

# A RESPONSE TO THE “STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES”

*by Salvatore J. Cordileone*

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The history of Catholic immigrants to the United States and their descendants is exemplary of the American dream, and intertwined with the Democratic party. I myself am a typical example of this Catholic Democratic legacy. My grandparents were immigrants, arriving here dirt-poor from Sicily. My father grew up in his father's trade and was a commercial fisherman; my maternal grandfather was a cement mason. They were classic working-class people. Both of my parents were registered Democrats—New Deal Democrats—their whole lives. What

the Democratic party, with its vital support for labor unions, brought to our country at the time helped my family survive and thrive, and made possible even greater opportunities for my siblings, my cousins, and myself.

It was a bit disconcerting, then, when on June 18, sixty Democratic members of Congress, all Catholics, issued a significant “Statement of Principles” in response to a decision by U.S. Catholic bishops to develop a teaching document on the nature of the Eucharist and its proper reception. In their statement, the members of Congress argue that “the Sacrament of Holy Communion is central to the life of practicing Catholics, and the weaponization of the Eucharist to Democratic lawmakers for their support of a woman’s safe and legal access to abortion is contradictory.” They go on to “solemnly urge” the bishops “to not move forward and deny [lawmakers] this most holy of all sacraments” over one issue.

The statement raises many troubling questions. While I speak only for myself in this column, the public nature of the statement invites a public response and provides an excellent opportunity for candid dialogue. In that spirit, allow me to begin the dialogue with comments on some specific passages from the statement.

Item one:

*As Catholic Democrats in Congress, we are proud to be part of the living Catholic tradition—a tradition that unfailingly promotes the common good, expresses a consistent moral framework for life, and highlights the need to provide a collective safety net to those individuals in society who are the most vulnerable.*

A “consistent moral framework for life” would logically seem to exclude laws that enable the killing of the

most vulnerable and innocent in society: the unborn. Surely the members of Congress know, as committed Catholics, that the early Church described abortion as a form of homicide, and that the Christian community condemned abortion as early as the first century in the *Didache*. Nor can we ignore the pain caused to many women, and others in their networks of relationships, by the emotional scars of abortion.

Item two:

*. . . we work every day to advance respect for life and the dignity of every human being.*

Except, that is, those human beings who are still in the womb, or even partially born.

Item three:

*We are committed to making real the basic principles that are at the heart of Catholic social teaching: helping the poor, disadvantaged, and the oppressed, protecting the least among us and ensuring that all Americans of every faith are given meaningful opportunities to share in the blessings of this great country.*

One of the “basic principles” of Catholic belief is rather blunt and simple: Don’t intentionally kill, or collude in enabling others to kill, innocent human life. Catholic principles build systematically on one another. The protection of innocent, defenseless life is first and foundational.

Item four:

*That commitment is fulfilled in different ways by legislators but includes: reducing the rising rates of poverty,*

*particularly child poverty; increasing access to education for all; pressing for access to universal health care; recognizing the dignity of all humans; and repairing long-standing racial and gender inequities in our society.*

These are admirable words, but if they are also sincere convictions, then why would Catholic members of Congress support laws that have the effect of destroying the natural family through marriage redefinition, no-fault divorce, and other similar policies? More than fifty years of social science data show the devastating effect that family fragmentation has on children, especially in situations of fatherlessness. Not only is the broken family a leading cause of poverty, but it also results in a host of other social ills, such as youth violence, incarceration, and substance abuse.

Item five:

*We envision a world in which every child belongs to a loving family and agree with the Catholic Church about the value of human life.*

What does a “loving family” mean when lawmakers redefine “family” to be whatever consenting adults want it to be, reimagining the natural family out of existence? Again, all reliable studies show that children do best with a (male) father and (female) mother in a stable, low-conflict, life-long commitment of marriage. Instead of advocating for policies that promote this proven model, why would any self-described “Catholic” lawmaker advance policies that dismantle it, even punishing adoption agencies that will only place children for adoption in homes with these kinds of parents? Moreover, their agreement “with the

Catholic Church about the value of human life” excludes the value of human life in the womb.

Item six:

*Each of us is committed to reducing the number of unintended pregnancies and creating an environment with policies that encourage pregnancies to be carried to term and provide resources to raise healthy and secure children. We believe this includes promoting alternatives to abortion, such as adoption, improving access to children's healthcare and child care, and creating a child benefit through the expanded and improved Child Tax Credit.*

It's worth asking what Catholic lawmakers have actually done to promote adoption. Or to create “an environment with policies that encourage pregnancies to be carried to term.” Such an environment would be a robust marriage culture, and that is exactly what too many Catholic legislators have helped to destroy. It's also worth asking how many and which of the statement's signers have positive ratings from NARAL and Planned Parenthood. Abortion is not just a controversial social issue, or a debate about “choice” vs. life in the womb; in the United States, abortion is a lucrative industry with a vigorous lobby. Adoption and other policies that help women bring their children to term reduce sales for Planned Parenthood. Perhaps that's why we find so little evidence for them.

Item seven:

*In all these issues, we seek the Church's guidance and assistance but believe also in the primacy of conscience.*

It's hard to see this passage as anything less than evasion. Conscience is not deciding what's right or wrong for oneself. We don't invent truth; we search it out with "the Church's guidance," and then submit ourselves to it. Conscience is the faculty to know and do what's right in concrete situations, whether we find it politically convenient or not.

Item eight:

*In recognizing the Church's role in providing moral leadership, we acknowledge and accept the tension that comes with being in disagreement with the Church in some areas.*

Disagreement in some areas? As in, the legitimacy of enabling and tolerating the killing of 66,000,000 unborn children in a fifty-year period? The abortion issue involves not just a tactical disagreement on a policy matter. This is a heinous evil. It's comparable to "disagreeing" on the evil of lynching or human trafficking.

Item nine:

*We also urge the Church to heed the words of Our Holy Father Pope Francis, who wrote in his Apostolic Exhortation, "The Joy of the Gospel," that "the Eucharist although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak."*

I would offer a similar reminder from the Second Vatican Council: "Life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception: *abortion and infanticide are abominable crimes*" (*Gaudium et spes* 51; emphasis added). Nowhere does Francis suggest

otherwise, nor could he; his predecessor Pius XI, to cite just one of many examples, called abortion “the direct murder of the innocent.” Nor does Francis anywhere endorse the specific kind of “decisions in conscience” suggested by the congresspersons’ statement. How any lawmaker claiming to be Catholic might consistently tolerate policies enabling not merely an injustice, but an ongoing form of intentional homicide, is unclear to me.

Item ten:

*As legislators, we too are charged with being facilitators of the Constitution which guarantees religious freedom for all Americans.*

True and admirable words, but then why would any Catholic lawmaker fail to protect the Little Sisters of the Poor, Catholic Charities adoption agencies, or Catholic schools seeking to ensure the integrity of their mission by not retaining faculty who are working against or publicly living as a counter-witness to it?

Item eleven:

*We believe the separation of church and state allows for our faith to inform our public duties and best serve our constituents.*

Agreed. The trouble is that so many of the statement’s legislators seem to conform and restrict their faith to the platform of the Democratic party.

Item twelve:

*The Sacrament of Holy Communion is central to the life of practicing Catholics, and the weaponization of the*

*Eucharist to Democratic lawmakers for their support of a woman's safe and legal access to abortion is contradictory.*

It is rather the statement's signers who "weaponize" the Eucharist precisely by issuing their public letter. And this suggests a regrettable level of calculated cynicism. The bishops' motivation is pastoral: the salvation of souls and reparation of scandal. There is nothing punitive in stating and restating the truth of Catholic belief, and its implications for an authentically Catholic life.

Item thirteen:

*No elected officials have been threatened with being denied the Eucharist as they support and have supported policies contrary to the Church teachings, including supporting the death penalty, separating migrant children from their parents, denying asylum to those seeking safety in the United States, limiting assistance for the hungry and food insecure, and denying rights and dignity to immigrants.*

Very true. These are serious, pressing matters that demand our attention and action. But they are different in kind, not simply in degree, from issues like genocide, infanticide, deliberate violence against civilian populations in war, euthanasia, and abortion. None of the issues listed by the lawmakers, important as they are, involves the sustained, intentional killing of innocent human life.

Item fourteen:

*To pursue a blanket denial of the Holy Eucharist to certain elected officials would indeed grieve the Holy Spirit and deny the evolution of that individual, a Christian person who is never perfect, but living in the struggle to get there.*



No one is suggesting a “blanket denial” of Communion to dissenting lawmakers, and the statement’s signers surely know it. This is not what the bishops’ proposed document is for; it would rather serve as a resource to a bishop in guiding his deliberations in this matter. It has been stated quite clearly and repeatedly that this document will not mention any particular individuals. Note too that I would warmly welcome any evidence of any of the statement’s signers struggling to come to understand the Church’s vision of what being pro-life really means, and accepting that.

Item fifteen:

*We believe the Church as a community is called to be in the vanguard of creating a more just America and world.*

Amen—and the right to life is the foundational human right. The most vulnerable and defenseless must be protected; that’s the first step to a just society. Without it, everything else is just a band-aid on fatal wounds.

We need faithful Catholics in both political parties to fight for a civilization of truth and love.

The Democratic party of my youth was the champion of “the little guy”—the factory hand, the farmer, the blue-collar worker. We bishops are charged with teaching the fullness of the faith both to the powerful and to the powerless. In that capacity, I ask each representative who signed this letter to commit to protecting the “littlest guys and gals” of all. Abortion is the axe laid to the roots of the tree of human life. Claims to respect the equal dignity of every human being sound hollow when one systematically enables or tolerates denying the right to life of the most vulnerable.

Rejecting abortion is a tall order for a Catholic Democrat in the current environment, I know. But this week especially, the week when we remember St. Thomas More, is a good time to look deep in the soul and ask: Will I be God's servant first?

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