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Vatican spokesman clarifies pope on civil unions

by Thomas Reese

NCR Today

Rev. Thomas Rosica, C.S.B., the English language assistant to Holy See Press Office, sent out an email clarifying what the pope said about "civil unions" in his interview in the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*.

There have been numerous questions, calls and messages throughout the day today regarding Pope Francis' recent interview in the Italian daily newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, particularly referring to the section on marriage and civil unions. Some journalists have interpreted the Pope's words in the interview to reflect an openness on the part of the Church to civil unions. Others have interpreted his words to be addressing the question of same-sex marriage. I have consulted with Fr. Federico Lombardi, SJ, throughout the afternoon and have prepared the following notes on Pope Francis' interview.

Asked specifically about "unioni civili," (civil unions), Pope Francis responded:

"Il matrimonio e' fra un uomo e una donna. Gli Stati laici vogliono giustificare le unioni civili per regolare diverse situazioni di convivenza, spinti dall'esigenza di regolare aspetti economici fra le persone, come ad esempio assicurare l'assistenza sanitaria. Si tratta di patti di convivenza di varia natura, di cui non saprei elencare le diverse forme. Bisogna vedere i diversi casi e valutarli nella loro varieta'."

My translation:

"Marriage (matrimony) is between a man and a woman. Civil states want to justify civil unions in order to regulate (normalize) different arrangements of cohabitation; - prompted by the necessity of regulating (normalizing) economic aspects among people, for example in providing health insurance or benefits. This consists of different kinds of living arrangements which I wouldn't know how to enumerate with precision. We must consider different cases and evaluate each particular case."

[It is important to understand here that "civil unions" in Italy refer to people who are married by the state, outside of a religious context.]

Journalists have asked if the Pope was referring specifically to gay civil unions in the above response. The Pope did not choose to enter into debates about the delicate matter of gay civil unions. In his response to the interviewer, he emphasized the natural characteristic of marriage between one man and one woman, and on the other hand, he also spoke about the obligation of the state to fulfill its responsibilities towards its citizens.

By responding in this way, Pope Francis spoke in very general terms, and did not specifically refer to same-sex marriage as a civil union. Pope Francis simply stated the issues and did not interfere with positions held by Episcopal Conferences in various countries dealing with the question of civil unions and same sex marriage.

We should not try to read more into the Pope's words than what has been stated in very general terms.

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