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Analysis
A wooden cross lies on a rainbow flag in Bonn, Germany, March 16, 2021. Catholic bishops ac

A wooden cross lies on a rainbow flag in Bonn, Germany, March 16, 2021. Catholic bishops across Eastern Europe are reacting negatively to the Vatican's recent decree allowing for priests to offer blessings for same-sex couples, Alex Fauldy writes. (OSV News/KNA/Julia Steinbrecht)



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Catholic bishops across Eastern Europe are reacting negatively to the Vatican's recent decree allowing for priests to offer blessings for same-sex couples, urging clergy not to utilize its permissions or offering interpretations of the text that clearly frustrate its intent.

A Dec. 27 statement by the Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference overtly rejected the approach of the document, titled "*Fiducia Supplicans*: On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings" and released by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith on Dec. 18.

"Considering the pastoral situation of our country" the Hungarian bishops advised their priests that, while blessing individuals is always possible without regard to sexuality, "we should always avoid giving a common blessing to couples who live together in a purely conjugal relationship, a non-ecclesially valid marriage or same sex relationship."



Pope Francis speaks during a meeting with Hungarian bishops, priests, religious and seminarians in the Basilica of St. Stephen April 28, 2023, in Budapest. (CNS/Vatican Media)

A more subtly obstructive approach emerged from Poland's hierarchy. In a statement to journalists on Dec. 21, Jesuit Fr. Leszek Gesiak, the Polish bishops' spokesman offered a reading of the new decree that is seemingly at variance with its plain wording.

Arguing for a "hermeneutic of continuity," Gesiak cited an earlier 2021 decree from the same Vatican office which said that blessings may be "given to individual persons with homosexual inclinations" but only persons "who manifest the will to live in fidelity to the revealed plans of God."

Reading the new decree in light of the previous text, Gesiak asserted that the new permission to bless same-sex couples was thus understandable only as pertaining to "individuals who totally abstain from sexual relations."

Further east, Ukraine's Latin-rite bishops voiced strident criticism of the new decree in a Dec 19 statement. The Conference of Roman Catholic Bishops in Ukraine said it saw a "danger in ambiguous wording that causes divergent interpretations among the faithful."

Indeed, the bishops went further saying, "What we missed in the document is that the Gospel calls sinners to conversion, and without a call to leave the sinful life of homosexual couples, the blessing may look like an endorsement."



The main door at the headquarters of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith is seen at the Vatican in this Feb. 15, 2022, file photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Friction between Ukrainian bishops and the Vatican over the decree further injures a troubled relationship. Ties have been strained since February 2022 because of what Ukrainian bishops perceive as ill-judged public and diplomatic interventions by Pope Francis, following Russia's violent invasion of Ukraine.

Besides collective statements by episcopal conferences, some bishops have articulated opposition individually.

Without naming the Vatican decree directly, Hungarian Cardinal Peter Erdo, archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest, nonetheless appeared to impugn both the document, and Francis' ministry, in his midnight Mass sermon on Christmas Eve by using barely coded language.

"If we are Christians, we must not only follow a pious philanthropic philosophy, perhaps with content that changes every decade according to fashion or the taste of the majority" but, rather, remember that "the teachings, life, death and resurrection of Jesus are the eternal standard," said the cardinal.

Erdo's intervention befits an established reputation for championing traditional views. The cardinal, favored by some conservative cardinals to succeed Francis, previously built a profile in this area during the 2014 and 2015 synods on the family, where he was known as an opponent of admitting divorced and remarried Catholics to Communion.



Pope Francis talks with Cardinal Péter Erdő of Esztergom-Budapest, Hungary, relator for the extraordinary Synod of Bishops, before a synod session at the Vatican Oct. 24, 2015. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Reactions to the decree from hierarchies in Eastern Europe have, however, not been uniformly negative.

The Slovak episcopal conference struck a decidedly positive note in a Dec. 21 communication welcoming the document as "a gesture of the Church's attention to every person." Slovak bishops pledged to "familiarize themselves with the document" and "if necessary … look for suitable forms in the context of the local Church."

The response likely reflects Slovakia's bishops search for a new way to discuss relations with the LGBT+ community after a shooting outside a LGBT bar in the capital Bratislava, widely perceived as a hate crime, left two people dead in October 2022.

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The Czech Republic bishops' conference has yet to issue a statement on the decree. That delay may reflect both diversity of opinion among the bishops and a desire to refrain from controversy over the Christmas period, when Czechia has been in mourning following the Dec. 21 mass shooting at Prague's Charles University. The tragedy left 15 dead and 25 injured.

Even in more conservative countries, however, public reactions from lay Catholic opinion-makers have been more varied than those of the episcopate.

In a Dec. 28 public Facebook post, Gyorgy Heidl, a Christian historian at Pécs University in Hungary said the Hungarian bishops' response statement seemed to assume blessings should only be given to couples living faultlessly by church teaching.

Conversely, Heidl opined, "If the [bishops' conference] sees the Church of the perfect as the goal to be achieved, we shouldn't be surprised at the radical decline in the number of people professing to be Catholics."

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