Vatican

View from the Vatican



Pope Francis poses for a photo with Msgr. Armando Matteo, left, secretary of the doctrinal section of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, dicastery prefect, during a meeting at the Vatican on Dec. 18, 2023, the date *Fiducia Supplicans* was released for publication. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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No Vatican document over the last year has caused more uproar than *Fiducia Supplicans*, the declaration from the church's doctrinal office allowing priests to bless individuals who are remarried or in same-sex unions.

The text — eight pages made available initially in five languages — arrived in reporters' inboxes at 2:15 in the afternoon one year ago today, on Dec. 18, for "immediate" publication. In many respects, it defined the year ahead for Pope Francis and some of his key allies.

The rollout was not dissimilar to another incident that occurred in March 2022, when after nine years in the making, the Vatican released the text of its long awaited new constitution, *Praedicate Evangelium*. That document overhauling the church's central bureaucracy was one of the signature reforms of Francis' papacy. With little fanfare at all, the document arrived on a Saturday without a customary press conference to explain the sweeping changes until the following Monday — more than 48 hours after the document had been released and stories published.

But if that was mostly concerned with the church's internal governance, *Fiducia* was an outward facing document, potentially affecting the lives of many Catholic faithful and those who minister to them.

Again, for *Fiducia*, there was no press conference to help offer a definitive interpretation of the document. A theological text about grace and the nature of blessings was quickly reduced to a political text about who is able to receive one. Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, the pope's then-newly named doctrinal czar, wouldn't make his debut in the Vatican press room's dais until four months later.



Pope Francis shares a laugh with Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, right, prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Msgr. Armando Matteo, secretary of the dicastery's doctrinal section, during a meeting in the library of the Apostolic Palace, Dec. 18, 2023, at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Was the new declaration meant to allow priests to bless *individuals* in same-sex unions or the *couples* themselves? Even the Vatican's own official news platform took some time to make sense of it.

The initial Dec. 18 headline in Vatican News announced that "Doctrinal declaration opens possibility of blessing couples in irregular situations." A few months later, however, another headline read: "Pope: Church open to all, but 'no' to blessings of same-sex unions."

Adding to the chaos, the text caught many Vatican officials by surprise — including members of the pope's own Council of Cardinal Advisers, who had just met together in Rome days before its release.

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In Eastern Europe and Africa the backlash was particularly severe. The Coptic Orthodox Church cut off dialogue with Rome over the move, and later in the spring, Fernández traveled to Cairo to meet with Pope Tawadros II in an effort to ease the tensions

Congolese Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo Besungu of Kinshasa, one of the pope's advisers and president of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, or SECAM, flew to Rome right after the document's release to meet with both Francis and Fernández to discuss the fallout on the continent.

The result was a document, approved by the pope, bluntly titled: "No blessing for homosexual couples in the African churches."



A rainbow flag is seen on the wall of a Catholic church in Cologne, Germany, May 10, 2021, as the building is open for same-sex couples to receive a blessing. Pope Francis formally approved letting Catholic priests bless people in same-sex unions, the Vatican announced Dec. 18, 2023. (OSV News/Reuters/Thilo Schmuelgen)

But even that had its internal challenges: later the regional Catholic bishops' conferences in North Africa and Southern Africa would distance themselves from Ambongo's statement. As Cardinal Cristóbal López Romero of Rabat, Morocco, told reporters during the 2024 synod: "we were not respected in this consultation process at the African level either."

The continuing back-and-forth raised the stakes as delegates returned to Rome in October for the final session of the synod on synodality.

LGBTQ issues surfaced both inside and outside of the synod hall, although the more dominant theme that emerged throughout the month was that of women's ministries.

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While the pope had relegated the topic to a special study group, the secretive manner in which it was handled and the lack of consultation and transparency throughout the process mirrored some of the *Fiducia* fallout.

"Learning about synodality is not a simple thing. We will have to go through many setbacks and many moments in which we will have to apologize," was Romero's assessment of the situation following the gay blessings declaration.

A similarly candid acknowledgement was offered by Xavière Sr. Nathalie Becquart following outrage on how the question of women had been handled.

"In synodality we are all learning," she said. "Even the Roman Curia, step by step, is trying to learn synodality."

One year later, perhaps *Fiducia Supplicans* highlights both the accomplishment and the challenge of this pontificate: a pope willing to put on full display the messiness of trying to extend his message of grace and mercy and, at the same time, being

held accountable by his own synodal standards of consultation and transparency.

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