

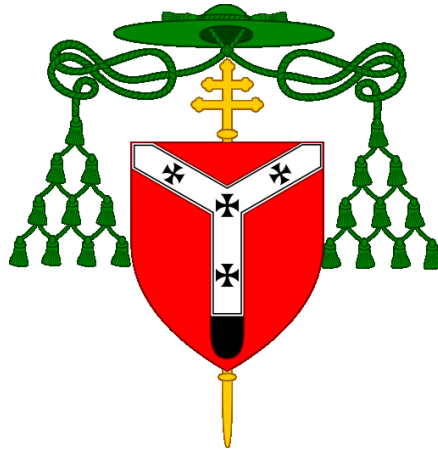
SAINT PAUL'S HAREFIELD

A Monthly Miscellany



Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

Romans 8:31-35



St Paul's Harefield

His eminence John Carmel, Cardinal Heenan, Archbishop of Westminster, has this day canonically erected the above parish of Harefield, and dedicated it to Saint Paul, Apostle of the nations.

5th April 1967

Parish Priest: Father James Mulligan

2 Merle Avenue, Harefield

UB9 6DG

07809 398171 01895 822365

Email: harefield@rcdow.org.uk

Mass daily at 9.15am ... Sunday Vigil Mass: Saturday 6.30pm

Sunday Masses: ... 9.00am and 11.00am

Holy Hour Monday: ... 9.45am - 10.45am

Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament: ... Friday 8.30am, Saturday 8.30am

Rosary each weekday morning after Mass

Confessions: 6.00pm Saturday – or indeed any time that a priest is available

Online Morning Prayer: 8.00am

Online Night Prayer: 9.00pm

Please note: St Paul's church is live-streamed 24 hours per day

SAINT PAUL'S HAREFIELD WELCOMES YOU

We extend a special welcome to those who are single, thinking of marriage, married, divorced, widowed, well-heeled or down at heel or down and out.

We especially welcome wailing babies and excited toddlers or bored teenagers.

We welcome you whether you can sing like Pavarotti or Maria Callas or Roy Orbison - or just mime (lip synch) or hum quietly to yourself.

You're welcome here if you're 'just browsing,' just woken up or just got out of bed the wrong side or just got out of prison. Whether a high flyer or a plodder.

You'll fit in here if you are a classical music aficionado or a punk rocker. You're welcome whether you are a cool dude or not, if you are an Elvis fan, a Johnny Cash fan, a Heavy Metal fan or (God forbid) a fan of Barclay James Harvest.

We don't care if you're more Christian than Pope Francis or Saint Mother Teresa, or haven't been to church since Christmas twenty-five years ago.

We extend a special welcome to those who have come only to scoff.

We welcome keep-fit mums, golf widows, football dads, joggers, bikers, starving artists, tree-huggers, line dancers, latte sippers, vegetarians, vegans, bumper sticker philosophers, existentialists, logical positivists and junk-food eaters.

We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted.

We welcome you if you're having problems, are down in the dumps or don't like 'organised religion' or have anger management issues.

We offer a welcome to those who believe in the Loch Ness Monster.

We welcome those who are tattooed, pierced, both or neither.

We offer a special welcome to those who took the wrong turning and wound up at Saint Paul's by mistake.

We welcome pilgrims, tourists, seekers, day-dreamers, doubters ... and you.

A Warm Welcome to you from Saint Paul's Harefield

SAINT PAUL'S HAREFIELD

A Monthly Miscellany

January 2024

The Holy Father's Intentions for the Month of January 2024

For the Gift of Diversity in the Church: We pray that the Holy Spirit may help us to recognize the gift of different charisms within the Christian community and to discover the richness of different traditions and rituals in the Catholic Church. (See also <https://www.popesprayer.net/>)

Feasts for January 2024

1. **MARY, MOTHER OF GOD, OCTAVE DAY OF CHRISTMAS**, *Solemnity*
2. Basil the Great; Gregory Nazianzen, *Memorial*
3. Wednesday of Christmas Time; Most Holy Name of Jesus, *Opt. Mem.*
4. Elizabeth Ann Seton (USA and CAN), *Memorial*
5. John Neumann, *Memorial*
6. Saturday of Christmas Time; André Bessette (USA), *Opt. Mem.*
7. **EPIPHANY OF THE LORD**, *Solemnity*
8. **Baptism of the Lord**, *Feast*
13. Hilary, *Opt. Mem.*
14. SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, *Sunday*
17. Anthony, *Memorial*
20. Fabian; Sebastian, *Opt. Mem.*
21. THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, (Sunday of the Word of God), *Sunday*
22. Day of Prayer for Unborn (USA), *Opt. Mem.*
23. Vincent of Saragossa (US), Marianne Cope (US), *Opt. Mem.*
24. Francis de Sales, *Memorial*
25. **Conversion of St. Paul the Apostle**, *Feast*
26. Timothy and Titus, *Memorial*
27. Angela Merici, *Opt. Mem.*
28. FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, *Sunday*
31. John Bosco, *Memorial*

Responses to Fiducia Supplicans

No papal document has produced such strong reaction as has 'Fiducia Supplicans' issued on 18th December 2023. Herewith a snapshot of the reactions:

Statement of Archbishop Mark O'Toole on Fiducia Supplicans

I warmly welcome the desire and intention of the Holy Father to encourage and challenge us to be close to all people irrespective of their personal circumstances. The Declaration Fiducia supplicans, issued yesterday by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, is another example of this. At the heart of the Declaration is a call for those of us who are pastors to take a sensitive pastoral approach in being available and willing to draw close to people whatever their situation.

The Declaration indicates that it is now permissible for ordained ministers to “join in the prayer of those persons who, although in a union that cannot be compared in any way to a marriage, desire to entrust themselves to the Lord and his mercy, to invoke his help, and to be guided to a greater understanding of his plan of love and of truth.” Such sensitive accompaniment clearly reflects the Lord’s desire to be present to all people. As the Declaration indicates, “When people ask for a blessing, an exhaustive moral analysis should not be placed as a precondition for conferring it. For, those seeking a blessing should not be required to have prior moral perfection.”

At the same time, the Declaration “remains firm on the traditional doctrine of the Church about marriage, not allowing any type of liturgical rite or blessing similar to a liturgical rite that can create confusion.” This is in keeping with what Pope Francis wrote in July, that while “pastoral prudence must adequately discern whether there are forms of blessing, requested by one or more persons, that do not convey an erroneous conception of marriage,...it is not appropriate for a

diocese, a bishops' conference, or any other ecclesial structure to constantly and officially establish procedures or rituals for all kinds of matters.”

The Declaration is clear about this, highlighting that in order “to avoid any form of confusion or scandal, when the prayer of blessing is requested by a couple in an irregular situation, even though it is expressed outside the rites prescribed by the liturgical books, this blessing should never be imparted in concurrence with the ceremonies of a civil union, and not even in connection with them. Nor can it be performed with any clothing, gestures, or words that are proper to a wedding. The same applies when the blessing is requested by a same-sex couple.”

I invite all in the Archdiocese of Cardiff and the Diocese of Menevia to read and reflect on *Fiducia supplicans* carefully, so that they are aware of the parameters in which clergy may impart a blessing to others who seek it from them. Such blessings should not take place within the liturgical or sacramental life of the parish, but “in other contexts, such as a visit to a shrine, a meeting with a priest, a prayer recited in a group, or during a pilgrimage. Indeed, through these blessings that are given not through the ritual forms proper to the liturgy but as an expression of the Church’s maternal heart—similar to those that emanate from the core of popular piety—there is no intention to legitimize anything, but rather to open one’s life to God, to ask for his help to live better, and also to invoke the Holy Spirit so that the values of the Gospel may be lived with greater faithfulness.”

I pray that this Declaration will encourage all of us to show ever more clearly that the Church is a loving mother, who desires to bring the closeness and compassion of God to all His children. May it give consolation and encouragement to those who seek the Father’s blessing, to draw closer to Him, and to discover more deeply the beauty of His Son Jesus, in the life of our holy mother, the Church.

+Mark O’Toole

Joy and alarm in bishops' responses to *Fiducia Supplicans*

Many bishops issued clarifications following local reaction to the document, but these varied considerably in their explanation of the text.



The Palazzo del Sant'Uffizio, seat of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Bishops across the world have issued responses to last week's publication of a Vatican document on blessings for couples in "irregular" relationships, *Fiducia Supplicans*.

Numerous bishops, particularly in Europe and the US, welcomed the document's "new idea" of blessings, though many emphasised that it did not provide approval for any "irregular" situation, including same-sex couples.

The document's chief author Cardinal Víctor Fernández, the prefect of the Dicastery of the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF), said that *Fiducia Supplicans* recognised "the possibility of blessing 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".

Many bishops issued clarifications following local reaction to the document, but these varied considerably in their explanation of the text.

The Archbishop of Salzburg Franz Lackner, who heads the Austrian bishops' conference, told the public broadcaster Österreichischer Rundfunk that it meant that priests "can no longer say no" when asked for a blessing by any couple.

He expressed "joy" at the recognition that "love, loyalty, and even hardship are shared with one another" in irregular couples.

Lackner's German counterpart, Bishop Georg Bätzing of Limburg, similarly emphasised that the document "points to the pastoral importance of a blessing that cannot be refused upon personal request", while in France the Archbishop of Sens and

Auxerre Hervé Giraud said that it promotes “another idea of blessing, a blessing of growth and not a blessing of pure recognition”.

“I myself could give a blessing to a same-sex couple, because I believe it’s based on a beautiful idea of blessing, according to the Gospel and the style of Christ,” Archbishop Giraud told *La Croix*.

“Pope Francis is trying to move away from the simple ‘permit-prohibit’ to place people under God’s gaze in order to lead them back to safer paths. Blessing opens these safer paths.”

In the Philippines, the president of the bishops’ conference Bishop Pablo Virgilio David of Kalookan issued a statement welcoming *Fiducia Supplicans* on 20 December, saying it was “clear in its content and intent” and “does not require much explanation”.

This followed a notice of “episcopal guidance” issued by Archbishop Socrates B. Villegas of Lingayen-Dagupan on 19 December, detailing “categories of blessings” to which the DDF document had now added “blessings of mercy”.

He said that “asking for mercy is a request for pity and for remedy” and that “when a Catholic priest prays a blessing of mercy on a couple in an irregular situation...he is asking God to have pity on both of them and to give them the grace of conversion so that they can regularise their relationships”.

In a letter to all African and Madagascan bishops dated 20 December, Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo, president of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), requesting their assistance in composing “a single synodal declaration, valid for the whole African Church” on *Fiducia Supplicans*.

“The ambiguity of [*Fiducia Supplicans*], which is open to many interpretations and manipulations, causes much confusion among the faithful and I believe that, as pastors of the Church in Africa, we must express clarity on this question in order to give a clear direction to our Christians,” he said.

Cardinal Ambongo’s letter came after African bishops had made a variety of responses to the document.

Malawi’s bishops published a four-point clarification, “having noted certain erroneous interpretations of this declaration that have generated interest, fears and worries amongst Catholics and people who look up to the Catholic Church for moral, spiritual and doctrinal guidance”.

It emphasised that *Fiducia Supplicans* upholds existing teaching on marriage and does not allow blessings on same-sex unions as such, concluding that “to avoid creating confusion among the faithful, we direct that for pastoral reasons, blessings of any kind and for same-sex unions of any kind, are not permitted in Malawi”.

Bishops in neighbouring Zambia issued a similar directive, saying that the document should be “taken as for further reflection and not for implementation in Zambia”.

In Cameroon, a statement signed by the bishops’ conference president Archbishop Fuanya Nkea of Bamenda condemned “semantic abuses designed to distort the value of realities and the true meaning of the notions of family, couple, spouse, sexuality and marriage”.

Declaring total opposition to homosexuality, it said that “differentiating between liturgical and non-liturgical contexts in order to apply the blessing to same-sex ‘couples’ is hypocritical” and forbid all such blessings.

Few other bishops on the continent issued such explicit prohibitions, though most emphasised that “you are blessing the people and not the union”, in the words of Bishop Matthew Kwasi Gyamfi of Sunyani, president of the Ghanaian bishops’ conference.

“In blessing persons, we do not bless the immoral actions they may perform but hope that the blessing and prayers offered over them as human persons will provoke them to conversion and to return to the ways of the Lord,” the Kenyan bishops’ conference said in its response.

A statement signed by the president of the Southern African Catholic Bishops Bishop Sithembele Sipuka of Umtata said: “The document makes it clear that it is not putting forward a change of doctrine about marriage to include people of the same sex.”

The statement said that *Fiducia Supplicans* “may be taken as a guide with prudence” and said the conference “will guide further on how such a blessing may be requested and granted to avoid the confusion the document warns against”.

Bishops in Burkina Faso made a similar commitment to further clarification in future.

In the US, many episcopal responses to *Fiducia Supplicans* were concerned with what Archbishop Samuel Aquila of Denver said was the failure of “the secular media to accurately report what was written in the document”.

He was typical in emphasising that such blessings “can never be seen as legitimising sin” and “should be done with discretion, preferably privately to avoid scandal and confusion”.

A response from the United States’ Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) focused on the “distinction between liturgical (sacramental) blessings, and pastoral blessings, which may be given to persons who desire God’s loving grace in their lives”, as articulated in the document.

“The Church’s teaching on marriage has not changed, and this declaration affirms that, while also making an effort to accompany people through the imparting of pastoral blessings because each of us needs God’s healing love and mercy in our lives,” it said.

In a statement to his Archdiocese of Boston, Cardinal Seán O’Malley emphasised that the Pope “has not endorsed gay marriage” but provided “clarity to how to impart [God’s] blessings”.

“Priests imparting these blessings need to be careful that it should not become a liturgical or semi-liturgical act, similar to a sacrament,” he said.

Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago said that the approach espoused in *Fiducia Supplicans* “will help many more in our community feel the closeness and compassion of God”.

Bishop David Walkowiak of Grand Rapids, Michigan, said that the document “reaffirms an appropriate pastoral response to people who express a request for these prayers”.

“These spontaneous, private prayers and blessings are given routinely. They are nothing new,” he said.

Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, in his capacity as chairman of the USCCB Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life, and Youth, issued a statement affirming that “the declaration does not constitute a ‘step’ toward ratification of same-sex marriage nor a compromising of the Church’s teaching regarding those in irregular relationships”.

It was, he said, “very much congruent with Pope Francis’s long-held conviction that those who do not live up to the full demand of the Church’s moral teaching are nevertheless loved and cherished by God and invited to accept the Lord’s offer of forgiveness”.

In a letter to the priests of the Dioceses of Trondheim and Tromsø in Norway, Bishop Erik Varden OCSO said that their “ability to combine responsible theological intelligence with Christian charity and pastoral tact” was key to the request in *Fiducia Supplicans* for “pastoral sensibility”.

He noted the “sincerity, humility, and strength” of Catholics who ask for a blessing at Mass when they cannot receive communion as an instance of blessing individuals in irregular circumstances.

Bishop Varden said that the document provided criteria for the application of “pastoral blessings”, emphasising that they should be private without any “legitimising” intention.

Considering its reference to Scripture, he argued that “a Biblical blessing is rarely an affirmation of a *status quo*” but instead “confers a call to set out, to be converted”, outlining instances of Christ’s “manifested sternness” which “must count as paradigms of pastoral blessing”.

A response from the Polish bishops’ conference, while not criticising the DDF, expressed serious reservations about the blessings, saying that “avoiding confusion and scandal is virtually impossible” when blessing same-sex couples.

The statement made extensive reference to the Vatican’s 2021 *responsum* which excluded any possibility of blessing same-sex unions, concluding that “individual people living in complete abstinence” could be blessed “in a private way, outside the liturgy and without any analogy to sacramental rites”.

The Roman Catholic bishops of Ukraine issued a statement on 19 December in response to “a storm of reactions and misunderstandings regarding questions of morality and doctrine” in *Fiducia Supplicans*.

They criticised its “ambiguous wording”, finding that “merciful acceptance of [a sinner] and express disapproval of his sin is not very clearly visible in the text”. They also argued that same-sex relationships and irregular heterosexual relationships should not be considered in the same way.

“What we missed in the document is that the Gospel calls sinners to conversion, and without a call to abandon the sinful life of homosexual couples, the blessing can look like approval,” the statement said.

The head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church said that *Fiducia Supplicans* had “no legal force” on Ukrainian Catholics, as it “interprets the pastoral meaning of blessings in the Latin Church, not the Eastern Catholic Churches”.

In a communiqué on 22 December, Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk said that his Church had a distinct understanding of blessings, drawn from “its own liturgical, theological, canonical, and spiritual heritage”.

Within this tradition, “the blessing of a priest or bishop is a liturgical gesture that cannot be separated from the rest of the content of the liturgical rites” and “has an evangelising and catechetical dimension [so] can in no way contradict the teaching of the Catholic Church about the family as a faithful, indissoluble, and fertile union of love between a man and a woman”.

“Pastoral discernment urges us to avoid ambiguous gestures, statements, and concepts that would distort or misrepresent God’s word and the teachings of the Church,” the communiqué concluded.

A statement from the Archdiocese of Astana in Kazakhstan was exceptional in its explicit criticism of Pope Francis, claiming that he had departed from the “truth of the Gospel” and asking him “to revoke the permission to bless couples in an irregular situation and same-sex couples”.

The statement, signed by Archbishop Tomash Peta and his auxiliary Bishop Athanasius Schneider, warned of “the great deception and the evil that resides in the very permission to bless [such] couples”, calling such a blessing “a most serious abuse of the Holy Name of God”.

“Therefore, none, not even the most beautiful, of the statements contained in this declaration of the Holy See can minimise the far-reaching and destructive consequences resulting from the effort to legitimise such blessings.”

Archbishop Peta and Bishop Schneider said that these would make the Church “a propagandist of the globalist and ungodly ‘gender ideology’” and prohibited any such blessings in the archdiocese.

Cardinal Gerhard Müller, the former prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (now the DDF), published a lengthy criticism of *Fiducia Supplicans*, denying the validity of “pastoral blessings” bestowed by priests as distinct from Church teaching – and calling it “a sacrilegious and blasphemous act” for a priest to attempt such.

“Given the unity of deeds and words in the Christian faith, one can only accept that it is good to bless [irregular] unions, even in a pastoral way, if one believes that such unions are not objectively contrary to the law of God,” he said.

“It follows that as long as Pope Francis continues to affirm that homosexual unions are always contrary to God’s law, he is implicitly affirming that such blessings cannot be given.”

Amid such reactions, comment from the Vatican focused on the document’s basis in tradition. Prof Rocco Buttiglione of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences wrote on Vatican News that *Fiducia Supplicans* was “almost a revolution” but “every authentic revolution is also simultaneously a return to the origins, the missionary presence of Christ in human history”.

He said that the blessings had a “paternal” character which provided “a response to a specific pastoral urgency of our time”, recognising the “rebellious belonging” of many who are bonded to the Church.

Cardinal Fernández maintained that his document wholly affirmed the Church’s teaching on marriage, but said that “does not prevent us from making a gesture of paternity and closeness, otherwise we can become judges who condemn from a pedestal”.

He told US-based news site The Pillar that the “pastoral blessing” outlined in the text was like that offered to any sinner, emphasising the need “to grow in the conviction that non-ritualised blessings are not a consecration of the person, they are not a justification of all his actions, they are not a ratification of the life he leads”.

“I do not know at what point we have so exalted this simple pastoral gesture that we have equated it with the reception of the Eucharist,” he said. “That is why we want to set so many conditions for blessing.”

Fiducia Supplicans prohibits liturgies for the “spontaneous” blessings of couples, and Cardinal Fernández explained that “ritualised forms of blessing irregular couples” were “inadmissible”, specifying Germany as an instance where bishops needed “clarifications” from the DDF.

Regarding the ambivalent or hostile reception of the document in Africa and elsewhere, he said that “prudence and attention to local culture could admit different ways of application, but not a total denial of this step being asked of priests”.

He said he recognised the concerns of bishops in Africa and Asia, particularly in countries where homosexuality is illegal, and emphasised that each was responsible for the document’s interpretation within his diocese.

“What is important is that these bishops’ conferences are not holding a doctrine different from that of the declaration signed by the Pope, because it is the same doctrine as always, but rather they state the need for study and discernment, in order to act with pastoral prudence in this context,” the cardinal said.

Pope Francis reportedly said that the document insisted that “people must be welcomed” in the Church but it did not affect the doctrine of marriage.

“It does not involve the sacrament of marriage. It doesn't change the sacrament,” he told priests at a meeting in Rome on 21 December, according to Fr Antonio Vettorato FdCC.

The DDF's “innovative” Declaration on blessings is a disaster



St. Peter's Basilica, Città del Vaticano, Vatican City (Image: Sean Ang | Unsplash.com)

The latest document from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, titled *Fiducia Supplicans* (Supplicating Trust), has generated a lot of controversy since its release early Monday. And as has become more and more common these days, you find both staunch conservatives and progressive liberals agreeing that there is more to this text than meets the eye and that it does indeed represent an important shift in magisterial teaching.

In a [podcast](#) on “The Catholic Thing,” Robert Royal and Fr. Gerald Murray said the new text has introduced an “innovation” into how the Church understands the nature of some priestly blessings in order to justify the blessing of “same sex couples”. The indefatigable LGBTQ advocate Fr. James Martin, S.J. agrees, as we see in his statement on “X” that, “Be wary of the ‘Nothing has changed’ response to today’s news. It’s a significant change. In short, yesterday, as a priest, I was forbidden to bless same-sex couples at all. Today, with some limitations, I can.”

My own view mirrors that of Royal and Fr. Murray, and I think the document clearly calls for an interpretation that views it as a significant change from past practices. As usual, the papal “explainers” are left scrambling for justifications and explanations that are increasingly difficult to sell to anyone who has been paying attention.

If there is nothing really new here and the text is just repeating what Pope Francis has already said in his response to the *dubia* questions in October, right before the Synod, then why issue it

at all? And, not only issue it, but raise it to the level of a “Declaration,” which is the highest level a DDF document can reach, the last one being *Dominus Iesus* in 2000.

In fact, Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, in his preparatory remarks, says that the document represents an important development of the Church’s doctrine concerning blessings, which is why he was issuing it as a “Declaration”. He goes so far as to refer to this development as an “innovation”:

The value of this document, however, is that it offers a specific and innovative contribution to the pastoral meaning of blessings, permitting a broadening and enrichment of the classical understanding of blessings, which is closely linked to a liturgical perspective. Such theological reflection, based on the pastoral vision of Pope Francis, implies a real development from what has been said about blessings in the Magisterium and the official texts of the Church. This explains why this text has taken on the typology of a “Declaration.”

Unfortunately, the document is just the latest in a line of confusing texts and documents in an already confusing papacy. Why is this document needed at all? The innovation of positing a distinction between types of priestly blessings, which makes some of them “non-liturgical” and “non-sacramental,” is problematic.

The text apparently presumes that such a distinction is possible. But it flies in the face of the fact that when a priest blesses anything or anyone, in any setting of any kind, he is doing so—not as an individual who possesses some kind of personal powers of magic—but precisely *in persona Christi* and in the name of the whole Church, which possesses the full agency of Christ as He who blesses the world.

Therefore, all priestly blessings have an inherent orientation to the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church. Indeed, is this not why people want a priest to bless them, their houses, and their devotional objects in the first place? I could ask any random lay person to bless those things “in the name of Christ Jesus”. But we seek out instead priests to make such blessings because of his sacramental character as one possessing Holy Orders, which in turn is what links him to Christ and all of the other sacraments in a preeminent way. In other words, we seek out priestly blessings because we rightly sense the full weight of the Church, in all of her sacramental glory, behind those blessings. Thus, all priestly blessings are inherently sacramental and liturgical in a real way.

Distinguishing between blessings with a liturgical/sacramental orientation and those without one might seem to make a useful pastoral distinction, but it is a distinction that smacks of a clever theological parlor room trick rather than of a genuine theological development. Cardinal Fernandez calls it a development of doctrine, but it is not evident how this constitutes a true and organic development of the doctrines concerning blessings instead of just some slight-of-hand in order to achieve a predetermined result.

In other words, as I said about the recent [Motu proprio](#) (*ad theologiam provendam*), the text reads like a conclusion in search of an argument. The only reason for such distinctions between different kinds of blessings—and the only reason for inventing a new kind of “non-liturgical, non-sacramental” kind of blessing—is to justify blessing people in sinful sexual unions while still being able to claim that there is nothing “formal” taking place.

Unmentioned by most commentators is the subtle, but very important, shift in language where sexual unions that are objectively, gravely sinful are now euphemistically referred to as merely “irregular”. I bought a shirt once that was cheaper because it had “irregular” arm lengths; I also once had an “irregular” heart beat. Irregular thus usually means something that deviates from a standard norm and such deviations can be as relatively harmless as a mis-sized sweater or as harmful as a sketchy heart rhythm. But, by itself, the term “irregular” can imply either. Therefore, the constant usage of the term in this document and others like it is itself a poker “tell” that the sexual sins in question are being portrayed as perhaps not so sinful “in all cases” and may just be the equivalent of that irregular shirt sleeve.

This little two-step has become both common and tiresome during the ten years of this papacy. First, begin by affirming that “no doctrines are being changed”; secondly, move quickly to speaking of the doctrines as “ideals of perfection” that nobody lives up to completely—this legitimates not applying the doctrines in any meaningful way to the lives of real people who are deemed “not yet ready” for the full milk of the Gospel. Thirdly, the doctrines in questions are quietly and quickly set aside “for pastoral reasons”.

That is a clever trick, but it has been used once too often and has now become predictable to the point of simply being tiresome.

The moral teaching of the Church, especially on matters sexual, is undercut directly when the text says that no “moral interrogation” of persons is to take place before a blessing is given lest this be seen as a kind of clerical “control” that positions itself as an obstacle between the supplicant and the unqualified love of God. This rather harsh and strange characterization of a pastor’s duty to make those kinds of moral adjudications is another indication of the mind of this papacy. The presumption is that most priests are finger-wagging, pinched-up moralizers who would most likely botch such pastoral encounters, so Rome is intervening to put the kibosh on any such “conservative” conversations. How very synodal of them!

These new blessings of Cardinal Fernandez are innovative precisely insofar as they are unmoored from real moral consideration. They are the reduction of a priestly blessing to a shallow, “Good morning. How are you? I hope you are well today.” And who could or would object to that except a jerk?

The rationale behind the problematic distinctions between blessings is vague and rather contradictory. The text is adamant that such blessings can in no way be confused with a marital blessing, or that what is being blessed is the “union” as such. But then the text says that the blessing is offered in order to lift up into God’s light those elements of the relationship that are truly good and nurturing. How, then, is that not blessing the union as such? Or are we seeing yet another hair-splitting distinction between the sinful elements in the union, which are not being blessed, and the good parts of the union which are?

But how is the priest to know, since he is not allowed to ask “moral” questions beforehand? This gives every indication that Rome does not think sexual sins are really all that nettlesome. I doubt the Vatican envisions an incestuous brother and sister couple who are in an “irregular union” requesting a blessing. But if they do, and they ask the priest to bless their “relationship,” is he not supposed to ask any further questions in that case? Or is it only *some* sexual sins that are off limits? I suspect such is the case, with the sins that are “off limits” pertaining to the more socially acceptable (and thus “overlookable”) sins of homosexual unions or the divorced-and-remarried.

Even worse, however, this text further justifies such blessings on the grounds that nobody is perfect anyway and priests routinely bless random people no matter their sinful status. On the surface this seems reasonable, but it masks a deeper agenda to so attenuate the call to sanctification that this call applies to practically nobody.

This is on par with the constant emphasis in this papacy that there can be no real Eucharistic discipline applied in the Church because the Eucharist is not, after all, a prize for the perfect. As with the Eucharist, so too here. None of us “deserve” the Eucharist or any priestly blessings. We do not “earn them” through good works and we are all sinners who fall short of the mark. Therefore, just as sinners can receive the Eucharist as a healing balm so too can they receive priestly blessings. And any opposition to this is just pharisaical hypocrisy.

The text insists that it is not contradicting the 2021 statement of the DDF, which states the Church cannot confer such blessings since the Church cannot bless sin. The explanation given is that the new blessings being proposed are not blessing the sinful sexual unions as such but only the individuals who have presented themselves “spontaneously” for a blessing. Apparently, it is the category of “spontaneity,” mentioned several times, which is the key since that makes the blessing, allegedly, less formal and similar to a priest randomly running into someone on the street who says, “Hey faddah, could ya give an old alta’ boy a blessing?”

But context is everything. And, really, who are we kidding here? There are already formal liturgical blessings of homosexual couples taking place in churches in Europe and North America. The vast majority of Catholics in those regions already approve of “gay marriage” and the moral legitimacy of homosexual relationships. They are already spinning this as a “huge step forward” and so on for the cause of “gay rights” in the Church.

It took Cardinal Fernandez 5,000 words to explain this, which is a waste of words. Are most Catholics in the pews going to recognize, understand, and care about all of these wonderful distinctions? Do they even want to?

Certainly most in the media have not gotten the memo. Here are some representative headlines from December 18th:

CNN: “Pope Francis authorizes blessings for same-sex couples.”

BBC: “Pope says priests can bless same-sex couples”

Drudge: “Pope says priests can bless same-sex unions”

CBS: “Pope approves blessings for same-sex couples under certain conditions”

ABC: “Pope approves priests blessing same-sex couples”

NBC: “Pope says priests can bless same-sex couples, a radical change in Vatican Policy”

Fr. James Martin: “Along with many priests I will now be delighted to bless my friends in same-sex unions.”

Thinking there is going to be a clean and neat distinction on a pastoral level between these blessings and marital blessings is foolish, or worse.

The cultural context is determinative here in analyzing and recognizing what this document is truly aiming at. Simply put, if Cardinal Fernandez and the Pope think this distinction between formal liturgical blessings and more informal non-liturgical blessings will hold up down in the trenches of parish life, then they are either the two most ignorant and obtuse people to ever occupy those offices, or they know exactly what they are doing.

Muller - 'Fiducia supplicans' is 'self-contradictory'



Cardinal Gerhard Müller. *public domain.*

While some have praised the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith's text, others have raised serious concerns, and some bishops' conferences have pushed back on the implementation of the document in their countries.

***Fiducia supplicans* was authored by Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernandez, who was appointed to lead the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith earlier this year.**

But Cardinal Gerhard Müller, who led the Vatican's doctrinal office from 2012 until 2017, said in an essay Thursday the text is "self-contradictory" and "requires further clarification.

Müller sent that essay, with exclusive permission to publish, to The Pillar, and to publications working in Italian, Spanish, and German.

In light of the ongoing debate over Fiducia supplicans, and Müller's role in the Church, The Pillar publishes his essay below, in its entirety:

With the Declaration *Fiducia supplicans* (FS) on the Pastoral Significance of Blessings, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF) has made an affirmation that has no precedent in the teaching of the Catholic Church. In fact, this document affirms that it is possible for a priest to bless (not liturgically, but privately) couples who live in a sexual relationship outside of marriage, including same-sex couples.

The many questions raised by bishops, priests, and laity in response to these statements deserve a clear and unequivocal response.

Does this statement not clearly contradict Catholic teaching? Are the faithful obliged to accept this new teaching? May the priest perform such new practices that have just been invented? And can the diocesan bishop forbid them if they were to take place in his diocese? To answer these questions, let us see what exactly the document teaches and what arguments it relies on.

The document, which was neither discussed nor approved by the General Assembly of Cardinals and Bishops of this Dicastery, acknowledges that the hypothesis (or teaching?) it proposes is new and that it is based primarily on the pastoral magisterium of Pope Francis.

According to the Catholic faith, the pope and the bishops can set certain pastoral accents and creatively relate the truth of Revelation to the new challenges of each age, as for example in the field of social doctrine or of bioethics, while respecting the fundamental principles of Christian anthropology. But these innovations cannot go beyond what was revealed to them once and for all by the apostles as the word of God (*Dei verbum* 8). In fact, there are no biblical texts or texts of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church or previous documents of the magisterium to support the conclusions of FS. Moreover, what we see is not a development but a doctrinal leap. For one can speak of a doctrinal development only if the new explanation is contained, at least implicitly, in Revelation and, above all, does not contradict the dogmatic definitions. And a doctrinal development that reaches a deeper meaning of the doctrine must have occurred gradually, through a long period of maturation. In point of fact, the last magisterial pronouncement on this matter was issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in a *responsum* published in March 2021, less than three years ago, and it categorically rejected the possibility of blessing these unions. This applies both to public blessings and to private blessings for people living in sinful conditions.

How does FS justify proposing a new doctrine without contradicting the previous 2021 document?

First of all, FS recognizes that both the CDF *Responsum* of 2021 and the traditional, valid, and binding teaching on blessings do not permit blessings in situations that are contrary to God's law, as in the case of sexual unions outside of marriage. This is clear for the sacraments, but also for other blessings which FS calls "liturgical." These "liturgical" blessings belong to what the Church has called "sacramentals," as witnessed by the *Rituale Romanum*. In these two types of blessings, there must be an agreement between the blessing and the Church's teaching (FS 9-11).

Therefore, in order to accept the blessing of situations that are contrary to the Gospel, the DDF proposes an original solution: to broaden the concept of a blessing (FS 7; FS 12). This is justified as follows: "One must also avoid the risk of reducing the meaning of blessings to this point of view alone [i.e., to the 'liturgical' blessings of the sacraments and sacramentals], for it would lead us to expect the same moral conditions for a simple blessing that are called for in the reception of the sacraments" (FS 12). That is, a new concept of blessing is needed, one that goes beyond sacramental blessings in order to accompany pastorally the journey of those who live in sin.

Now, in reality, this extension beyond the sacraments already takes place through the other blessings approved in the *Rituale Romanum*. The Church does not require the same moral conditions for a blessing as for receiving a sacrament. This happens, for example, in the case of a penitent who does not want to abandon a sinful situation, but who can humbly ask for a personal blessing so that the Lord may give him light and strength to understand and follow the teachings of the Gospel. This case does not require a new kind of “pastoral” blessing.

Why, then, is it necessary to broaden the meaning of “blessing,” if the blessing as understood in the *Roman Ritual* already goes beyond the blessing given in a sacrament? The reason is that blessings contemplated by the *Roman Ritual* are only possible over “things, places, or circumstances that do not contradict the law or the spirit of the Gospel” (FS 10, quoting the *Roman Ritual*). And this is the point that the DDF wants to overcome, since it wants to bless couples in circumstances, such as same-sex relationships, that contradict the law and the spirit of the Gospel. It is true that the Church can add “new sacramentals” to existing ones (Vatican II: *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 79), but she cannot change their meaning in such a way as to trivialize sin, especially in an ideologically charged cultural situation that also misleads the faithful. And this change of meaning is precisely what happens in FS, which invents a new category of blessings beyond those associated with either a sacrament or a blessing as the Church has understood them. FS says that these are non-liturgical blessings that belong to popular piety. So there would be three kinds of blessings:

a) Prayers associated with the sacraments, asking that the person be in the proper state to receive the sacraments, or asking that the person receive the strength to turn from sin.

b) Blessings, as contained in the *Roman Ritual* and as Catholic doctrine has always understood them, which can be addressed to persons, even if they live in sin, but not to “things, places, or circumstances that ... contradict the law or the spirit of the Gospel” (FS 10, quoting the *Roman Ritual*). Thus, for example, a woman who has had an abortion could be blessed, but not an abortion clinic.

c) The new blessings proposed by FS would be pastoral blessings, not liturgical or ritual blessings. Therefore, they would no longer have the limitation of “ritual” or type “b” blessings. They could be applied not only to persons in sin, as in “ritual” blessings, but also to things, places, or circumstances that are contrary to the Gospel.

These “c” type blessings, or “pastoral” blessings are a novelty. Not being liturgical but rather of “popular piety,” they would supposedly not compromise evangelical doctrine and would not have to be consistent with either moral norms or Catholic doctrine. What can be said about this new category of blessing?

A *first observation* is that there is no basis for this new usage in the biblical texts cited by FS, nor in any previous statement of the Magisterium. Nor do the texts offered by Pope Francis provide a basis for this new type of blessing. For already the blessing according to the *Roman Ritual* (type “b”) allows a priest to bless someone who lives in sin. And this type “of blessing can easily be applied to someone who is in prison or in a rehabilitation group, as Francis says (quoted in FS 27). The innovative “pastoral” blessing (type “c”), in contrast, goes beyond what Francis says, because one could give such a blessing to a reality that is contrary to

God's law, such as an extramarital relationship. In fact, according to the criterion of this type of blessings, one could even bless an abortion clinic or a mafia group.

This leads to a *second observation*: it is hazardous to invent new terms that go against the traditional usage of language. Such procedure can give rise to arbitrary exercises of power. In the case at hand, the fact is that a blessing has an objective reality of its own and thus cannot be redefined at will to fit a subjective intention that is contrary to the nature of a blessing. Here Humpty Dumpty's famous line from *Alice in Wonderland* comes to mind: "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less." Alice replies, "The question is whether you can make words mean so many different things." And Humpty Dumpty says: "The question is which is to be master; that's all."

The *third observation* relates to the very concept of a "non-liturgical blessing" which is not intended to sanction anything (FS 34), that is, a "pastoral" blessing (type "c"). How does it differ from the blessing contemplated by the *Roman Ritual* (type "b")? The difference is not in the spontaneous nature of the blessing, which is already possible in type "b" blessings, since they do not need to be regulated or approved in the *Roman Ritual*. Nor is the difference in popular piety, since the blessings according to the *Roman Ritual* are already adapted to popular piety, which asks for the blessing of objects, places, and people. It seems that the innovative "pastoral" blessing is created ad hoc to bless situations that are contrary to the law or spirit of the gospel.

This brings us to a *fourth observation* concerning the object of this "pastoral" blessing, which distinguishes it from a "ritual" blessing of the *Roman Ritual*. A "pastoral" blessing can include situations that are contrary to the Gospel. Notice that not only sinful persons are blessed here, but that by blessing the couple, it is the sinful relationship itself that is blessed. Now, God cannot send his grace upon a relationship that is directly opposed to him and cannot be ordered toward him. Sexual intercourse outside of marriage, qua sexual intercourse, cannot bring people closer to God and therefore cannot open itself to God's blessing. Therefore, if this blessing were given, its only effect would be to confuse the people who receive it or who attend it. They would think that God has blessed what He cannot bless. This "pastoral" blessing would be neither pastoral nor a blessing. It is true that Cardinal Fernandez, in later statements to *Infovaticana*, said that it is not the union that is blessed, but the couple. However, this is emptying a word of its meaning, since what defines a couple as couple is precisely their being a union.

The difficulty of blessing a union or couple is especially evident in the case of homosexuality. For in the Bible, a blessing has to do with the order that God has created and that he has declared to be good. This order is based on the sexual difference of male and female, called to be one flesh. Blessing a reality that is contrary to creation is not only impossible, it is blasphemy. Once again, it is not a question of blessing persons who "live in a union that cannot be compared in any way to marriage" (FS, n. 30), but of blessing the very union that cannot be compared to marriage. It is precisely for this purpose that a new kind of blessing is created (FS 7, 12).

Several arguments appear in the text that attempt to justify these blessings. First, the possibility of conditions that reduce the imputability of the sinner. However, these conditions refer to the person, not to the relationship itself. It is also said that asking for the blessing is the possible good that these persons can realize in their

present conditions, as if asking for a blessing already constituted an opening to God and to conversion. This may be true for those who ask for a blessing for themselves, but not for those who ask for a blessing as a couple. The latter, in asking for a blessing, implicitly or explicitly seek to justify their relationship itself before God, without realizing that it is precisely their relationship that distances them from God. Finally, it is claimed that there are positive elements in the relationship and that these can be blessed, but these positive elements (for example, that one helps the other in an illness) are secondary to the relationship itself—whose defining characteristic is the sharing of sexual activity—and these elements do not change the nature of this relationship, which in no case can be directed towards God, as already noted in the 2021 *Responsum* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Even in an abortion clinic there are positive elements, from the anesthesiologists who prevent physical pain, to the desire of the doctors to protect the life project of the woman who is having an abortion.

A fifth observation concerns the internal inconsistency of this innovative “pastoral” blessing. Is it even possible to give a non-liturgical blessing, a blessing, that is, which does not officially represent the teaching of Christ and of the Church? The key to answering this question is not whether the rites are officially approved or rather spontaneously improvised. The question is whether the one giving the blessing is a priest, a representative of Christ and the Church. FS affirms that there is no problem for the priest to join in the prayer of those who find themselves in a situation contrary to the Gospel (FS 30), but in this blessing the priest does not simply join in their prayer, but rather invokes the descent of God's gifts upon the relationship itself. Insofar as the priest acts as a priest, he acts in the name of Christ and the Church. Now to claim that one can separate the meaning of this blessing from the teaching of Christ is to postulate a dualism between what the Church does and what the Church says. But as the Second Vatican Council teaches, revelation is given to us by deeds and words, which are inseparable (Dei Verbum 2), and the Church's proclamation cannot separate deeds from words. It is precisely the simple people, whom the document wishes to favor by promoting popular piety, who are most susceptible to being deceived by a symbolic deed that contradicts doctrine, since they intuitively grasp the doctrinal content of the deed.

In light of this, can a faithful Catholic accept the teaching of FS? Given the unity of deeds and words in the Christian faith, one can only accept that it is good to bless these unions, even in a pastoral way, if one believes that such unions are not objectively contrary to the law of God. It follows that as long as Pope Francis continues to affirm that homosexual unions are always contrary to God's law, he is implicitly affirming that such blessings cannot be given. The teaching of FS is therefore self-contradictory and thus requires further clarification. The Church cannot celebrate one thing and teach another because, as St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote, Christ was the Teacher “who spoke and it was done” (Ephesians 15:1), and one cannot separate his flesh from his word.

The other question we asked was whether a priest could agree to bless these unions, some of which coexist with a legitimate marriage or in which it is not uncommon for partners to change. According to FS, he could do so with a non-liturgical, non-official “pastoral” blessing. This would mean that the priest would have to give these blessings without acting in the name of Christ and the Church. But this would mean that he would not be acting as a priest. In fact, he would have to give these blessings not as a priest of Christ, but as one who has rejected Christ. In fact, by his actions, the priest who blesses these unions presents them as a path

to the Creator. Therefore, he commits a sacrilegious and blasphemous act against the Creator's plan and against Christ's death for us, which meant to fulfill the Creator's plan. The diocesan bishop is concerned as well. As pastor of his local church, he is obliged to prevent these sacrilegious acts, otherwise he would become an accomplice to them and would deny the mandate given to him by Christ to confirm his brethren in the faith.

Priests should proclaim God's love and goodness to all people and also help sinners and those who are weak and have difficulty in conversion with counsel and prayer. This is very different from pointing out to them with self-invented but misleading signs and words that God is not so demanding about sin, thus hiding the fact that sin in thought, word and deed distances us from God. There is no blessing, not only in public but also in private, for sinful living conditions that objectively contradict God's holy will. And it is no evidence of a healthy hermeneutic that the courageous defenders of Christian doctrine are branded as rigorists, more interested in the legalistic fulfillment of their moral norms than in the salvation of concrete persons. For this is what Jesus says to ordinary people: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light." (Mt 11:28-30). And the apostle explains it this way: "And his commandments are not burdensome, for whoever is begotten by God conquers the world. And the victory that conquers the world is our faith. Who [indeed] is the victor over the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 Jn 5:3-5). At a time when a false anthropology is undermining the divine institution of marriage between a man and a woman, with the family and its children, the Church should remember the words of her Lord and Head: "'Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and those who enter through it are many. How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life. And those who find it are few'" (Mt 7:13-14).



“CONTEXTUAL” THEOLOGY AND *FIDUCIA SUPPLICANS*



In the apostolic letter *Ad Theologiam Promovendam* (To Promote Theology), issued by Pope Francis on November 1, 2023, the Church was urged to do theology contextually: As the *motu proprio* put it, theology must be “fundamentally contextual . . . capable of reading and interpreting the Gospel in the conditions in which men and women live daily, in different geographical, social, and cultural environments.” How well does *Fiducia Supplicans* (Supplicating Trust), the Declaration on “blessings” issued by Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernández and the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF) on December 18, 2023, meet that standard?

Not very well at all. Consider the “contexts” *Fiducia Supplicans* ignores.

The Media Context. According to the instantaneous media take on it, the pope, in *Fiducia Supplicans*, authorized priests to “bless” same-sex couples, full stop—although the Declaration itself stated that such “blessings” were not to be considered liturgical, had to be spontaneously requested, involved the “blessing” of individuals, and should be conducted in such a way that the Church’s teaching on marriage as the “inclusive, stable, and indissoluble union of a man and a woman, naturally open to procreation” (as Pope Francis put it last July) was not compromised. Cardinal Fernández subsequently complained that the fine distinctions in which *Fiducia Supplicans* abounded had been ignored in the initial media reporting. If the cardinal did not expect *exactly* that result, however, he did not reckon with the global media context in which *Fiducia Supplicans* would be received. And if the cardinal were truly unhappy with the way his document was being spun, why did he not re-contextualize *Fiducia Supplicans* (so to speak) by calling out clergy who promptly conducted same-sex “blessings” in a manner that was obviously pre-planned (not least to garner media

attention), that was quasi-liturgical, and that unmistakably blurred the doctrinal and moral lines the cardinal claimed his document had drawn?

The Evangelical and Cultural Contexts. Hours after *Fiducia Supplicans* was issued, I received a phone call from an African archbishop, deeply concerned about the impact the Declaration would have on his local Church's efforts to be the Church of missionary disciples for which Pope Francis had called. As the archbishop explained, the local Christian Pentecostals were aghast at *Fiducia Supplicans*; so were the local Muslims; and the Catholic Church's evangelical mission had thus become far more difficult. Did Cardinal Fernández and his DDF colleagues take that bishop's "context" into account in crafting *Fiducia Supplicans*? In preparing the Declaration, did the cardinal and DDF consider the "different . . . geographical, social, and cultural environments" of the local Churches of the Catholic "peripheries," celebrated by this pontificate and cited as sources of theological reflection in *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*? It seems not. The only ecclesiastical "context" I can discern in *Fiducia Supplicans* is that of the Church of Catholic Lite, clinging to the thoroughly falsified claim that appeasing the deconstructive Spirit of the Age is more evangelically effective than working to convert the Spirit of the Age by the forthright proclamation of the gospel, hard bits (see Mark 1:15) and all.

The Synodal Context. The question of "blessing" same-sex couples was vetted this past October at Synod-2023, where the concerns raised by my African friend were discussed. If there was any consensus reached at Synod-2023, it was that the Church ought not authorize any such "blessings"—which is why the subject was not mentioned in the Synod's final Synthesis Report. How, then, does *Fiducia Supplicans* reflect the synodal context in which this pontificate is so invested? What does "synodality" mean if a synodal consensus can be overridden by the unilateral act of a Curial dicastery, issued without any serious consultation with the world episcopate? What does it mean for the future discussion of "synodality" that so many individual bishops—and indeed entire episcopal conferences—have severely criticized, and in some instances repudiated, *Fiducia Supplicans*?

The Linguistic Context. *Fiducia Supplicans* is being presented as a genuine development in the pastoral practice of "blessing" those experiencing same-sex attraction, yet that "blessing" "does not validate or justify anything" (as Cardinal Fernández [later told](#) *The Pillar*). As the bishops of Cameroon noted, however, "blessing" signals approval of that-which-is-being-blessed in any linguistic context: a commonsense observation that underscores what can only be described as the sophistry of *Fiducia Supplicans*.

Once upon a time, and not so long ago, the dicastery charged with the defense of Catholic truth and the promotion of dynamically orthodox theology was a source of clarification. That is no longer the case. And that will be an issue during the next papal interregnum and at the next conclave.

I've Never Seen Mary ... But Thirteen Years Ago, I Felt Her Powerful Presence

Yes, Our Lady visited my Benedictine cell on Oct. 4, 2010. She was escorting me to my earthly mother, who was waiting for me outside the cloister doors.



Antonello da Messina, “Virgin Annunciate,” 1470s (photo: Public Domain)

I spent close to three years discerning my vocation in a Benedictine monastery. This time brought some of the most beautiful moments of my life and some of the most painful moments of my life. To have Jesus under one’s roof is by far the greatest blessing any priest or religious will experience in his lifetime. And I had that privilege during my time as a monk. Yes, priests, monks and nuns may not have an earthly spouse to grow old with, to cuddle with, to pour out their joys and sorrows, but they have something far greater: the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. Only Jesus can grant us true peace, happiness and fulfillment in this life.

I will never forget looking out my monastic cell window as the snow blanketed our courtyard. It reminded me of some scene from St. Thérèse’s *Story of a Soul*. Or the nights in the novitiate when I could walk 50 feet and say goodnight to Jesus in our private chapel. Beyond the chapel windows, I could see rows of houses and skyscrapers

in the distance. I felt privileged to be praying for so many souls. I felt humbled to be called to such a spoiled life where Jesus was all mine and I was all his. While in the chapel, I would put my monastic cowl (hood) over my head and become lost in my private audience before the King of Kings. And then there was the chant. I loved singing hymns to Our Lady, especially the Salve Regina in Latin.

And the moments of silence. For the first time in my life, I could hear the leaves rustle, the trees howl and the heating unit bellow. In fact, on the first night of my postulancy, the heater broke and my room temperature soared to over 100 degrees. As I woke up in the night, I thought I was in purgatory. Little did I realize that my purgatory was about to begin.

And so the painful moments. As St. Augustine said, “The Church is a hospital for sinners,” and the same could be applied to religious life. There are so many characters in a monastery. Some are more wounded than others. I carried my own wounds, but others sadly inflicted their wounds and their distorted desires on others. The quest for lust and power can easily pass through cloister walls.

Indeed, the devil prowls even more within monastic walls than throughout the secular world. The secular world has already been convinced that the devil does not exist, while the monastic walls he is looking to take out God’s chosen ones — to create scandal. For when a consecrated soul betrays the Lord, the lance pierces his heart more so than a pagan. It is tantamount to being kissed again by Judas. Our Lord has called some laborers to the most glorious vocation to be his spouse, sparing them from the temptations and rat race of the world, and yet some sadly repay him with only indifference and betrayal. The habit and the monastic walls can never hide the human heart from God.

When I was a high school senior in 2002, the clergy sex abuse scandal was making headlines. Six years later, when I joined a Benedictine Abbey, I thought this scandal was over. I was wrong. Sadly, many men had entered religious life not to seek the Lord, but to seek other men. Within a year of my entrance, I came face-to-face with the unwanted advances of a superior on two occasions.

Thanks be to God and Our Lady, I was protected “physically,” but emotionally I was broken. When I told a few monks in the monastery about this superior’s errant behavior, I was advised to “let it go.” I believe this superior was also dealing with possession. I saw it in his eyes, and it scared me to death. He tried to manipulate me for more than two years.

But this is not the point of the article. After confronting this superior to leave me alone, I realized that I had to leave my monastery right away. I would have left sooner but I did not want to disappoint God since I was in simple vows. For almost three years since I entered the Abbey, I was riddled with anxiety, mostly due to this superior’s machinations.

Finally having enough, I made a phone call to my brother about my situation. He immediately called my mom and told her to get me. I notified my immediate superior and the prior that I was leaving. And as the monks were praying their evening prayers, I gathered my few belongings. I looked around my now empty cell and for the first time in almost three years, I experienced the most peace I have ever experienced in my life — even to this day! You see, as a child I had always wanted to see Our Lady, but through the years, I realized it was more blessed to believe without seeing (see John 20:29).

I did not see Our Lady or hear her sweet voice in my ears, but she was present. And in my heart, I heard these words, “My son, it is time to go.” Yes, Mary was in my monastic cell on Oct. 4, 2010. She was escorting me to my earthly mother, who was now waiting for me outside the cloister doors.

That night, I slept in heavenly peace in my own bed. It was the best sleep I’d had in almost three years. I slept knowing that I would no longer need to defend my vows from the predatory superior. Our Lady, the twelve-star general, the Mother who wears combat boots, was protecting me and guiding me out of the only world I had known for three years to the world of the unknown. It was a scary feeling. And yet, God and Our Lady had far greater plans for my life. They would eventually lead me to my true calling in marriage.

I never intended to leave religious life, but sometimes God pulls you from that which you desire for an even more important mission. I take great consolation that St. Thérèse’s parents, St. Louis and Zélie Martin, also wanted to join religious life, but God drew them to the sacrament of Matrimony.

Although more than 13 years have passed since I experienced Mary’s indescribable peace that October day, the Blessed Mother continues to watch over me and every Catholic who welcomes her into the cloister of their heart. She echoes to each one of us the same words she spoke to St. Juan Diego: “Am I not here, who is your Mother? Are you not under my protection? Am I not your health? Are you not happily within my fold? What else do you wish? Do not grieve nor be disturbed by anything.”



Patrick O’Hearn Patrick O’Hearn is an author and freelance editor, formerly serving as TAN Books’ Acquisitions Editor for more than two years. He has written several books including his latest releases: *Courtship of the Saints: How the Saints Met their Spouses* (TAN Books), *The Grief of Dads: Support and Hope for Catholic Fathers Navigating Child Loss* (Ave Maria Press), and *Go and Fear Nothing: The Story of Our Lady of Champion* (OSV Kids). You can visit his website at patrickrohearn.com.

Eight Children receive First Holy Communion in Gaza



The children, who have finished their First Communion preparation program despite the war, received the Eucharist thanks to members of the parish who made the Hosts.

For Christians in the Gaza strip, sacramental life continues even in the face of war. A group of eight children at Holy Family Church, the only Catholic church in Gaza, recently reached a major milestone in their faith journey: First Holy Communion. Photographs of the ceremony, held on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord celebrated Sunday, were shared by the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem:

The announcement, from the website of the Latin Patriarchate, noted that the children who received their First Communion completed the educational preparation program during the war. Holy Family Church has not closed its doors since the conflict began October 7, 2023, and continues to provide shelter for civilians caught in the crossfire. Aside from the First Communion ceremony, the church has held baptisms and Masses for the last three months.

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, complemented the parish's resourcefulness, which has allowed it to continue its vital work for the community in the time of war. For example, when they could no longer procure Communion hosts, parishioners set up a production room where they could bake the bread themselves. In check-ups with the monastery over the last three months, Cardinal Pizzaballa has praised the "strength and steadfast faith demonstrated by the parishioners of Gaza."

Holy Family Church has been a place of refuge for many since October, and those who are sick remain in the church for safety and so their conditions can be monitored.

The heartwarming message ended with a slideshow of pictures and a prayer for peace and the continued prosperity of these young Catholics as they embark on the next step of their faith journey: Confirmation:



"We continue to pray for our people in Gaza so that God would give them strength and patience during these tough times. And we continue to plead for a cease-fire and hope for a comprehensive plan of peace and justice to take place."

PAINTING OF THE MONTH

This month the painting is selected by Shirley Miles



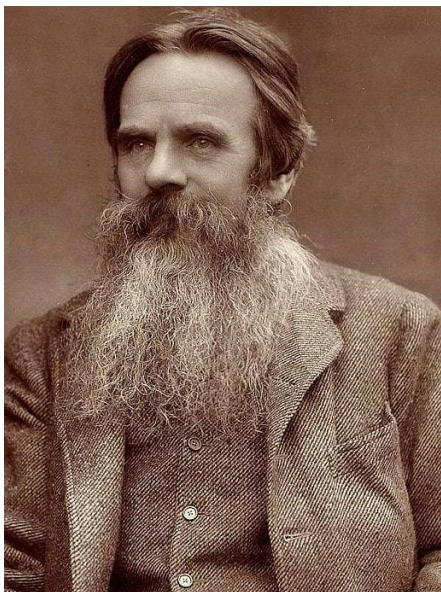
'The Light of the World' by Holman Hunt

'The Light of the World' by Holman Hunt is (one of) my favourite paintings. Part of the pre-raphaelite movement, anything by the artist JW Waterhouse also grabs my attention (such as 'Hylas and the Nymphs' or 'The Soul of the Rose', not to mention 'The Annunciation ' which all capture my admiration and imagination for their wistful and romantic portrayal of the feminine both in erotic and spiritual terms. However, The Light of the World speaks to me every time I gaze on it.

The richness of the colour, as well as the quality of the light which predominately envelops Christ. His divinity is represented by the halo, but the light upon his face, on his robes and of course on the lantern He is holding draws us in deeper. There is also the light on his outstretched hand which he uses to knock on the door with, and the door itself does not escape the light and our gaze. But the door has no handle, signifying that it is us who must open the door to Him. And then there is the door itself. Perhaps it is the 'Narnia' in me but the door represents that which separates us from that other world - the world where we can choose to walk with Him; the door that represents 'relationship' rather than religion.

There is a quietness to this painting, a stillness, and all the while His eyes ask that question: "Will you open the door to Me?"

Shirley Miles



Holman Hunt

THE POWER OF THE SPOKEN OR WRITTEN WORD

*Something I have listened to, read,
appreciated and remembered*

This month the featured contribution is by Shirley Miles

DIGGING

By Seamus Heaney

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an
edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.

But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests.

I'll dig with it.

I have always loved poems from the pen of Seamus Heaney. There is a humility and yet deep profundity to his work. Many of his poems look at and elevate the 'ordinary', together with the traditions of rural life, spotlighting the essential nature of customs and the sacredness of the 'old way of life'. I'm a sucker for metaphor in poetry and Heaney never disappoints.

His use of assonance and onomatopoeia enrich this tapestry of an old way of life which displays a respect and admiration for its skill, often passed down in the generations. "By God, the old man could handle a spade. Just like his old man." There is affection and admiration in those lines whilst knowing that Heaney himself follows another path - one which he digs with his pen, not a spade, digging for words instead of turf.

Shirley Miles



Seamus Justin Heaney, 13 April 1939 - 30 August 2013, was an Irish poet, playwright and translator. He received the 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature.

ON THE LIGHTER SIDE

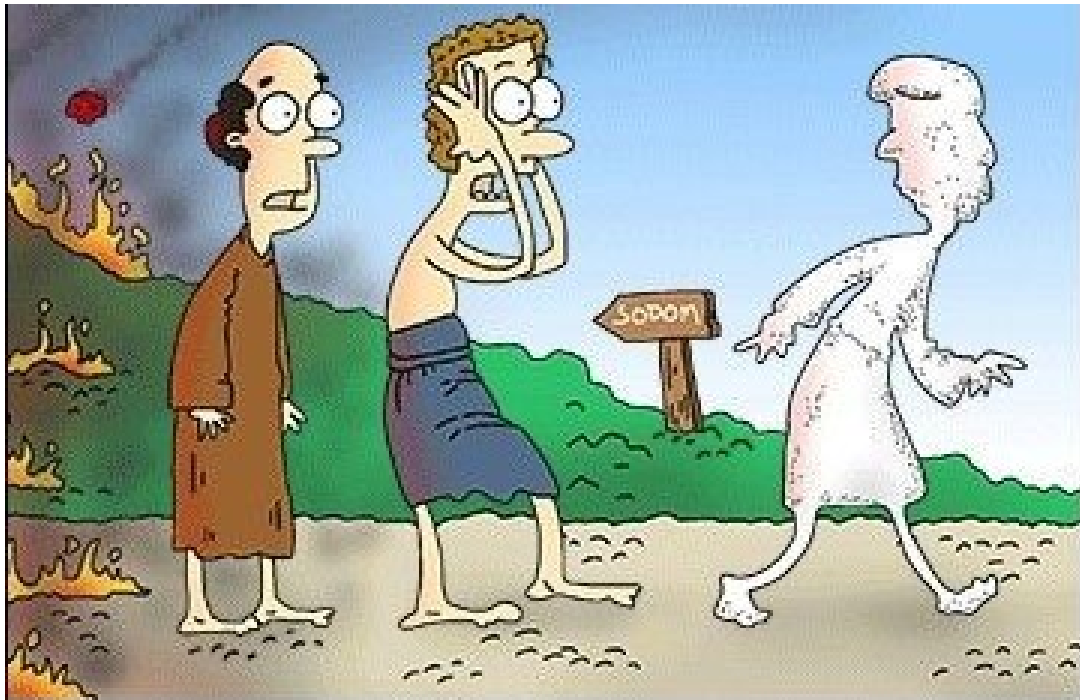
HOLY HOWLERS

Typos, misprints, inadvertent double entendre and all manner of infelicitous error published in church notices, bulletins and newsletters

The visiting monster today is Rev. Jack Bains

The preacher will preach his farewell message,
after which the choir will sing,
"Break Forth With Joy".

Remember in prayer the many
who are sick of our church and community.



Thanks to Joshua Zambrano (See Genesis 19:23-26) 01-17-2014

IRONIC THING IS, SHE HAD JUST CUT WAY
BACK ON HER SODIUM INTAKE