Some Thoughts and Guidance on the Publication of *Fiducia Supplicans*

My dear friends, the secular news media has produced a torrent of false and misleading stories with headlines saying that the Catholic Church now allows blessing of strange and exotic unions. We need to step back from the publicity and read what the document actually says, and take stock of what we believe and what the Church, the Body of Christ, teaches. It is a good opportunity to remind people of the danger of getting their knowledge of the Faith from the secular news media.

BLESSINGS

Anyone can bless. I know men who bless their children each night before bed time with a fatherly blessing. On the other hand, a liturgical blessing, or a priestly blessing, is a corporate act by the Church, the Body of Christ.

As priests, we can give a priestly blessing to anyone who asks, and we are blessing the person who asks, a person made in the image and likeness of God with an immortal soul; we are not approving of every past or future action of the person. Many words have conflated meanings which leads to confusion. I myself have never understood how the word "sanction" can mean approve and disapprove at the same time. When someone is sanctioned we have to guess from the context whether it means punished or approved. So too, the word bless has come to mean approve in some contexts, and other things as well. A priestly blessing is not always an approval. A priestly blessing is not actually from the priest, but is a request to almighty God to bless someone or something. As such, it is implicit that all persons and things in this world are contaminated by the sin of Adam and his descendants and are in need of God's mercy and healing.

One of the beautiful things about our Liturgy is that it always makes clear that God blesses. When someone says, "Bless me Father", in our Liturgy, the priest replies, "May God bless you." When we say at Compline, "Forgive me Father", the priest replies, "May God forgive you."

Sometimes a blessing can imply approval. In the great movie "Ostrokh" or "Island" a troubled woman travels to a monastic island in the arctic and asks a monk, who is reputed to be a saint, "Father, bless my abortion." I daresay, she knew it was wrong and that is why she asked. He told her sternly, "I cannot bless your abortion. If you have an abortion, you will become a murderer." In fact, the monk was living with the guilt of a murder he thought he committed, and wanted to spare her the misery that had driven him to live penitentially on this frozen island. To bless a sin in advance is not mercy or compassion, it is aiding and abetting.

If a stranger asks spontaneously for a blessing, for example at an airport, it is always appropriate to ask, "What's going on?", or "What's happening?", in a friendly or compassionate tone. There is often something happening that he or she needs to share with someone.

SCANDAL

Scandal means a stumbling block. Scandal does not mean something shocking, although I have heard well educated clergy misuse the word that way. A scandal is something that might lead someone else to sin.

In all of our actions as priests, we must avoid even the appearance of approving of evil. An English jurist wrote, "Judges, like Caesar's wife, must be above suspicion." Sometimes wearing our clerics into a

situation protects us and our reputation. For example, I was called into many situations as a police chaplain where I might have caused scandal if I went there at any other time, but wearing clerics with the police at the scene of a tragedy gave hope as a sign of God's presence in darkness. Going into some places dressed in clerics otherwise might be scandal.

Jesus is very stern about scandal. "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung about his neck and he were thrown into the depths of the sea. Alas for the world for scandal. Scandals must come, but woe to the man through whom scandals come."

As a priest, I have been careful to avoid situations in which it might appear that I was blessing or approving something improper. In my first parish, a couple asked for the use of the social hall for their granddaughter. I didn't realize at the time that the granddaughter was a baptized Catholic and was marrying outside the church. When welcoming people she mentioned that I might come over during the reception and give them a blessing. As a matter of fact, I fell asleep in the rectory and was spared the decision. When I went over to the hall later, the non-Catholic groom was happy to see me and we exchanged pleasantries, but she was so furious that she snubbed me. Her hatred for me was visible, almost palpable. Nevertheless, I was glad that I did not give the appearance of blessing a marriage contrary to the laws of the Church.

In the past thirty years, I have avoided attending a number of wedding ceremonies for friends and even close relations. For a non-Catholic wedding, I might come the day before and attend a banquet or reception instead of the ceremony, but I don't want to give the appearance of a priestly blessing to a wedding that is not a Catholic wedding. Friends recognize that I made sacrifices to be a Catholic priest, and they respect me for it.

When I was young, there was a senior priest whom I greatly admired. He said that whenever he was asked to give a prayer, he always went. He was invited once by a well intentioned, but uninformed, freemason to give the opening prayer at one of their events. He appeared in his purple monsignorial robes and gave a fervent prayer to the astonishment of many of the freemasons. The man who invited him was unaware that the freemasons, as an organization, are dedicated to the destruction of the Church. He only knew it as a men's social organization. From the twinkle in his eye, it was clear the monsignor enjoyed pulling one over on the freemasons.

The subject of marriage is simple in the catechism but complicated in the sinful world. Even the Apostle Paul struggled to deal with situations where Christians were married to pagans, and, in doing so, he instituted the first marriage dissolutions by the Church.

FALSE TEACHERS

In today's world, people are demanding Catholic Liturgical blessings for junctions that are not sacramental unions, and in some cases, are even contrary to natural law. The scriptures foretold false teachers in the Church. The Holy Apostle Jude warned us, "Certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. ... just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire ... they are hidden reefs at your love feasts; they feast with you without fear, shepherds who feed only themselves. They are waterless clouds driven by the wind. They are like trees in autumn that are doubly dead, for they bear no fruit and are uprooted--

waves on an angry sea throwing up foam of shame. They are wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever."

Similarly the Holy Apostle Peter warns us, "There were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them. ... For when they speak great pompous words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption ... For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them."

WHAT THE DOCUMENTS SAYS

Taken on its face, the Fiducia Supplicans stops these immoral requests in their tracks. The document says, "a blessing requires that what is blessed be conformed to God's will, as expressed in the teaching of the Church". The document also says, that in the Rite of the Sacrament of Marriage, "the blessing given by the ordained minister is tied directly to the specific union of a man and a women, who establish an exclusive and indissoluble covenant by their consent." The document also says that, "the Church has the right and the duty to avoid any rite that might contradict this conviction or lead to confusion."

WHAT THE SCRIPTURES SAY

We turn to the words of Our Lord for guidance in these confusing times. When the Pharisees asked Jesus about the possibility of divorce, He replied, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no man put asunder." Whatever other unions, or clubs, or friendships, or liaisons, or associations we form in this life, a Catholic sacramental marriage can only be what was described by Our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ: "He who made them at the beginning made them male and female, for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." The Holy Father Francis has said clearly that the Church has not changed this teaching, and will not change this teaching, and does not have the power to change this teaching.

In addition to Christ's clarification on marriage, the Book of Genesis describes our creation as follows: "Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." Male and female he created them. "Be fruitful and multiply." Marriage is about our creation and our innate power to create new life, to create new men and women made in the image and likeness of God, to create new men and women with immortal souls.

In the next chapter of Genesis, we read, "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.' .... He brought her to the man. The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.' ... That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh."

CONCLUDING GUIDELINES

Confusing interpretations of the document may lead to mistakes and injuries to our people and priests, therefore as Bishop, I offer the following observations and guidelines:

1) The document purports to be liturgical guidelines. The laws of the Church are clear that liturgical laws of the Latin Rite do NOT apply to the Eastern Churches.

2) In the West, couples marry each other by the exchange of consent. By ancient tradition and by current laws of the Church, in the East, a couple is married sacramentally by the blessing of a presbyter/priest. Canon 828

3) In the Constantinopolitan tradition, which includes us, the sign of the matrimonial blessing of the presbyter/priest is the Crowning ceremony.

4) Sometimes it is our custom to use Crowns at a renewal of vows, for example at 25 or 50 years of marriage. No one should confuse this pious custom with the priestly blessing that marries people.

5) A reminder to priests: a Crowning ceremony performed for a couple that cannot be married in the Catholic Church is a crime or delict under canon law. It is called simulating a sacrament. Canon 1443. All the parties are guilty of the crime, but the priest will be hurt the most.

6) Please do not be misled. Even without a Crowning, one might commit the crime of simulating a sacrament by giving the appearance of blessing an unlawful union. Cf Canon 828 §2

7) Lay people should take care not to compromise a priest by encouraging him to do something he is forbidden to do by the Church or by Divine Law or by his conscience.

8) Please be aware that presbyter/priests in recent years in our Churches in the United States have been excommunicated and involuntarily laicized for attempting to marry two males.

All of us, clergy and laity, should renew our love of God's Law which is given to us as a free gift to protect us from injury and to lead us on the path to eternal life and joy. God gave us His Law because He loves us and desires to protect us. God's Law is not a burden. God's Law is a blessing and a delight.

Recently I saw parents telling their small children, "Hold my hand!", as they crossed a busy street. When God gives us His Law, He is saying, "Hold my hand. I don't want you to get hurt."

> Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commands!
> His descendants shall be mighty in the land, a generation of the upright will be blessed.
> Wealth and riches shall be in his house; his righteousness shall endure forever.
> Light shines through the darkness for the upright, gracious, compassionate, and righteous.
> --Psalm 112(111)

Your servant,

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