

ROME -- The Vatican declared Monday that the Catholic Church won't bless same-sex unions since God "cannot bless sin."

The Vatican's orthodoxy office, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, issued a formal response to a question about whether Catholic clergy have the authority to bless gay unions. The answer, contained in a two-page explanation published in seven languages and approved by Pope Francis, was "negative."

The note distinguished between the church welcoming and blessing gay people, which it upheld, but not their unions. It argued that such unions are not part of God's plan and that any sacramental recognition of them could be confused with marriage.

The Vatican holds that gay people must be treated with dignity and respect, but that gay sex is "intrinsically disordered." Catholic teaching says that marriage is a lifelong union between a man and woman, is part of God's plan and is intended for the sake of creating new life.

Since gay unions aren't intended to be part of that plan, they can't be blessed by the church, the document said.

God "does not and cannot bless sin: He blesses sinful man, so that he may recognize that he is part of his plan of love and allow himself to be changed by him," it said.

Francis has endorsed providing gay couples with legal protections in same-sex unions, but that was in reference to the civil sphere, not within the church.

Bill Donohue, president of the conservative Catholic League, praised the decision as a decisive, non-negotiable "end of story" declaration by the Vatican. The Vatican left nothing on the table. The door has been slammed shut on the gay agenda. Donohue wrote on the League's website, calling the document "the most decisive rejection of those efforts ever written."

In the article, the Vatican stressed the "fundamental and decisive distinction" between gay individuals and gay unions, noting that "the negative judgment on the blessing of unions of persons of the same sex does not imply a judgment on persons."

But it explained the rationale for forbidding a blessing of such unions, noting that any union that involves sexual activity outside of marriage cannot be blessed because it is not in a state of grace, or "ordered to both receive and express the good that is pronounced and given by the blessing."

And it added that blessing a same-sex union could give the impression of a sort of sacramental equivalence to marriage. "This would be erroneous and misleading," the article said.

In 2003, the same Vatican office issued a similar decree saying that the church's respect for gay people "cannot lead in any way to approval of homosexual behaviour or to legal recognition of homosexual unions."

Doing so, the Vatican reasoned then, would not only condone "deviant behaviour," but create an equivalence to marriage, which the church holds is an indissoluble union between man and woman.