**July, 2021 Reflections Vol 43 No 8**

**The Catholic Bishops and Communion for President Biden**

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 “Targeting Biden, Catholic Bishops Advance Controversial Communion Plan.” This was the headline in the June 18, 2021, Issue of *The New York Times* covering the virtual June meeting of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB). By a vote of 168 to 55, the bishops directed the Committee on Doctrine to move forward on drafting a document on the Eucharist, tentatively subtitled: *A Mystery to be Believed, A Mystery to be Celebrated and A* *Mystery to be Lived.* The bishops plan to discuss the forthcoming draft at their November meeting later this year.

*The* *Times* headline was typical of the media coverage all over the country, which highlighted whether pro-choice Catholic politicians, like President Biden, should be allowed to receive communion at Mass. The news coverage has prompted questions and discussion among ordinary Catholics, who share a love for the Eucharist but are divided on eligibility to receive Communion. Recognizing a need for clarification, the USCCB issued a statement that put the proposed document in the context of a “multi-year Eucharistic Revival Project, a major national effort to reignite Eucharistic faith in our country.” Furthermore, the bishops pointed out that at their June meeting they “made no decision about banning anyone from receiving Holy Communion” and stated that “there will be no national policy on withholding Communion from politicians.” Responding to news reports, the USCCB denied that the Vatican told them “not to move forward on drafting the document,“ but rather encouraged them to “engage in dialogue and broad consultation.”

The secular media alerted the general public to the deep division within the USCCB and the passionate interventions of individual bishops on the communion issue, describing the virtual exchanges as “heated,” “brawling” and “contentious.” The media also reported that some of the bishops who supported writing a document mentioned President Biden by name, suggesting he remains a major concern for them.

One of the bishops who has mentioned Biden in his public statements is Salvatore Cordileone, Archbishop of San Francisco. In response to a question if he would give Communion to the President, he said he would first try to talk to him personally, and if he could not convince him to change his position, he would expect that the president would not present himself for communion. Cordileone, who studied in Rome, was appointed auxiliary Bishop of San Diego by Pope John Paul II in 2002 and Archbishop of San Francisco by Pope Benedict in 2012. He is commonly known as one of the “culture warrior” bishops who are concerned that the Church and its teachings are under attack in the United States today. On May 1, 2021, he published a 16 page pastoral letter on “The Human Dignity of the Unborn, Holy Communion and Catholics in Public Life.” After quoting a doctor’s graphic description of an abortion procedure, the archbishop said it is for “good reason” that the U.S. Bishops speak of abortion as the “preeminent political issue of our time and place,” since it directly attacks life itself and destroys so many innocent lives. Apparently responding to a statement of Pope Francis, Cordileone insisted that the Catholic Church is not “preoccupied “ with abortion, but champions various causes: for example, opposing racism and working for greater economic equality. Assessing the culpability for an abortion, he said “it is never solely the mother’s act,” but includes those who perform the abortion, those who encourage it and those who support “candidates who advance pro-abortion legislation.” In a section on the Eucharist, the pastoral letter recalled the constant tradition of the Church, that Catholics receiving the Eucharist are professing their faith and their commitment to live by the moral teachings of the Church. The letter went on to declare that Catholics who “reject the teaching of the Church on the sanctity of human life and those who do not seek to live in accordance with that teaching place themselves in contradiction to the communion of the Church, and so should not receive the sacrament of that communion, the Holy Eucharist.”

 In the final section of the pastoral on the responsibilities of Catholics in public life, Cordileone argued that prominent Catholic politicians who “participate in abortion or seek to advance it through legislation or advocacy” cause scandal and lead others to do evil. Furthermore, if pastors do not challenge them, Catholics and others may “assume that the moral teaching of the Catholic Church on the inviolate sanctity of human life is not seriously held.” As a last resort, correcting politicians can take the “public form of exclusion from the reception of Holy Communion,” a discipline exercised throughout Christian history, a “bitter medicine,” but sometimes warranted because of the “gravity of the evil of abortion.” Addressing Catholic politicians who “openly advocate for the legitimacy of abortion,” the archbishop praised those who work for justice, but added “we cannot empower the weak by crushing the weakest.” Politicians who advocate for abortion “should not come forward to receive Holy Communion.” Archbishop Cordileone concludes his argument: “To publicly affirm the Catholic faith while at the same time publicly rejecting one of its most fundamental teachings is simply dishonest.”

Other bishops have also spoken out explicitly against President Biden going to communion. For example, Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City, Missouri, said in an interview on Newsmax TV that Biden, “the most radical president that we’ve ever had” on abortion, is creating “confusion if not scandal amongst our people” by presenting “himself as a devout Catholic” and receiving communion at Mass. With this in mind, Naumann insisted the bishops “have to intervene to protect our people.”

The opposite view within the USCCB is well represented by San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy, who has degrees in history from Harvard and Stanford, a doctorate in moral theology from the Gregorian University in Rome and a doctorate in political science from Stanford. In 2015, Pope Francis appointed him bishop of San Diego, a position he still holds. An expert on the great Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray, McElroy published a 2005 essay arguing that the church should not deny communion to politicians because it tends to “cast the church as a partisan actor in the American political system” and unwisely uses the Eucharist “as a means of discipline.” To support his argument, he pointed out that Pope John Paul II distributed communion to political leaders who favored legal abortion.

In 2015, when the American bishops were discussing their voting guide “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” McElroy advocated, unsuccessfully, that “alongside the issue of abortion and euthanasia which are central issues in our effort to transform this world, poverty and the degradation of the earth are also central.”

On the abortion issue, McElroy has in the past challenged the claim that abortion is “the preeminent moral issue of our time” in various ways: it is not a moral statement but a political one; it is not part of the universal teaching of the Church; and it obscures the importance of other aspects of Catholic Social Teaching. More recently, he has said that abortion is not “the” preeminent issue but is “a” preeminent issue, along with other preeminent issues, such as climate change and racism. Recognizing the sad magnitude of the abortion problem, he insists that excluding pro-choice Catholic political leaders from the Eucharist is the wrong way to deal with it. That would “weaponize” the Eucharist and deploy it as “a tool in political warfare.” The Catechism teaches that the Eucharist is “a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity.” In this regard, Pope Francis reminds us that the Eucharist” is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.” McElroy says Catholics do have a moral obligation to appropriate the teachings of the Church, but that “obligation in its fulness cannot be the measure of Eucharistic worthiness in a Church of sinners and questioners.” He asks how many Catholics would be eligible for communion under the fulness criterion. Furthermore, he questions why the proposed eucharistic sanctions do not apply to racism, an intrinsic evil, which is “tearing at the heart of our nation.” According to McElroy, if the USCCB “passes a national policy of eucharistic exclusion aimed at abortion and not racism,” it will deal a “great blow” to the integral unity of Catholic doctrine and will be interpreted by a large number of Catholics as a partisan move.

In a 2020 talk weeks before the presidential election, Bishop McElroy argued that faithful Catholics could vote for Joe Biden in good conscience. The bishop distinguished Biden’s personal judgment that abortion is immoral, which accords with the Church’s teaching, and his judgment that this view cannot be imposed on a country divided on the issue, which, according to McElroy, is “inescapably the realm of prudential judgment, not intrinsic evil.” In other words, faithful Catholics who agree that abortion is intrinsically evil can legitimately disagree on the best public policy to protect the unborn. This line of argument reenforces Bishop McElroy’s current opposition to any effort to exclude President Biden from receiving communion at Mass.

Prominent among the many bishops who generally align with McElroy is Cardinal Joseph Tobin, Archbishop of Newark, who was also appointed by Pope Francis. At the USCCB June meeting, Tobin argued that any effort to exclude Catholic leaders from the Eucharist “based on their public policy positions would thrust the bishops of our nation into the very heart of the toxic partisan strife which has disturbed our own political culture and crippled meaningful dialogue.”

Due to media coverage, the deep division within the USCCB on excluding politicians from Communion is now widely known in the Catholic world and the general public. The general lines of the disagreement are available. According to a 2021 Pew poll, 67% of American Catholics think President Biden should be permitted to receive Communion at Mass, while 29% say he should be denied Communion. The poll shows that partisan politics have already influenced public opinion, with 55% of those identifying or leaning Republican saying Biden‘s abortion stance should disqualify him from Communion, and just 11% of those identifying or leaning Democrat agreeing with this prohibition.

To clarify my own position, I think the proposal to deny Communion to Biden and other public officials is theologically unsound and pastorally unwise. I myself signed a petition supporting the bishops who wanted to step back from the statement, and I shared my views with individuals distressed by the bishops’ vote to go ahead. Denying Communion to individuals presumes the clergy can judge the state of a parishioner’s soul, which only God can do, and it distorts the meaning of the Eucharist as nourishment for the journey to a more authentic Christian life.

I see abortion as a horrendous intrinsic evil, and the almost one million abortions a year in the United States as a national tragedy. There is a moral responsibility to reduce that number, but there are legitimate differences of opinion on how to accomplish that. However, continually insisting that abortion is the preeminent issue is not helpful. It puts the U.S. Church at odds with Pope Francis, who said we should not “obsess” over the issue and with the official Vatican *Compendium of the Social* *Doctrine of the Church*, which nowhere in its 446 pages teaches that abortion is the preeminent moral issue of our time.

It is misleading to claim President Biden “advocates for abortion,” since he has publicly stated abortion is immoral. However, I do find his campaign rhetoric on repealing the Hyde Amendment, which he always supported in the past, to be extremely troublesome since dropping it would mean taxpayer money could be used for abortions, an abhorrent concept for many Americans.

Initial responses to the media reports suggest that any restrictive statements by the USCCB will move many sincere practicing Catholics to join the millions of Americans who consider themselves “former Catholics.” In my opinion, any attempt to restrict Communion for public officials is going to do more harm than good and will result in more confusion among American Catholics.

If things go as planned, the USCCB doctrinal committee will draft a broad statement on the Eucharist that will be submitted to a vote at the Bishops’ annual meeting in November. It will need a two-thirds vote to pass and will require approval by the Vatican to become official Catholic teaching. Whatever is decided, it will remain the responsibility of individual bishops to set diocesan policies on Communion. In this regard, Cardinal Wilton Gregory, Archbishop of Washington DC, has said that President Biden, who attends Mass regularly, is free to receive Communion in his diocese. On the other side, Bishop Cordileone has indicated Biden is not welcome to receive Communion in the San Francisco diocese. This situation means that the controversy over restricting Communion for public officials is going to divide the Catholic community in the foreseeable future.

In the meantime, we Catholics have the opportunity to deepen our own appreciation of the Eucharist, to engage others in respectful conversation on this contentious issue and to pray that our bishops will be faithful to their vocation as servant leaders.