Opinion

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Over the last few weeks, there has been a range of reactions to — and a lot of commentary about — the recent declaration by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Fiducia Supplicans*, "On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings," which clarifies when people in relationships considered "irregular" are eligible to receive blessings and under what circumstances.

Most people have embraced the positive and rather matter-of-fact declaration that there is no pastoral or theological reason to withhold a blessing for a person seeking one, especially when the church already sanctions the blessings of animals, as well as tools and other inanimate objects. But there have also been those who mistakenly see this declaration as an affront to Catholicism as they understand it.

The fears of such critics appear to fall into two general buckets. First, there are those who believe that the blessing of same-sex couples (as well as divorced and remarried couples or other "irregular" relationships) will be viewed as a formal affirmation of the institution of same-sex marriage. Some people fear that blessing a same-sex couple will be "confused" for sacramental marriage, which *Fiducia Supplicans* explicitly distinguishes from such an ordinary blessing (a point reiterated on Jan. 4 in a dicastery press release).

Catholic leaders in Africa have expressed concerns that such confusion runs counter to local cultures and views about homosexuality, which may lead some African Catholics to convert to other Christian denominations that are more hostile to LGBTQ+ rights. Similar resistance has surfaced in some Eastern European contexts.

Second, it appears that there are those who are angry that LGBTQ+ persons are acknowledged as existing in the world at all. This homophobic frustration is most commonly found on social media and anonymous internet comments, but others have been more public with their displeasure.

Some have appeared to double down on the most incendiary and pastorally insensitive (not to mention theologically dubious) language that has appeared in Catholic documents on LGBTQ+ persons and ministry over the years.

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One conservative commentator recently objected to the Vatican's use of "couple" to describe two people of the same sex in a relationship, expressing indignation over the absence of language like "objectively disordered" and "acts of grave depravity" when referring to LGBTQ+ persons.

Another, also obsessing over the term "couple," presumes to know the sexual relationship status of all people referred to as a couple.

The first grouping of "concerns" is really a nonstarter and a distraction. The text of *Fiducia Supplicans* is sufficiently clear and the qualifications abundant for good-faith readers to understand the important distinctions between blessings and sacraments, so-called "regular" relationships and "irregular" relationships (of both the straight and queer varieties), and what is a formal rite or ritual and what is an impromptu request for prayer or blessing.

I would argue that anyone who remains "confused" or "unclear" about what this declaration on blessings permits or sets out to achieve is either reading the text in bad faith or not reading the text at all.

But the second grouping of "concerns" actually points to one of the more overlooked and yet significant results of the publication of *Fiducia Supplicans* for queer Catholics: simple recognition.

In other words, what has not received much attention over these last few weeks is the importance of LGBTQ+ people finally being seen and acknowledged by the institutional church. For so long, the ways in which LGBTQ+ people — whether single or partnered — have been described or addressed, often in absentia, have been done in ways that are inherently dehumanizing.

In the church, queer people and queer love have been erased by both misunderstanding and, at times, overt bigotry. Debates about whether or not official church documents, such as those at the synod on synodality, could use the acronym "LGBTQ+" is itself reflective of the strong desire of some people to continue denying the existence and experiences of queer folks.

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And this is one reason why *Fiducia Supplicans* is particularly meaningful. In order to declare that those in same-sex relationships can and should receive blessings from the church's ministers upon request, you must first acknowledge that such people actually exist in the world!

I am reminded of some of the insights shared by the New York Times columnist David Brooks in his latest book, *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*. Early in the book, he writes: "In this age of creeping dehumanization, I've become obsessed with social skills: how to get better at treating people with consideration; how to get better at understanding the people right around us."

Brooks adds, "There is one skill that lies at the heart of any healthy person, family, community organization, or society: the ability to see someone else deeply and make them feel seen—to accurately know another person, to let them feel valued, heard, and understood."

The Catholic Church has not been entirely healthy, at least according to Brooks' assertion that this skill of deeply seeing other people, especially people different from oneself, is necessary for a healthy individual or community. For so long, there has been no attempt to actually see LGBTQ+ people, which reminds me of the 2009 speech at Columbia University by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the former president of Iran, who said: "In Iran, we don't have homosexuals like in your country. In Iran, we do not have this phenomenon."

This kind of denial reflects willful ignorance at its worst. Sadly, we can see a similar denial in the ways many in the church view and talk about the LGBTQ+ community.

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Whether it is religious leaders, pastoral ministers, ordinary believers or former Iranian presidents, the denial of the existence of an entire category of persons is a form of dehumanization. As Brooks writes, "No crueler punishment can be devised

than to *not* see someone, to render them unimportant or invisible."

Though the gesture may be small, the publication of *Fiducia Supplicans* signals an important departure from the status quo of erasure and dehumanization. Perhaps this declaration will be enough of a recognition, of seeing and beholding of LGBTQ+ persons that over time the broader faith community (of which LGBTQ+ Catholics are equally a part) can open itself up to learn more about and from them.

As Brooks rightly reminds us, "Before a person is going to be willing to share personal stuff, they have to know that you respect their personal stuff."

I believe that previous dynamics have caused a vicious circle of ignorance in the church when it comes to LGBTQ+ persons. The broad message has been "You are not welcome here," or even "We do not acknowledge your existence or experience," which has rightly led to many in the LGBTQ+ community to shut down and walk away.

As a result, those in ministerial leadership rarely have the benefit and blessing of learning about the "joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties" of the queer people of God and their families. This only perpetuates cycles of ignorance, misunderstanding, rejection and exclusion.

I don't want to exaggerate either the intent or the impact of *Fiducia Supplicans*. It is a very small move that does not change much substantially. We could always bless people, just as we bless so many other things in the world. The church has not adjusted its understanding of who can be admitted to a sacramental marriage.

The pope has not departed from anything that has come before, apart from a commitment to pastoral consistency and recognition of the actual, diverse experiences of people in the church and world.

That many LGBTQ+ folks feel seen now and recognized by leaders in their faith community is a very good thing. Perhaps it will be the beginning of something more, but in the meantime it is at least a small acknowledgement of full dignity, value and humanity of LGBTQ+ people.