

## **THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ON THE BLESSING OF SAME-SEX UNIONS**

On Monday, March 15, 2021 the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (*CDF*) published a document stating that the Catholic Church does not, and cannot have, the power to give a blessing to the unions of same-sex couples. The document is entitled, *Responsum to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a Dubium Regarding the Blessing of the Unions of Persons of the Same Sex*, and is accompanied by a commentary. According to the *CDF* Pope Francis was informed and gave his assent to the publication of the document. As the title suggests the *CDF* uses the format of a response to a dubium (a question) to state the church's position. The dubium, or question is, "Does the Church have the power to give the blessing to unions of the same sex?" The response is "Negative."

Although the document and the commentary give three reasons to support this decision, the primary and ultimate reason is based upon the Catholic Church's traditional understanding of the relationship and connection between human sexuality and marriage. According to the teaching of the church, marriage can only be a union between a man and a woman and all sexual relations can only be morally acceptable within the context of such a union. For this reason, the *CDF* states that "it is not licit to impart a blessing on relationships, or partnerships, even stable, that involve sexual activity outside of marriage (i.e., outside the indissoluble union of a man and a woman open in itself to the transmission of life), as is the case of the unions between persons of the same sex." (*CDF Document*, 1). The commentary states that the source for the church's teaching on marriage and human sexuality is found in the design of God inscribed in creation and God's revelation in Jesus Christ. (*CDF Commentary*, 2). Although the *CDF* does not say it this way, the church is clearly affirming that its teaching on marriage and human sexuality is

supported by both the natural law and divine revelation and, as such, it is an absolute and immutable teaching of the church. Consequently, not only do same-sex unions violate this norm, but all unions that involve sexual activity outside of marriage do so as well. What the church is saying is that it is God who set things up this way, not the church. As a result, the church does not have the power to bless same-sex unions. (*CDF Commentary*, 2).

A second reason given is based upon the church's understanding of the truth and value of blessings. Blessings as sacramentals are liturgical actions of the church that "require consonance of life with what they signify and generate." Therefore, the blessing of a relationship requires that it be "ordered to both receive and express the good that is pronounced and given by the blessing." (*CDF Document*, 1). Since persons in same-sex unions are living in a state that is forbidden by the natural law and divine revelation, to bless their union would be to "approve and encourage a choice and way of life that cannot be recognized as objectively ordered to the revealed plan of God." (*CDF Document*, 2). *De facto*, persons in same-sex unions are living in a state of objective sin and God cannot bless sin. (*CDF Document* 2).

The third reason given by the *CDF* is that the church wishes to avoid any possible error of "assimilating the blessing of unions of persons of the same sex to that of matrimonial unions." (*CDF Commentary*, 2). Because of the relationship between the blessing of persons and sacraments some might see the blessing of same-sex unions as an "imitation" or "analogue" of the nuptial blessing given in the sacrament of Matrimony. (*CDF Commentary*, 2). The church appears to be concerned that such an "erroneous and misleading" interpretation might lead some to think that the church was approving same-sex unions. However one evaluates the merits of the second and third reasons, they cannot stand alone. Their cogency depends upon the first and foundational reason that same-sex unions are contrary to the natural law and divine revelation.

Although the church's teaching on same-sex unions has not changed, both the document and commentary attempt to take a more pastoral tone. In the document the church states that the rejection of the blessing to same-sex unions does not imply a judgment on the persons. It adds that men and women with homosexual tendencies "must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided." (*CDF Document*, 1). The commentary states that the church's negative judgment on blessing same-sex unions "in no way detracts from the human and Christian consideration in which the Church holds each person." (*CDF Commentary*, 2). As a sign of its pastoral concern, the commentary ends by stating that individual homosexual persons who manifest the "will to live in fidelity to the revealed plans of God as proposed in the Church's teaching" can receive a blessing. (*CDF Commentary*, 2).

Given the reaction to the *CDF* document and commentary by the Catholic LGBTQ community and the Catholic bishops, priests, religious sisters, and laity who minister to them, it does not seem that the church has adequately dealt with the pastoral question or offered any hope or encouragement to Catholic LGBTQ persons. To tell an LGBTQ Catholic that one's own self-understanding and sexual orientation is basically unnatural, against God's law for the order of creation, and against divine revelation does not offer much room for a positive pastoral approach. The positive and loving aspect of the relationship of persons in a same-sex union is totally cancelled out by condemning them to a state of objective sin from which they cannot escape unless they renounce their own self-understanding and give up the fulfillment of their sexual orientation. The Catholic Church is asking LGBTQ Catholics to commit psychological suicide.

The fundamental cause of the church's inadequate pastoral approach is rooted in its present doctrinal formulation of marriage and human sexuality and the relationship between the

two. This teaching correlates an abstract philosophy of the natural law which evaluates the morality of human sexuality on the basis of the physical completion of the sexual act with a literal interpretation of the scriptural statements on marriage and human sexuality. In such a framework element like personal identity, sexual orientation, and loving personal relationships are not considered relevant to the moral evaluation of marriage human sexuality. In fact, all of these aspects, and others, are seen as extraneous to the morality of marriage and human sexuality.

What makes the recently released Vatican document, along with the pope's apparent approval, even more perplexing is that it appears so inconsistent with Pope Francis' overall effort to reforming the church according to a more pastoral, kerygmatic, and less dogmatic approach. However, if one looks more closely the publication of the Vatican document reveals a serious lacuna in Pope Francis' approach to reforming the church. The focus of Francis' reform is pastoral, aimed at changing the attitude of the clergy and laity who serve in the Roman Curia and other governing roles in the church. Francis wants the ministers of the church and the magisterium to listen to the people, hear their concerns. His typical approach has not been to issue dogmatic statements that attempt to totally solve an issue and leave no room for further reflection. At the same time, Francis also has been reluctant to directly challenge any core Catholic doctrines, or to call for reform of doctrinal teachings that present intrinsic obstacles to pastoral reforms in some areas, like giving the church's blessing to same-sex unions. His approach has been to try to find some resolution in what he calls the "overflow." Although Francis accepts doctrinal diversity and the possibility of the development of doctrine, he does not seem to want to take on the thorny issue of something like reforming the church's teaching on marriage and human sexuality. Yet, the release of the recent Vatican document makes it

painfully apparent that the church's pastoral outreach to LGBTQ Catholics is doomed to failure unless there is a church-initiated effort to engage in a renewed theological reflection on the church's present formulation of its teaching on marriage and human sexuality in light of contemporary Catholic theological studies and more positive theological developments in contemporary Catholic theology.

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