



Office of the Bishop

January 2, 2024

My dear brother priest:

I pray that you had a blessed Christmas in God's grace, and I want to thank you once again for all that you do in the Lord's service. My phone calls with you and the other priests during the week before Christmas reminded me once again of the profound blessing that each of you, with your unique talents and your common dedication to the service of God's people, contribute to our local church.

I want to speak to you from a pastoral perspective on the Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans*, the statement issued by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith on the nature of pastoral blessings and their application to those in irregular and same sex relationships. This topic touches upon critical and complex pastoral questions in the church today, and I know many of you have found joy in the Declaration, while others have found challenge.

I think it is important to begin with the foundational contribution of the Vatican statement - its beautiful and grace-filled presentation of the theology and spirituality of blessings, especially those non-liturgical moments when men and women of faith come to us spontaneously, seeking the Church's accompaniment in prayer to receive the benediction of God upon them. Each of us in our ministry knows the palpable grace and longing for the Lord which animates those who so frequently ask for a blessing -- for their family relationships, their healing, their friendships, their consolation, their aspirations, their work, their sense of being lost in the world. In the eyes and hearts of those who come to us, we sense the

presence of God and the desire to come closer to God. These simple and spontaneous prayers of benediction which we offer to our people in their lives are an essential form of ecclesial accompaniment and occasions for grace.

The spiritual reality contained in the requests we receive for pastoral blessings is beautifully captured in the Declaration: "One who asks for a blessing shows himself to be in need of God's saving presence in his life, and one who asks for a blessing from the Church recognizes the latter as a sacrament of the salvation that God offers. To seek a blessing in the Church is to acknowledge that the life of the Church springs from the womb of God's mercy and helps us to move forward, to live better and to respond to the Lord's will."

Even more penetratingly, the Declaration states: "the request for a blessing expresses and nurtures openness to the transcendence, mercy and closeness of 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 and not hindered."

We are privileged to serve in a diocese in which the diverse cultural communities of our local church convey this powerful reality to us on a daily basis. Our people bring to us the whole of their lives and see in them opportunities to seek God's grace and closeness to them, precisely in the dimension of benediction and accompaniment.

Fiducia Supplicans should be for us a moment to comprehend in a deeper way the mystery and Incarnational love that blessings outside the liturgy constitute. They complement on a very human level the rich array of liturgical blessings that help form the life and ministry of the Church.

It is against this theological and spiritual backdrop that *Fiducia Supplicans* turns to the question of blessings for those who are in irregular unions and

those in same sex relationships. The Declaration repeatedly points to the centrality of the clear teaching of the Church that any couple living in a sexual relationship outside "the exclusive, stable and indissoluble union between a man and a woman, naturally open to the generation of children" is living in contradiction to the law of God. It states that nothing in the provision of blessings to those in irregular unions or same sex unions must ever detract from the clarity and importance of this moral reality and doctrine.

Keeping this teaching consistently in mind, *Fiducia Supplicans* turns to the lived reality that so many faith-filled women and men are in relationships that do not constitute a valid marriage. From the pastoral perspective of our local church of San Diego, I focus particularly on the tens of thousands of faith-filled men and women who are divorced and remarried without benefit of annulment and those in same sex relationships. Can these men and women be blessed in their lives, which include their life together? Can the goodness in their relationship be blessed, and the call to greater closeness to God effectuated?

Pope Francis, who has brought a profound pastoral perspective to the entire life of the Church, showed the foundation for answering this question when he proposed a notion of "blessing that is offered to all without requiring anything. 'It is God who blesses. In the first pages of the Bible, there is a continual repetition of blessings. God blesses, but humans also give blessings and soon it turns out that the blessing possesses a special power, which accompanies those who receive it throughout their lives, and disposes man's heart to be changed by God. So we are more important to God than all the sins we can commit because he is father, he is mother, he is pure love, he has blessed us forever."

It is from this stance that the Declaration concludes that priests can offer

blessings for couples in irregular or same sex relationships as an authentic element of pastoral care. These blessings should be seen as an act of accompaniment by the Church, seeking to nurture the faith, striving and conversion of the individuals and to nurture those grace- filled elements that are in the relationship itself.

The Declaration is emphatic that no liturgical ceremony of blessing for irregular or same sex relationships can occur. For a liturgical ceremony would inevitably be seen as a legitimization of the relationship. The Declaration is also emphatic that any provision of a blessing for same sex couples or those in irregular unions would have to guarantee that in its wording or setting, it does not legitimate such unions. An act of blessing is not meant for legitimization, but for the sanctification and ever greater conversion of men and women in the concrete realities of their lives, which includes their relationships.

Such blessings should have the character of praying for grace upon two people seeking the blessing of God in their lives. The words of blessing should convey the mystery, affirmation and invitation of God's benediction, and the Church's accompaniment in that act of blessing and call for greater conversion. There should be a spontaneity in such blessings and the wording chosen, just as we are spontaneous in the myriad of blessings that we bestow upon our people throughout our daily ministry. For this reason, the diocese will not be supplying any texts or rote formulas, lest the blessing be seen as an act of validation, rather than accompaniment.

As the bishop of this local church, I believe that caringly and authentically offering blessings according to the norms of *Fiducia Supplicans* can be a significant spiritual support for many faith-filled couples in second marriages and those in same sex relationships.

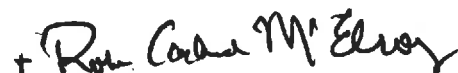
For that reason, I fully support and encourage those of you who wish to prudently follow the pathway of providing pastoral blessings to those in irregular unions and those in same sex relationships who faithfully approach you seeking such a blessing. Doing so will be a wonderful act of accompaniment and grace.

I am also aware that some of you would find it impossible to carry out such a ministry of blessing without believing that you are undermining the sacrament of marriage. I support you in your decision, also, and I recognize that the challenge of balancing pastoral accompaniment with faithful witness to the nature of marriage is what makes this whole issue difficult. Remember, the Declaration permits blessings for women and men who are in irregular or same sex relationships. It does not mandate that every priest offer such blessings.

I would be happy to talk with you individually about any of these issues if you would like, and I pray that the foundational theology of blessings presented in the *Fiducia Supplicans* will be for us all a spur to deepening our ministry of blessing in the grace of God.

With all best wishes, I remain

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rob. Card. McElroy". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Robert Cardinal McElroy
Bishop of San Diego