**Fiducia Supplicans**

**{Supplicating Trust}**

**You may have read about the document promulgated by The Department for the Doctrine of the Faith in The Vatican and signed by Pope Francis – Fiducia Supplicans – On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings. It got some publicity in the National Press in December. I attach a commentary by Andrea Tornielli - an Italian Catholic journalist and religious writer who serves as the editorial manager for the Vatican's Department for Communication.**

"Nemo venit nisi tractus". {no one comes to Jesus unless he is drawn}, wrote St Augustine, paraphrasing the words of the Nazarene: 'No one comes to me unless my Father draws him'. At the origin of the attraction to Jesus - that attraction of which Benedict XVI spoke, recalling the way faith spreads - there is always the action of grace. God always precedes us, calls us, attracts us, makes us take a step towards Him, or at least kindles in us the desire to take that step even if we still seem to lack the strength and feel paralysed. A shepherd's heart cannot remain indifferent to people who approach him humbly asking to be blessed, whatever their condition, their history, their life path. The shepherd's heart does not extinguish the smouldering glimmer of those who sense their own incompleteness, knowing that they are in need of mercy and help from on high. The shepherd's heart glimpses in that request for blessing a crack in the wall, a tiny chink through which grace may already be at work. And so, his first concern is not to close the tiny crack, welcoming and imploring blessing and mercy so that the people in front of him can begin to understand God's plan for their lives. This basic awareness shines through in ‘Fiducia supplicans’ , the Declaration of the Department for the Doctrine of the Faith on the meaning of blessings, which opens up the possibility of blessing irregular couples, even same-sex couples, making it quite clear that blessing in this case does not mean approving their life choices, and also reiterating the need to avoid any ritualisation or other elements that could even remotely imitate a marriage. It is a document that deepens the doctrine on blessings, distinguishing between those that are ritual and liturgical, and those that are spontaneous, which are rather characterised as acts of devotion linked to popular piety. It is a text that makes concrete, ten years later, the words written by Pope Francis in 'Evangelii gaudium': "The Church is not a customs house, it is the paternal home where there is room for each person with his or her own laborious life". The origin of the Declaration is evangelical. On almost every page of the Gospel, Jesus breaks religious traditions and prescriptions, respectability, social conventions. And he performs gestures that scandalise the well-thinking, the self-styled 'pure', those who make a shield of norms and rules to push away, reject, close doors. Almost on every page of the Gospel we see the doctors of the law trying to put the Master on the spot with provocative questions, only to murmur indignantly in the face of his freedom overflowing with mercy: "He welcomes sinners and eats with them!" Jesus was ready to run to the house of the centurion of Capernaum to heal his beloved servant, without the worry of defiling himself by entering the dwelling of a pagan. He allowed the sinner to wash his feet in front of the judgmental and contemptuous gazes of the guests, unable to understand why he did not turn her away. He watched and called the publican Zacchaeus as he stood clinging to the branches of the sycamore tree, not expecting him to convert and change his life before receiving that merciful look. He did not condemn the adulteress, who was liable to stoning under the law, but disarmed the hands of her executioners by reminding them that they too - like everyone else - were sinners. He said he had come for the sick and not the healthy, he compared himself to the singular figure of a shepherd willing to leave 99 sheep unattended to go and find the one that had gone astray. He touched the leper by healing him of his disease and the stigma of 'untouchable' outcast. These 'rejects' met his gaze and felt loved, recipients of an embrace of mercy given to them without any preconditions. Discovering themselves loved and forgiven, they realised what they were: poor sinners like everyone else, in need of conversion, beggars of everything. Pope Francis told the new cardinals in February 2015: 'For Jesus what counts above all is to reach out and save the far away, to heal the wounds of the sick, to reintegrate everyone into the family of God. And this scandalises some! And Jesus is not afraid of this kind of scandal! He does not think of closed people who are even scandalised by a healing, who are scandalised at any opening, at any step that does not fit into their mental and spiritual schemes, at any caress or tenderness that does not correspond to their habits of thought and their ritualistic purity'. The "perennial Catholic doctrine on marriage", the Declaration points out, does not change. One must therefore avoid recognising as marriage "that which is not". But in a pastoral and missionary perspective, now is not the time to close the door on an 'irregular' couple coming to ask for a simple blessing, perhaps on a visit to a shrine or during a pilgrimage. The Jewish scholar Claude Montefiore has identified the distinctiveness of Christianity precisely in this: 'While other religions describe man seeking God, Christianity proclaims a God who seeks man.... Jesus taught that God does not wait for the sinner's repentance, he goes looking for him to call him to himself'. The open door of a prayer and a small blessing can be a beginning, an opportunity, a help.

Andrea Tornielli