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Pope Francis faces and stands in front of a group of men wearing cardinals' cassocks

Pope Francis meets members of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith in the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Jan. 26, 2024. In the front row from left are: Cardinals Christoph Schönborn, Robert Prevost, Seán P. O'Malley, Peter Turkson, Victor Manuel Fernández, Claudio Gugerotti, Marc Ouellet, Fernando Filoni, John Onaiyekan and Stephen Mulla. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Pope Francis again insisted that an informal blessing of a gay or other unmarried couple is not a blessing of their union but a sign of the Catholic Church's closeness to them and its hope that they will grow in faith.

"The intent of 'pastoral and spontaneous blessings' is to concretely show the closeness of the Lord and the church to all those who, finding themselves in different situations, ask for help to carry on -- sometimes to begin -- a journey of faith," Francis said Jan. 26 as he met members of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The full membership of the dicastery was holding its annual plenary meeting at the Vatican.

While Francis' remarks to the members focused on their discussions about the sacraments, human dignity and faith, particularly the centrality of evangelization, he also mentioned "Fiducia Supplicans" ("Supplicating Trust") on "the pastoral meaning of blessings," which was published by the dicastery and signed by Francis Dec. 18.

The document said that while the church "remains firm" in teaching that marriage is only a life-long union between a man and a woman, in certain circumstances priests can give 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."

Reaction from bishops to the document ran the gamut from saying it did not go far enough to outrage and diocesan bans on implementing it.

Francis told dicastery members that he wanted to make two points about the document. The first, he said, was that "these blessings, outside of any liturgical context and form, do not require moral perfection to be received."

Secondly, he said, "when a couple spontaneously approaches to ask for it, one does not bless the union, but simply the people who made the request together. Not the union, but the people, taking into account, of course, the context, the sensitivities, the places where people live and the most appropriate ways to do it."

In early January, Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the dicastery, issued a note clarifying that "prudence and attention to the ecclesial context and to the local culture could allow for different methods of application" of "Fiducia Supplicans."

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In his speech to dicastery members, Francis also mentioned a document on human dignity that the dicastery is working on.

In an interview with the Spanish news agency EFE Jan. 13, Fernández said, "We are preparing a very important document on human dignity which includes not only social issues, but also a strong critique of moral issues such as sex change,

surrogacy, gender ideologies, etc."

"As Christians, we must not tire of insisting on the primacy of the human person and the defense of his or her dignity beyond every circumstance," the pope said, adding that he hoped the new document "will help us, as a church, to always be close to all those who, without fanfare, in concrete daily life, fight and personally pay the price for defending the rights of those who do not count."

Francis began his speech to the group by quoting the dicastery's main task as described by "Praedicate Evangelium," which says it is "to help the Roman Pontiff and the Bishops to proclaim the Gospel throughout the world by promoting and safeguarding the integrity of Catholic teaching on faith and morals."

As the church prepares to celebrate the Holy Year 2025 and as it strives to preach the Gospel to a changing world, he said, the dicastery must lead the way in helping the church "reflect again and with greater passion on several themes: the proclamation and communication of the faith in the contemporary world, especially to the younger generations; the missionary conversion of ecclesial structures and pastoral workers; the new urban cultures with their many challenges but also unprecedented questions about meaning; finally, and especially, the centrality of the kerygma in the life and mission of the church."

In his 2013 exhortation "Evangelii Gaudium," Francis summarized the "kerygma" as the message: "Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you."

"For us, that which is most essential, most beautiful, most attractive and, at the same time, most necessary, is faith in Christ Jesus," the pope told dicastery members. "All of us together, God willing, will solemnly renew it in the course of the jubilee year and each one of us is called to proclaim it to every man and woman on earth."