



Beyond 'Fiducia Supplicans'

Implications for the Synod, the Curia & the papacy

By Massimo Faggioli

The months following last fall's synodal assembly might have been quietly taken up with preparation for next fall's if not for the release of *Fiducia supplicans* [On the Pastoral meaning of blessings]* on December 18 and the "clarifications" that the Vatican Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith** issued on January 4. But this is where the

Church is. The publication on the "possibility of blessing couples in irregular situations and same-sex couples" and the reactions to it send yet more signals about Francis's pontificate—but also about the role of the Curia and, indeed, the prospects of the Synod.

....

As to *Fiducia supplicans* and the Synod: the fundamental question is whether and how *Fiducia supplicans* and its reception affect the possibility of consensus on sensitive issues at the second assembly in October. Maybe *Fiducia supplicans* is Francis's way of telling us that only the pope, not the Synod, is in charge, or that only the pope is able to take steps when there is lack of consensus on the most sensitive issues.

The agenda of the synodal assembly is ultimately under papal and Vatican control, as specified in the December 11, 2023, statement of the Synod's office in Rome concerning "matters of great importance, some of which need to be considered at the level of the whole Church and in collaboration with the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia." These would include changes in canon law, the formation of ordained ministers, the relationships between bishops and religious orders, and theological and pastoral research on the diaconate. The statement by the Synod's office was more detailed on that last point: "[M]ore specifically, on women's admission to the diaconate, etc. A list of these topics will be submitted to the Holy Father as the fruit of the Synod Assembly. Groups of experts from all continents together with the relevant Dicasteries of the Roman Curia and coordinated by the General Secretariat of the Synod will be asked to work in a synodal way on the topics indicated by the Holy Father."

But papal control can also protect and help the Synod. *Fiducia supplicans* does not mark the first time that a papal or Vatican document has intervened in a synodal or conciliar agenda. In the three intersessions between the four different sessions of Vatican II, there was Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* of April 1963 and Paul VI's *Ecclesia Suam* of August 1964, which significantly helped the work of the council. The difference here is that it is still not clear just *what* the agenda for the intersession is, beyond another round of [listening sessions](#) in the spring (as indicated in the guidance in that December 11 communication), or what kind of *theological* work theologians are supposed to do for the preparation of the second assembly. The plan seems to take into account realistically, and rely on, the different degrees of synodal energy in the Church and the local episcopates, where Latin America and CELAM are the model, while the situation is different in other continents and regions.

But the reactions to *Fiducia supplicans* are also bound to affect the Synod and its reception. Much has been made of the negative or unenthusiastic responses from many countries in Africa (Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger, Burundi, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Togo, Zambia, and Zimbabwe), but that's only part of the story. Generally speaking, Western Europe has reacted with more enthusiasm than Eastern Europe, but there are shades of difference even between countries in Western Europe (the welcome response from German bishops and the almost total silence of Italian bishops), as well as within individual countries, like the United States and France.

As to what *Fiducia supplicans* tells us about Francis's papacy: it's important because it reflects his will to cement his legacy in a strategic and definitional way—that is, beyond simply appointing bishops and cardinals. Víctor Manuel Fernández is his creature. He is not part of that dicastery prefect's line of succession inaugurated when John Paul II appointed Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to the position in 1981. Fernández's appointment signifies the access

of a “commoner” (a pastoral theologian from Argentina) after a line of “blue-blood” systematic theologians from Europe and North America, Roman insiders with personal ties to Ratzinger and the academic world he came from. But there is also a literal change of pace: after Ratzinger’s long tenure, his successors (Cardinals Levada, Muller, and Ladaría) conducted the work of the dicastery by slowing down its doctrinal “legislation.” The age of Ratzinger restored the doctrinal order that had been upset in the post-Vatican II period, and after that there was no longer any need for an activist dicastery for the doctrine of the faith. Judging by the last few months, with a series of responses to *dubia* and the declarations on blessings, this could be the beginning of a new phase of activism, for a different kind of order (despite the reassurances that *Fiducia supplicans* doesn’t change doctrine) shaped by the former Holy Office now under Cardinal Fernandez.

Fiducia supplicans isn’t just the first major test for Fernandez. It will also be a test of the unusual mission statement that Francis gave to the former Holy Office in his letter to the new prefect on July 1, 2023. In that letter to Fernandez, the pope seemed intent on closing an almost five-hundred-year-long Tridentine era in the history of the doctrinal office and opening a new one. “As the new prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, I entrust to you a task that I consider very valuable,” Francis wrote. “Its central purpose is to guard the teaching that flows from the faith in order to ‘to give reasons for our hope, but not as an enemy who critiques and condemns.’ The Dicastery over which you will preside in other times came to use immoral methods. Those were times when, rather than promoting theological knowledge, possible doctrinal errors were pursued. What I expect from you is certainly something very different.”

The turbulent reactions of individual bishops and bishops’ conferences to *Fiducia supplicans* marks a first in the modern history of that dicastery. And it suggests that the transition from a Tridentine-era Roman office to a more global and pastoral way of promoting doctrine will be a long and complicated process.

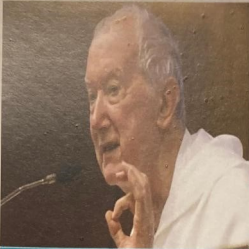

NOTES

**Fiducia supplicans* [Declaration on the Pastoral meaning of blessings]

**The Vatican Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith is the oldest among the departments of the Roman Curia. It was founded to defend the Catholic Church from heresy and is the body responsible for promulgating and defending Catholic doctrine.

Source: Edited version of Commonweal Article, January 11, 2024

The Patrick Finn Lectures 2024

Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP

THE SYNOD

A WORD TO THE WORLD

St Mary's Parish Church, Haddington Road, Dublin 4

Thursday 1 February 2024, 7pm

Admission is Free

(A collection will be taken to defray costs and contributions will be welcome)

Timothy Radcliffe is a well-known theologian and spiritual author who looks at the questions that many Christians ask in living out the faith. At the request of Pope Francis he led the three day preparatory retreat for participants in the Synod on Synodality in Rome, as well as delivering weekly spiritual reflections, last October.

He is the author of many books and articles in the popular field of practical Christianity, the most recent being *Why Go To Church* (2009), *Alive in God* (2019) and *Questioning God* (with Lukasz Popko, 2023).

He was ordained a priest in the Dominican Order (OP) in 1971, and subsequently was based at the west London Catholic Chaplaincy. He taught scripture at Oxford, and was elected provincial of the Order of Preachers in England in 1988. In 1992 he was elected master [Superior General] of the Dominican Order, holding that office up to 2001.”

Mass Intentions.

11am: Martin Nealon

5pm: Patrick Nealon

Masses Times

Sundays: 9.30am, 11am, 5pm

Weekdays: 10am

Rosary following 10am mass

French Mass 2nd and 4th Sunday of each month

Collections Last Sunday

N/A

Contacts: Fr Fachtna McCarthy, Administrator, Fr Patrick Claffey, svd C.C. Fr Miron Sikivic OFM, Deacon Greg Pepper., . Tel 01-6600075

Streaming and Website www.stmaryshaddingtonroad.ie email: info@stmaryshaddingtonroad.ie

Child Protection: <http://www.stmaryshaddingtonroad.ie/ministries/child-protection/> also www.csp.dublindiocese.ie

Streaming also at www.churchservices.tv/haddingtonroad

Funded by Living the Joy of the Gospel Campaign