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**Regarding the documentary “Francesco”
and the comments by Pope Francis
in regard to Civil Unions of Same-Sex Couples**

November 2, 2020
The Commemoration of
All the Faithful Departed

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

I wish to respond to the interest, confusion, and concern expressed by many Catholic clergy and laity about recent reports regarding Pope Francis’s comments with respect to civil unions of same-sex couples.

Recently, concerns and questions have been raised about the Church’s teaching on *marriage* due to remarks by Pope Francis regarding civil unions for same-sex persons, included in a documentary film that recently premiered in Rome. The statements were contained in the 2020 documentary "Francesco" by director Evgeny Afineevsky. The Pope’s previously unpublished remarks originated from a 2019 interview conducted by a Mexican television network. News reports quote the Pope as saying in the film: *"Homosexual people have the right to be in a family. They are children of God."* As well as: *"What we have to have is a civil union law. That way they are legally covered."*

In correspondence received from the Vatican last week by the Canadian Catholic Council of Bishops, Pope Francis has requested that the following points be made to correct and help with the understanding of his words:

“Over a year ago, in an interview, the Pope answered two distinct questions at two different times which, in the documentary, were drafted and published as a single answer without proper contextualization, which led to confusion. The Holy Father had firstly made a pastoral reference on the need that, within the family, the son or daughter with a homosexual orientation should never be discriminated against...

The following paragraph of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family Amoris Laetitia (2016) illuminates these expressions: “During the Synod, we discussed the situation of families whose members include persons who experience same-sex attraction, a situation not easy either for parents or for children. We

 In all things we are *rooted in Christ*,
in His desire to bring God’s love to all peoples.

would like before all else to reaffirm that every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity and treated with consideration, while ‘every sign of unjust discrimination’ is to be carefully avoided,” (n. 276) particularly, “...any form of aggression and violence. Such families should be given respectful pastoral guidance, so that those who manifest a homosexual orientation can receive the assistance they need to understand and fully carry out God’s will in their lives.” (n. 250)

A subsequent question in the same interview was addressing a local law of ten years ago in Argentina on "matrimonios igualitarios de parejas del mismo sexo" ("equal marriage of same-sex couples") and the opposition to it by the Pope when he served then as the Archbishop of Buenos Aires. In this regard, Pope Francis affirmed that "es una incongruencia hablar de matrimonio homosexual", ("...it is an incongruity to speak of homosexual marriage.") He added that, in this precise context, he had spoken of the right of these persons to have legal protection: "...lo que tenemos que hacer es una ley de convivencia civil; tienen derecho a estar cubiertos legalmente. Yo defendí eso ». (...what we need is a civil law of coexistence; they have the right to be covered legally. I defend this.)"

The Holy Father expressed himself in the following way during an interview in 2014:

“Marriage is between a man and a woman. Secular states want to justify civil unions to regulate different situations of living together, driven by the need for regulating economic aspects between persons, such as ensuring health care. These are living together agreements of various kinds, of which I cannot list the different forms. It is necessary to see the different cases and evaluate them case by case.”

Concerns for pastoral care, outreach and justice are behind these brief comments by Pope Francis, who in many other statements has upheld and extolled the Church’s teachings on marriage. Unfortunately, the world continues to witness the ongoing discrimination and persecution of same-sex attracted persons, and in some parts of the world criminal prosecution and life-threatening violence.

These remarks about civil unions – a deeply divisive and emotional issue in our society, and one that affects many Catholic families – have become a lightning rod for a range of reactions, including confusion about whether this means a change in church teaching about marriage or homosexual unions. Given this confusion, I write to affirm the Church’s teaching and hopefully provide some clarity.

Support and compassion need to be expressed for those among us who experience same-sex attractions. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, those who identify as LGBT, *“...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...”* (CCC#2358)

It is noteworthy how Pope Francis is consistently ‘pro-life.’ For example, in 2019, Pope Francis remarked to the British comedian Stephen K. Amos while in Rome to do a BBC documentary, that discriminating against homosexual persons because of their sexuality was to misplace the emphasis, choosing the adjective (such as gay or homosexual) over the noun or person. “*There are people that prefer to select or discard people because of the adjective,*” he said. “*These people don’t have a human heart.*” (see article by Charles Collins in *Crux Now*, April 20, 2019) The Pope on this point underscores that we are speaking first and foremost about *human persons* versus descriptors of behavior – including sexuality – that may distance our ability to see ourselves in relationship with all our brothers and sisters.

The Church teaches that all sexual activity outside of Christian marriage – in which such activity is open to unitive love and the transmission of life – is contrary to its moral teaching and to natural law (see CCC #2357). The Church’s doctrinal response to the issue of same-sex civil unions is a relatively new issue. The most recent and well-known statement is by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In 2003, the CDF addressed the issue of same-sex civil unions in a document titled “*Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons.*” It stated: “*The principles of respect and non-discrimination cannot be invoked to support legal recognition of homosexual unions.*” (par. 9) Further: “*Laws in favour of homosexual unions are contrary to right reason.*” (par. 6) The document made clear the Church’s teaching that civil unions between same-sex couples are not supported by the Church because they are against the good of individuals and of society.

The discussion about how Pope Francis’ comments can be understood in relation to the CDF statement will be ongoing and is beyond the scope of this letter. While Pope Francis does not contradict the CDF document, his previous comments might be interpreted as trying to frame differently a very difficult and polarizing issue. What will probably feature in the ongoing course of the discussion will be the contrast between forms of civil unions and/or partnerships – including those for same-sex couples – and the features of what the Church teaches in relation to sacramental marriage between one man and one woman.

On the topic of various forms of civil unions, the following quote by the Archbishop of San Francisco, Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone, is illuminating. He recounts his *ad limina* meeting with Pope Francis in January 2020, on the topic of civil unions, Pope Francis clearly differentiated between a civil arrangement which accords mutual benefits to two people, and marriage. The former, the Pope said, can in no way be equated to marriage, which remains unique.

Upon reflecting about the support for civil unions and taking into account that this category is potentially much broader than only same-sex couples in a sexual relationship and could also include other long-term cohabitation arrangements that are not about sexual relationships, the Archbishop comments as follows:

“I would add that a civil union of this type (one which is not equated to marriage) should be as inclusive as possible, and not be restricted to two people of the same sex in a presumed sexual relationship. There is no reason, for example, why a brother and a sister, both of whom are unmarried and support each other, should not have access to these kinds of benefits. Marriage is unique because it is the only institution that connects children to their mothers and fathers, and therefore is presumed to be a sexual relationship. Indeed, the sexual relationship that marriage is presumed to involve is the only kind by which children are naturally made. The nature of marriage, the place of sex within a virtuous life, these great teachings of the Church come to us from God, are illuminated by reason, and do not change.”

Archbishop Cordileone’s comments explore ways in which the care for and dignity and legitimate rights of people – including those in a same-sex relationships – can be approached while also upholding the Church’s consistent teaching on marriage and sexuality.

A good summary of the nature of Christian Marriage, sexual ethics and the relation to public ‘law’ can be found in “Pope Francis, Civil Unions, and Moral Truth” by R. Anderson and R. George in *The Public Discourse*, October 27, 2020. It summarizes as follows:

- 1. Marriage is the conjugal union of husband and wife. It is a bond consummated and actualized by sexual intercourse uniting spouses as one flesh, and naturally oriented to, and uniquely apt for, the bearing and rearing of children.*
- 2. All non-marital sexual acts—including same-sex acts—are immoral.*
- 3. All people are made in God’s image and likeness and are, as such, bearers of profound, inherent, and equal dignity. Those who experience same-sex attraction, no less than others, are precious in God’s sight, and they are to be loved and treated with benevolence and generosity as well as justice. They, no less than anyone else, are subjects of moral duties as well as rights, and they are called, as all of us are, to exercise the virtue of chastity.*
- 4. Children have a right to be raised by a mother and a father whenever reasonably possible.*
- 5. The political common good depends on marriage as the basis of the family and the fundamental unit of society. By eroding people’s understanding of marriage and of children’s right to a mother and a father, and by sanctioning non-marital sexual partnerships, the legal recognition of same-sex relationships as marriages harms the public good. It is therefore unjust.*
- 6. It is likewise unjust for government to undermine the institution of marriage through competing “marriage-lite” unions, or to promote non-marital sexual*

activity by this or other means. Insofar as “civil unions” do so, they must be opposed.

The authors go on to make the following observations:

We think the first three truths have been taught in ways that satisfy the Catholic Church’s explicit criteria for definitive (and thus irreformable) teaching. The subsequent three truths follow from the preceding ones (and have been affirmed by popes and bishops as well, though not taught definitively). No one could change these teachings. No pope can change them.

Fundamental moral and metaphysical realities cannot be altered by human willing or declaring. Thus, no public official or religious leader can change the nature of marriage or the moral status of non-marital sexual conduct. But some laws do obscure the nature of marriage and encourage (and even facilitate and license) non-marital sexual acts. The Church has long opposed them for that reason. For a law to serve the common good, it must reflect the truth about marriage. Getting marriage law wrong harms the common good and harms people who act based on a faulty notion of what marriage is.

To summarize, our Catholic teaching extols the following major features about the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony. Marriage as instituted by God is a faithful, exclusive, lifelong union of a man and a woman joined in an intimate community of life and love. Marriage is both a natural institution and a sacred union because it is rooted in the divine plan for creation. The Church teaches that a valid marriage between baptized persons is also a sacrament – a visible sign of Christ’s love for the Church. The permanent and exclusive commitment of marriage is the necessary context for the expression of sexual love intended by God both to serve the transmission of human life and to build up the bond between husband and wife. Sexual activity outside of this marriage bond between a man and a woman, open to life, is a violation of the call to chastity and holiness. (See CCC #1602 – 1617, also USCCB “Between Man and Woman” copyright 2003)

What comes to mind for me at this point is to urge faithful Catholics to be dedicated to *all* that the Gospel reveals and the Church magisterium teaches – especially in regards to difficult and controversial issues. Living the fullness of the Church’s teaching on many issues, including chastity, and the various vocations including marriage – is not always simple or easy. In what is sometimes referred to as ‘the messiness of the human condition’ – many struggle and deal with heart-breaking situations. In all of this, let us seek a spirit of charity and compassion, rather than the kind of judgment that features condemnation. Let us pray for each other and strive always to follow the example of Jesus Christ.

Let us also be conscientious when it comes to doing the intellectual and reflective work of understanding what our faith teaches, and understanding the important nuances

that assist us with the paramount task of the ‘salvation of souls’ and drawing all people into an intimate union with the Triune God. In a technological age in which the internet seeks to attract readers, let us be disciplined and discerning when various news sources and film-makers make sensational statements on difficult and controversial issues. Otherwise, the Christian community ends up acting like the world!

In the recent letter by the Saskatchewan Catholic Bishops in July 2020 titled, “Regarding Racism in our Society and a Call for Respect and Caring”, we concluded with a statement on the call to ongoing conversion. As we stated: “Let us work together to address ... our society's major justice issues, including addressing obstacles to human dignity...” We also stated that in the biblical tradition, growth and ongoing conversion always first involves a personal change of mind and heart – an ongoing interior conversion. “Get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!” (Ezekiel 18:31)

I conclude this letter on the same point. In this case, the call to conversion features growth in chastity, holiness, and charity. The person seeking growth in *chastity* is called to a deepening integrity of the powers of life and love placed in him/her. It also features the journey of deepening self-mastery and human freedom, including freedom from concupiscence – the tendency to sin that remains in us all. (see CCC #2337 – 2345). The person seeking greater *holiness* seeks, “... *living the fullness of the Christian life and ...the perfection of charity.*” (CCC #2013) And, the one who seeks growth in *charity*, seeks that which brings fullness and ‘perfection’ of the Christian life. (see CCC #1844, 1973 re: St Francis de Sales, *Love of God* re: “Charity as Queen of all virtues.”)

I also implore us all to pray for Pope Francis in his role as chief shepherd of our Church. Indeed, the Holy Father reveals to us the key qualities of being a spiritual father in a difficult world needing healing and light.

Sincerely, in Christ,



 Most Reverend Mark A. Hagemoen
Bishop of Saskatoon