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Pope Francis speaks to employees of the Italian bishops' TV and radio networks in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican Jan. 29, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Making a list of which sinners are welcome in the church and which sinners are not goes against the teaching of the Gospel, Pope Francis told an Italian newspaper.

The pope said more than one person had asked him why he approved the declaration of the Dicastery of the Doctrine of the Faith permitting priests to give informal blessings to gay couples and couples not married in the church as long as those blessings do not give the appearance of blessing the couple's union.

"I respond that the Gospel is to sanctify everyone," the pope said in the interview with La Stampa published Jan. 29.

Francis said that when he was in Lisbon, Portugal, in August for World Youth Day and repeatedly said the church is open to "todos, todos, todos" — everyone, everyone, everyone — he was affirming the Gospel, and particularly the parable about the wedding feast where the invited guests don't arrive so the king tells his servants to go out to the streets and invite everyone, "good and bad alike."

"The son of God wants us to understand that he doesn't want a select group, an elite," the pope said. "Then maybe someone gets 'smuggled in'? But at that point, God takes care of it and indicates the path" forward.

"When they ask me, 'But can these people who are in such an inappropriate moral situation also enter?'" the pope said, "I assure them, 'Everyone. The Lord said it.'"

"I get questions like this, especially recently after some of my decisions," Francis said.

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Asked specifically about the blessings of couples, the pope said it was important that the people requesting them are doing so with "good will" and that they are given

"precise instructions about the Christian life," including an explanation that the church is blessing them and not their union.

"But we are all sinners. Why then draw up a list of sinners who can enter the church and a list of sinners who cannot be in the church? This is not the Gospel," he said.

The people who are "vehemently protesting" the decision to allow the blessings "belong to small ideological groups," although that is not the case with bishops from many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the pope said. "For them, homosexuality is something 'ugly' from a cultural point of view; they do not tolerate it."

Francis said he trusts that "gradually everyone will become calmer about the spirit of the statement" and understand that the aim is "to include, not divide. It invites people to welcome people and entrust them, and ourselves, to God."