

THE PASTORAL MEANING OF BLESSINGS IN *FIDUCIA SUPPLICANS* AND THE AFRICAN RESPONSE

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Abstract

This paper is a prognosis on the publication by the Dicastery for Doctrine and Faith (DDF), dated 18 December 2023, authorized by Pope Francis, on the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings which is a declaration on blessing and not on marriage. This is evident in the document as it suggested pastoral blessings when requested by persons in irregular unions such as same-sex persons. Evidently, the directive is a pastoral solution of a pastoral challenge especially of the Western world. Hence, the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), on 11 January 2024, gave her response titled: “No Blessing for Homosexual Couples in the African Churches.” Using descriptive-analytical method, the paper argues that in most African cultures, same-sex union is an abomination. Accordingly, the Church in Africa will find it difficult to bless homosexuals and lesbians, as this is understood to be against the culture, nature and the will of God. After all, there is no blessing for living in sin. Among others, the paper recommends that African Catholicism has more pastoral concerns which directly affect the Church in sub-Saharan Africa in need of pastoral solutions. She must resist any form of cultural colonization as she makes effort to defend the Christian values.

Keywords: Pastoral, Blessing, Liturgical, Celebration, Sacraments, Sacramentals

1. Introduction

The celebration of blessing holds a privileged place among all the sacramentals instituted by the Church for the pastoral benefits of the faithful. Indeed, blessing is strictly speaking a liturgical action that invokes God’s favour and is a gratuitous gift on an individual, persons, or things, thereby preparing them for the principal effect of the sacrament. The Church, as the means of the universal sacrament of salvation, is endowed with the authority and power to sanctify the people of God through the administration of sacraments and sacramentals whereby the impartation of blessing is an integral component. Down the memory lane, she has judiciously exercised this ministry by celebrating blessings to sanctify the faithful

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in their various occasions and events in life. The reformed liturgy of the Second Vatican Council decreed that in the celebration of blessings, special attention should be given to the full, conscious, and active participation of the faithful² and that elements should be eliminated that suggest in the course of time had obscured the true nature and purpose of sacramentals.³

Nonetheless, there has been proliferation of concerns since the Dicastery for Doctrine and Faith (DDF), published the new directive, titled: *Fiducia Supplicans* (FS) [Pleading with Courage], dated 18 December 2023, authorized by Pope Francis, on the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings.⁴ It has raised some dust and mixed feelings, with social media hype, being awash with sensational writings, headings, and opinions about the document. Some are worried that it will give room now for endorsement and recognition of the same-same union as a sacrament; hence, some individuals, scholars, theologians, liturgists, bishops, and episcopal conferences issuing disapproval, reservation, and outright rejection. *Quid da casum?* (Where do we go from here?). What is the authentic interpretation of this document? Why do we have ambiguities in the understanding of the text? What is the African response to FS? Accordingly, this document will be critically reviewed in the light of future development of African Catholicism *via* its liturgical and para-liturgical meaning of blessings.

2. The Dynamic Nature of Blessing

Blessing is a word with a variety of meanings; yet only God blesses, for strictly speaking; hence, a blessing means that God looks favourably upon persons or things.⁵ Etymologically, the word 'blessing' is derived from the Latin *benedicare* whereas the Greek is *ἐνλογέω* and Hebrew *barak*. It can be used in reference to either to God or to an object. Broadly, blessing can come from God, parents to children or from superiors or priests, and indeed, any human being. God is always blessing and never relents from blessing His children through His Church. Strictly, blessing is the action of God who blesses, expressing His kindness to human beings. Hence, it connotes that God imparts His favour on humanity because He (God) is the source of blessings. Blessings bring about the presence of God on a person, place, object, image, works of human hands, objects of devotion, places of life, etc.

² Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy) [henceforth SC] in Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II*, (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1987) 14.

³ SC 37.

⁴ Dicastery for Doctrine and Faith (DDF), *Fiducia Supplicans*, On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings, from <http://www.vatican.va> > documents, accessed on 1st October 2024.

⁵ Jovian P. Lang, *Dictionary of the Liturgy*, (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1989) 68.

Within the framework of digital platforms, E-Blessing simply means invoking God's favour and praying over a person who is not physically present but he/she requests that prayer should be said for him or her over the phone or any other electronic device. In this case, the priest says the prayer as the person hears it on his or her own phone or device. Sometimes, one could be on a transit, or hospitalized, have an emergency, etc. which could not warrant the physical presence of the minister. In such a situation, it is good, encouraged and recommended that the priest says the prayer of blessing through the phone as the faith of the recipient suggests. The Church is a mother that cares for her children in all situations; thus, to engage in E-blessing is one of the ways the Church shows concern to all her members. An instance is seen in the "*Urbi et Orbi*" extraordinary blessing Pope Francis pronounced on 20 March 2020, as he carried the monstrance containing the Blessed Sacrament and prayed for the end of the global COVID-19 pandemic. However, there are some prayers and blessings that have rites for celebration.⁶ In such case, it is encouraged that Christ's faithful should always strive to physically come for them. E-blessing should be the last resort and not a model or an ideal practice.

Be that as it may, the Church, as the universal sacrament of salvation, continues the work of salvation through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Church is taken to mean the official and liturgical community of the new people of God. These new people of God are the new people in Christ. This community is established by Christ himself. He established this community and continued to sustain it through the ministry of the Apostles and their successors. Christ has promised to remain with this community until the end of time (see Matt 16:20; 28:16-20). Through the blessings, the Church calls the people of God to praise God, encourage them to implore His protection, seek His mercy and ask for His favours. Thus, the blessings, instituted in the Church, are included among those signs perceptible to the sense by which the glorification of God and human sanctification (*glorificationis Dei et sanctificationis populi*) in Christ are signified and brought about in ways proper to each of those signs.

⁶ For instance, the sacrament of reconciliation negates e-confession because it does not warrant proper disposition of the confessor and the liturgical decorum necessary for the celebration of the sacrament. ICT gadgets have main servers from where any information that has passed through them can be retrieved. The machine is not bound by any oath or seal to choose whom to access it or not. Once anyone has access to know what to do or better still, the right button to press, then very sensitive information can be hacked, and the seal of confession breached. When such situation occurs, the electronic device is not blamed because it is not bound by any seal of secrecy (For a detailed study, see Emmanuel C. Anagwo, *The Nexus between ICT and Liturgy: Towards Consolidating Digital Worship in the African Context* (Berlin: LIT Verlag Dr. W. Hopf, 2023), 67-69).

In the *Roman Ritual*, the *Book of Blessings* are categorized as follows: i. Blessing directly pertaining to person; ii. Blessings related to buildings and to various human activity; iii. Blessings of objects that are designed or erected for use in Church within the liturgy or popular devotion; iv. Blessings of artifacts meant to foster devotion of the faithful; v. Blessings related to feasts and seasons; vi. Blessings for various needs and occasions.⁷ These have proper ritual assigned to them.

3. Theological Meaning of Blessings

Without theology, our understanding of blessing is bound to be incomplete. The purpose of liturgy is to contribute to theology which possesses faith and doctrine. The theology of blessing is predicated on the understanding that the Church is a sacrament of salvation. From the beginning, we must state that blessings are not superstitious magical attempts to get God to act on people and events in the world. Every blessing is first thanks and praise of God, the origin and giver of every blessing. Accordingly, the purpose of blessing is ultimately to give worship to God. This implies that blessings of human beings and things are in the final analysis laudatory invocations of God upon them. They are *anamnesis* or remembrance: the Church gratefully remembers the fact that human beings and things are already blessed by creation and redemption, and they express thanks to God.

Biblically, some forms of blessings are seen both in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament. When God created man in His image as male and female, He blessed them and said to them: Be fertile and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it (Gen 1:28). Abraham is blessed by God and said that he (ultimately through Jesus Christ) will be a blessing to all people. Aaron, the priest, blesses the people with the famous priestly blessing, “May the Lord bless and take care of you; May the Lord be kind and gracious to you; May the Lord look on you with favour and give you peace” (Num 6:24-26). Some Psalms and canticles as well as some of Paul’s letters contain formulations of “Blessed be God.” In the New Testament, Christ blesses little children (Matt 19:13) as well as the Apostles (Luke 24:51). When Elizabeth encounters Mary and baby Jesus in her womb, she is filled with the Holy Spirit and declares, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (Luke 1:42). Zechariah and Simeon are born filled with the Holy Spirit and “bless” (praise or give thanks to) God. This attitude of praise and gratitude should also be our response to God’s gift of blessings to us.

⁷ *The Roman Ritual, Book of Blessings*, (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Corp., 1989) 7-15.

ANAGWO: The Pastoral Meaning of Blessings in Fiducia Supplicans and the African Response

Theologically, blessings, therefore, are meant to make it possible to experience God's favour in sensible ways. Thus, in the bestowing of blessings, there are two elements: praise of God and petition for the application of salvation to human beings. They are also bestowed with view to everyday life in which man and woman are to communicate the love of God they received through blessings and thereby continue to praise God that found that expression in those blessings: blessing confers grace. Additionally, the very act of celebration of them most effectively disposes the faithful to receive this grace to their advantage, to worship God and to practice charity.⁸

Blessings are first sacramentals because they prepare us to receive the grace of the sacraments and help us to grow to be more like Christ.⁹ They do not confer grace, but they prepare the faithful to receive and cooperate with grace. Blessings consists of prayer, Scripture, and sometimes a special ritual sign.¹⁰ Blessings are ascending and descending.¹¹ God, in the scriptures, gratuitously poured His blessings on mankind, on Abraham and Isaac. Jesus Christ also blessed His disciples (Luke 24:51). These forms of blessings are descending blessing. Whereas ascending blessings are when we bless God through praise, thanksgiving, and worship. Undoubtedly, we also have the blessings of parents over their children when they are travelling or are sick or the like.

4. Background to *Fiducia Supplicans* (FS)

Our primary assignment is to discover this document within the ambience of the universal Church. Remotely, FS is a reaction to an error that has been institutionalized in some European Churches, especially for the rights of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender). Accordingly, the document is not about blessing of same-sex marriage, but against those who have started to bless same-sex union and have even evolved an official rite of blessings for such occasions. Against the backdrop that blessing of same-sex couple has become a topical issue in some parts of Europe such as Germany and the global trend of human freedom has been the talking point both in politics and in the Church. In the process of the "synodal path," some German Church and some regional decisions by episcopal conferences showed openness towards same-sex unions, denial of communion to politicians, among others. Hence, on 22 February 2021, the DDF responded

⁸ SC 59.

⁹ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), (Nairobi: Paulines/St. Paul, 1995) 1670.

¹⁰ CCC 1668.

¹¹ FS 29-30.

(*responsum ad dubium*) by stating that the Church does not have the power to bless same-sex couples.¹²

Another contributory factor is the liberal posture of Pope Francis who, on various occasions, emphasized the love of God and encouraged a warm reception and openness to sinners, the poor, the marginalised like the children of the imprisoned who belonged also to the most vulnerable folks of the parish and society at large. For instance, on the third Sunday of November 2023 (World Day of the Poor), Pope Francis invited the poor to the table. Since some journalists spotted some persons whom they knew or imagined to be in irregular marriages, they framed the news of Pope Francis dining with gays and lesbians.

Proximately, before the Synod on Synodality that was held in Rome in October 2023, among the questions posited to Pope Francis directly by a group of bishops (*DUBIA*) was whether “the Church is now going to be blessing irregular so-called marriages or not.” By rule, the Pope was expected to answer “yes” or “No”. But this time, he did not answer the question. Accordingly, the DDF, in FS, attempted to explain to those who asked that question “what is meant by blessing in the Church?”

Admittedly, blessings do not have moral prerequisite since the blessing of God is gratuitous and not based on the individual moral rectitude with Him (God). From the perspective of popular piety, blessings should be valued as acts of devotion. Conferring them does not demand ‘prior moral perfection’ as a precondition. FS calls for pastoral charity to be extended to such persons. Since God has given the Church the power to bless, requesting for blessing means the recognition of God’s power and the Church, as a sacrament of salvation in the world. The Church cannot deny God’s blessings to those who humbly request it. The reactions and controversies that arose at the wake of publication of the declaration is more from numbers 31 to 34 of FS on the blessing of couple in irregular union and couple of the same-sex. Unfortunately, this gave the misinterpretation that the Church has approved the blessing of the same sex union. To gain deeper insights into the discussion, let us briefly discuss the distinction between liturgical blessing and pastoral blessing.

5. Liturgical Blessing vis-à-vis Pastoral Blessing in FS

Blessing means praying for God’s grace, favour, and protection on someone or something. Hence, constitutive blessings are similar in their effects to consecrations and dedications because the first place for anything so blessed

¹²See *Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei, ‘Responsum ad dubium’ de benedictione unionem personarum eiusdem sexus et Nota esplicativa* (15 March 2021): AAS 113 (2021), 431-434.

ANAGWO: The Pastoral Meaning of Blessings in Fiducia Supplicans and the African Response

becomes a sacred place or thing set aside for divine worship. From a strictly liturgical point, the blessing requires that what is blessed 'is in accordance with the will of God expressed in the teaching of the Church.' Example includes an oratory, chalice, paten,¹³ priestly vestments, and palm fronds. Whereas the invocative blessings, known as prayers seeking God's protection for a home or a sick person, have no such constitutive effects; the persons so blessed retain their status, and the places or things so blessed retain their secular character.¹⁴ FS explores the theme of blessings; hence, the English translation of the title (*Fiducia Supplicans*) is "The Pastoral Meaning of Blessings." Emmanuel O. Nwabude rightly agrees with the document that distinguishes between liturgical (ritual) and pastoral (spontaneous, akin to signs of popular devotion) blessing. A Liturgical blessing is a sacred rite which usually consists of words and actions, and ordinarily the Sign of the Cross, which are expected to sanctify or consecrate a person, thing, or activity. Thus, it is the act of hallowing, consecrating, or making a person or thing holy by a religious rite or word or sign of the cross.

Currently, the law of the Church indicates two types of liturgical blessings, namely, constitutive, and invocative. Constitutive blessings permanently bring about the dedication of a person or an object, in the service of the Church. Example includes the bishop, or the church building, or the altar. Invocative blessing is whereby the pastor asks God to help those who are in need or who use blessed objects. It includes the blessing of the sick or the blessing of a house or a car. Whereas pastoral blessing is the act of invoking divine care and graces on a person or thing.¹⁵ Admittedly, every faithful, even a thief, has the right to ask a priest to pray for him or her, not to be a confirmed thief but as a sign of belief, and the priest with his prudence can pray/bless for him/her. Similarly, when a transgender, gay or lesbian, etc. ask for prayer, it is not a call for nuptial Mass; the priest is free to pray for them without judging them whether worthy or unworthy of blessings. Precisely, in the second category, there is now new consideration of the possibility of welcoming even those who do not live according to the norms of Christian moral doctrine but humbly request to be blessed. Here, the pastor can pray for the individual and not their union, and the Church lacks their records as those whose togetherness is recognized or solemnized as marriage.

¹³ Can. 1169 § 2, 1217 § 1, 1229, 1237 § 1, 1240 § 1.

¹⁴ Can. 1169 § 2.

¹⁵ Emmanuel O. Nwabude, *An Encyclopedic Dictionary of Canon Law of the Western (CIC 1983) Church and Eastern (CCEO 1990) Churches*, (Onitsha: Africana First Publishers, 2008) 25.

6. The Main Position of FS

The publication of this declaration gave birth to various responses and reactions of acceptance, sceptical reserve and outright rejection from National and Inter-territorial Episcopal Conferences and individual bishops across the world. This is more because it extended pastoral blessings for same-sex unions and irregular marriages. For certain, FS did not contradict the Church's position on marriage. Instead, it argued that the same-sex unions, those in polygamous unions, in concubinage, divorced or remarried couples whose previous marriages had not been annulled, etc. cannot be compared to marriage. As a divine law, the Church does not have the power to change it. Marriage is between a mature man and woman, with full consent and within the levels approved by God, society, and the Church. Pointedly, Christian marriage is the union contracted between a baptized man and a baptized woman. The two adult come together in mutual understanding and love to give themselves to each other for the whole of their lives. Christian marriage is for the purpose of love for procreation and raising up of children according to the law of God and the Church for the good of the couple, and the society. The Church has a very clear notion of marriage: an exclusive, stable, and indissoluble union between a man and a woman, naturally open to the generation of children. In marriage, the Church blesses, as a liturgical act, the union and the persons. But on blessing those in irregular unions, the Church only prays for the individual and not their union. The Church does not have the power to impart a blessing on irregular unions.

Besides, FS does not contradict the *responsum ad dubium* of DDF in 2021 that the Church does not have the power to bless same-sex couples;¹⁶ instead, it clarifies it.¹⁷ FS also makes it clear that the blessing is on the person as an individual and not the union nor the relationship. This document is majorly for pastoral blessings, not liturgical blessings, or ritual blessings. As such, it should not be mistaken for liturgical blessing at the sacrament of matrimony; instead, spontaneous blessings upon those living in irregular unions, such as same-sex unions, those in polygamous unions, in concubinage, divorced or remarried couples whose previous marriages had not been annulled. Consequently, this is not legal or sacramental blessing but a pastoral charity. After all, *Salus animarum suprema lex* (Salvation of soul is the supreme law) is an outstanding pastoral principle for the Church. It means that saving soul is an essential thing to be considered always. Christian worship both expresses and shapes our faith. The document prohibits liturgical blessings but at same time recommends spontaneous pastoral blessings for them. It presupposes some pastoral concerns to make decision in a particular

¹⁶ See *Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei, 'Responsum ad dubium' de benedictione unionem personarum eiusdem sexus et Nota esplicativa* (15 March 2021): AAS 113 (2021), 431-434.

¹⁷ FS 31.

ANAGWO: The Pastoral Meaning of Blessings in Fiducia Supplicans and the African Response

circumstance or concrete situation. This is because blessings mean calling on God’s assistance and grace to live a better life. God’s mercy is for everyone. It shows God’s gratuitous love extended to sinners. Through blessings, God will heal their relationship according to His will. FS reiterated that same-sex couples and irregular unions cannot be blessed sacramentally, but pastoral blessings can spontaneously be extended to them. It states that: “In this regard, there comes to mind the following words of Pope Francis, already quoted in part:

Decisions that may be part of pastoral prudence in certain circumstances should not necessarily become a norm. That is to say, it is not appropriate for a Diocese, a Bishops’ Conference, or any other ecclesial structure to constantly and officially establish procedures or rituals for all kinds of matters [...]. Canon Law should not and cannot cover everything, nor should the Episcopal Conferences claim to do so with their various documents and protocols, since the life of the Church flows through many channels besides the normative ones.¹⁸

The document further recalled that “what is part of a practical discernment in particular circumstances cannot be elevated to the level of a rule” because this “would lead to an intolerable casuistry.”¹⁹ The document is classified as a declaration and not a law. Hence, the local church that applies it is guided by its sense of prudence.

7. African Response to *Fiducia Supplicans* (FS)

Guided by the proper interpretation of the above and the African context, the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), on 11 January 2024, gave her response titled: “No Blessing for Homosexual Couples in the African Churches.”²⁰ From the beginning, the Symposium maintained her fidelity to the Gospel truth and communion with the Roman Pontiff. She states:

...the Episcopal Conferences across Africa, which have strongly reaffirmed their communion with Pope Francis, believes that the extra-liturgical blessings proposed in the Declaration *Fiducia supplicans* cannot be carried out in Africa without exposing themselves to scandals. They remind, as *Fiducia supplicans* clearly does, the clergy, religious communities, all believers and people of

¹⁸ FS 37.

¹⁹ FS 37.

²⁰ Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), ‘No Blessing for Homosexual Couples in the African Churches,’ from <https://www.aciafrica.org/news> accessed 7th October 2024.

good will, that the Church's doctrine on Christian marriage and sexuality remains unchanged.²¹

Accordingly, the Symposium upheld the unchanging doctrine on marriage and sexuality. This is because homosexuality/lesbianism is a sin and such acts are intrinsically disordered and contrary to natural law;²² hence, there is no possibility of blessing same-sex couples or same-sex unions in Africa. Like FS, the Symposium also suggested pastoral care to couples in irregular unions and at the same re-emphasizing that same-sex unions are contrary to the will of God and therefore cannot be blessed. Additionally, the Symposium held that same-sex acts are against African culture. Richard Gaillardetz rightly observes, for instance, that Vatican II's positive appreciation of the role of cultures in the expression of the Christian faith demonstrates the recognition by the Council that the local church is "the place where the universal church was concretely realized."²³ Elochukwu E. Uzukwu rightly puts that, "...the one Church of God is fully realized in diverse locations with its own autonomy. This requires mutual recognition, respect for difference of each local church vis-à-vis the Church of Rome in order to create room for the realization of the specific mission and contextual nature of the pastoral life of local churches."²⁴ Assuredly, African Catholicism does exist in isolation, but must be incarnated and firmly rooted in the cultural patterns, epistemological depths, experiential contexts, and worldview of Africans. Catholicism does not imply rigid nor blind uniformity. It simply means the faith, which is universal must be expressed in diverse forms. The ultimate challenge of African Catholicism is for the Church to take a risk with the onerous task to make Christianity wear an African face without sacrificing the universal bent.

In this way, the richness and beauty of African Catholicism abound. This search reinvigorates and rekindles the ongoing liturgical renaissance and the need for more studies on African culture and tradition, as we speak of an African Theology in post-modernity. Accordingly, African Catholicism is drawn out of the Christian faith that is enriched with African cultural values. In every culture and religious milieu, there is a moral predisposition to virtue open to the Gospel, otherwise called seeds (values) for *preparatio evangelica* (preparation for evangelization). The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* by Pope St. John Paul II already recognizes that the institution of marriage and family is a very important

²¹ Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM).

²² CCC 2357.

²³ Richard Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: A People Called and Sent*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008) 117.

²⁴ Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, 'A Theology of Christian Unity for the Church in Africa,' in *The Church We Want: Foundations, Theology and Mission in the Church in Africa*, (ed.), Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2015) 286.

ANAGWO: The Pastoral Meaning of Blessings in Fiducia Supplicans and the African Response

one in the traditional society with some values for evangelization and transformation of Christian family.²⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, in his Apostolic Exhortation “*Africae Munus*,” following the Second African Synod, affirms that it is imperative “to make a commitment to transmit the values that the Creator has instilled in the hearts of Africans since the dawn of time.”²⁶ Basically, marriage is not just an affair between a man and a woman. It involves the whole kindred and to some extent the entire village. Thus, marriage is a covenantal relationship between two extended families and not just between the couple themselves. It is a common practice to see the interest of the extended group taking upper hand in terms of priority.

However, “cooperate responsibility” in the marriage of every member of the extended family is the hallmark to sustain marriage in the traditional setting. The value of the sense of the sacred is transmitted in the members of the family because it permeates the whole fabric of African existence. Everything is linked in one way or another to the Supreme Being. Authentic values and traditions are important marriage values. Respect for each other’s family is also very important. The value of children in marriage is palpable. Children are the most important gifts from God. According to the African belief, it constitutes the essence of marriage. Thus, they are expected to be taken good care of by the family and community. Heterosexual love, love between men and women, is encouraged. There is no place for homosexuals and lesbians unlike some parts of the Western world today. SECAM rightly notes that: “...the cultural context in Africa, deeply rooted in the values of law regarding marriage and family, further complicates the acceptance of unions of persons of the same sex, as they are seen as contradictory to cultural norms and intrinsically corrupt.”²⁷

In most African cultures, same-sex union is an abomination (*haram/abin kunya* (Hausa), *aru* (Igbo), *èwò* (Yoruba), *osù* (Egun), *abom* (Ibibio), *atuufu* or *errbi* (Idoma) language (s) of Nigeria); hence, the Church in Africa will find it difficult to bless homosexuals and lesbians, as this is understood to be against natural law and the will of God. After all, there is no blessing for living in sin. The truth is that God cannot bless evil, and His blessings will always conform to His will. African Catholicism has more pastoral concerns which directly affect the African Church which need pastoral solutions such as liturgical aberrations, explosion of new

²⁵ Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), no.43.

²⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2011) 38.

²⁷ Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM).

religious movements, pastoral malpractices, polygamy, insecurity, political instability, poverty, hunger, to mention but a few.

8. Implications for Pastoral Ministry

What are the implications for pastoral ministry in Africa? Africans respect culture, epistemological depths, and experiential contexts. This is because faith without context is meaningless. Although irregular unions are frowned at culturally, same-sex unions are prohibited. They are taboos and offensive to the African sensibilities. One cannot bless such union since it also would be a sense of scandal for the weak in Africa. It is against the genius and values of African sense of marriage. Granted that some Western world would tag it 'development and advancement', for now, the Church in Africa is still very conservative. Their Western lifestyle cannot be imposed on Africans. A typical African would believe that blessing would mean approval. After all, to bless something is to recommend the thing or being for God's favour upon it. Hence, Africans totally rejected the pastoral blessing of same-sex unions or divorcees.

Additionally, same-sex couples and irregular unions are against the natural law of creation. Anything against this law of creation cannot be approved especially in the African context. On one hand, it presupposes that the FS is asking for the grace of God to ratify their union. Scripturally, sexual immoralities are grave sins, but same-sex unions are abomination. Leviticus 18:22 says: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman." Here, homosexuality is explicitly prohibited, and it is considered an abomination. Leviticus 20:13 says: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them". The scandal of homosexuals of Sodom is so abominable that it can lead to the destruction of a city (Gen 19:4-11). In the New Testament, St. Paul condemns what he describes as unnatural relationship (see Rom 1:26-33) or shameful morals (1 Cor 6:9-10). The Book of Jude 1:7 states, "Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire." Africans directly condemn all forms of sexual immoralities. After all, the prayer of blessing would be viewed as asking God to endorse their union according to His will. The premise is faulty. This is because some people live in sinful conditions. But they must make move against their sinful conditions for God to bless them. The Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) in their letter titled: "Concerning *Fiducia Supplicans*: A Declaration by the Dicastery for the Propagation of the Faith on the Pastoral Meaning of Blessing in the Church" rightly notes:

...the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria assures the entire People of God that the teaching of the Catholic Church on marriage remains the same. There is, therefore, no possibility in the Church

ANAGWO: The Pastoral Meaning of Blessings in Fiducia Supplicans and the African Response

of blessing same-sex unions and activities. That would go against God's law, the teaching of the Church, the laws of our nation and the cultural sensibilities of our people. The CBCN thanks all the Priests for their accompaniment of married couples, asking them to continue in all they do to sustain the sacrament of holy matrimony and never to do anything that would detract from the sacredness of this sacrament.²⁸

It therefore presupposes that for the pastoral ministry in the African contexts, same-sex couples and irregular unions are not favourably accepted to be blessed due to the cultural, natural, and scriptural standpoints. This is because it could be translated as an endorsement by the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, people in such situations should pastorally be catered for to turn a new leaf to benefit from the liturgical blessings. There should be proper catechesis to deepen the faith of the worshipping community on the pastoral meaning of blessings. The mantra of this paper is that no matter the situation of a person's state of life, he/she must be accorded the dignity of human life. As an inalienable right from God, the Church also respects that dignity. Human dignity and human salvation have been the foundation of the Christian theology. The protection and promotion of human dignity have always been at the heart of the Christian Theological reflection on social issues. Consequently, the Catholic theology teaches and does everything possible for the protection, promotion, and preservation of the human dignity, even as she engages in conversion with the people. Despite the media hype, pastors must utilize every available opportunity to stress on the implications of this document to the faithful especially guiding against being judgemental. As recommended by SECAM, not to bless homosexual unions, FS offers the Church in Africa an avalanche of opportunities of extending the pastoral ministry on such lapsed Christians, as steps towards their conversion to celebrate the liturgical blessings.

9. Conclusion

From the foregoing prognosis, the major fuss from the African context remains that same-sex couples and irregular unions would not favourably be accepted to be blessed, as recommended by FS, due to the cultural standpoint, natural perspective and the will of God. Doing so could be translated as an endorsement by the Catholic Church. However, people in such situations should pastorally be ministered in order to turn a new leaf to benefit from the liturgical blessings. Accordingly, SECAM explicitly noted that FS is a declaration on blessings and not on

²⁸ The Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), 'Concerning *Fiducia Supplicans*: A Declaration by the Dicastery for the Propagation of the Faith on the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings in the Church' from <https://www.nigeriacatholicnetwork.com>, accessed on 6th October 2024.

marriage.²⁹ Marriage is between a mature man and woman, with full consent and within the levels approved by God, the society, and the Church. In marriage, the Church blesses as a liturgical act, the union, and the persons. But blessings for those in irregular marriage, the Church only prays for the individual and not their union. This is evident in the document as it suggested pastoral blessings when requested by persons in irregular unions such as the same-sex unions, those in polygamous unions, in concubinage, divorced or remarried couples, whose previous marriages had not been annulled, etc. Undoubtedly, there is a subtle, dangerous, ominous trend and attack on the Church in our time. Some rich and industrialized countries of Western Christianity want to have doctrinal autonomy from Rome; hence, dancing to earthly ideologies and mundane anthropology. The FS is not about liturgical blessings; instead, it focuses on pastoral meaning of blessings. Admittedly, the directive is more a pastoral challenge of the Western world, which is less a concern for African Christians. African Catholicism is mostly developed within the contexts of the challenges and cultural sensibilities facing African Church and society. Accordingly, the Church in sub-Saharan Africa must have the courage in receiving, preserving, and transmitting the Gospel from the apostolic tradition. She must resist any form of cultural colonization as she makes effort to defend the Christian values.

²⁹ Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM).