

MR. BIDEN AND THE MATTER OF SCANDAL

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12 . 4 . 20



Readers may recall that during the 2004 presidential campaign, Sen. John Kerry led the Democratic ticket. As a Catholic, Kerry held certain policy views that conflicted with the moral beliefs of his Church. This led to internal tensions among U.S. bishops about how to handle the matter of Holy Communion for Catholic public officials

who publicly and persistently diverge from Catholic teaching on issues like abortion. At the time, Washington's then-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, along with Pittsburgh's Bishop Donald Wuerl, had very different views from my own regarding how to proceed.

I believed then, and believe now, that publicly denying Communion to public officials is not always wise or the best pastoral course. Doing so in a loud and forceful manner may cause more harm than good by inviting the official to bask in the media glow of victimhood. What I opposed in 2004, however, was any seeming indifference to the issue, any hint in a national bishops' statement or policy that would give bishops permission to turn their heads away from the gravity of a very serious issue. At the time, fortunately, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith resolved any confusion about correct practice in these matters with its July 2004 memorandum to then-Cardinal McCarrick, [Worthiness to Receive Holy Communion: General Principles](#). It includes the following passage:

5. 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.

6. 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). This decision, properly speaking, is not a sanction or a penalty. Nor is the minister of Holy Communion passing judgment on the person’s subjective guilt, but rather is reacting to the person’s public unworthiness to receive Holy Communion due to an objective situation of sin.

To my knowledge, that statement remains in effect. And it reflects longstanding Catholic sacramental discipline based on the Word of God.

The implications for the present moment are clear. Public figures who identify as “Catholic” give scandal to the faithful when receiving Communion by creating the impression that the moral laws of the Church are optional. And bishops give similar scandal by not speaking up publicly about the issue and danger of sacrilege. Thus it’s also worth revisiting the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on the evil—and the grave damage—of scandal:

2284. Scandal is an attitude or behavior which leads another to do evil. The person who gives scandal becomes his neighbor's tempter. He damages virtue and integrity; he may even draw his brother into spiritual death. Scandal is a grave offense if by deed or omission another is deliberately led into a grave offense.

2286. Scandal can be provoked by laws or institutions, by fashion or opinion. Therefore, they are guilty of scandal who establish laws or social structures leading to the decline

of morals and the corruption of religious practice, or to “social conditions that, intentionally or not, make Christian conduct and obedience to the Commandments difficult and practically impossible.” This is also true of business leaders who make rules encouraging fraud, teachers who provoke their children to anger, or manipulators of public opinion who turn it away from moral values.

Those bishops who publicly indicate in advance that they will undertake their own dialogue with President-elect Joseph Biden and allow him Communion effectively undermine the work of the task force established at the November bishops’ conference meeting to deal *precisely* with this and related issues. This gives scandal to their brother bishops and priests, and to the many Catholics who struggle to stay faithful to Church teaching. It does damage to the bishops’ conference, to the meaning of collegiality, and to the fruitfulness of the conference’s advocacy work with the incoming administration.

It seems that several critical principles are at stake here:

- Each local bishop is responsible before God for the care of souls and the integrity of the sacraments within the Church—within the whole Church, but especially within his local diocese
- **Each local bishop also has an obligation to conform the discipline in his diocese to Catholic teaching and to make that teaching clear to the people within his diocese. This**

includes the teaching on the importance of receiving Communion worthily.

- While each local bishop has some freedom to determine how best to apply the discipline of the sacraments in his diocese, guided by prudence, **no bishop can presume to ignore basic moral and sacramental principles.**

When bishops publicly announce their willingness to give Communion to Mr. Biden, without clearly teaching the gravity of his facilitating the evil of abortion (and his approval of same-sex relationships), they do a serious disservice to their brother bishops and their people. The reason is obvious. By his actions during the course of his public life, Mr. Biden has demonstrated that he is not in full communion with the Catholic Church. To his credit, he has championed many causes and issues that do serve the common good. However, many of his actions and words have also supported or smoothed the way for grave moral evils in our public life that have resulted in the destruction of millions of innocent lives. Mr. Biden has said that he will continue to advance those same policies as president, and thus should not receive Holy Communion. His stated intention requires a strong and consistent response from Church leaders and faithful.

This is not a “political” matter, and those who would describe it as such are either ignorant or willfully confusing the issue. This is a matter of bishops’ unique responsibility before the Lord for

the integrity of the sacraments. Moreover, there is also the pressing matter of pastoral concern for a man's salvation. At minimum, every bishop has the duty of privately discussing these vital moral issues and the destructive effect of receiving Communion unworthily with public figures who act contrary to Church teaching. Reception of Communion is not a right but a gift and privilege; and on the subject of "rights," the believing community has a *priority* right to the integrity of its belief and practice.

In the year ahead, a great many people will be watching our nation's Catholic leadership. They will be led, for good or for ill, by the witness of America's bishops.

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