

A Response to Bishop McElroy on Reception of Communion

COMMENTARY: While there is some room for interpretation, it is important that the actual teaching of the Church and the current discipline be accurately laid out.



A priest carries the monstrance containing the Eucharist during a candle-lit procession. (photo: Unsplash)

Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego recently authored an article in *America* magazine regarding the denial of Holy Communion to certain Catholics in political life. This has been one of a series of articles giving various perspectives on the matter.

The primary thesis of Bishop McElroy's essay is to reject the adoption of a "national policy of excluding pro-choice political leaders from the Eucharist." According to him, the denial of Holy Communion to pro-abortion politicians would amount to "weaponizing the Eucharist." He argues that support for this policy is the result of a new and distinctly American theology of "unworthiness" regarding the Eucharist. He concludes noting that a proper attitude of mercy must govern, one that is incompatible with a general policy of the denial of Holy Communion in cases of manifest grave sin.

While there is some room for interpretation of the issues in question, **Bishop McElroy's article fails to lay out accurately the actual teaching of the Church and the current discipline on reception of Holy Communion.** For the reasons I discuss below, his approach rests on a variety of misinterpretations and misunderstandings. The goal of this essay is to examine ways Bishop McElroy's approach falls short and to provide a better common framework for dialogue in applying Church teaching to this very difficult issue.

The most general issue with Bishop McElroy's argument is that **there is no such proposed policy to exclude Catholic pro-abortion politicians from reception of the Eucharist, nor could there be.** The

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is not a Catholic Senate for America. Except in very limited cases, the body has no authority to issue binding policy on bishops or dioceses.

Setting forth a common understanding of Church teaching would be helpful, but such a document would only be as binding as the Church teaching and law referenced in it. Cardinal Luis Ladaria, prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, recently reiterated in a letter to the USCCB president, Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles, that any policy a bishops' conference wishes to be binding on all the nations' bishops must be approved by the Holy See.

It is important to note, however, **that the U.S. bishops' conference has only been considering the drafting of a "teaching document" on "worthy reception," not a binding national policy. Their more limited scope is likely because there is no need for any national policy. The policy already exists as universal law in the Catholic Church.**

As I have previously written, **the prohibition on giving Communion to those who obstinately persist in manifest grave sin has been a part of Church discipline for centuries. All ministers of the Eucharist have a moral obligation to follow this discipline, and no bishop has the power to prevent it.** Applying this ancient discipline to pro-abortion politicians is not new. What is relatively new, at least since the middle of the last century, is **the increasing and scandalous tendency of politicians**

who claim to be “devout Catholics” and yet, by their words and decisions in government, both formally and materially cooperate in the grave sin of abortion.

Holy Communion with the Church

Bishop McElroy criticizes what he calls a “newly emerging” “theology of unworthiness.” He asserts that this approach results from a view that holds that “Any Catholic who continually rejects a significant teaching of the church is automatically unworthy to receive the Eucharist.”

Yet, the teaching of the Church, taught as *de fide* since at least the Council of Trent (1545-1563), is precisely that **Catholics who, with full knowledge and consent, reject or persistently doubt a revealed truth of faith or morals commit a grave sin. The name for that sin is “heresy.” Not only should they not receive Communion, but heretics can incur an automatic penalty of excommunication.**

Every Catholic is obligated to maintain communion with the Church, which includes communion with what the Church teaches as revealed truth. **To reject an essential revealed truth of the Church is to separate oneself from that communion. For such a person to receive Communion would then become a countersign of the unity implied by Holy Communion, and therefore contradictory to the sacrament itself.** Of course, that may not mean that a minister of Communion must *deny* them Communion in every case. However, a notorious heretic gives scandal to

the faithful, leading others into the same error, and for that reason must be denied.

The reason to deny Communion to pro-abortion politicians is not rooted simply in their rejection of a teaching of the Church, as gravely sinful as that may be. It is a result of specific actions by the politicians that amount to cooperation in moral evil. As then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger [wrote to the U.S. bishops in 2004](#), this happens 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).”**

When an elected politician, for example, uses the authority of his office to allow government funds to support abortions both at home and overseas, to permit experimentation on the body parts of aborted children, to require certain government grantees to agree to provide abortion referrals, this is more than just rejecting a significant teaching of the Church. **This is manifest and persistence cooperation, both formal and material, in perpetuating the evil of abortion. It is precisely this sort of scandalous activity that the discipline is meant to counter.**

Bishop McElroy argues that this discipline is too expansive. Yet he also argues that it is not expansive enough. That is, he says that the discipline is selectively applied only to pro-abortion and pro-euthanasia politicians. **This is a favorite logical fallacy in modern times, especially on issues of morality.**

The argument is essentially that unless a rule can be perfectly applied in every case, it should never be applied in any case.

The application of moral and legal rules do not have the precision of mathematical proofs, which is why this argument is so fallacious. While those with authority should desire an equitable application of the law, the failure to do so can never in itself be a reason to reject a law in its entirety.

The bishop's argument posits that those who follow the Church's discipline downplay some sins in favor of others. The example provided by Bishop McElroy is the sin of racism and **he seemingly paints those who disagree with him as sympathetic to racism because of their apparent refusal to apply the same discipline to those guilty of racism.**

The obvious counter to Bishop McElroy is that ministers of Communion *should* deny the Eucharist to Catholic politicians who publicly and obstinately persist in the grave sin of racism. I certainly hope that if there are politicians in the Diocese of San Diego who advocate the lawful killing of innocent persons based on their race that the bishop of San Diego would deny them Holy Communion.

However, there is also a reason why the denial of Holy Communion to politicians has focused largely on those who support pro-abortion and pro-euthanasia policies. The reason is that that Holy See has continually highlighted these as pre-eminent issues (even if not using the exact word)

precisely because of the sacred goodness of life itself and therefore singular evils in its unjust destruction.

Both Cardinal Ratzinger's 2004 letter and his [2002 Doctrinal Note on the Participation of Catholics in Political Life](#) focus on these two aspects, describing them as "fundamental and inalienable ethical demands." The gospel requires us as Christians to read the signs of the times in light of the gospel. **Since the Supreme Court's disastrous 1973 *Roe v. Wade* opinion, abortion is the moral issue of our time, as civil rights and slavery have been pre-eminent at other times.**

In arguing against this preeminence, Bishop McElroy pointed to Cardinal Ratzinger's assertion in that doctrinal note, "The Christian faith is an integral unity, and thus it is incoherent to isolate some particular element to the detriment of the whole of Catholic doctrine." However, Cardinal Ratzinger was not referring in that paragraph to the discipline of admission to the Eucharist. Rather, he was **reminding the Catholic politician that he must consider and weight the fullness of Catholic teaching, even if not every issue involves the same fundamental moral principles as does the impermissible taking of innocent human life.** Nonetheless, as the recent letter from Cardinal Ladaria rightly points out, abortion and euthanasia are not the "only grave matters of Catholic moral and social teaching."

The 2002 doctrinal note also explicitly mentioned the Church's teaching on the nature of

marriage as a life-long covenant between a man and a woman ordered to the bearing and raising of children, true freedom for parents in educating their children, and freedom from modern slavery like prostitution and drug abuse. Seeing this issue of abortion as preeminent does not mean these other moral evils are ignored, but recognizes the special vigilance and witness necessary to overcome the monumental moral evil of abortion.

This highlights another concern that Bishop McElroy raises. He is afraid that if bishops obey the current discipline and deny Communion to pro-abortion politicians that “fully half the Catholics in the United States will see this action as partisan in nature.” But the bishop’s argument is a two-edged sword, and the other edge is sharper. The current discipline is that Communion *must* be denied to such politicians. Thus, **fully half of Catholics in the United States will see the bishops’ failure to follow the existing discipline as partisan in nature. This is especially true given the extraordinary lengths some bishops and Catholic media outlets have gone to justify voting for pro-abortion candidates.**

The Divine Physician

Bishop McElroy concludes his case with a question, “Is the central identity of the invitation of Christ to the Eucharist a sign of personal worthiness or the graced call of the God of mercy?” **This question poses a false**

dichotomy that is at odds with the perennial teaching of the Church.

In making his argument, Bishop McElroy quotes Pope Francis as his authority that the Eucharist is “not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.” **Pope Francis’ statement is in perfect accord with the Church’s long discipline, Bishop McElroy’s interpretation is not.**

The Church has consistently used the image of Christ as the Divine Physician in explaining the “disease” of sin. In man’s fallen state, with his tendency to sin, the Eucharist is meant as a healing medicine.

The Catholic who falls into venial sin may find forgiveness in a devout reception of Communion, with true repentance for this sin committed. But the Church has also consistently held that the right medicine must be applied to the applicable disease.

Mortal sin causes not mere “sickness” in the soul but, as its name implies, it leads to the “death” of the spiritual life. The proper remedy for this spiritual death is the new life offered in penance and sacramental absolution.

For one in mortal sin, Communion is not merely ineffectual, it is an act of presumption by which he “eats and drinks judgment to himself” (1 Corinthians 11:29). For one who obstinately persists in manifest grave sin, **the denial of Communion then serves as an act of mercy not only to him, but to all those who might be led by him to fall into the same grave sin.**

It is common in modern discourse today to not only argue that another's argument is wrong, but to insist that the person must therefore be evil. When the great theologian St. Thomas Aquinas considered the arguments of others, he always put them in their best light. I firmly believe that Bishop McElroy's position is motivated by his love for the Eucharist and for others to experience the joy he does in communion with the Lord. **Too often those who would carry out the Church's ancient tradition on the denial of communion are judged to being motivated by a lack of mercy and a mere desire to politicize the Eucharist, desiring to "pummel" politicians into submission.**

If we would truly be a Church of dialogue and synodality, I **would urge Bishop McElroy and those who argue like him to consider the possibility that ministers who would follow the Church's teaching on the denial of Communion are, like they, motivated by a true love for the Eucharist, great mercy for the sinner, and a real desire for conversion.**

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