



Marriage Rites

Many of you will have seen recent media reports regarding the recent decision by Pope Francis to enable Catholic clergy to provide blessings to married same-sex couples. This decision by the Pontiff, which has come at the end of a long process of consultation and discussion, represents a significant departure within the Catholic Church regarding its stance on sexuality.

In the wake of the Pope's decision, a number of key archbishops and cardinals around the world have similarly announced that they will permit Catholic clergy within their jurisdictions to perform the blessings. And while Pope Francis' decision does not appear to have total support within the hierarchy of the Church, nonetheless, the public statements supporting his decision by senior clergy indicates that there was a strong view within the leadership that offering blessings to same-sex marriages was a way of enabling the Church to provide support to LGBTQIA+ Catholics, as well as heal some of the wounds caused by the Church's previous position on this issue.

Of course, offering a blessing stops well short of sanctifying the marriage of a same-sex couple - something that is not likely to happen within the Catholic Church for the foreseeable future. And in order to get this decision about blessings through, Pope Francis had to make a number of concessions to those who still oppose any involvement by the Church in same-sex marriage. The two principle concessions was the stipulation that offering a blessing to a same-sex married couple is not the same as the Church "affirming" or

"approving" of same-sex relationships; and that the blessing could not be offered as part of the Church's normal or regular services (in other words, it would have to be provided outside a Mass or other "normal" liturgical service of the Church).

The making of these concessions will, of course, dissatisfy those who are seeking full sanctification of same-sex marriage within the Catholic Church. But the very fact that such concessions had to be made is a reminder that, contrary to popular misconception, the Pope is not an absolute ruler who can make whatever decrees he likes and expect total obedience. The fact that Pope Francis has been able to get this decision through at all is a remarkable testament to his determination to make the Church more oriented toward compassion and inclusion rather than legalism and judgement.

Nor is this a recent development; from the beginning of his papacy, Francis has offered a more conciliatory tone than those of his predecessors - a tone informed by his own difficult and humbling experiences as a senior clergyman in Argentina. In 2013, at the beginning of his reign, when asked in an interview about gay priests, he responded: "If they accept the Lord and have goodwill, who am I to judge them? They shouldn't be marginalized. [Same-sex attraction] is not the problem... they're our brothers.". Similarly, in 2014, while being interviewed by a leading conservative Argentine newspaper, Francis called on the parents of LGBTQIA+ children to love them as unconditionally as they were loved by God, and to neither condemn nor abandon them. He repeated these statements in another media interview in 2022.

Of course, Francis has at times said things which might appear to contradict these sentiments, especially when he has defended the Church's traditional understanding of marriage as being between a man and a woman for the purposes of raising a family. But those statements have only reflected the complexity of the issue within the Catholic Church, and the tricky balancing act

and negotiation which the Pope and those who support him have had to undertake.

More to the point, however, is that when it comes to individuals and their lived reality, Francis has consistently responded with compassion, inclusion, and non-judgementalism. His concern has always been to reach out to people, to embrace them in God's unconditional love - and his push to enable Catholic clergy to offer blessings to married same-sex couples reflects his emphasis on the Church putting this into practice as well as words. No doubt there will be some "push back" from those who oppose this position - but the blessing option having been put in place, it will now be very hard to rescind without the Catholic Church suffering considerable (or, perhaps more accurately, more) reputational damage.

In a little over a month from now, I will have the privilege and honour of presiding at the wedding of a young gay couple whom I first met some years ago during my placement at Mountview. To say that this couple are devoted to one another in all the ways that constitute a loving, affirming relationship is to make an understatement of colossal proportions. To say that their commitment to each other is precisely the commitment that constitutes the union by marriage of two people is to likewise make a statement of the blindingly obvious. That the Uniting Church enables me to sanctify their marriage through religious ceremony gives me a great deal of pride; that the two people who constitute this loving couple have asked me to perform the service is one of the most humbling and affirming moments of my ministry.

That Catholic clergy are now able to offer blessings to gay married couples may fall short of what many people want - but it's a step in the right direction. Let's hope it provokes a discussion within the wider Church that prompts more Christian traditions to act in accord with the Spirit of God's inclusive, unconditional love.

Rod Alsop Memorial Service

A service to commemorate the life of our brother in faith, Rod Alsop, will be held at **Heathmont Uniting Church on Tuesday 9th January, starting at 2:00pm**. The service will be preceded by a private cremation earlier that morning.

Please continue to hold Joan and the Alsop family in your prayers at this time.

Combined Services For January 24

Just as we did for January this year, there will be combined services for Ringwood and Heathmont in January 2024. The schedule is as follows:

Jan 7th: Combined @RUC (Communion)

Jan 14th: Combined @HUC

Jan 21st: Combined @RUC

Jan 28th: Combined @HUC

Please note that all services **start at 10am**.

Blessings,

Brendan





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Heathmont Uniting Church
89 Canterbury Road
Heathmont, Victoria 3135
Australia

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