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Home > Religion

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## The weaponized Eucharist

One can believe abortion is the "preeminent issue" of our time and strongly oppose refusing pro-choice politicians Holy Communion



United States President Joe Biden departs the Church of the Holy Trinity in Georgetown, in Washington, DC on Saturday, April 10, 2021. (Photo by Alex Edelman / Pool via CNP /MaxPPP)

By [Chris Middleton](#) | [Australia](#)

The debate among American bishops around whether President Biden and other Catholic politicians should be denied Holy Communion because of their policies on abortion is an important and unsettling one.

Let me say at the start that I think it would be a tragedy if the bishops were to venture down this path.

For the nation's bishops, the continued injustice of abortion remains the *'preeminent priority.'*

In a statement congratulating President Biden on his election victory, Archbishop Gomez, the President of the US Bishops Conference, noted that: 'Preeminent does not mean "only"'.

We have deep concerns about many threats to human life and dignity in our society.

But as Pope Francis teaches, we cannot stay silent when nearly a million unborn lives are being cast aside in our country year after year through abortion'.

His full statement illustrates the complexity many bishops believe they face in the election of a devout Catholic to the presidency.

It is worth noting, however, that, in the increasingly polarised American church, polls show that the majority of Catholic disagree with the proposed action by the bishops.

Regular Mass-goers, however, are sympathetic to those bishops taking a hard line on pro-choice politicians.

And there are precedents in American history. Some point to the example of Archbishop Joseph Rummel of New Orleans who, in 1962, not only denied Communion to three Catholics, but formally excommunicated the three, who vehemently opposed his efforts to desegregate Catholic schools.

Archbishop Ritter of St Louis had previously threatened excommunication in 1947 to Catholic opponents of desegregation.

More recently, the question has been raised regarding a number of politicians based on their stance on abortion.

In 2008, New York Cardinal Edward Egan condemned former Republican Mayor Rudy Giuliani's decision to receive Communion during a papal visit to the city because of Giuliani's support for abortion rights.

The issue has become more acute given that President Biden is very clear in articulating his commitment to his faith, and its importance to him.

It is worth noting further, that there have been significant recent developments in the Democratic Party over abortion that go some way to explaining the controversy.

Whereas Hillary Clinton argued that abortion should be 'safe, legal and rare' in 2008, that position would not be acceptable now in Democratic circles (in 2016 she dropped 'rare').

Similarly, the position of Catholic politicians who could say they were personally opposed to abortion, but they were bound to defend the law in a diverse and secular society, is a position that is largely unacceptable in the Democratic Party today.

The pressure is to articulate abortion as a human right, to deny judicial appointments to anyone who is pro-life, to deny any conscience provisions, and to aggressively promote abortion as a public good.

## The weaponisation of the Eucharist for any cause is deeply problematic

It has been a situation long in the making, as when Governor Bob Casey of Pennsylvania was denied the right to speak at the Democratic Convention in 1992.

The Democratic Party has been quicker and more systemic than the Republicans in enforcing conformity on the abortion issue (enforced by Emily's List and Planned Parenthood).

This reality goes some way in explaining why some US bishops find it challenging when a practicing Catholic like Biden rises to the highest office, and yet he has moved with his party from a somewhat ambivalent position to a fully pro-abortion position.

For example, he changed his position on the Hyde Amendment during the election campaign, and as recently as 2015, he told *America* magazine that as a matter of faith, he agreed that 'abortion is always wrong,' while now speaking of it as a human right.

The move in his language reflects closely the growing militancy in the Democratic Party in regards to abortion.

It comes at a time too, where the Supreme Court may reverse in part 'Roe v Wade', and Biden is pledged to fight this with the full force of his administration.

Given that I accept that abortion is 'the preeminent issue', the most important human rights issue of our time, why would I oppose refusing Biden Holy Communion?

Partly, because it would only exacerbate the divisions in the American church, without advancing the pro-life cause. It makes the Church subservient to ideological divides in the US. Bishop McElroy of San Diego argued that:

'Once we legitimate public policy-based **Eucharistic** exclusion as a regular part of our teaching office — and that is the road to which we are headed — we will invite all of the political animosities that so tragically divide our nation into the very heart of the Eucharistic celebration ... that sacrament which seeks to make us one will become, for millions of Catholics, a sign of division.'

It would be terrible if the Eucharist was to be itself a source of division, whatever the intent or justification of the bishops. It will expose the deep divisions in American Catholicism and

thrust the bishops, in the words of Cardinal Tobin, 'into the very heart of the toxic partisan strife'.

More deeply, I resonate with Pope Francis' words that 'The Eucharist is not the reward of saints, but the bread of sinners.'

We are at a point where inclusion, healing and listening are necessary for our wounded church. We are all unworthy, and it would be a rare politician indeed, who could say that their policies accord fully with Catholic teaching.

Moreover, many American bishops, themselves, have failed in terms of their response to the child abuse tragedy in church institutions. A test of worthiness cannot only be applied to a few.

It seems to me that the Eucharist is an enactment of unity, and the weaponisation of the Eucharist for any cause is deeply problematic.

The language of 'left and right' is too entrenched among us Catholics for denial of Communion to be contemplated. While there is a prophetic aspect to the Gospel, I am very hesitant about using the Eucharist as the forum for this.

Fr Pedro Arrupe's challenge that every Eucharist is incomplete while someone is hungry in our world, are words that I refer to often as a challenge and inspiration to all of us to work for justice, but I would not use that same Eucharist to advocate for specific political positions.

It is important that Catholics seek to understand both sides of the issue because the Eucharist and Communion are the very expression of our unity as the Corpus Christi.

The accusation is also made that many bishops are obsessed with the single issue of abortion, yet the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, in its publication we call Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, addresses a wide range of concerns, including euthanasia, the death penalty, immigration, racism, poverty, care for the environment, criminal justice reform, economic development, and international peace.

The bishops as a whole have been more consistent than most in arguing against both abortion and the death penalty.

The debate over the American bishops' document on the Eucharist confirms my fears about the unhealthy polarisation in American life that has increasingly seeped into Church life.

I think that denying anyone Holy Communion is nearly always a step too far, and that in the American context it is deeply damaging of the Body of Christ.

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