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Home > Religion

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## The Eucharist: a schooling for sinners, not a reward for the just

Many instances of exclusion have later been seen to involve a misunderstanding of the Eucharist or an abuse of power



(Photo by Thays Orrico/Unsplash)

By [Andrew Hamilton](#) | [Australia](#)

Looking from outside at the debates among American Catholics about whether President Biden should be refused **communion** has been a little like watching the crowd in a Rangers v Celtic game in Glasgow.

Much that was said and done fervently in the name of faith showed little familiarity with it. To understand the issue we must enter the Catholic imaginative world in which the Eucharist is central.

This is built around the story of a God who in Jesus enters a fractured human world to offer healing, hope, freedom, wholeness and model a way of living.

Jesus' faithfulness to that promise and way of life ended in conflict with the powerful forces responsible for fracturing the human world and in the manifest defeat of a tortured and dehumanising execution.

That defeat, however, turned out to be a victory. His rising from the dead vindicated his way of life, made him present to those who believed in him and promised a life beyond the conditions of this world.

In the Catholic imagination the Eucharist draws people into Jesus' story at the eve of his trial and killing. It is the meal when they 'do what Jesus did'.

They are associated with the risen Christ in doing what Jesus did, namely offering themselves with him and with one another to live as he did.

In receiving the Eucharistic body of Christ, they enact the commitment that ended with tortured body of Christ and are formed into the risen body of Christ as church.

That is a bald account of the Catholic imaginative world within which to set the United States Bishops' discussion of the Eucharist and the proposal to exclude some politicians from it.

In Catholic terms, the central question is whether such a proposal is compatible with doing as Jesus did. And to answer that question, we need to set what Jesus did against the two opposed constructions of human life revealed in his execution

St Augustine gave a typically penetrating account of those two constructions, perhaps best described as operative imaginings of the world.

The division between them is not between groups of people, but runs through each human being. One construction is bounded by individual desire without any reference to a benevolent God.

It leads to a life based in self-interest, competition, violence, appeal to power, injustice, war, a unity based on power and exclusion, and self-righteousness. If it includes a God, it will be a God who demands compliance.

For Augustine this construction was embodied in the Roman Empire.

The second construction sees the world as bounded by love. In it God is a God of gift.

This leads to respect for the world and other people, to fraternal relationships and to a hospitable community. Most people would recognise themselves as acting at different times

out of each of these constructions.

Against this background, the pursuit, isolation and sentencing of Jesus, and the dehumanising of his body embody the world of self-interest, power, injustice and violence, and its apparently decisive victory.

His acceptance of death as a victim of such violence and his rising to life, however, represents the triumph of the victim, of self-sacrifice for others, of the possibility of a world based in love and care, and of the shaping of a community built around Jesus that follows his way.

It vindicates a paradoxical way of living and opens out to a distinctive polity.

From this perspective Jesus' instruction to do this in association with him refers to his offering of himself and his being offered.

In celebrating the Eucharist people join him both as perpetrators and victims of injustice, power and self-interest, and join him in the joy and freedom of finding in this the gift of hope and the promise of full life to come.

In being associated with Christ in his giving himself, they are also given, and shaped into a community that welcomes people, which is based in respect for human dignity, forgiveness and resists self-serving and power domination.

The Eucharist is a schooling for sinners, not a reward for the just. It expresses gratitude to God for gift, and challenges any polity based in competition, power and violence.

## **The Catholic tradition offers a better construction of life**

That is the background against which exclusion from the Eucharist should be judged. The history of the Catholic Church offers many reasons for self-exclusion or imposed exclusion.

They include sinfulness, specific sins, differences in faith and church allegiance, decrees of excommunication, episcopal whim, membership of the military, recent sexual relations, unavailability of the sacrament of reconciliation, and prohibited marital relationships.

Many of these instances of exclusion have later been seen to involve a misunderstanding of the Eucharist or an abuse of power.

If people are associated with Christ in being offered as well as offering, then it is clear that they can't be excluded on the grounds of sinfulness.

The Eucharist is an invitation and an instrument of conversion for the self-seeking to become part of a community of reconciliation.

The understanding of the Eucharist as a discipline for hospitality, in contrast to the discipline of power and exclusion, means that exclusion from the Eucharist should be rare.

Exclusion is normally a countersign because it is so readily read as an act of power, of self-righteousness and of division.

One situation where it might be justified is in the case of behaviour that replicates and endorses within the community the forces which dehumanised and isolated Jesus in his dying.

Torturers who were excommunicated in Chile, for example, were not committed to do what Jesus did, but to do what was done to Jesus.

They inhibited trust that Jesus' death had overcome the death dealing forces, and preached a grim God of compliance.

They dismembered the body of Christ instead of re-membering it. Even in this case, however, the purpose of excommunication was properly to encourage forgiveness and reconciliation.

Does President Biden's record of voting on abortion constitute such a dismemberment of the body of Christ?

Though I believe abortion to be a social tragedy, I do not believe that voting for particular legislative proposals contradicts the Eucharist in the sense that I have described.

My colleague Chris Middleton has set out well [the prudential reasons against denying communion to politicians on this issue](#).

The deeper question raised for Catholics by the proposal to exclude President Biden is whether it is compatible with the polity of the Eucharist.

Does it help sinners, who have been brought together by their joy in the gift of being freed by the tortured body of Christ, to share that joy with others who have been excluded?

Or is the proposal tainted by the polity that led to the dismemberment of Christ's body — the competitiveness, the hostility, the reliance on power and punitive judgment and self-righteousness?

Is this a case of the polity of the Eucharist purifying a society, or the polity of a society corrupting the Eucharist? I believe that history of the proposal to exclude Biden from communion suggests the latter to be more likely. The church has allowed itself to be used.

How then should Catholics respond to abortion and other practices they see as wrong?

The understanding of the Eucharist that I have sketched suggests that it should first reach out to victims, and particularly to those who are excluded.

These especially include women who have abortions because of rape, poverty and lack of support to raise a child. They should be welcomed.

In reflecting on practices they see as wrong, too, they should focus more on exploring the two constructions of human life that underlie behaviour than on the behaviour itself.

The root of many such practices is to be found in precisely the construction that led to Jesus' death.

In the assumption, for example, that the decisive consideration in abortion, euthanasia and other social issues is individual choice to the exclusion of other relationships.

Does this isolated focus lead naturally to competition, the appeal to power, violence and self-righteousness?

If Catholics believe, as I do, that the Catholic tradition offers a better construction of life, they should not exclude but reach out to people with whom they disagree, and particularly to those who are drawn by compassion to endorse positions with which they disagree.

That is a more Catholic response than excluding people from communion.

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