the result of an evident change of perspective in the Catholic Church. Generally, the pastoral data is founded on the theological one. In this case, the perspective is overturned. As we read, the «theological reflection» is based «on the pastoral vision of Pope Francis», thus subjecting the *orthodoxy* to the *orthopraxy* (on this path, [Pierluigi Consorti](#) had assessed the 2021 Responsum as «legally inappropriate»).

#### THE ASSISTANCE OF THE ORDAINED MINISTER

According to «Fiducia supplicans», it is possible to bless same-sex couples, but Catholic teaching regarding marriage and the family remains unchanged. There is nothing new compared to the teaching

of Pope Francis, who in «Amoris Laetitia» quoted the [document](#) drafted in 2003 by the former *Holy Office*: «*there exists no foundation whatsoever for assimilating or establishing analogies, however remote, between homosexual unions and God's plan for marriage and the family*» (par. 4). In [2018](#), the Pontiff reaffirmed: «*the human family as an image of God, man and woman, is only one*». This idea may or may not be shared, but from a theological point of view the principle is clear, and it is reflected in state-law: in a comparative perspective, even in the “secular” Italian system, civil unions are not a family in the constitutional sense (art. 29 Const.), given that law no. 76 of 2016 refers them to generic social formations (art. 2 Const.).

But the theological structure of this idea does not appear so solid, as it is presented. «*Fiducia supplicans*» distinguishes between the blessing of irregular or same-sex couples, which would only have an “ascending” dimension, and the blessing in the Rite of the Sacrament of Marriage, which would have both an “ascending” and a “descending” dimension. Considering that the act of blessing in the Rite of the Marriage does not correspond to the constitutive moment of this sacrament, whose ministers remain the spouses, the Declaration specifies that when referring to the marriage blessing «this concerns not just any blessing, but a gesture reserved to the ordained minister» (para. 6). In fact, depending on the circumstances, the liturgical books may provide that the sacramentals are also imparted by lay men and women because the sacerdotal dignity deriving from baptism (see can. 1168). Whereas according to the Declaration, the blessing of irregular or same-sex couples, even about discernment, is reserved to the ordained minister (par. 30), who can ask «that the individuals have peace, health, a spirit of patience, dialogue, and mutual assistance—but also God's light and strength to be able to fulfill his will completely» (par. 38). As a result, the blessing of irregular or same-sex couples should not be “any blessing”, although the document clarifies that it is a “simple blessing” or a “spontaneous blessing” (par. 39).

From this point of view, one wonders: why the assistance of an ordained minister is explicitly requested for a “simple blessing”? Probably, it is precisely in the presence of the ordained minister that the authentically innovative character of the Dicastery's document lies. For this reason, the blessing of irregular or same-sex couples could not have an exclusively “ascending” dimension.

#### NEW WINE IN OLD WINESKINS?

Furthermore, «*Fiducia supplicans*» rejects an assimilation between the religious blessing and the civil unions provided by state-law. That is to say, the blessing of irregular or same-sex couples is not to be considered as a sort of religious union, even if it is qualitatively less relevant than marriage. However, this vision matches an excessive ecclesial prudence which produces the overlap between a blessing not included in a liturgical rite (that is, outside the Eucharistic celebration or a sacrament) and a non-ritualized blessing. According to the Declaration, «one should neither provide for nor promote a ritual for the blessings of couples in an irregular situation» (para. 38). It is neither a «liturgical» nor a «semi-liturgical» act (par. 36), and this blessing «should never be imparted in concurrence with the ceremonies of a civil

union, and not even in connection with them», or it cannot «be performed with any clothing, gestures, or words that are proper to a wedding» (par. 39). For this reason, ordained ministers should not expect further guidance than that already provided. But the ritualization of a blessing does not give it any liturgical or even sacramental nature. The ritualized process responds to practical needs, to avoid confusion.

In short, we are certainly faced with a «real development» for the Catholic Church in the matter of the blessing of irregular or same-sex couples. But it seems that there is the risk to put «new wine into old wineskins», while it is well known that *new wine* must be put in *new wineskins* (Mt 9, 17). Therefore, it is extremely urgent for the Catholic Church to provide itself with new wineskins, also in terms of theological and canonical categories. The direction seems to be the right one: starting from below, from the concrete needs and lives of the faithful, from the orthopraxy. Nevertheless, a general reflection on sexuality and on relationships, in particular same-sex ones, in the Church and in the society, cannot longer be postponed.

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