

Enough with the disgraceful, politicized commentary on Communion

The Catholic Faith, in the strange and decidedly secular world of politics and journalism, consists of external gestures that have only tenuous connections to vaguely held sentiments.

July 15, 2021 Carl E. Olson

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A priest prepares to distribute Communion during Mass in Washington. (CNS photo/Bob Roller)

“In journalism,” wrote Venerable Fulton Sheen in 1955’s *Thinking Life Through*, “the modern man wants controversy, not truth.” I could say that examples abound, but that would assume a broad definition—to the point of non-definition—of “journalism”.

Still, let's consider a recent article in *Slate*, a popular online outlet which allegedly “combines humor and insight in thoughtful analyses of current events and political news.” The piece in question is about a controversial vote, ideological conflict, community discord, conservatives v. liberals, “partisan politics”, authority, “factions”, committees, and even “monarchy”. The young author makes no attempt to hide her rooting interests: she is fully on the side of the long-suffering and merciful liberal leader over against the ideologically-rigid “renegades” who oppose him.

Yes, it's an article—**“Why the Pope Won't Rein In the Renegade American Bishops”** (June 22, 2021)—about Pope Francis, the U.S. bishops, and the recent USCCB Spring Assembly: “The vote was part of a campaign by conservative bishops to deny Catholic politicians who support abortion access—most notably, President Joe Biden—the Eucharist, one of the most central and sacred elements of the Catholic faith.”

Perhaps Molly Olmstead, the author, is interested in truth. I cannot judge her heart, only her article. And it is rather dreadful. The style is wildly breathless and the approach is mostly witless. Now, I do not expect, in 2021, to read a secular news account of this topic that masterfully addresses or references matters of theology, doctrine, soteriology, sin, confession, grace, and canon law. But shouldn't there be a hint that those do in fact exist? And they really do matter? It's like reading an account of Lincoln-Douglas debates that never mentions slavery, racism, popular sovereignty, territorial rights, or “Dred Scott”.

I admit that my choice of Ms. Olmstead's article has the appearance of cherry-picking. Alas, her piece is hardly unique, just as it is hardly readable. *The Washington Post*, to choose another outlet, shouts, **“Biden, deeply Catholic president, finds himself at odds with many U.S. bishops”**, as if Mr. Biden, in the course of innocently turning political water into jars overflowing with social justice, was suddenly ambushed by a gang of neo-Pelagian prelates outside **an ice cream shop** in the Midwest.

“Biden is arguably the most observant president in decades, and his faith is a core part of his identity. He rarely misses Mass. He crosses himself in public,” reports the *Post*, with the sort of objectivity one now expects from a mainstream news outlet, “He quotes scripture, he cites hymns and he clutches rosary beads ahead of key decisions.” However, we also read, he

“rarely discusses his Catholicism”. But why would he need to discuss it when MSM scribes mention it constantly and a Catholic professor (quoted often by the *Post*) pens a hagiographical pamphlet titled *Joe Biden and Catholicism in the United States*? (Full disclosure: I have a deep and abiding aversion to any and all books about any politician and his “deep” and “devout” faith, no matter how “complex”.)

More to the point, the *Post* reports: “Biden said he personally accepts the church’s position on abortion, ‘but I refuse to impose it on equally devout Christians and Muslims and Jews.’” Again, theology, doctrine, soteriology, sin, confession, grace, and canon law make no appearance. Catholicism, it seems, is about going to Mass and clutching a Rosary while talking about how one’s faith is “private”. **The Catholic Faith, in this strange and decidedly secular world, consists of external gestures that have only some tenuous connections to vaguely held (or clutched) sentiments.**

Put another way: **Catholicism is essentially a political prop.** It is understood, viewed, and used in purely political terms and for political ends. “We once lived in the age of the Theological Man;” wrote Sheen in 1944, “then came the age of the Economic Man; now we are in the age of Political Man”—and he “lives for the State.”

One of the most powerful tools of the Political Man—and here I am not thinking of Biden as much as I am of almost every politician today—is sentimentality. Sweet, simple, and seemingly innocent, sentiment is the candy cast from the constant political parade. And in this particular narrative, a key form of sentiment is the amorphous appeal to “unity”.

A recent piece in *America* states: **“Baseball’s All-Star Game has a lot to teach American Catholics about Communion and unity”**. First, no, it really doesn’t. Secondly, the appeal to unity throughout is decidedly one-sided and so disparate as to mean nothing at all: “The unity baseball players enjoy during the All-Star Game is based on tradition and a common love, albeit the love of a game. We Catholics also have a common tradition and a love for our faith.” Hmmm. Do we?

Here’s an essential question the author misses or avoids: What if a baseball player **cheats**? What if an **entire team cheated and enjoyed success**

because of it? Further, what if a pitcher insisted that even though he uses steroids and puts gunk on the ball, he should not be punished because he is personally opposed to doing those things, but he is still a good man and a fine pitcher despite it? All analogies limp, of course, especially as they round third base, but the point is obvious: if you are going to appeal to the unity enjoyed by baseball teams, you have to acknowledge the integrity in conduct and consistency in rules required for such unity to be real in any meaningful way. Team A cannot claim points for hitting a single, Team B cannot have ten men on the field and insist they are “observant baseball players” who have been “playing ball since birth”, and Team C cannot hire hit men to kill opposing players and call it “health care”.

Again, not much mention of theology, doctrine, soteriology, sin, confession, grace, and canon law, though the author does correctly (to his credit) observe, “Unity itself [in the early Church] was a central dimension of the faith. It was grounded in the spiritual communion of the sacraments and the Trinity.” This raises plenty of questions, many of them with fairly clear answers. For instance: did the sacramental unity of the early Christians involve moral standards and take into account public actions? (Answer: It most certainly did.) And: did bishops sometimes discipline Catholics who failed to adhere to moral standards? (Answer: Yes, of course they did.)

And then there is **a *Commonweal* piece** by a professor of religious studies (more on it next week) that begins by lamenting the anti-Catholicism of the Catholic bishops:

Now, a rather large swath of the American bishops feel no such pride at the election of our second Catholic president. Instead, they seem intent on making him a negative example to the American Catholic faithful. This initiative is especially striking because President Biden is a practicing Catholic, a palpably good man who speaks readily about how his deep faith has been a source of comfort in facing the tragedies that have beset his life.

Once again we see the appeal to external gestures and the vaguely held sentiments rather than a sober assessment of **public actions and positions** held over long periods of time. While many rightly point to President Biden’s support of abortion (there is a reason that **NARAL**

endorsed him, after all), there is also the fact that he **officiated at a “gay wedding”** and has clearly rejected the Church’s teaching about the nature of true marriage.

But, to the bigger point, the *Commonweal* essay claims the U.S. bishops are falling into the heresy of Donatism, which involves the nature of grace, the veracity of the sacraments, and the nature of the ordained priesthood:

In the judgment of the bishops, Biden’s sin seems to be that, as a Catholic politician, he has not taken a public, political stand against abortion. Biden has stated many times that he considers abortion to be a moral evil. This is his Catholic belief. But, like many Catholics who believe the same, he finds that his personal belief conflicts with the beliefs of other citizens and with the law in a democracy that affirms the First Amendment.

Much could be said, but suffice for now to note that this is meek homage to the triumph of Political Man over Theological Man. Or, simply, of hypocrisy over integrity; of falsehoods over truth. The Donatist spin is clever, but misrepresents the historical issue—the veracity of the sacraments regardless of the holiness of the ordained priest—and the nature of the current situation—refusing to give Holy Communion to a Catholic is a necessary call to repentance and restoration of the communion the would-be communicant has severed *by his own freely chosen public actions*.

Now, let’s get theological for a brief moment. In baptism, we are filled with divine, Trinitarian life: “Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God. . .” (CCC, 1213). The newly baptized believer is made “a new creature, an adopted son of God, who has become a ‘partaker of the divine nature’. . .” (CCC, 1265). In this way we enter the Church and become members of the Body of Christ (CCC, 1267). So, through the sacraments we are made “children of God, partakers of the divine nature” (CCC, 1692) and now “participate in the life of the Risen Lord” (CCC, 1694). The life of grace—God’s divine life—increases or decreases through our growth in virtue, which is rooted in charity and is expressed and demonstrated in acts of sacrifice, goodness, and holiness. This is both pre-political and trans-political; the political and public realms reveal the nature of our Christ-like,

Trinitarian-fueled commitment and love. There is no place for saying, “I really do *believe* X, but because of this or that reason I *have* to do Y or Z.”

Furthermore, the life of the sacraments is not by nature private, but ecclesial, communal, and public. Just as Christ’s incarnational, saving work is demonstrated and revealed to the world through the sacraments, the sacraments “are the signs and instruments by which the Holy Spirit spreads the grace of Christ the head throughout the Church which is his Body. The Church, then, both contains and communicates the invisible grace she signifies.” This is why Vatican II referred, in an analogical sense, to the Church as a “sacrament” (CCC, 774; *Lumen Gentium*, 1). The Church is “the sacrament of the *inner union of men with God*.” (CCC, 775). And the Church shines forth in the lives, actions, and words of the children of God.

Which is why Saint Paul exhorted the Christians in Philippi to “be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life...” (Phil 2:15-16a). And, elsewhere, tells the Christians, “For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness” (1 Thess 5:5), while Saint John states, with startling starkness:

By this it may be seen who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother. ... Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth. (1 Jn 3:10, 18)

The Political Man will have no part of this sort of language; in fact, he must denounce it. It is judgmental, rigid, harsh, hateful, unmerciful. But the Political Man not only peddles false mercy, he claims that he will judge what is good, even while he so often spits in the face of He who is Good.

Finally, Sheen (once more) in his 1943 book *The Divine Verdict* observed that **liberal Christianity—which certainly includes today’s progressive Catholicism—“thinks of God solely as a God of sentimental love—such love as a doting modern mother might**

have for her erring son who could do no wrong, and even when he did it, must needs be forgiven, for he did not mean it.”

We too often hold to a high and lofty view of man without God while ignoring the truly high and lofty calling of the man filled with God’s life. Too much of the furor and discussion about the Eucharist has been *dis-graceful*: absence of any reference to grace, to any real belief in grace or in the saving power of God—and the complete commitment and utter devotion that power should inspire:

The bonds which bind men to the Church in a visible way are profession of faith, the sacraments, and ecclesiastical government and communion. **He is not saved, however, who, though part of the body of the Church, does not persevere in charity.** He remains indeed in the bosom of the Church, but, as it were, only in a “bodily” manner and not “in his heart.” All the Church’s children should remember that their exalted status is to be attributed not to their own merits but to the special grace of Christ. If they fail moreover to respond to that grace in thought, word and deed, not only shall they not be saved but they will be the more severely judged. (*Lumen Gentium*, 14)

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