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The Eucharistic Theology of Pro-Abortion Catholic Politicians

THE AMERICAN CHURCH'S GREATEST CRISIS

By Monica Migliorino Miller | **October 2021**

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We are in an unprecedented moment in the history of the Catholic Church in America, a moment of significant spiritual crisis. The essence of what it means to be a practicing Catholic hangs in the balance. This crisis has gnawed at the Church since January 22, 1973, when William Brennan, a Catholic associate justice of the Supreme Court and the chief architect of *Roe v. Wade*, sided with the court's majority in legalizing abortion on demand and doing so with complete ecclesial impunity. Since that day, with very few exceptions, Catholic politicians who support, advocate, and facilitate the killing of the unborn have stepped into the Communion line and received the Body and Blood of Our Lord, Jesus Christ.

This crisis has finally come to a head, due to the election of Joseph Biden as president of the United States. Biden presents himself as a devout Catholic, and a dotting media magnifies his alleged piety. Together they have redefined what it means to be Catholic, namely, that one can claim the Catholic faith and yet support and protect a law that sends millions of innocent human beings to their deaths. Had Biden not gained the presidency, the American bishops could have continued to look the other way when it comes to the eucharistic incoherence of pro-abortion Catholic politicians. After all, nearly 50 years have passed without any serious pastoral directives from the episcopacy addressing this scandal, much less admonishments or penalties.

Biden, who facilitates legal abortion and supports so-called gay marriage (having officiated at two such ceremonies), is now the most visible example of American Catholicism. Thus, Biden's

presenting himself for Holy Communion is not an isolated diocesan problem; it is a national ecclesial problem, a crisis for the Church that many, if not most, bishops know they can no longer ignore.

Let us briefly review what the Church teaches on worthy reception of the Eucharist, as well as the Catholic politician's duty to protect life. We may start with the much-ignored canon 915, which states, "Those who have been excommunicated or interdicted after the imposition or declaration of the penalty and others obstinately persevering in manifest grave sin are not to be admitted to Holy Communion."

In June 2004 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then-prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), sent a memo to Theodore Cardinal McCarrick, then-archbishop of Washington, D.C., providing specific guidelines for denying the Eucharist to pro-abortion Catholic politicians. At the time, John Kerry, another Catholic who supports abortion, was running for U.S. president. Ratzinger's memo states, "Regarding the grave sin of abortion or euthanasia, when a person's formal cooperation becomes manifest (understood, in the case of a Catholic politician, as his consistently campaigning and voting for permissive abortion and euthanasia laws), his Pastor should meet with him, instructing him about the Church's teaching, informing him that he is not to present himself for Holy Communion until he brings to an end the objective situation of sin, and warning him that he will otherwise be denied the Eucharist" (no. 5).

Ratzinger's memo continues, "When 'these precautionary measures have not had their effect or in which they were not possible,' and the person in question, with obstinate persistence, still presents himself to receive the Holy Eucharist, 'the minister of Holy Communion must refuse to distribute it' (cf. Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts Declaration 'Holy Communion and Divorced, Civilly Remarried Catholics' [2002], nos. 3-4)" (no. 6).

McCarrick, however, suppressed Ratzinger's memo, deliberately misrepresenting it at the June 2004 assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), telling his brother bishops that Ratzinger merely acknowledged that "there are circumstances in which Holy Communion *may be denied*," when, in fact, Ratzinger directed that "the minister of Holy Communion *must refuse* to distribute it."

The Vatican's "Declaration on Procured Abortion" (1974) unequivocally declares the Catholic politician's duty to protect life, stating, "It must in any case be clearly understood that whatever may be laid down by civil law in this matter, man can never obey a law which is in itself immoral, and such is the case of a law which would admit in principle the liceity of abortion. Nor can he take part in a propaganda campaign in favor of such a law, or vote for it. Moreover, he may not collaborate in its application" (no. 22).

In 2002 the CDF issued the doctrinal note "Participation of Catholics in Political Life," which reads, "When political activity comes up against moral principles that do not admit of exception, compromise or derogation, the Catholic commitment becomes more evident and laden with responsibility. In the face of fundamental and inalienable ethical demands, Christians must recognize that what is at stake is the essence of the moral law, which concerns the integral good of the human person. This is the case with laws concerning abortion.... Such laws must defend the basic right to life from conception to natural death. In the same way, it is necessary to recall the duty to respect and protect the rights of the human embryo."

At their June 2021 plenary assembly, in a vote of 168 to 55, the U.S. bishops approved the drafting of a document on the Eucharist that would, among other things, possibly address the issue of worthiness to receive Communion. The weeks leading up to the meeting were filled with conflict, as Bishops Thomas Olmstead of Phoenix, Joseph Naumann of Kansas City (head of the bishops' Committee on Pro-life Activities), Samuel Aquila of Denver, and, perhaps most notably, Salvatore Cordileone of San Francisco publicly stated that Catholic politicians who support abortion should not present themselves for Communion. Cordileone even issued a pastoral letter directly addressing the topic six weeks before the assembly.

Other bishops, however, vocalized their opposition to denying Communion to pro-abortion Catholic politicians. During the November 2019 bishops' assembly, Robert McElroy of San Diego denied that abortion is the "pre-eminent issue." McElroy later wrote that in the drive to deny Communion to pro-abortion Catholic politicians, "the Eucharist is being weaponized and deployed as a tool in political warfare" (*America*, May 5). *Weaponizing the Eucharist* is the favored accusatory jargon of those who oppose denying Communion to pro-abortion Catholic politicians. McCarrick himself used similar

terminology as far back as June 2004, stating that “the battles for human life and dignity and for the weak and vulnerable should be fought not at the Communion rail, but in the public square.”

This served as the primary backdrop to the bishops’ June 2021 vote on issuing a document on the Eucharist. Their debate created a media frenzy, with headlines proclaiming, “Bishops on Path to Refuse Biden Holy Communion” (*New York Times*, June 19). That the Church in America is experiencing an unprecedented moment is proven by the fact that 60 pro-abortion Catholic congressmen issued a “Statement of Principles” opposing the bishops’ pending document (June 18). On congressional letterhead, these politicians publicly explain to the bishops, and indeed the entire world, why, despite their advocacy for legalized killing of the innocent, they should not be prevented from receiving Communion. They urge the bishops “to not move forward and deny [them] this most holy of all sacraments, the source and summit of the whole gospel over one issue.”

At this point, it is pro-abortion Catholic politicians who are teaching the bishops the meaning of the Eucharist, something as absurd as it is unprecedented. Here the *ecclesia dicens* sees fit to lecture the *ecclesia docens* with their own eucharistic theology.

The browbeating began with an article by Tim Kaine, a pro-abortion Catholic senator from Virginia and Hillary Clinton’s 2016 vice-presidential running mate. In “A Catholic Senator’s View of Biden and the Bishops” (*National Catholic Reporter*, May 18), Kaine accuses the bishops of “redefining the meaning of the sacrament.” He expresses his eucharistic theology quite plainly: “The theology of Communion begins with an acknowledgment of weakness.... By church doctrine, no one is worthy to receive Communion, even those in the hierarchy who administer it! None of us is worthy, but through the grace of God, we seek the sacrament to be healed and grow stronger in our faith.”

First of all, authentic Catholic eucharistic theology doesn’t begin with an “acknowledgment of weakness.” It begins with an acknowledgment that the Eucharist is nothing less than the Body and Blood of Christ. Yet Kaine attempts to drive home his argument by noting that before receiving Communion, the faithful declare, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word, and my soul shall be healed.” The problem with Kaine’s view is that he does not believe he needs to be healed of the sin of supporting and facilitating a law that sends millions of human beings to their deaths. Rather than repenting of this sin, he tries to justify it! Kaine argues that the sacrament is meant for the weak, but he offers no recognition of his own weakness, no

recognition of his personal culpability in the murder of innocent persons. On the contrary, Kaine admits he does not accept Catholic teaching “over laws regarding abortion, contraception and LGBTQ equality.” True to his word, on August 11 Kaine voted against a budget amendment that would ban taxpayer funding of abortion.

Kaine makes the typical mistake of treating the right to life as if it were a sectarian Catholic belief that cannot be imposed on a diverse population. “Bishops demanding that Catholics in public life not only live according to church doctrine but additionally shape the law, even to include the threat of criminal prosecution and punishment, to enshrine church doctrine on sexuality as mandatory for all Americans, is contrary to our basic liberty,” he writes. “Why would government require that Catholic sexuality doctrine, or Sharia law, or Orthodox Jewish rules about Sabbath observance, be followed by all?”

Kaine trivializes the defense of the unborn and the meaning of human sexuality and marriage, treating them as if they were simply quirks of Catholicism. And he equates the enshrining of Catholic doctrine into law with the imposition of Muslim sharia law! Not only is Kaine’s eucharistic theology shallow and vapid, but he fails to understand that basic human rights originate in the natural law, which is not only the foundation of Catholic social thought but the starting point for any just society, and which transcends parochial religious faith.

Kaine would do well to read the CDF’s “Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life” (2002), which corrects his error: “Living and acting in conformity with one’s own conscience on questions of politics is not slavish acceptance of positions alien to politics or some kind of confessionalism, but rather the way in which Christians offer their concrete contribution so that, through political life, society will become more just and more consistent with the dignity of the human person” (no. 6).

The 60 congressmen who signed the “Statement of Principles” present themselves as persons of compassion who “seek to make real the basic principles that are at the heart of Catholic social teaching: helping the poor, disadvantaged, and the oppressed, protecting the least among us, and ensuring that all Americans of every faith are given meaningful opportunities to share in the blessings of this great country.” They “envision a world in which every child belongs to a loving

family,” and they “agree with the Catholic Church about the value of human life.” Of course, when such politicians claim to be concerned for the “oppressed” and the “least among us,” they invariably fail to include the unborn, who are killed at the rate of 2,500 per day and are truly “oppressed” and the “least among us.”

These pro-abortion congressmen appeal to Pope Francis for support, quoting his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013): “The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.” This may be, by now, the most often-quoted teaching of Francis’s pontificate, eclipsing even “Who am I to judge?” No one has been more exploited by pro-abortion Catholic politicians, and by those who defend them, including various bishops, than the Holy Father himself. The Pope’s remark came in the context of an ecclesiology that calls for a Church “with doors always wide open,” in which the doors of the sacraments should not “be closed for simply any reason.”

Since the sacraments should not “be closed for simply any reason,” then we may conclude that the sacraments can be closed for a good reason, as affirmed by canon 915. Though we should give Francis the benefit of the doubt that he didn’t intend to provide pro-abortion Catholic politicians a defense, thus far he has not rebuked them for misusing his words. Francis says the Eucharist is “nourishment for the weak,” but again, the signers of the “Statement of Principles” fail to acknowledge their own weakness — the bare minimum spiritual prerequisite for worthy reception of Christ’s Body and Blood. These pro-abortion congressmen make it appear that they are on the Pope’s side while the bishops are on the outs regarding Holy Communion.

The congressmen complain that they are being singled out for their disagreement with a solitary Church doctrine while other elected officials are not threatened with a denial of the Eucharist for supporting “the death penalty, separating migrant children from their parents, denying asylum to those seeking safety in the United States, limiting assistance for the hungry and food insecure, and denying rights and dignity to immigrants.” The death penalty is not, of course, intrinsically immoral — though the Church, for the sake of protecting the sanctity of life, disfavors it and argues against it. As for the other issues, though they are serious ones, some are matters of prudential judgment, such as the denial of asylum and limiting assistance. (Who, exactly, seeks to deny “rights and dignity to immigrants”?)

For the sake of argument, let's suppose these are indeed intrinsic evils, that under no circumstances can they be supported. There would still be a vast difference between such evils and the legalized killing of the unborn. Simply put: Abortion is different. Only the unborn have been formally named by law to be nonpersons. Only the unborn may be put to death in the most hideous acts of violence based on nothing more than the will of their mothers. Only the unborn perish by the thousands every day. Only the unborn have their crushed bodies treated as so much trash, or their body parts sold for scientific research. Approximately 62 million unborn children have been killed in the United States since 1973. The enormity of the body count is staggering, and *this alone* qualifies legalized abortion as the "pre-eminent issue," contra McElroy, and as affirmed by the U.S. bishops in their voters' guide, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship." The unborn are the most oppressed class of human beings in the world. The right to life is the first and most fundamental human right, and thus the foundation of all other rights — those of asylum-seekers, immigrants, the poor, the hungry, minority groups, and death-row inmates.

The ultimate expression of the eucharistic theology of pro-abortion Catholic politicians can be found in a statement posted on the website of Holy Trinity Church in Georgetown (June 29), the Jesuit-run parish Biden attends most regularly. With the approval of its pastor, Fr. Kevin Gillespie, the parish council first expressed disappointment that the bishops voted to issue a document on the Eucharist. They stand with Washington archbishop Wilton Cardinal Gregory who, in a November 24, 2020, interview, stated he would not deny Communion to Biden. The parish council declares, "Holy Trinity Catholic Church will not deny the Eucharist to persons presenting themselves to receive it." There is no nuance here. The statement articulates no concern for an examination of conscience, the necessity to be in a state of grace, or the concept of worthiness to receive Communion. Instead, since "none of us," according to the parish, "is worthy to receive it," everyone is welcome to receive the Eucharist! If we accept this statement at face value, then literally anyone may partake of the Body and Blood of the Lord. The parish will not withhold Communion from known atheists, Satanists, drug dealers, human traffickers, Mafia hitmen, pedophiles, rapists, serial killers, white supremacists, war criminals, or abortionists.

One wonders whether Holy Trinity, in its eagerness to welcome Biden, realizes the implications of its policy. The parish undoubtedly believes it has forged a loving path, that welcoming all without

restriction is the way of Christ. Gone, however, is the way of the Cross, the call to conversion, repentance of sin, following the “narrow road” that leads to salvation, and love of neighbor. In a word, no one need change, as Biden’s D.C. parish “will not deny the Eucharist to persons who present themselves to receive it.”

Cardinal Gregory justified Biden’s continued access to the Eucharist by characterizing the President’s rejection of Catholic teaching on abortion as something that comes with “being a family, a family of faith.” He stated, “The difficulty is too many people want to throw out of the family of faith people with whom they have disagreements.” By characterizing Biden’s support for legal abortion as mere disagreement, Gregory trivializes the injustice it inflicts on the unborn. He reduces this ongoing, brutal violence to a mere concept, an idea over which there can be a conflict of viewpoints. But abortion is not an abstraction. Abortion is 62 million dead people! The conflict here is not just about what someone like Biden *believes*, which is bad enough; it’s about what Biden *does* by supporting actions that directly cause grave evil.

Bishop McElroy, in his *America* article, describes Biden’s failure to embrace the whole of Catholic teaching as a rejection of “the moral obligation to seek laws protecting the unborn.” Here is one of the San Diego bishop’s greatest errors. He misrepresents the actual evil President Biden causes. The objective evil is not simply that Biden does not support laws to end abortion, or that Biden doesn’t agree with Catholic teaching that the civil ruler has an obligation to protect life. Rather, Biden *actively facilitates* the mass murder of an entire class of people. He supports legalized abortion for the full nine months of pregnancy and has personally initiated public policies that expand the killing of innocent persons — all contrary to the faith he claims to profess!

These are not sins of omission — as bad as those are — but sins of commission, for which Biden is morally responsible. It’s easy to pass off abortion as simply an abstract concept, when, in truth, every act of abortion *kills someone*. Thus, those who advocate legalized abortion ultimately commit a grievous violation of love of neighbor. Cordileone, in explaining why pro-abortion Catholic politicians should be denied Communion, cites Christ’s words: “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did to these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt. 25:40). It is obvious, on any spiritual level, that facilitating the crushing of the bodies of the unborn is contrary to the charity we owe our neighbor and thus a contradiction of what it means to be “welcoming to all.” A rejection of the unborn is a

rejection of Christ Himself. One cannot reject the least of Christ's brothers and sisters and *receive* Him. The incongruity is staggering! The bishops need to say so.

If the bishops do decide to restrict pro-abortion politicians' access to Communion, will it matter?

Not to Nancy Pelosi. During a May 14 press briefing, a reporter told her, "The bishops and the bishops' conference don't want to allow you to receive Communion." She responded, "No, they don't. I think I can use my own judgment on that." Pelosi basically scoffed that anyone, let alone a bishop, or even a pope, could deny her Communion.

Similarly, on June 18, a reporter asked Biden about the possibility that he would be denied Communion. He responded, "That's a private matter, and I don't think that's going to happen." On the contrary, the reception of Communion is a *very public matter*. The public dimension of the Eucharist is one of the important reasons why reception by those "obstinately persevering in manifest grave sin" is even an issue. Reception of Our Lord's Body and Blood is a public act, indeed a public declaration of faith, a public pledge that one accepts Christ and the teachings of His Church and seeks to live them. By consuming Christ's Body, the ecclesial Body of Christ becomes a reality. Holy Communion creates the holy communion of the Church as those who worship Christ are made one. When someone acts against the faith of the Church yet partakes of that sacrifice, one publicly expresses a falsehood, a contradiction, a lie. Reception of Our Lord's Body and Blood is not simply between the communicant and Jesus.

The celebration of the Eucharist is the most sublime social event involving the entire ecclesial body, to which the communicant has duties and responsibilities of a spiritual and moral nature. One of those duties is not to give scandal to others. A scandal is committed every time those who facilitate the killing of the innocent receive Communion, an offense against the social dimension of the liturgy. When Pelosi declares that she "can use her own judgment" about whether to receive Communion, not only has she privatized the eucharistic moment, she has usurped the authority of the bishops, who, as successors of the Apostles, have been entrusted by Christ with the most sacred responsibility to oversee the celebration of the sacraments and guard the integrity of eucharistic worship. Pelosi has rendered the bishops' authority irrelevant to her faith life and to the life of the Church.

As a pro-life activist who has worked for decades to save the unborn scheduled for the killing rooms and to end the killing of the unborn, I take the issue of eucharistic coherence very personally. This is not just an abstract theological issue for me. Frankly, that Catholics who facilitate the killing of the unborn should be permitted to receive Our Lord's Body and Blood is madness. I am one of perhaps no more than 50 people in the world who have actually retrieved the broken bodies of the aborted unborn from abortion-clinic dumpsters. I have lived with the unborn dead, photographed the unborn dead, and buried the unborn dead. As I write, our home is host to the severed body parts of an 18-week-old aborted baby whom Red Rose Rescuer Matthew Connolly found in the trash barrel outside the Northeast Ohio Women's Center on June 7. This human being, tossed in the garbage with biohazardous waste and numerous patient records, may have been someone we tried to save three days earlier during a Red Rose Rescue at the Cuyahoga Falls abortion clinic.

Joseph Biden supports and defends this atrocity. What, then, is the true fault of pro-abortion Catholic politicians? Driven by their obsession to defend a "woman's right to choose," to appear liberal and progressive, they fail to acknowledge the existence of the unborn. They simply cannot admit that abortion is violence. They cannot, and will not, admit that abortion *kills someone*.

This fall, the U.S. Supreme Court will hear arguments in *Dobbs v. Jackson*, to decide the constitutionality of a Mississippi law that bans abortion after the 15th week of fetal gestation. At a June 17 press conference, a reporter asked Pelosi a point-blank question: "Is an unborn baby at 15 weeks a human being?" The California congresswoman would not answer the question. Instead, she affirmed her support for legalized abortion, believing she has authority to pronounce on the subject: "Let me just say that I am a big supporter of *Roe v. Wade*. I am a mother of five children in six years. I think I have some standing on this issue as to respecting a woman's right to choose."

Similarly, on June 21, Biden's White House press secretary, Jen Psaki, would not directly answer the same question. Speaking for Biden, she echoed Pelosi: "Are you asking me if the president supports a woman's right to choose? He does." Pelosi and Biden refuse to answer the question because the humanity of the unborn is irrelevant to them. While pro-abortion Catholic politicians refuse to acknowledge the existence of unborn children, there's a shattered victim of abortion in my home awaiting burial, a baby whose murder they helped facilitate.

In the wake of the vote to issue a document on the Eucharist, the bishops felt the need to clarify their intention in light of widespread media distortion. The clarification, posted on the USCCB website (June 21), states that the bishops did not vote on or debate banning politicians from receiving Communion. Moreover, “there will be no national policy on withholding Communion from politicians. The intent is to present a clear understanding of the Church’s teachings to bring heightened awareness among the faithful of how the Eucharist can transform our lives and bring us closer to our creator and the life he wants for us.”

If I were a Catholic politician who acts against the Church’s teachings on the sanctity of life, I would take great comfort from this clarification. The bishops never affirm that their proposed document will address the issue of worthiness to receive Communion. After every headline, every debate, every article, every talk-show discussion, and every letter sent to the bishops, in the end, there will likely be no teaching on worthiness to receive Communion and certainly no discipline, no admonishment, no formal correction of any kind, much less excommunication of those who cause the deaths of the innocent unborn.

During the debate at the June assembly, Cordileone stated that the bishops would not be taken seriously if they did not issue a document. “Our credibility is on the line,” he said. “The eyes of the whole country are on us right now.” If the bishops’ document avoids the issue of worthiness and fails to address the scandal to others caused by pro-abortion Catholic politicians’ reception of Communion — including the spiritual harm such persons cause themselves — the Church in America will have missed its most important moment to speak the truth of Christ in the gathering darkness.