

Pastoral Incoherence

By Fr. Timothy V. Vaverek JULY 3, 2021

The Church in America is in the midst of a controversy over so-called “Eucharistic coherence.” The debate focuses on the duties of the faithful (especially politicians) in receiving Holy Communion and of the bishops in overseeing that reception. While the issue is vital, it’s symptomatic of a graver, **half-century-old crisis that, like many family dysfunctions, remains deliberately unaddressed: pastoral incoherence.** Unless that root problem is acknowledged, Eucharistic coherence is destined to remain little more than a pious aspiration.

The pastoral life of the Church is succinctly described in Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the Apostles and to the communal life (*communio*), to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.” The fraternal sharing in those elements of the Gospel constitutes the “holy communion” that is the Church without which there can be no “Holy Communion” at Mass.

The Church Fathers often reflected on the intricate nature of the *communio sanctorum*. In Latin, *sanctorum* means either “of the holy ones” or “of the holy things.” So, the communion of the “holy things” (shared belief, life, sacraments, and worship) is both the foundation and expression of the communion of the “holy ones.” Reception of the Body of Christ in Holy Communion is a sign and means of sharing his life and teaching as members of his Body and Bride, the Church, which is the Communion of Saints.

The problem facing us regarding Eucharistic Coherence is that the faithful have **for more than fifty years received openly contradictory presentations of “the teachings of the apostles” without pastoral correction from the bishops.** This is true of preaching, spiritual guidance, catechesis, Catholic education, marital preparation, and seminary formation.

The result is chaos. **The seminarians trained by dissident theologians beginning in the 1960s are now bishops and senior priests.** During the intervening decades, they and their progeny often ran the seminaries, staffed diocesan pastoral centers, and held tenured positions at Catholic universities. **Under their “guidance,” we are now into the third or fourth generation of Catholics who have little awareness of authentic Christian faith and morals.**

Seminarians and priests opposed to the dissent learned early on to accommodate themselves to the situation and to avoid “rocking the boat.” During the years of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, there was a “Cold War” or “Frozen Conflict” in which contradictory versions of the Gospel existed side-by-side within the Church.

The ability to “manage” that dichotomy (i.e., “to keep the peace”) was generally considered crucial in candidates for senior leadership in the Church. This approach was already well-entrenched in the offices of the Vatican where *la bella figura* (keeping up appearances) has reigned longer than any pope. As with the abuse crisis, a **primary concern has been to avoid open controversy.**

Along the way, the **dissent succeeded in promoting a false, individualistic theory of conscience, which made morality and – by extension – the reception of Holy Communion matters of subjective opinion** and discernment rather than of communal formation and discipline in the life of Christ. Consequently, episcopal oversight of Christian life has effectively vanished.



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With Catholic clergy declaring immoral activities to be moral or, at least, to be matters of subjective conscience, it is no surprise that the faithful feel free to act contrary to human dignity and the Gospel. Dissident theologians have continued to promote false teachings. Many Catholic hospitals permit contraception or sterilization. Fr. Robert Drinan, S.J., a Congressman in the 1970s, remained a priest even though he supported federal funding of abortion.

Why, then, *should* septua- and octogenarians today, like President Biden and Speaker of the House Pelosi, think there is an incompatibility between their voting record and the reception of Holy Communion? Why *should* any Catholic believe that Eucharistic coherence requires conformity to the life of Christ in accordance with the Gospel authentically proclaimed by the Church?

In this context, **episcopal statements about the Eucharist won't change many hearts and minds. Malformed Catholics, including clergy, will continue to act on the false notion of**

conscience they were taught. This outcome is all the more likely given that the bishops will studiously avoid correcting the false notion of conscience because, otherwise, they would have to correct fellow bishops who hold the dissenting view.

It's unrealistic to expect priests and laypeople to change beliefs or practices when bishops aren't called to change. Bishops hoping to proclaim the Gospel authentically and effectively in their own dioceses or nations will **have to address openly the scandal their brothers are causing – as Paul did regarding Peter.**

The refusal to name the root problem lies at the heart of the crisis. We lack Pastoral Coherence because **our pastors do not have a common, coherent understanding of the Gospel. It's impossible for them to evaluate situations together and arrive at a joint approach because they are heading in contradictory directions.** Thus, they settle for documents carefully written to avoid exposing the truth of their sometimes fundamental disagreements on matters of faith and morals.

This fits a pattern in which statements from the hierarchy at all levels increasingly adopt a “live and let live” approach that either carefully limits their claims to their own territory or are open to multiple, indeed, incompatible interpretations. **Cloaking the underlying incoherence by manipulatively appealing in the documents to “conscience” or “diversity” is like a family invoking “compassion” or “love” to hide “daddy’s little problem” of abuse.**

***Pastoral Incoherence* is an existential threat, not to the Catholic Church, which will survive somehow and somewhere until Jesus returns, but to every particular Catholic, parish, and diocese in the world. As we have repeatedly seen, it won't spare even the hallowed halls of the Vatican (although the Successors of Peter, worthy and unworthy, continue).**

If the Church in America is to enjoy Eucharistic Coherence and to flourish, we must return, under the authentic guidance of the bishops, to “the teachings of the Apostles and the common life.” The reason is simple: without the Apostolic Gospel, we have no communion in the life of Christ and his Church.

***Image:** *The Cardinal's Nap* by Léo Herrmann, c. 1900 [private collection]

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