

Gay Relationships and the Catholic Church by Frederick Sneesby

Three years ago in February 2021, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of the Roman Catholic Church published a document, *Responsum ad dubium*, that answered a question that had been posed, “Does the Church have the power to give blessing to unions of persons of the same sex?” a question the Congregation answered in the negative. At the time I wrote an article, *Blessed Unions*, taking issue with that document.

On December 18, 2023, the Vatican issued another document, *Fiducia Supplicans*, that serves to “broaden and enrich the meaning of blessings” and re-examines what a “blessing” might mean in reference to the blessing of same-gender unions. Indeed, *Fiducia Supplicans* offers “new clarifications on the *Responsum*” and makes a narrow allowance for such blessings. This shift in the practice of the Catholic Church is welcomed but fundamental problems with the Church’s teaching on same-gender unions remain. This being the case, I want to recollect and supplement what I wrote a few years ago.

A survey of the history of the Catholic Church will find a story of contradictions. The Church that has defended human rights through the centuries is also the Church that has seen periods of repression when it battled political and economic aspirations and sided with autocratic systems. The Church that was instrumental in preserving and advancing knowledge, keeping the spark of wisdom burning through the Dark Ages, establishing universities worldwide, and declaring the consonance of reason and faith, is also the Church that has at times trailed behind science and the understanding of the human person, so much so that this clinging to outdated knowledge has manifested itself in faulty moral teaching.

With the publication in 2021 of the “*Responsum*” of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a *dubium* (“doubt”) regarding the blessing of the unions of persons of the same sex,” the Catholic Church sinned twice, once in offending against the cause of human rights and once in willfully disregarding advances in knowledge.

Fiducia Supplicans is an attempt by the Church to dull the sharp edges of the *Responsum*, but there is evident in the document an underlying conflict. The Church is wrestling with itself as it tries to uphold traditional teaching on marriage and sexuality while, at the same time, feeling tortured by the fact that it is blacklisting a significant portion of the people of God.

The fact that the Catholic Church names Marriage as one of the seven sacraments is especially important background to both pronouncements by the Vatican. The Catholic Church believes that God’s presence is communicated through the physical elements of the seven sacraments. So, for example, God’s Spirit takes residence in a person through the waters of Baptism. Jesus himself is present in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. The very tangible elements of the sacraments bestow the intangible life of God. In Marriage, the element of the sacrament that

communicates God's presence to the world is the consent of the couple; their relationship brings holiness to others. It is a simple but profound and mysterious teaching.

News media coverage in 2021 and 2023 give the impression that with these documents the Catholic Church has reinforced the prohibition against gay marriage; that is not what the documents are about. Both documents were not written to say whether a same sex couple can be married in the Church. The possibility of a sacramental marriage is dismissed out of hand. The document simply addresses the possibility of offering a blessing to a gay couple.

The *Responsum* linked the blessing of a human relationship to the Sacrament of Marriage. It is important to recognize that the document made this connection because it indicates what the Church believes is at stake once even the slightest hint is made toward the acceptance of same-sex unions. With the *Fiducia Supplicans* document, the Church backs off this harder-line stance by nuancing the meaning of "blessing." Rather than insisting, as was done in the *Responsum*, that whatever is to be blessed must "be objectively and positively ordered to receive and express grace, according to the designs of God inscribed in creation," in other words, any reality that is not designed by God through His creation to serve the ends of receiving and expressing grace cannot be blessed, *Fiducia Supplicans* states that while a blessing may be bestowed on a gay couple, 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."

This change is a tiny step forward. Rather than declare that gay relationships cannot receive and express grace, *Fiducia Supplicans* recognizes that gay couples are people of faith upon whom ...

"a blessing may be imparted that not only has an ascending value but also involves the invocation of a blessing that descends from God upon those who—recognizing themselves to be destitute and in need of his help—do not claim a legitimation of their own status, but who beg that all that is true, good, and humanly valid in their lives and their relationships be enriched, healed, and elevated by the presence of the Holy Spirit. These forms of blessing express a supplication that God may grant those aids that come from the impulses of his Spirit—what classical theology calls "actual grace"—so that human relationships may mature and grow in fidelity to the Gospel, that they may be freed from their imperfections and frailties, and that they may express themselves in the ever-increasing dimension of the divine love. Indeed, the grace of God works in the lives of those who do not claim to be righteous but who acknowledge themselves humbly as sinners, like everyone else. This grace can orient everything according to the mysterious and unpredictable designs of God. Therefore, with its untiring wisdom and motherly care, the Church welcomes all who approach God with humble hearts, accompanying them with those spiritual aids that enable everyone to understand and realize God's will fully in their existence."

Fiducia Supplicans still warns that this allowance of a blessing should not be confused with any sort of official or liturgical recognition of a gay union:

“This is a blessing that, although not included in any liturgical rite, unites intercessory prayer with the invocation of God’s help by those who humbly turn to him. God never turns away anyone who approaches him! Ultimately, a blessing offers people a means to increase their trust in God. The request for a blessing, thus, expresses and nurtures openness to the transcendence, mercy, and closeness to God in a thousand concrete circumstances of life, which is no small thing in the world in which we live. It is a seed of the Holy Spirit that must be nurtured, not hindered.”

A small step indeed, but at least the beginning of accepting the reality of God’s creation and the wide variances in human sexuality. It is most people’s experience that their sexual identity and orientation are not inventions but givens. In other words, people understand, “this is how God created me.” It seems to most ordinary people that homosexuality is something that God has, in fact, “inscribed in creation.”

The Church’s prohibition against same-sex relationships remains because they involve sexual activity outside of marriage and outside of God’s plan that sexual activity in marriage be open to the transmission of life. This reasoning fails on two points. First of all, the Church’s condemning the sexual activity of gay couples because it happens outside of marriage while, at the same time, forbidding gay couples from being married, is unjust if not cruel. Secondly, the Church permits heterosexual couples to be married even when they cannot conceive children, thus creating a double standard of sexual morality. The Church has always insisted on the two ends of marriage: the growth of the couple’s love, and the transmission of life. That understanding of marriage fits statistically, but the fact is that there are many beautiful and grace-filled marriages that are either childless or in which the couples have reached the age when their sexual activity is in no way open to the transmission of life.

For the Catholic Church, then, homosexual unions “are not in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and family.” (Pope Francis I’s Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*). In this way, the Church persists in pushing against the reality of human experience. Many people know gay couples whose love is not only exemplary but life-giving to others. Furthermore, many people know gay couples who have created wonderful families. These families are not illusory. They are not anomalous. In fact, they are analogous to God’s plan for marriage and family. Yet, the Church has constructed a definition of marriage and family that is too narrow to contain what people have found to be true and good.

While the Church’s documents have for the most part stayed within a traditional understanding of marriage and family – and some of those writings are insightful and even profound – there is a passage in a document of the Second Vatican Council, the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (also known as *Gaudium et Spes* because the Council documents and most

Church documents are titled by the first words of the text, in Latin, which in this document are “The joy and hope ...”) that could be built upon to open wider the Church’s teaching.

Section 50 in *Gaudium et Spes* concludes with this sentence: *Even in cases where despite the intense desire of the spouses there are no children, marriage still retains its character of being a whole manner and communion of life and preserves its value and indissolubility.* So, marriage is marriage even when there is no possibility of children from the couple’s sexual activity. If *Gaudium et Spes*, one of the fundamental and most authoritative documents of the teaching Church in our times, can cast the “character of marriage” in this light, is there not room for the Church to broaden its understanding of marriage to include same-sex unions?

Like most areas of knowledge, what we know about human sexual identity and human relationships has increased at an accelerated pace in the last fifty years. The Church’s teaching has been left behind. It is not a matter of the Church being “old-fashioned” or of the Church bravely defending timeless values. No, this is the Church disregarding well-established and accepted social science. In doing so, the Catholic Church is alienating many people who can no longer tolerate the dissonance between what their Church is teaching and what they know to be true from their own experience.

Even with the small allowance of blessing gay couples, the Church’s insistence on condemning same-sex unions is especially tragic for a Church whose mission is to invite people to share a relationship with God who is Love. “God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God in that person.” (I John 4:16b) The Church should be expert on human love in all its aspects because God’s presence is manifested in human love. The Church should be promoting human love in all its aspects because “ubi caritas, Deus ibi est” that is, “wherever there is love, God is there.” The world needs a Church that will inform couples how to build relationships that are filled with love that is faithful, self-sacrificing, enduring, and life-giving whether they be same sex couples or not. The Catholic Church can be that Church, and not only invoke a blessing on same-sex unions, but also rejoice in the blessings that same-sex unions bestow on others.

However, there are pockets of the worldwide Church that are refusing to allow even the implementation of *Fiducia Supplicans*. The opposition to blessing gay relationships is particularly strong in areas in which the cultures do not tolerate homosexuality and certainly do not allow for civil unions or civil marriage of gay couples. Cultural norms are dictating Church teaching. The absorption of social norms into Church teaching is not new. This phenomenon can be seen in the letters of Paul in the New Testament. However, as we know, Paul and the early Church reached beyond conventional morality to introduce new dynamics in human relationships. Can the Church of the 21st century do the same?

The teaching Church has an opportunity to be prophetic and to challenge the worldwide Church to recognize the boundaries of accepted social norms concerning human relationships and marriage and to expand them in light of the Gospel. Is there room in the Roman Catholic Church

for varying cultures to challenge one another about the understanding of human sexuality and marriage? Does the Church have enough faith to enter into an area of controversy and disagreement in order to bring more people into the life of the Church?