



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

December 21, 2023

Memorial of St. Peter Canisius, Priest and Doctor

Dear Priests, Deacons, and Church in Eastern Oklahoma,

As you know on December 18th Cardinal Fernandez, Prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, released a new Declaration titled *Fiducia Supplicans: On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings*. Much has already been said about what the Declaration says or does not say and given that this document will affect our pastoral ministry in the diocese, I wanted to share a few thoughts with all of you.

In terms of pastoral practice, it seems to me that there is not a lot that is new here. The Declaration describes a spontaneous and lower level kind of blessing that is not performed liturgically or using any rite or attached to any sacrament, but that still forms an important moment of prayer and mercy between the Church's minister and one or more members of the faithful. What seems to be new is a more careful and complete rationale for extending this kind of blessing even to couples who are living in irregular situations or including persons who may have a same sex attraction and be in a sexual relationship with someone of the same sex.

Of course, we have always had such informal blessings available to us, and you and I have always imparted them. How often does someone come to you before or after a Mass and say, "Father would you please give me your blessing?" How often have you been approached by someone in an airport or other public place and asked for and given a blessing without even knowing if the person is in fact Catholic, let alone what are their life circumstances? Whenever we celebrate Mass in a jail or at the end of any Mass that we celebrate anywhere, we offer the blessing over all those who are in attendance no matter who they are and no matter what kind of moral trials they may be facing. How often have we been asked to bless people before they go on a pilgrimage or a road trip or bless students before they enter final exams and in many other circumstances? In all such cases, we offer these blessings because we know that God always desires to help every person he creates. The Good Shepherd is willing to leave the ninety-nine sheep and go after the one lost sheep and blessings are one way for all of us when we feel lost to encounter the Shepherd.

In recommending this Declaration to us, Pope Francis is striving for this kind of generous attitude toward blessings over anyone who asks for them. I think paragraph 34 is an apt summary of the entire document:

The Church's liturgy itself invites us to adopt this trusting attitude (that trusts in the love of God for every person), even in the midst of our sins, lack of merits, weaknesses, and confusions, as witnessed by this beautiful Collect from the Roman Missal: "Almighty ever-living God, who in the abundance of your kindness surpass the merits and the desires of those who entreat you, pour out your mercy upon us to pardon what conscience dreads and to give what prayer does not dare to ask" (Collect for the Twenty-Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time). How often, through a pastor's simple blessing, which does not claim to sanction or legitimize anything, can people experience the nearness of the Father, beyond all "merits" and "desires"?

This is what the Holy Father is asking for in this new document. He desires to see the pastors of the Church offer simple blessings to people who ask for them and who are trusting that God desires to work in all our lives. In paragraphs 4-6 and elsewhere, the Declaration notes that the Church cannot bless the sexual unions of persons who may be in irregular marital situations or who may be cohabiting without marriage or who may be persons who are same sex attracted and engaging in sexual relationships. But with the heart of a father, the pope is saying



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in *Fiducia Supplicans* that there must be some level on which the church can say *yes* to a request for a blessing—some level on which the Church must be able to bless people in such circumstances or in any circumstance.

The Declaration describes this simple kind of blessing over persons, not unions, that can be offered. When a person recognizes a need for God's grace and instruction, we are to be able to offer a blessing over them in a spontaneous, informal, and merciful fashion. When we do so, as when we offer any kind of blessing, we are not offering a blessing over anything in the person's life that may be contrary to the Catholic faith; but rather, we are asking that God will bless the persons themselves so that they, like us, can grow in faith and deepen their conversion and come more fully into communion with the Church that Jesus Christ has given us. The Church cannot always respond *yes* with her more formal liturgical blessings or blessings that are attached to sacraments or other rituals that have their own objective requirements. But as this Declaration makes clear, there is always and at least on the level of a prayer for mercy, the ability to bestow a blessing on anyone.

As the Declaration notes in paragraphs 36-38, precisely the informal nature of these kinds of blessings precludes any formal rite or ritual language, but I think a blessing along these lines would be what the Declaration has in mind: "Father of Goodness, we praise you for the gifts of life and faith. Bestow on your son(s) (daughter(s), son and daughter) here before me a deepening of faith, your blessing in their (his, her) lives and growth in every virtue. By your grace draw them (him, her) in greater union with the Church. We ask this through Christ our Lord." Paragraph 41 notes that the pope is content to leave the rest to the pastoral prudence of the ordained ministers.

A final word to the lay faithful of the diocese, we live in a time when the rush to make reports on issues in the life of the Church often causes the media to be incorrect when it reports on things like the present Declaration. In such a time it is wise to be patient and to question the first reporting and headlines that we see and where possible, to read the documents of the Church themselves which can shed a corrective light on what we may see in the media. *Fiducia Supplicans* is a reminder to us that our Lord desires his followers to have the same concern for one another that he has for all. No one is excluded from his love and we are all promised his grace as we seek to convert our lives according to his will and the faith he has entrusted to the Church.

And so, while recommending that you read this document carefully and prayerfully, I hope that you will join me in praising God that he has given to the Church the ability to impart a blessing on everyone who asks for it so that no one who is with us on the journey ever feels the need to walk alone and that all of us may more perfectly conform our life to the holiness that God teaches us in our Catholic faith.

In Christ,

Most Rev. David A. Konderla, Bishop
Diocese of Tulsa and Eastern Oklahoma