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A Black man wearing glasses, a gold and red mitre and white vestments speaks behind a pod

Congolese Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo Besungu of Kinshasa is pictured in a 2018 file photo. (CNS photo/Baz Ratner, Reuters)

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Vatican City — January 11, 2024
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Reaffirming their fidelity to the pope and the Gospel, Catholic bishops in Africa have released a common response to a recent Vatican declaration, saying they "generally prefer" not to offer blessings to same-sex couples.

The episcopal conferences across Africa "believe that the extra-liturgical blessings proposed in the declaration 'Fiducia supplicans' cannot be carried out in Africa without exposing themselves to scandals," said the statement released Jan. 11.

"We, the African bishops, do not consider it appropriate for Africa to bless homosexual unions or same-sex couples because, in our context, this would cause confusion and would be in direct contradiction to the cultural ethos of African communities," it said.

While recognizing the declaration, "Fiducia Supplicans" ("Supplicating Trust") on "the pastoral meaning of blessings," does not change church teaching about human sexuality and marriage, the statement said, the language it uses "remains too subtle for simple people to understand."

"Furthermore, it remains very difficult to be convincing that people of the same sex who live in a stable union do not claim legitimacy of their own status. We, African bishops, insist on the call for the conversion of all," it said.

The message, titled "No blessing for homosexual couples in the African churches," was signed by Congolese Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo Besungu, president of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, or SECAM, and a member of Pope Francis' Council of Cardinals.

The statement was addressed to all "brothers and sisters in the Lord" and represented a synthesis of responses from the African bishops' conferences to "Fiducia Supplicans," signed by Francis and published by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of Faith Dec. 18, 2023.

The SECAM statement "received the agreement" of Francis and Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the dicastery, it said, and presents a consolidated summary of the positions adopted by the different national and inter-territorial bishops' conferences across Africa in response to the Dec. 18 declaration.

The Vatican declaration firmly maintains church teaching that marriage is only a life-long union between a man and a woman, but it allows priests in certain circumstances to give very brief, informal, non-sacramental, non-liturgical blessings to "couples in irregular situations and same-sex couples without officially validating their status or changing in any way the Church's perennial teaching on marriage."

"Within the church family of God in Africa," the SECAM statement said, "this declaration has caused a shockwave, it has sown misconceptions and unrest in the minds of many lay faithful, consecrated persons and even pastors and has aroused strong reactions."

Fernández noted the strong opposition to the declaration in Africa in an interview Dec. 25 and said the bishops there were raising a concern about "the inappropriateness of performing blessings that could easily be confused with a legitimization of an irregular union in their regional contexts."

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Several African nations have laws that "penalize with imprisonment the mere fact of declaring oneself gay," so it would be difficult to imagine a priest in those countries giving a gay couple a blessing, he had told the Spanish newspaper ABC, and "it is up to each local bishop to make this discernment in his diocese or in any case to give further guidance."

The SECAM statement repeatedly reaffirmed the bishops' communion with and "unwavering attachment" and fidelity to the pope and the Word of God.

It said the bishops recognized the declaration does not change church teaching, that it explicitly excludes the recognition of homosexual marriage and that it deems any rite or prayer that could blur the proper definition of marriage to be unacceptable.

But it also noted the Vatican declaration "offers the possibility of these blessings but does not impose them" and that some countries prefer to take more time to reflect on the declaration.

The Vatican doctrinal office said in a follow-up statement Jan. 4 that bishops may take a cautious approach to the Vatican's guidance on blessing same-sex or other unmarried couples, but they should not deny their priests the possibility of discerning and imparting blessings on people who ask for them, as some bishops had forbidden priests in their diocese from imparting the pastoral blessings.

The Vatican office had said some communities will want to wait until more time is provided for study and for catechesis and "prudence and attention to the ecclesial context and to the local culture could allow for different methods of application."

The SECAM statement said bishops in Africa "will continue to reflect on the value of the general theme of this document, apart from just blessing for couples in an irregular situation, that is to say, on the richness of spontaneous blessings in everyday pastoral care."

The bishops' conferences in Africa reaffirm their commitment to continue to offer pastoral assistance to all its members, especially to couples in irregular situations, and they emphasized that "people with a homosexual tendency must be treated with respect and dignity, while reminding them that unions of the same-sex are

contrary to the will of God and therefore cannot receive the blessing of the church."

The bishops' conferences "general prefer -- each bishop remaining free in his diocese -- not to offer blessings to same-sex couples," it said.

Ambongo called on "Christian communities not to allow themselves to be shaken. His Holiness Pope Francis, fiercely opposed to any form of cultural colonization in Africa, blesses the African people with all his heart and encourages them to remain faithful, as always, to the defense of Christian values."