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Pope Francis delivers his homily during an ecumenical prayer vigil in St. Peter's Square Sept. 30, ahead of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Pope Francis has expressed openness to Catholic blessings for same-sex couples, under the condition they are not confused with marriage ceremonies for men and women, in what could be a watershed moment for the global Catholic Church.

Francis has also suggested the question of women's ordination to the priesthood, controversially prohibited by Pope John Paul II in 1994, could be open to further study.

"Pastoral prudence must adequately discern whether there are forms of blessing, requested by one or several people, that do not transmit a mistaken conception of marriage," Francis wrote in a letter dated Sept. 25 and released by the Vatican on Oct. 2.

The pope's words come in response to five retired conservative Catholic cardinals who had written to the pontiff, expressing concerns about a number of hot-button issues that are expected to be discussed at a major Vatican meeting this month, known as the Synod of Bishops.

The pope's eight-page reply to some of his most vociferous critics was offered in response to their questions — formally known as *dubia* — regarding gay blessings, women's ordination to priesthood, synodality, divine revelation and the nature of forgiveness. The cardinals, apparently frustrated by the pope's reply to them, had

made public their original questions earlier in the day on Oct. 2.

Related: Five cardinals challenge pope to affirm church teaching on gays, women ahead of synod

While Francis offered a strong defense of the church's longstanding teaching that marriage is between one man and one woman, and must be open to children, he also said that it is important for the church not to "lose pastoral charity, which must be part of all our decisions and attitudes."

Defending what the church teaches to be objective truth, he continued, does not mean that church leaders "become judges who only deny, reject, exclude."

The pope then indicated that discernment is necessary when blessings are requested by same-sex couples, and said any blessings must avoid giving any misunderstanding about what the church teaches about the nature of marriage.

"When you ask for a blessing you are expressing a request for help from God, a prayer to be able to live better, a trust in a father who can help us live better," he wrote.

The pope's latest letter seems to be an abrupt and intentional shift from a March 2021 decree issued by the Vatican's doctrinal office — with the pope's approval — explicitly forbidding priests from blessing same-sex unions, with the justification that God "cannot bless sin."

At the time, the two-page explanation was published in seven languages declaring that Catholic teaching considers marriage to be between a man and a woman — with an aim toward creating new life — and that since gay unions cannot achieve that goal without medical intervention, it is impossible to offer blessings for same-sex couples.

On the question of women's ordination, Francis acknowledged John Paul's 1994 declaration in the apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* that the church had "no authority" to ordain women as priests, and John Paul's statement that the teaching must be "definitively held" by all Catholics.

But Francis also said there is not "a clear and authoritative doctrine ... about the exact nature of a 'definitive declaration.' "

"It is not a dogmatic definition, and yet it must be accepted by everyone," the pope summarized. "No one can contradict it publicly and yet it can be an object of study, as in the case of the validity of the ordinations in the Anglican communion."

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Francis also cited the Second Vatican Council's teaching of a "priesthood of all believers," and said: "It is not possible to maintain a difference of degree that implies considering the common priesthood of the faithful as something of 'second class' or of lesser value."

Francis likewise said that, in making the 1994 decree, John Paul was "in no way belittling women and giving supreme power to men."

Citing from John Paul's earlier 1988 apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Francis said his predecessor "stated that if the priestly function is 'hierarchical,' it should not be understood as a form of domination, but 'is totally ordered to the holiness of the members of Christ.' "

Said Francis: "If this is not understood and the practical consequences of these distinctions are not drawn, it will be difficult to accept that the priesthood is reserved only for men and we will not be able to recognize women's rights or the need for their participation, in various ways, in the leadership of the church."

On the matter of blessing for same-sex couples, Francis said that decisions taken for reasons of pastoral prudence "do not necessarily become a norm."

"Canon law should not and cannot cover everything, and episcopal conferences should not pretend to do so with their documents and varied protocols, because the life of the church runs through many channels in addition to the regulations," said the pope.

Despite the Catholic Church's current prohibition against blessings for same-sex couples, the Catholic bishops of Belgium published guidelines in September that included a prayer and blessing for same-sex unions, while distinguishing them from sacramental marriage.

In March, Catholic bishops in Germany had voted to approve plans for same-sex blessings, and last month several priests in Cologne held a public blessing of gay couples in defiance of their diocese's conservative leader.

Earlier this summer, Francis initiated a major shakeup at the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. He appointed a fellow Argentine and longtime theological adviser, new Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, to serve as the office's new leader.

In an interview published soon after his appointment, Fernández signaled that he was open to revisiting the question of gay blessings, as long as they do not cause confusion about the meaning of marriage.

"If a blessing is given in such a way that it does not cause that confusion, it will have to be analyzed and confirmed," Fernández said at the time.

[GSR Latin American regional correspondent Rhina Guidos contributed to this report.]

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 13-26, 2023** print issue under the headline: Pope signals openness to blessings for gay couples, study of women’s ordination.