On December 18, 2023, the Vatican released a document titled, *Fiducia supplicans*, approved by Pope Francis, that allowed Catholic priests to bless Catholic couples in irregular situations including cohabitating relationships, non-sacramental civil marriages, divorced and remarried unions, polygamous bonds, and same-sex unions. The declaration is clear that it opens up 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.”

With an emphasis on the pastoral meaning of blessings, *Fiducia supplicans* distinguishes two kinds of blessings, liturgical or ritual blessings, which are the official blessings of the Catholic Church, and spontaneous blessings, which are the informal words of blessing chosen by a priest at the request of the faithful. It then affirms that the former can never be used to bless couples in irregular situations, while the latter may be used if the couple humbly approaches the priest seeking God’s mercy.

But what exactly does it mean to say that a Catholic priest blesses a couple in a cohabitating relationship or a polygamous bond or a same-sex union? And for the priest, what words should he use if he is asked to bless a couple in these irregular situations, especially since *Fiducia supplicans* leaves the words of the blessing itself to the discretion of the priest?

To answer these questions, we have to begin with a robust understanding of blessings. A blessing is an invocation to God -- a request to God -- to exercise His power on a person or a thing. Human beings cannot bless. Only God can. Typically, after praising God for His majesty and glory, Catholic blessings ask God to do one or two things. First, we ask God to dispel the evil that may be in a person or a thing. This is what happens when a priest blesses a car, or a deacon blesses a newly-purchased rice field. This is a blessing of exorcism.

Second, we ask God to make a person or a thing holy. This is a blessing of sanctification. This happens when a bishop blesses the altar of a new church, or a priest blesses a newly-married couple during their wedding rite. For centuries, Catholic blessings often combined the two. An object was first exorcised before it was sanctified. Persons too are exorcised before being sanctified by the sacrament during the rite of baptism.

Thus, *Fiducia supplicans*, citing the Book of Blessings, will explain: “So that this intent might become more apparent, by an ancient tradition, the formulas of blessing are primarily aimed at giving glory to God for his gifts, asking for his favors, and restraining the power of evil in the world” (no. 10).
To this list of blessings, *Fiducia supplicans* now adds a third category of blessing, a blessing of mercy. Following after St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas defines mercy as “heartfelt sympathy for another’s distress, impelling us to assist him if we can” (*Summa theologiae*, II-II.30.1). In other words, asking for mercy is a request for pity and for remedy.

Therefore, when a Catholic priest prays a blessing of mercy on a couple in an irregular situation, who “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” (no. 30), he is asking God to have pity on both of them and to give them the grace of conversion so that they can regularize their relationships.

This blessing of mercy is not and cannot be a blessing of sanctification since we cannot ask God to bless something that, as *Fiducia supplicans* explains, is not “conformed to God’s will, as expressed in the teachings of the Church” (no. 9). Priests who are invited to bless couples in irregular situations should choose the appropriate words to reveal this intent of the Church.

In closing, we turn once again to our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the incarnation and instrument of God’s mercy: “The Catholic Church is called to preach the power of grace through prayer and Holy Communion, and the mercy of Jesus Christ through the sacrament of penance. It is Jesus Christ, and He alone, who can heal every broken human heart that yearns for unconditional love and authentic friendship.”

December 19, 2023, Saint John the Evangelist Cathedral, Dagupan City

SOCRATES B. VILLEGAS
Archbishop of Lingayen Dagupan

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