

D I O C E S E
of NEW ULM

Office of the Bishop

December 20, 2023

Dear Priests and Deacons serving in the Diocese of New Ulm,

Following the release of the document, *Fiducia Supplicans* (FS), On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings, that was issued by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, I feel it is important to send you some points of clarification and pastoral reflection for the benefit of your continued ministry to souls as it applies to the Diocese of New Ulm.

First, I encourage you to read the document itself. It gives a thorough explanation of the Church's perennial teaching on marriage, as well as what blessings are. The secular media has been very quick to report on this, but often from a cultural slant and without making some important theological distinctions, which have led many to misunderstanding. Adding to this, in the English language, we often use the word "blessing" as permission or approval, such as is common to say, "My marriage is blessed by the Church," which is not what this document is stating.

This document, officially called a "declaration," reminds us that the Lord Jesus Christ came to call all to repentance and conversion. Whenever one approaches the Lord in the Gospel with a desire for a closer relationship, the Lord responds, such as the moving encounters of the Lord with the woman at the well (*Jn 4:4-30*), the woman caught in adultery (*Jn 8:3-11*), and Zaccheus the tax collector (*Lk 19:1-10*) to name just a few.

Blessings that are outside of the liturgy are often given. The document reminds the reader of a priest often being asked for a blessing by an individual, which "does not sanction or legitimize anything" but instead allows someone "to experience the nearness of the Father" (FS 34). As priests, we are regularly asked to bless individuals who encounter various struggles that are a challenge to respond to their call to holiness. I am deeply thankful that many of our priests go beyond the simple blessing and accompany these persons in their faith journey, offering spiritual guidance as they earnestly desire to walk closer to Christ.

A pastoral invitation to pray with someone who is asking for a blessing is "an opportunity for a renewed proclamation of the *kerygma* (the "Good News" message of salvation), an invitation to draw ever closer to the love of Christ" (FS 44). Consequently, when people seek the Church's blessing, in all situations, we are reminded that these are opportunities to find the love of Jesus through the repentance of sin, which is a message so often put before us all in the Gospel and especially in the penitential seasons of the Church.

The declaration gives specific mention of discerning when a blessing might be given to those who are in living situations that are not in conformity with the moral teachings of the Church. The declaration says that:

...it is not appropriate for a Diocese, a Bishops' Conference, or any other ecclesial structure to constantly and officially establish procedures for such situations, yet pastoral prudence and wisdom – avoiding all serious forms of scandal and confusion among the faithful – may suggest that the ordained minister joins in the prayer of those persons, who although in a union that cannot be compared in any way to a marriage, 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 truth (FS 30).

This distinction being made is that what is being proposed in offering an informal “blessing” is akin to an informal prayer with an individual and, as such, is an opportunity to “reach out” to the peripheries that Pope Francis so often speaks about as part of the Church’s mission to mercifully bring sheep back into the fold who have wandered off.

As this applies to anyone who seeks a blessing from the Lord who is in an irregular situation, any such blessing would be pastorally given to an individual, outside of and not connected with a public ceremony or sacrament or liturgical framework (FS 24), and is similar to the way that we often invite those who are not able to receive Holy Communion to come forward with their arms crossed to receive a “blessing” from the priest. Such a blessing to which *Fiducia Supplicans* is referring is to have “no intention to legitimize anything, but rather to open one’s life to God, to ask for his help to live better, and also to invoke the Holy Spirit so that the values of the Gospel may be lived with greater faithfulness” (FS 40).

Practically speaking, this would mean that a priest or deacon would not offer any such non-liturgical blessing in a public setting or with others present. The document says that “to avoid any form of confusion or scandal,” the blessing cannot “be performed with any clothing gestures, or words” that would reflect anything proper to liturgy or a sacrament (FS 39). This will then avoid any confusion or scandal among the Christian faithful, who might be confused as to someone whose life does not reflect the holy order of God revealed to us in Natural Law.

If you have any other questions, please contact me or Msgr. Grams.

The upcoming Christmas and Epiphany celebrations of the Church remind us of the great beauty of God’s Divine Plan of both Creation and then Redemption as it is revealed to us through the Christ Child in Bethlehem. As the Infant is revealed to us again this year, let us especially pray for all who are far away from the Lord, for ourselves, and the whole Church, as we hear St Paul proclaim, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Indeed, the Lord is near!”

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

In the Christ Child,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Chad W. Zielinski". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Most Reverend Chad W. Zielinski
Bishop of New Ulm

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