

Dear Friends,

As most of us know by now, our Catholic Church made headlines around the world last week with the release of the Italian documentary, *Francesco*, which documents our Holy Father, Pope Francis. In a portion of that documentary, the Holy Father says to the director in an interview that there is a need for people of the same biological sex to be able to enter into civil unions that would be recognized by the governments of the states in which they live, and thus would provide legal protections for them. Unfortunately, as we know, following a decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in 2015, same-sex “marriage” was legalized throughout the United States, allowing two people of the same biological sex to be able to receive the same legal recognition as heterosexual married couples.

The Catholic Church has been very adamant in its teaching about three important points regarding same-sex marriage. First, marriage, as an institution created by God by which a man and a woman enter into an irrevocable covenant that lasts until death for the purpose of the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of children, cannot be redefined by anyone or any human power. A true, valid and binding marriage bond can only exist between one man and one woman. This teaching of the Church is irreformable and will not change. For this reason, the Catholic Church cannot recognize the validity of same-sex “marriages”, even if they are legally recognized by the state.

Second, this firm position about the nature of marriage held by the Church is in no way to be understood as condemning, ostracizing or otherwise treating people who identify as homosexual or who struggle with same-sex attraction in a poor or uncharitable way. Every single human person, no matter their race, sex, religion or sexual orientation, is a person who has been created in the image and likeness of God and therefore possesses a dignity and value that is of eternal worth. Every person is to be loved, cared for, respected and treated with the honor and value which they possess as God’s beloved creature. Therefore, any mistreatment of persons because of their same-sex attractions or because of their having identified themselves as homosexual is never acceptable. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is very clear here: “The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible ... they must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition.”

Finally, while the Catholic Church is insistent in Her call for persons who identify as homosexual or who struggle with same-sex attractions to be treated with love, kindness, dignity and respect, she also is insistent that, as in all cases of sexual activity outside of the bond of marriage between one man and one woman, the engagement in sexual activity between persons of the same sex is always gravely wrong and can never be approved or condoned. In addition, while same-sex attractions or inclinations are not sinful in themselves, such attractions and inclinations are disordered in that they do not follow the order established by God by which sexual desire and attraction was created for the pursuit of and desire for the marital relationship between men and women. Therefore, persons with homosexual inclinations, like all unmarried people, are called to live a life of chastity and sexual purity.

So, what are we to make of Pope Francis' recent comments regarding the need for state-recognized civil unions for same-sex couples in order to provide for their legal protection?

First, please recognize that since the release of this documentary, *Francesco*, it has come to light that many of the comments that the Holy Father appears to make in interview with the director have actually been segments from another interview given last year to a different media source, and which have subsequently been cut, spliced and placed together, sometimes out of order in the documentary, in order to make it appear that the Pope is saying certain things.

Even so, the following statement from our Holy Father *appears* to be truly his. Regarding people who have homosexual inclinations, the Holy Father says, "What we have to create is a civil union law. That way they are legally covered. I stood up for that." Immediately after its release, media outlets carried headlines that stated that the Catholic Church has changed its position on civil unions, that the Pope is officially endorsing same-sex unions, and that even the Church's teaching on the nature of marriage might be changing.

None of that is true. One of the very important teachings of the Church that Catholics need to remember here is that there are very distinct levels or degrees of teaching authority which can be exercised by Church leaders, such as bishops and the Holy Father. In other words, not everything that the Pope says or writes is infallible, or without error (in fact, *very few* of the popes' teachings throughout history can be identified as an exercise of the Pope's ability to teach with infallibility). The highest form of authority in exercising his teaching office for the Holy Father would be for him to make a solemn declaration, from the chair of St. Peter, with clear language and intention, that he is defining a certain doctrine to be infallible and which thus must be believed with faith by the Catholic faithful. As the law of the Catholic Church states clearly, a teaching of the Holy Father or an ecumenical council of bishops is not to be understood to be infallible unless it is manifestly evident that that is their intention. That is clearly not the case here, in regards to Pope Francis' words in the documentary.

A second, lower level of teaching authority would be the teaching given by the Pope in encyclical letters, because there, he is formally exercising his role as teacher of the faith. Catholics are required to offer religious submission of mind and will to the teachings of this level. That is not what Pope Francis is doing in this instance either.

One of the *lowest* levels of teaching authority occur when the Holy Father speaks in an interview, or offers his opinion about state policy or other matters of civil government in an informal way in which he is simply responding to the questions of an interviewer, as Pope Francis has done in this interview regarding the question of same-sex civil unions. The Catholic faithful are not bound in conscience to agree with or to hold his view, at least not until he states it in a more formal way recognized by the Church as possessing teaching authority.

I think it is very important to note here as well that the Holy Father's offering of an opinion on the possible establishment of same-sex civil unions is absolutely not to be viewed as his viewing a same-sex relationship as in any way on par with or equal to traditional marriage. In this matter, the Holy Father has been very clear that true marriage can only exist between one man and one

woman, and that efforts to redefine marriage threaten God's plan for family and family life. He has consistently reaffirmed the definition of marriage as only possible between one man and one woman, and his apparent support for the establishment of legally recognized same-sex civil unions should not be confused with support for a same-sex relationship that would be in any way equal to or on the same plane as traditional marriage.

So, that being said, what could we say about the Holy Father's statement on civil unions? I believe that what we can say is that it *appears* (though we still do not know all of the context or details regarding the original source of this interview) that the Holy Father has voiced an opinion in support of the establishment of same-sex civil unions, and that this opinion is incongruent with the current formal teaching of the Church. In 2003, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which is the teaching office in Rome that exercises the teaching and defense of the Church's doctrine, on behalf of and with the approval of the Holy Father, declared the following regarding the establishment of same-sex civil unions: "The Church teaches that respect for homosexual persons cannot lead in any way to approval of homosexual behavior or to legal recognition of homosexual unions." This teaching of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was reviewed and approved by the Holy Father at the time, St. John Paul II, who ordered it to be published for the faithful. As such, it possesses a higher level of teaching authority than the statement of Pope Francis in interview, and thus it remains the current official position of the Catholic Church regarding the establishment of same-sex civil unions.

For more information about this issue, I have included a couple of helpful links below. As always, I am most happy to speak to you about this or any other questions that you may have about our Catholic faith at any time. God bless you!

Fr. Steve Laflamme

<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/what-did-pope-francis-say-about-civil-unions-a-cna-explainer-57625>

<https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2020/10/transcript-shows-popes-distinction-between-gay-marriage-civil-unions/>