COMMENTARY: The pastoral concessions the Vatican’s latest document gives for the blessing of people in same-sex relationships and other irregular marriages is imprudent and does not reflect reality ‘on the ground.’

The great joy of a parish priest is to be with the people of God, elbow deep in the midst of their joys, sorrows and sufferings. The fatherly vocation of the parish priest is to teach, govern and sanctify his parishioners in Christ’s name. This is done by teaching and shepherding, exhorting and consoling, absolving and admonishing, guiding his parishioners to greater conviction in their discipleship, encouraging them, accompanying them, crying and laughing with them, and — in all things Christian — to love them as a reflection of Christ’s own love for the Church.

The corridors of the Vatican dicasteries are very different from the trenches of parish life. Magisterial declarations can be promulgated (perhaps even with good intentions) and explained within a series of theological gymnastics to the satisfaction of high Churchmen, but parish priests and the people under their pastoral care are left scratching their heads trying to figure out what was just declared, what it all means, and how we’re supposed to make sense of it.

In a healthy Church, the various structures — including Vatican dicasteries — would support and champion the grassroots reality of parish life, since that is where the vast majority of believers hear the Gospel, sacramentally encounter the Lord, and experience the life of the Church.

The recent declaration *Fiducia Supplicans*, however, is not a reflection of a healthy Church. The pastoral concessions it gives for the blessing of people in same-sex relationships and other irregular marriages is imprudent and does not reflect reality “on the ground.” In fact, this declaration — however well-intentioned it might be — causes unnecessary confusion, moral ambiguity, anger, pastoral hurt, and a regrettable, needless tension between the baptized and their appointed shepherds.

The reality, at the parish level, is that there are no droves of divorced-and-remarried people or gay couples aspiring to receive the Church’s blessing, liturgical or pastoral.

While it might seem bourgeois to some, most people (who do not classify themselves as activists and reformers) have a basic and compelling moral sense of right and wrong. When they find themselves in a state of sin, rather than a sinful act, they tend to make one of two decisions: repent and reconcile with the Lord, or remain obstinate and walk away. In these instances, the Church welcomes and encourages all people to repent. There is no harsh judgment or dismissal of the person. There is an invitation that can be accepted or rejected.

The people I encounter in active parish life are the ones who have repented, or who want to repent, or who want to want to repent. They understand the need to seek the graces of conversion, to repent, confess their sins in prayer and in sacramental confession, remedy their state of sin, reconcile with the Lord Jesus and the Church, do acts of penance, and seek the ongoing help of God’s grace to persevere in the way of the Lord Jesus.

Such a process of conversion is displayed for us in the public ministry of the Lord Jesus in the Gospel. We see it throughout the Acts of the Apostles, and, more recently, such a process was confirmed and elevated by the Second Vatican Council in *Ad Gentes*, its decree on missionary activity, and by Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. It is a process that is also known by every Christian believer, as we are all constantly called to undergo such a process so that we can draw closer to the Lord Jesus every day.

Sadly, there are no references to repentance, the sacrament of confession or conversion in *Fiducia Supplicans*. There is only one passing reference (in a quote) to penitential practices. The declaration’s references to grace are overly passive and do not call for a change of one’s life. The limp references to grace in the declaration do not withstand the “sniff test” of the real fight between sin and holiness.

This is one of many foundational problems associated with what many see as a blind jump to give pastoral blessings to those in irregular relationships.

The people in active parish life are very different from the activists in social movements. This can be hard for high Churchmen to understand since they might need or choose to deal more with societal movements rather than with grassroots communities of Christian believers.

In average parish life, it’s extremely rare that I have a gay couple wanting a blessing from the Church. It’s more common that I’ll have people who have been emotionally and spiritually beaten up by the gay lifestyle who...
want to change their lives and receive the mercy of God. In parish life, it’s very uncommon that a divorced-and-remarried couple will seek a blessing from the Church. It’s more common that they will want to rectify their irregular marriage and will need guidance and encouragement in the annulment process.

Active parish life serves as a strainer. Leaders of social movements do not commit themselves to a real, stable Eucharistic community. They are rarely active members of parishes since the ordinary living out of the Christian way of life seems offensive and belittling to them. The people in parish life have already made some initial decision for conversion, and it’s the best starting point to lead someone to deeper discipleship.

In addition to these types of parishioners, there are the circle of loved ones and friends — so praised and esteemed throughout the life of the Lord Jesus — who have been praying, doing penances, inviting, receiving scorn, trying to explain moral truth, and inviting their loved ones again and again back to the way of the Lord Jesus. The return of their loved ones to the faith is a cause for rejoicing since it was brought forth by a true conversion to Christ and a desire for something more than what they previously possessed.

With this perspective in mind, the recent Vatican declaration appears destined to cause spiritual stress and uncertainty to parish priests and the people of God in the trenches of life. The blessing of couples in a state of sin only confounds and causes bewilderment among the faithful. The blessing of sin, with no call to conversion, is a scandal. The intricacies of the Vatican’s theological explanation for the new declaration will cause confusion, since it sounds like equivocation to sin. It will anger and frustrate many of those in irregular marriages who are trying to reform their lives and follow the Gospel and who now feel unsupported by the higher shepherds of the Church.

Among the general body of believers there is further anger since leadership is now authorizing the blessing of what God will not bless. They are fighting to hold the line in their own lives and in the lives of their families. Imagine the sense of betrayal in the parents who have fought to keep their adult child out of a gay lifestyle and who now have to explain what the Vatican has just done.

The Vatican declaration has also caused perplexity among priests, who are already fighting the effects of secularism and relativism among their people and will now have to explain the difference between doctrine and the new understanding of supposed pastoral outreach.

For example, imagine the pastor who now has to emphasize the need for a divorced-and-remarried couple to continue the annulment process even if they now think it’s unnecessary.

Imagine the pastor who must stress again and again in his preaching that homosexual activity is grave sin, though we are now blessing those engaged in it.

Lastly, imagine the people hurt by the gay lifestyle who no longer see the Catholic Church as the field hospital and path to a renewed life since we’re blessing gay couples and appear to have compromised on this point.

The list of conditions and provisions for the blessing of couples in irregular marriages are excessive and will all be ignored by the more progressive clergy among us. Such dismissiveness of the conditions will be overlooked by leadership. There will be no accountability. As such, tensions will increase among the clergy and further divisions will be introduced over those who will bless according to the current mind of the Church, those who will bless however they prefer, and those who will refuse to give blessings in this way.

Rather than serving the lifeline of the Church on the parish level, the declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* has only made the Christian way of life and the process of conversion a thousand times harder to preach, teach, apply, enforce and live.

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