



DIOCESE OF BAKER

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To Bless or Not to Bless

On the Vatican Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans*

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In March 2021, to the question whether the Church could bless unions of persons of the same sex, the Vatican's doctrinal office answered "No." In his *Response*, which bore the signature of Pope Francis, Cardinal Luis Ladaria stated that "it is not licit to impart a blessing on relationships . . . that involve sexual activity outside of marriage," because a blessing that acknowledges the legitimacy of same-sex unions would effectively "approve and encourage a choice and a way of life that cannot be objectively ordered to the revealed plans of God." The cardinal made clear, however, that "persons with homosexual inclinations" may be blessed *as individuals* if they "manifest the will to live in fidelity to the revealed plans of God as proposed by Church teaching."

The pope's signature also appears on the Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* of 18 December 2023, by the successor to Cardinal Ladaria, Cardinal Victor Fernandez. In the years since the 2021 *Response* was issued, Cardinal Fernandez contends, the "horizon" of Church teaching has undergone "a real development." The new "context" allows "the possibility of blessing . . . same sex couples without officially validating their status or changing in any way the Church's perennial teaching on marriage."

That teaching Cardinal Fernandez earnestly re-affirms in *Fiducia Supplicans*: marriage between a man and a woman is the uniquely

blessed environment for sexual relations between human persons. Far from authorizing same-sex unions, therefore, the Declaration repeatedly cautions against "the risk of confusing a blessing given to any other union with the Rite that is proper to the Sacrament of Marriage." In fact, Cardinal Fernandez says, the new non-ritualized "pastoral" blessings he proposes, *should not be given* if they will spread confusion about Catholic doctrine on marriage and sexual morality.

Despite the Cardinal's concern not to sow division, within weeks of *Fiducia's* release dramatically opposed responses erupted in fifty countries. Bishops in Flanders and Germany welcomed the Declaration as a "help to move forward" on their previously chosen path toward formal blessings of same-sex couples. Photos and videos of pre-planned same-sex ceremonies filled computer screens around the globe with images of priests giving blessings *Fiducia* prohibited. Mass media quickly spread the news worldwide: the Catholic Church has changed her mind; she now approves of same-sex unions.

Just as quickly Nigerian Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo declared that in Africa *Fiducia* caused "a shockwave." Throughout the continent, what seemed to be papal authorization to bless homosexual couples stunned Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, who had always counted on unflinching Catholic

witness to the biblically based truth of marriage. Africa's Muslims took critical note of the document too. So did the African bishops.

Cardinal Ambongo promptly brought their concerns to Rome for detailed discussions with Pope Francis and Cardinal Fernandez. With the pope's approval, the two cardinals carefully worked out and signed a statement "on behalf of the entire Catholic Church in Africa." It stated the bishops' belief that "the extra-liturgical blessings proposed in . . . *Fiducia Supplicans* cannot be carried out in Africa without exposing themselves to scandals."

I do not believe they can be carried out scandal-free in the Diocese of Baker either. Here as in Africa, if a co-habiting heterosexual couple or a same sex couple were to ask a priest to bless them, they would be seeking an official sign of approval for behavior that the Church teaches is sinful in God's sight. If the priest complies with their request, the subtle distinctions of *Fiducia Supplicans* will not keep bystanders from concluding that the Church the priest represents no longer believes as she always did before, but is now endorsing the unions of unmarried couples.

That is not the message that I as bishop wish priests to be sending in the Diocese of Baker. Therefore, in accord with Cardinal Fernandez's above-noted cautions about creating confusion and the statement of the African bishops, I ask priests of Baker *not* to bless known co-habiting *couples*, of the same sex or both sexes. Individual men and women, however, as Cardinal Fernandez and the African bishops agree, should feel free to request and should receive, a priestly blessing outside of Mass. In line with a suggestion of Cardinal Fernandez, the priest should say the following words:

May Almighty God—
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—
bless you with the grace
to turn away from sin
and believe in the Gospel.

For my part, I would be happy to hear a priest say those words over me any day of my life.

From "the beginning," the Gospels assure us, our Creator intended human flourishing to flow from the one-flesh marital embrace of a man and a woman open to the transmission of life. With human happiness in view He reserved that mutual bodily enfolding to the marriage bed and solemnly blessed it on the wedding day. If priests of Jesus Christ bless behavior that contradicts His commandments, they devalue the sanctity of wedding vows and distort the divine design for human happiness. "What God has joined together, man must not divide." The God of the Covenant Promise is the Redeemer of Marriage, not its disabler. Any form of blessing that endorses extra-marital unions cannot flow from the hands of His priests.