

Today is the Feast of the Epiphany. This feast, in part, focuses on God's calling of all peoples, Gentiles and Jews – to His covenant. And as I prayed about the feast and since some people have asked me about it, I thought this was a fit occasion to share my thoughts on the recent Vatican Document *Fiducia Supplicans* and what it says and doesn't say because I believe that the desire to reach out to all people is the driving force behind the Pope's document.

I've read the document a couple of times. I would suggest you read it as well, and not accept everything the media reports about it. The media throughout the world ran headlines saying, "Pope allows Blessings of Gay Couples." The Pope clearly states that he doesn't intend to change the Church's teaching. Marriage can only be an exclusive, life-long union between a man and a woman, open to children. And that union is the only licit context for sexual acts.

But the controversy arises from the intent of the document to permit clergy to bless homosexual couples and non-married, sexually

active, heterosexual couples. To justify this permission the document goes into some detail about different kinds of blessings and what blessings are – and are not. Priests are often asked to give blessings to people and objects on various occasions – after mass, at parish socials, etc. We don't inquire about the spiritual state of people requesting such blessings. These are usually spontaneous encounters that only take a moment. The document asks, then why delve into the spiritual state of such couples if they ask for a blessing in that same situation? This is especially true given that – and here the document says it is expanding the meaning of blessings – such blessings are not expressions of approval of the acts or lives of people who make the requests. A blessing can be sought precisely to help one live out the Gospel better.

*Fiducia Supplicans* says that such blessings are to be spontaneous and simple. They are not to be parts of liturgies or other rituals. No special clothes or symbols are to be used. They're especially not to look like the celebration of a wedding or other sacraments. Given these

realities, it is deceptive to suggest, as some have, that this document gives an explicit approval of such states of life.

However, there are issues. Think of the debate and confusion in our society concerning the most basic ideas about the family. Our society disagrees about what constitutes a family, what marriage is, what sex is for, even what a man and woman are! In the context of this fluid situation the document has caused confusion.

The day the document was released, Catholics throughout the world awoke to headlines saying the Pope allows the blessing of gay couples. Which is strictly true -- although, given the technical parsing of the definition of blessings in the document, what that means is not what the media articles often suggested it means. But the average Catholic will not know that. In fact, given this predictable confusion and media coverage, the document has the possibility of undermining the Church's definition of marriage and sexuality in the minds of Catholics.

This potential danger in the permission to bless gay couples and heterosexual couples living outside of marriage (after all, this not just about gay couples!) does not lie in the meaning of blessings. We're all sinners. If an individual in a same-sex relationship or someone cohabiting with someone of the opposite sex asked me for a blessing I would bless him or her, not knowing, or inquiring about, their state of life or theology. And other priests would do the same.

But it's not really the blessing that's the issue. It's "the couple" part. If two people present themselves as a "couple," then they are not just asking for a blessing as individuals. In their own minds they may very well be asking that their relationship at some level be recognized and validated via the blessing. This seeking of support for their relationship is why the document is seen as a big deal. Blessing such a couple is not yet an explicit approval, but it can be seen as implicit approval – with a clear possibility that it will gradually morph through

custom and familiarity into explicit approval, and Jesus' teaching on family, marriage and sexuality be slowly undermined.

So, to conclude, I want to make three points. First, coming back to Epiphany and the desire to reach out to all: conversion does not begin with the rejection of a person no matter what their sexual behavior, but with compassion and the discerning of the image of God in everyone who approaches us. I think this is why Pope Francis' wrote the document. But second, discipleship means we follow Christ on His own terms, not ours. Think of the Magi kneeling before the baby Jesus. We must strive to bring our lives, including our sexual lives, into line with His will, not our own will-- or the world's norms. Third, sexuality is a great gift of God that is necessarily linked to marriage. It is the physical expression of the marriage vows, which means God intends sex to be a self-gift of husband and wife that brings about new life. That is why sex is only morally licit in acts between a man and woman joined in marriage and open to life.

This difficult virtue of chastity remains necessary for all people – for our own individual spiritual flourishing, and for the health of marriage, families, and society in general. Some of the relationships covered by this document could be regularized through the canonical annulment process. But many, perhaps most, of them will eventually need to be left behind on the path conversion to deeper discipleship.

But this often won't happen overnight or easily. Just think of the Magi. They had a long journey to Christ. And so, in walking with those who do not yet see the truth and beauty of Jesus' teaching in this area, I think the Pope is saying we're meant to play the long game. We're to love and pray with all who approach us seeking spiritual help on their personal journey, trying to discern Christ's star and find Him in their own lives.