Opinion
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Prelates process into St. Mary's Cathedral in Kampala, Uganda, July 21, 2019, for the opening Mass of a weeklong meeting of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, known as SECAM. The organization released a document Jan. 11 that said bishops in Africa "generally prefer" not to offer blessings to same-sex couples. (OSV News/Courtesy SECAM)



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In the Tiroler Volkskunstmuseum in Innsbruck, Austria, featuring regional art of the Tyrol, there is a collection of magnificently, and intricately, carved nativity scenes. One of them shows the manger set amidst the mountainous Alps, with medieval towers looking down on the scene. That carving may not be historically accurate, but it is not heresy either. Its lack of historical precision does not undermine the doctrine of the incarnation. On the contrary, the Tyrolean manger exemplifies the doctrine. We Catholics believe that, just as the Son of God took on human flesh, the Christian faith can and must inculturate itself, adapting to the goodness inherent in all human cultures even while purifying any elements that are inherently contrary to the Gospel.

I thought of that manger scene when reading the response of the African bishops to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith's decree *Fiducia supplicans*. The Vatican document said that while not changing the church's perennial doctrine about marriage, it wanted to commend the practice of giving non-liturgical, spontaneous blessings to couples who are in an irregular union, whether because they are divorced or remarried or because they are in a same-sex relationship.

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"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," the statement read. Signed by Congolese Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo Besungu, president of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, or SECAM, the statement represented the united voice of the African bishops.

African Catholics have long warned that in the competition for adherents with other Christian churches and with Muslims seeking converts in the vast continent, any support for LGBT men and women would cripple their efforts to evangelize. The bishops said they "believe that the extra-liturgical blessings proposed in the declaration 'Fiducia supplicans' cannot be carried out in Africa without exposing themselves to scandals." Fair enough.

How is that different, then, from the decision by the German Synodal Way in March 2023 to affirm the practice of blessing same-sex couples? The article about the German decision noted, "German bishops face pressure from frustrated grassroots Catholics in a country where Christians are roughly equally divided between Protestants and Catholics." In Germany, unlike Africa, it seems scandalous to many Catholics that the Catholic Church does not bless same-sex couples.

In the United States, when I talk to many leaders in Catholic higher education, they tell me that the church's stance against any sexual relations outside marriage, especially for gay couples in long-term, loving relationships, is a huge stumbling

block for the students on their campuses.

Some of my conservative U.S. Catholic friends side with the Africans, and warn that if the church were to become more willing to reexamine its moral theology in light of changed anthropological understandings, many Catholics would bolt for the evangelical churches or for the schismatic Lefebvrist communities.

Both sides make the same exact argument: If the church does not stay/shift on issues of human sexuality, it risks damaging its appeal; it will cripple its ability to evangelize. Why should a pastoral provision be made for one group and not the other?

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The awkward disagreements between the churches of Europe and North America with the churches of the Global South will not be easy to resolve. Alongside our belief in inculturation, we Catholics believe we must be united in doctrine and discipline, that what is a sin in Nigeria cannot be a sacrament in the Netherlands.

The synodal process is the perfect mechanism for resolving the disagreements, first and foremost by distinguishing between doctrine and pastoral practice, and also acknowledging that the two are not alien from one another either. This is what the African bishops hinted at when they stated: "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." The one part of Fiducia supplicans that seemed too cute by half was its insistence that a blessing only be imparted to a couple if they were not seeking such recognition of the legitimacy of the relationship.

Something that is worth studying, also, is the degree to which efforts to include LGBT people into the life of the church in the West produce a backlash that is felt in the Global South. In this age of globalized, unmediated news, it seems likely that events celebrating inclusion in the West could be put to disastrous use by those who oppose such inclusion elsewhere. I witnessed this in 2003 when living in Little Rock, Arkansas. My gay friends and neighbors were thrilled when the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled in favor of same-sex marriage but they were also worried about the backlash in Arkansas. Again, the synodal process should look into such phenomena.

Given the long, ugly history of anti-LGBT bigotry, I hope the African bishops will find a way to do what they can to uphold the dignity of all people. I hope, too, that those in the West will not be so condescending when discussing the African bishops' stance. Most of all, I venture to hope that the synodal process will see this issue as part of a larger, important discussion regarding the relationship of doctrine to pastoral practice. The synodal process, too, can consider the establishment of legitimate diversity, as well as the prevention of illegitimate diversity, in the pastoral practice. Otherwise, the church will be broken in two.