

ROME

Instruction on valid sacraments

THE VATICAN has warned priests against “creativity” when conferring the sacraments, *writes Patrick Hudson*.

The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF) published the note *Gestis verbisque* (“Deeds and words”) – “on the validity of the sacraments” – with a preface by its prefect Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández on 2 February.

He explained that the document was prompted by the “multiplication in the number of situations in which it was necessary to declare the invalidity of the celebrated sacraments” due to a priest’s alterations to the rite.

This led to “the need to track down the individuals involved to repeat the right of baptism or confirmation”.

The document sets out how “intimately connected words and events” reveal God’s design, with sacraments entrusted to the Church to “safeguard them as a precious inheritance and source of her life and mission”.

“Matter and form [of the sacraments], summarised in the Code of Canon Law, are established in the promulgated liturgical books ... which must therefore be faithfully observed, without ‘adding, removing, or changing anything.’”

The liturgy already “permits that variety which preserves the Church from ‘rigid uniformity,’” the document said.

AFRICA

‘We can’t modify divine laws’

THE SECOND session of the Synod on Synodality in October should “help the Universal Church not to modify divine laws and precepts so as to create room for all”, according to a statement on behalf of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences in Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), *writes Francis Njuguna*.

A message from Fr Rafael Simbine on behalf of Mozambique’s Bishop Andrice Lucio Muandula of Xai-Xai, first vice-president of SECAM, said that the invitation to “discipleship for all” should not alter teaching.

“All who respond to become his disciples are to follow him not on their own terms but on the Lord’s terms and standards,” the statement said.

“The Jesus call to discipleship involves the challenge to ongoing conversion of turning away from a sinful life to embrace a life of holiness.”

VIEW FROM ROME

Joseph Tulloch



ELEVEN INJURED Gazan children arrived in Rome last week to receive treatment in Italian hospitals. They had been brought to the city on a special military flight from Egypt. The next day, a ship set sail with a second set of wounded children, headed for a port in Liguria. As I write, further flights are in the works.

The architect of all this is Fr Ibrahim Faltas, an Egyptian Franciscan. Middle-aged, well-spoken, with a quick, mischievous smile, he has been based in and around Jerusalem since the 1980s. There, he has worked as a member of the Custody of the Holy Land, the group of Franciscans entrusted with the care of pilgrimage sites in the region. Since 2022, he has been the Custodial Vicar, or the number two official.

It was in this capacity, Fr Faltas told *L’Osservatore Romano* – the Vatican’s official newspaper – that he began to get requests for aid from Gaza. “I immediately got to work with Italian government institutions,” he said, “receiving an immediate, enthusiastic ‘Yes.’ From there, an intense mediation began, involving Israelis, Palestinians and Egyptians.”

This is not the first time the Franciscan friar has been at the centre of a major news story. In 2002, he was one of several dozen priests trapped in Bethlehem’s Church of the Nativity after Palestinian gunmen took refuge in it, and the Israel Defence Forces laid siege. During this 39-day ordeal, many of the gunmen and one of the priests were shot by Israeli snipers. Multiple media outlets credited Fr Faltas with playing an important role in the negotiations – involving the Vatican, the CIA and various European governments – that eventually brought the siege to an end.

POPE FRANCIS made headlines recently with a brief reflection about hell. In an interview with Italian TV, he said: “What I’m about to say is not a dogma of the faith, it’s a personal thing – I like to think of hell as empty. I hope it is.”

The negative response from some quarters was swift and predictable. This was the latest evidence of the Pope’s descent into heresy. “A hope that hell is empty,” warned one commentator, “will do much to fill it up.”

Francis, however, is in good company. Taking their cue from St Paul, who said that God will one day be “all in all”, many Christian theologians have, from the earliest days of the Church, hoped that nobody, not even the worst of sinners, will have to suffer for all eternity. Some

have even proclaimed this as a theological truth. St Augustine, who himself accepted the doctrine of eternal damnation, lamented that “there are very many in our day who do not believe in endless torment”.

Note, however, that although, according to these theologians, hell will eventually be emptied, temporary suffering is still very much on the cards. St Gregory of Nyssa, one of the most important theologians of the early Church and an opponent of the theory of eternal torment, spoke of hell as a “furnace of cleansing fire”. Perhaps those warnings from your catechism teacher were not entirely unfounded.

“TOLKIEN: Man, Professor, Author” is the name of an exhibition which opened recently, to much fanfare, in Rome’s Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art. It was heavily promoted by Giorgia Meloni, Italy’s hard-right prime minister, prompting much discussion about the Italian right’s longstanding effort to claim Tolkien for themselves. Back in 1976, the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement launched a women’s magazine entitled *Eowyn*, after one of *The Lord of the Rings*’ central female characters. Another far-right group used to organise “Hobbit Camps” for young people, featuring Tolkien film nights and debates on Italian nationalism.

The exhibition in Rome is far more subtle. There are panels with information about Tolkien’s life, some books that once belonged to him and a few video interviews (the same ones I have seen half a dozen times on YouTube) playing on repeat. Although time spent thinking about Tolkien is rarely wasted, it was hard not to feel a little disappointed.

The English translations of the information panels, some of which have very clearly been run through a machine translator with no human oversight, are, however, unforgivable. At one point, we learn that “Tolkien’s lively associative life was vast”, a phrase translated so literally from the Italian that it puts even the English versions of Vatican documents to shame. As a lover of language, Tolkien would have been horrified. He might, though, have appreciated the reminder that, even in this age of artificial intelligence, there are still some things that we need human beings for. Or, as Aragorn might put it: The age of men has not yet come crashing down.

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