

CONFUSION REIGNS OVER SAME-SEX BLESSINGS

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Last December, Pope Francis gave priests permission to bless homosexual couples. It immediately triggered a blowback of massive proportions. But some loved it. Among the happiest are Catholic dissidents, members of the clergy, religious, and laity who have long rejected the Church's teachings on women and sexuality.

We issued a report detailing the comments that these people made in support of this change. Catholics for Choice—the anti-Catholic pro-abortion letterhead funded by wealthy individuals and foundations—acknowledged that “some priests have been secretly blessing same-sex unions for years.” They noted, with delight, that they can now do so publicly.

They were right. Fr. James Martin, a LGBT advocate, said he was delighted to bless a gay couple in a living room, saying, “It was really nice to be able to do that publicly.” Thus did he tacitly admit that he had been doing so all along.

The confusion that stories like this have generated is considerable.

There has been widespread opposition by the African Catholic clergy to this decision. Bishops and priests in the United States, France, Eastern Europe, and many other parts of the world have also expressed their misgivings.

Earlier in the year, it was reported that an American Catholic priest blessed a same-sex couple in a church, something the pope's declaration did not permit. The question that Catholics

need answered is whether the Vatican is willing and able to deal with situations like that in Kentucky which appear to run afoul of its intentions.

Fr. Richard Watson offered the blessing to a lesbian couple at Saint Paul Catholic Church in Lexington, Kentucky on New Year's Eve; the couple claim to have been civilly "married" for 22 years. Had the blessing taken place in the home of the couple, it would not have drawn much attention. But it took place in a church, and the priest was wearing a rainbow stole. The Vatican document on this issue clearly states that it is not acceptable to allow "any type of liturgical rite or blessing similar to a liturgical rite," citing the "confusion" it would incur.

The situation in Lexington should come as no surprise. After the Vatican declaration on same-sex blessings was issued, Fr. Watson pledged to open his doors to everyone, "no matter their circumstances." Yet the Vatican statement is replete with qualifications, citing many circumstances where the blessing would not be appropriate.

The director of the gay, lesbian and transgender ministry of the Diocese of Lexington, "JR" Zerkowski, also heralded the new directive. In 2021, Bill Donohue wrote to his boss, Bishop John Stowe, asking whether he agreed with Zerkowski about his publicly stated support for the Equality Act, legislation that has been slammed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops for its anti-Catholic provisions. He did not reply.

In a statement released October 25, 2023, Donohue mentioned that Pope Francis thanked Zerkowski for his work. He pointedly questioned whether the pope knew of his association with extremist groups who reject Church teachings. Donohue addressed another issue as well. "Does he [the pope] know that under the tutelage of Zerkowski that his ministry draped an image of Our Blessed Mother in a gay pride flag, posting it online, calling Jesus' mother the 'Mother of Pride'?"

In other words, it was to be expected that, given its history, the Diocese of Lexington would put its own spin on the recent same-sex marriage directive. It was also to be expected that the confusion that this statement would engender would begin as soon as it was released.

In March 2021, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith posed this question: "Does the Church have the power to give the blessing to unions of persons of the same sex?" It replied, "Negative." It said that it "declares illicit any form of blessing that tends to acknowledge their unions as such." To make its point crystal clear, it said that God "does not and cannot bless sin."

On December 2023, the *New York Times*, citing the latest document, ran a headline, "Gay Catholics Hear History: 'God Bless You.'"

The author of the document, and the head of the Dicastery (previously the Congregation) for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernández, said on December 18 that this was his only statement on this issue—"no further responses should be expected."

On January 4, 2024, Fernández issued another response, seeking to clarify his comments of December 18. Now Catholics learned that the original statement was not "heretical."

Catholics from Kentucky to Kenya are supposed to believe in the same Church teachings, but given the confusion over same-sex blessings, this is in jeopardy. What makes this issue so important is that the Catholic Church is losing members in the United States while it is booming in Africa. Indeed, more than half of all the people who joined the Catholic Church worldwide in 2021 came from Africa.

If Africa is the future of the Church, the disillusionment that African Catholics are currently experiencing should be one of the most pressing issues facing the entire Catholic

Church today.