Vatican
Vatican News



A rainbow flag is seen near the spires of the Cologne Cathedral on July 9. The Vatican's doctrinal office on Dec. 18 released a document declaring it possible for Catholic priests to bless same-sex unions and divorced and remarried couples. (OSV News/Reuters/Jana Rodenbusch)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

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The Vatican's doctrinal office has officially declared it possible for Catholic priests to bless same-sex unions and divorced and remarried couples, under the condition that the blessings do not send mixed messages about the church's teaching on sacramental marriage and do not occur within a liturgical celebration.

While extremely narrow in scope, the Dec. 18 "declaration" from the powerful Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith may serve as the most concrete pastoral shift on the church's stance toward gay couples in the church's centuries' long history.

The publication of the eight-page document, "*Fiducia supplicans*: On the pastoral meaning of blessings," comes less than three months after Pope Francis had personally opened the door to such a possibility in response to five retired conservative Catholic cardinals who had written to the pontiff about whether such blessings might be possible.

While the new document distinguishes between liturgical blessings and spontaneous or personal ones, it states that Catholic priests may offer blessings to gay couples or those in "irregular" unions, if requested as a matter of popular piety or devotion. It also states that the couples "should not be required to have prior moral perfection" as a precondition for obtaining the blessing.

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"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," the document states.

Blessings under this form, the document says, serve as a prayer that God may aid such relationships so they "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."

While the declaration paves new ground for the pastoral practices of individual priests, it explicitly forbids that such blessings take place within the context of a liturgical celebration and does not allow for them to "be performed with any clothing, gestures, or words that are proper to a wedding."

Under the limited conditions the new guidelines outline, such blessings must be personally administered by the minister without any prepared texts or rituals developed by a national bishops' conference.

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The new Vatican instructions could force a course correction to a number of Catholic bishops' conferences in Europe, where various guidelines have been drafted or published in recent months.

In September, the Catholic bishops of Belgium published guidelines that included a prayer and blessing for same-sex unions, while distinguishing those blessings from sacramental marriage ceremonies.

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

Earlier this month, the Church of England officially sanctioned same-sex blessings for couples, including within the context of its liturgies, though the church still forbids church weddings for gay couples. As within the Catholic Church, the move has been the source of intense debate for years.

The Dec. 18 Vatican declaration marks a significant tonal shift from past Catholic documents on gay blessings and is co-signed by the prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, and the office's doctrinal secretary, Msgr. Armando Matteo.

In July, Francis initiated a major shakeup at the doctrinal office when he appointed Fernández, a fellow Argentine and longtime theological adviser, to lead the office.

In one of his first interviews, Fernández indicated that the question of gay blessings would likely be examined, following a controversial decree on the same issue from the office in 2021 that tersely said God "cannot bless sin."

While the new declaration acknowledges the 2021 decree, it states that it is time to "broaden" the church's perspective on blessings.

"There is the danger that a pastoral gesture that is so beloved and widespread will be subjected to too many moral prerequisites, which, under the claim of control, could overshadow the unconditional power of God’s love that forms the basis for the gesture of blessing," the document states.

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