Opinion
NCR Voices



Pope Francis waves to the crowd gathered in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican to pray the Angelus with him Dec. 17. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

December 20, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Pope Francis is known as a pope of surprises, and his decision to approve a document that cracked open the door to blessing same-sex unions and other "irregular" couples is a big one.

The declaration, *Fiducia Supplicans* from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, was bound to be the stuff of controversy. The pope might, in some future interview, reveal why he chose to have the declaration issued, and issued now. That decision is largely, but not entirely, in keeping with some of the dominant projects of the pontificate.

The caveat "not entirely" is required because this decision was not very synodal as many have conceived synodality, and synodality is one of the pope's largest theological projects.

The delegates to the synod on synodality only left Rome a few weeks ago, unable to find any consensus on LGBTQ issues. So the pope's decision to strike out along a new path on his own authority, though perfectly within his authority, is nonetheless a reminder that synodality within the church of Rome will exist alongside hierarchy and papal primacy, not replace them.

> *Fiducia Supplicans* is largely, but not entirely, in keeping with some of the dominant projects of the pontificate. The caveat 'not entirely' is required because this decision was not very synodal as many have conceived synodality.
>
> Tweet this

NCR's headline notwithstanding, there was no "major doctrinal shift" contained in the declaration. In fact, the document went out of its way to point out that the church's doctrine about marriage was left entirely intact:

> Therefore, rites and prayers that could create confusion between what constitutes marriage — which is the "exclusive, stable, and indissoluble

> union between a man and a woman, naturally open to the generation of children" — and what contradicts it are inadmissible. This conviction is grounded in the perennial Catholic doctrine of marriage; it is only in this context that sexual relations find their natural, proper, and fully human meaning. The Church's doctrine on this point remains firm.

The shift Francis intends is, at once, less exact and more profound than a doctrinal shift. What Francis has been trying to achieve for many years is to relocate the place of doctrine within the magisterium of the church, specifically to insist that doctrine serve the good of souls, not the other way round.

Instead of seeing the pope's responsibility as confined to the articulation of clearly thought-out statements of what the church does and does not believe, Francis wants the teaching office to prioritize its own pastoral application above doctrinal clarity. "How will this affect real people?" Francis asks before he puts pen to paper.

Papal documents usually are referred to by the opening words of their Latin text: *Rerum Novarum*, *Quadragesimo Anno*, *Humanae Vitae*, *Laborem Exercens*, *Caritas in Veritate*. This document is called *Fiducia Supplicans*. I would like to propose a title for the document in English, one not drawn from its opening words but one that captures its essence: "No Pariahs!"

What the declaration does is say that the church will not treat people in "irregular" situations — like being in a LGBTQ relationship or being divorced and remarried — as if they are beyond the pale. We welcome them into the church. Full stop. We cannot perform a marriage for a relationship that our Catholic tradition does not recognize as a marriage, but that should not be any bar to our welcoming people.

Advertisement

The pope is distancing the Catholic Church from the position adopted by some conservative Catholics and evangelicals that sees opposition to homosexuality as somehow especially important in defining the Christian faith.

The Gospels do not mention homosexuality. St. Paul does, and there are varying exegetical theories about his teachings. The prohibitions in the Hebrew Scriptures stand alongside other prohibitions like those against eating pork or shellfish, so it is not clear why this prohibition is considered uniquely relevant today.

I do not discount the word of God, nor the teachings drawn from them for 2,000 years, nor do I see any easy way to alter them that would allow full acceptance of same-sex marriage. But the question must be posed: Why is the church's stance toward gay men and women considered so totemic for certain conservatives?

And not just conservatives. Willingness to adopt the latest ideological position on gay and transgender issues is one of the ways progressives are most keen to self-identify.

Progressives are not called to account any longer for driving a car that is not union-made or for staying in a non-union hotel. Some progressives have abandoned their commitment to free speech. Many advocate a restrictive understanding of freedom of religion. But one dare not question progressive orthodoxies around issues of gender and sexuality.

Funny thing is that most of the gay men and women I know do not give a hoot what a bishop, even the bishop of Rome, thinks about their sex lives. Just as most straight people have long since stopped worrying about using artificial contraception, most LGBTQ Catholics care as much about good liturgy as they do about the possibility of getting a blessing for their union.

> The declaration says the church will not treat people in 'irregular' situations — like being in a LGBTQ relationship or being divorced and remarried — as if they are beyond the pale. We welcome them into the church. Full stop.
>
> Tweet this

For those who do care about getting such a blessing, the pope has cleared the path, and done so unequivocally. That is a good and decent thing. It is not difficult to imagine a gay or divorced and remarried couple, one of whom is in the hospital, calling the priest and asking for a blessing at a moment of acute vulnerability, and being glad to receive it.

Whenever Francis makes headlines on some controversial topic, especially one related to human sexuality, I am plagued by one question and one fear.

The question is the degree to which our American myopia shades and shapes our understanding of the particular issue, which the pope must view from the standpoint of the universal church.

The fear is that the loudest voices will belong to those who are also the most extreme, both those whose think animus to gay men and women is essential to Christian discipleship and those who, thinking tradition is nothing but an impediment, will fault the pope for not going whole hog and officiating at a same-sex wedding in the Sistine Chapel. Those voices will be the loudest. They are not the surest.

No one knows if this step the pope has taken will prove to be the first of many steps or the last, whether the synod next year will encourage additional movement or if it will shut it down.

The lessons drawn from other Christian communions are not encouraging. The Anglicans did not split when some local churches ordained women, but they did split when the American branch ordained an openly gay man as a bishop. The Methodist church in this country continues to break itself in twain over the issue of same-sex unions.

At the end of the day, the Petrine ministry exists to serve the unity of the church, and the pope will need to think long and hard about how to achieve that.

There are no easy answers on this. The step Francis took in approving *Fiducia Supplicans* is significant for those who will be comforted to have such a blessing. For the rest, I fear it will just be more fodder for the culture wars.