

# Beyond These Stone Walls

## Biden and the Bishops Communion and the Care of a Soul

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July 7, 2021

*Some bishops fear political fallout if they draft a policy on the Eucharist and pro-abortion politicians but they overlook the most fundamental duty of the Church.*



There is a lot of misdirected anger toward the Church and its leaders in our culture. For some it is the anger of adolescents who think that shedding the moral authority of parents is in their best interest. Some parents forget that it is not. For others, it is the anger of those who have lived in fidelity to the moral authority of the Church only to see it weakened at every turn in this age of moral relativism and cancel culture. For others still, it is the anger born of seeing too many of the Church's shepherds in the role of sheep, diminish-

ing the Church's prophetic witness to accommodate the self-serving politics of our time.

In 2018, I wrote a controversial post for the fifth anniversary of the pontificate of Pope Francis entitled, "Pope Francis in a Time of Heresy." Lots of conservative Catholics were drawn to it because of its title. Many assumed that I was accusing Pope Francis of heresy. Within weeks, that post was shared 25,000 times on Facebook. Then someone actually read it only to find nothing really scandalous. Interest in it just quietly evaporated.

I did not accuse the pope of heresy though the heresy implied therein was in fact his. It was political heresy, however, and not theological. In a series of challenges earlier

in his pontificate, Pope Francis was confronted with wayward bishops and priests in various parts of the world. In one notorious case when a bishop was accused of sexual misconduct in Chile, Pope Francis spontaneously said, "Show me some evidence."

I think the true heart of this pope was laid bare in that spontaneous remark, but he had to walk it back a few days later. It was political heresy. One of his immediate critics was Cardinal Sean O'Malley appointed to oversee the Vatican's response to sexual abuse. The "woke" among us simply cannot abide any questions that might diminish a claim of victimhood.

The most prevalent heresy in my post cited above, however, was committed by conservative and traditional Catholics, the very people with whom I feel most aligned as a Catholic and as a priest. You may recall all the controversy surrounding the 2018 Synod on the Family and the document, "Amoris Laetitia" by Pope Francis. They both explored, in part, a question about whether otherwise faithful Catholics in a state of divorce and civil remarriage should be allowed to receive the Eucharist.

The mere question, which never became reality, raised in the Church a loud alarm and protest about weakening the sacramental bond of marriage and the sacramental coherence of Communion. I agreed with these concerns, but I asked some challenging questions which to date no one has attempted to answer.

Where was this concern among the faithful over the last twenty years when "zero tolerance" became the operative agenda and the sacramental bond of Holy Orders was summarily discarded by bishops when priests were accused - merely accused - with little or no due process? Just asking this question is political heresy. Since then, an ongoing stream of concern for politics and political fallout has been allowed to creep into the life of the Church in our time.

## President Joe Biden and Communion

Now comes the latest counter-cultural Catholic controversy. Our bishops are wrangling over the potential for political fallout if they move forward with the majority's intent on drafting a pastoral document on the meaning of the Eucharist and the conditions under which a Catholic would be in communion with Jesus and the Church.

Cardinal Wilton Gregory, Archbishop of Washington, has gone on record to state that he would not deny Communion to President Joe Biden. Cardinal Blase Cupich, Archbishop of Chicago, warned that this discussion could have the effect of aligning the Church to one political party over another. Both prelates signed an unsuccessful petition to remove this whole topic from the agenda of the Bishops' Conference. In the end, 75 percent of the bishops voted to proceed.

Though this discussion is not about one person, everyone knows that its focal point is President Joe Biden and, to a lesser extent, Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Both are Democrats who describe themselves as devout Catholics. Both have also been proponents of unconditional access to abortion, same-sex marriage, limits on religious liberty, and transgender ideology.

In the current controversy over receiving Communion, President Biden has said that he does not believe the bishops will address this because "it is a private matter." On several levels, he is wrong about that. He is by no means a private person who would not cause scandal by living a duplicitous life of faith.

He is also wrong for the same reason that all the concern for Communion for Catholics living in an illicit marriage became a public controversy. Marriage is a public state in life and not just a private one. Joe Biden's longstanding and ever-expanding promotion of abortion is a highly public aspect of his agenda. His living a contrary expression of faith is a very public matter.

President Biden is now described by some media commentators as being singled out by conservatives for his support of "a woman's right to choose." The reality is far beyond that. He has also lobbied to expand abortion and to remove it from reconsideration by the Supreme Court by promising to encode in federal law an absolute right to abortion. He has vowed to repeal the Hyde Amendment which for decades has protected conscientious objectors among taxpayers from being forced to fund abortions. He has advocated "packing" the U.S. Supreme Court to diminish the influence of pro-life justices.

This is a dilemma for the Church and the U.S. Bishops Conference. A policy statement which truly reflects the Church's discipline on worthiness to receive Holy Communion could directly preclude such a publicly known abortion advocate from the Sacrament without signs of repentance. Putting forth that policy statement may, and likely would, also be seen on the practical level as a repudiation of at least some of this president's political agenda and that of some in his political party who also profess to be Catholic.

This is a painful and difficult position for the bishops to be in, and it is not going to go away. The first and foremost concern of the bishops, however, should not be a fear of political fallout, or of losing the Church's tax exempt status (which is also highly doubtful). The foremost concern should be something that no one else seems to be raising. It is not concern for Joe Biden's agenda that should impact our bishops, but concern for Joe Biden's soul.

## **Politicians Are Not a Privileged Class of Catholics**

The Church's teaching in this matter is based in part on Sacred Scripture. Among several clear examples is this one from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians:

"Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the Body and Blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves."

– 1 Corinthians 11: 27-29

The Catechism of the Catholic Church addresses this with a clarity that needs no interpretation:

"Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable. Direct abortion, that is to say, abortion willed as an end or a means, is gravely contrary to the moral law."

– CCC 2271

"Formal cooperation in an abortion constitutes a grave offense. The Church attaches the canonical penalty of excommunication to this crime against human life. 'A person who procures a completed abortion incurs excommunication latae sententiae' (Canon 1398). The Church does not, thereby, intend to restrict the scope of mercy. Rather, she makes clear the gravity of the crime committed, the irreparable harm done to the innocent who is put to death, as well as to the parents and the whole of society."

– CCC 2272

An argument can be made that a politician who promotes legislation that provides the means for abortion may not incur the same penalty as someone who "procures a completed abortion," but this is also splitting hairs. Both the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Church's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith define the moral obligation to promote legislation that protects life:

"The inalienable right to life of every innocent human individual is a constitutive element of a civil society and its legislation."

– CCC 2273

"The inalienable rights of the person must be recognized and respected by civil society and the political authority ... The moment a positive law deprives a category of human beings of the protection which civil authority ought to accord them, the state is denying the equality of all before the law. When the state does not place its power at the service of the rights of each citizen ... the very foundations of a state based on law are undermined. As a consequence of the respect and protection which must be assured for the unborn child ... the law must provide appropriate penal sanctions for every deliberate violation of the child's rights."

– CDF, *Donum Vitae* III

For any Catholic, the reception of Communion is not just a private matter. It is both a private and public witness to being in communion with both Christ and His Church. Some of the most beautiful and clear commentary on this has come from Bishop Thomas Olmstead of the Diocese of Phoenix who developed an apostolic exhortation on the Eucharist and what it means to be "in Communion":

"Holy Communion is reserved for those who, with God's grace, make a sincere effort to live this union with Christ and His Church by adhering to all that the Catholic Church believes and proclaims to be revealed by God."

"For this reason, the Church requires Catholic leaders who have publicly supported gravely immoral laws such as abortion and euthanasia to refrain from receiving Holy Communion until they publicly repent and receive the Sacrament of Penance."

– "[Veneremur Cernui](#)" by Bishop Thomas Olmstead

Bishop Olmstead described the great harm to the soul of a Catholic who receives the Sacrament after allowing belief in the True Presence of Christ in the Eucharist to diminish. A person who truly believes in this Sacrament for the Life of the World could not possibly also embrace and promote a culture of death. Such an unworthy reception of Holy Communion transforms the Sacrament into a sacrilege that continues the betrayal of Christ by Judas Iscariot at the first Institution of the Eucharist.

You may remember an important Holy Week post of mine entitled "Satan at the Last Supper: Hours of Darkness and Light." It recalls Saint John's account of the Institution of the Eucharist. Satan had entered into Judas who received the bread from Christ with betrayal in his heart. The final words of Saint John's Gospel account of the scene speak volumes about the state of the soul of the betrayer:

"After receiving the piece of bread, Satan entered into him ... Judas immediately went out. And it was night."

– John 13:27,30

Avoiding a clear statement on Eucharistic coherence now can do far more damage to the faith and moral sanctity of Catholics than the appearance of taking a political side. It is cheap and easy for those who live to not take a long, hard look at how we may promote, by commission or omission, a denial of the right to life.

How could our bishops possibly expect otherwise faithful Catholics in unrecognized second marriages to accept in good faith the discipline of refraining from Communion while the most pro-abortion Catholic politician in history is given a pass. The path of righteousness in this will not be easy for our bishops. As Father Michael Orsi wrote in a recently published letter to the Wall Street Journal: "This will take courage, but it will separate the shepherds from the hired hands."