

# **THE PROPOSED USCCB DOCUMENT ON CATHOLIC POLITICIANS AND THE RECEPTION OF COMMUNION**

**by John R. Connolly**

The document under consideration by the U.S. Bishops Conference (USCCB) Committee on Doctrine will not prohibit Joe Biden and Catholic politicians from receiving communion. The USCCB does not have the authority to make this decision. Pope Francis has given the authority to make decisions on the reception of communion to the individual diocesan bishops. So, as an alternative approach, the USCCB has decided to request that Joe Biden and Catholic politicians voluntarily refuse to present themselves for the reception of communion. If such a document is eventually approved and publicly promulgated it will not change any of the present procedures of the church on the reception of communion. Its objective appears to be to put some public pressure on Joe Biden and Catholic politicians to force them to bend their consciences to the will of the bishops. The decision on whether Joe Biden can receive communion or not will still be a matter of his own conscience unless an individual diocesan bishop formally and publicly declares that he is prohibited from receiving communion in his diocese. It is more likely that the publication of such a document would simply add to the present confusion and lead to more divisions in the Catholic Church in the United States.

However, there are deeper theological issues at stake in this discussion; namely, the status and validity of the U. S. bishops teaching on the “preeminent priority of abortion. The significance of this teaching cannot be underestimated since it is at the very foundation of the U.S. bishops’ campaign to refuse communion to Joe Biden and Catholic politicians. The “expression the preeminent priority of abortion” can be found in many recent documents and statements of the USCCB including their 2020 voting guide document, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United*

*States*. However, the expression, “the preeminent priority of abortion” does not appear in any of the official church documents on abortion. It is not included in the teaching on abortion in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, CC*, 2270 and 2319). The expression is not found in John Paul II’s instruction on human life, *Donum Vitae*, February 22, 1987 or Benedict XVI’s instruction on bioethical questions, *Dignitas Personae*, September 8, 2008. (*Donum Vitae, DV*, I:1 and *Dignitas Personae, DP*, 4). This evidence suggests that the expression, “the preeminent priority of abortion” has not been an essential element of the Catholic Church’s traditional teaching on abortion. As such, the USCCB teaching on the “preeminent priority” of abortion is, at best, only one possible way to interpret the Catholic Church’s teaching on abortion.

In fact, Pope Francis does not accept the U.S. bishops teaching on the “preeminent priority” of abortion but teaches that the Catholic Church’s teaching on abortion includes and integrates all the respect for life teachings of the church. Pope Francis teaches that abortion and all the Catholic Church’s teachings on respect for life are “equally sacred.” In *Evangelii Gaudium* he affirms the Catholic Church’s constant concern for those who are vulnerable, among whom are the unborn who are “the most defenseless and innocent among us.” (*EG*, 213). Pope Francis goes on to point out that the church’s defense of the unborn is “closely linked to the defense of each and every other human right.” (*EG*, 213). The church’s teaching on abortion “involves the conviction that a human being is always sacred and inviolable, in any situation and at every stage of development.” (*EG*, 213). Pope Francis adds that it is precisely because the church’s teaching on abortion involves “the internal consistency of our message about the value of the human person, the Church cannot be expected to change her position on this question.” (*EG*, 214). The church’s teaching on abortion is not subject to reform or change. (*EG*, 214). In

his apostolate exhortation on the call to holiness, *Gaudete Et Exsultate*, Francis reaffirms the connection between abortion and respect for life at all stages of its development.

Our defense of the innocent unborn, for example, needs to be clear, firm and passionate, for at stake is the dignity of human life, which is always sacred and demands love for each person, regardless of his or her stage of development. *Equally sacred* are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection. (*GEE*, 101)

For Pope Francis an authentic Catholic pro-life position means viewing all of the church's teachings on respect for human life as "equally sacred." Anyone who maintains that they can accept the church's teaching on abortion, while rejecting its teachings on racism, the care for immigrants and refugees, respect for the environment, poverty, and health care cannot claim to be supporting the Catholic Church's teaching on the sacredness of all human life.

Even among the U.S. bishops there are questions about the adequacy of USCCB's teaching on the "preeminent priority" of abortion. At the November, 2019, meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops some of the bishops questioned the validity of the expression, "preeminent priority," and its compatibility with the teaching of Pope Francis. At the meeting Bishop Robert W. McElroy of San Diego pointed out that, "It is not Catholic teaching that abortion is the pre-eminent issue that we face as a world." (Thomas Reese, article in the *National Catholic Reporter*, *NCR*, November 14, 2019)." To this Bishop McElroy added that the teaching that abortion is the pre-eminent priority is "discordant with the pope's teaching." He went on to say that it is "a great disservice to our people if we're trying to communicate to them what the Magisterium teaches." (Reese, *NCR* Nov. 14, 2019). A couple of other bishops expressed support for Bishop McElroy's concerns. (Reese, *NCR*, Nov. 14, 2019). In order to give more prominence

to Pope Francis' teaching, Cardinal Blasé Cupich, Archbishop of Chicago, recommended that the whole paragraph from section 101 from Pope Francis' apostolic letter, *Gaudete et Exsultate* be included in the introductory letter of the f the bishops' 2020 voting guide document. This request was denied. (Heidi Schlumpf, article in the *National Catholic Reporter*, November 15, 2019). In the body of the voting guide document the U.S. bishops present their own view on the "preeminent priority" of abortion as the normative Catholic view over Pope Francis' view of "equally sacred."

The monumental nature of this decision cannot be underestimated. It resulted in a division between the U.S. bishops and Pope Francis on the issue of abortion and it presented Catholics in the United States with two inconsistent, if not contradictory, views of the church's teaching on abortion. It also divided Catholic Bishops, priests, religious, and laity in the United States on the church's teaching on abortion. The validity of the U.S. bishops' efforts to deny communion to Joe Biden and Catholic politicians is totally dependent upon their teaching on the "preeminent priority" of abortion. It is their acceptance of this teaching that allows them to apply their exclusion of Catholic politicians from communion on the basis of the issue of abortion alone to the exclusion of the other teachings of the church on respect for life. Also, the teaching on the "preeminent priority" of abortion allows the bishops to identify the church's teaching on abortion with their own public political agenda which has the ultimate objective of making the teachings of the church the laws of the United States government. It seems that "preeminent priority" is less a teaching on abortion and more a statement of a political strategy adopted by the U.S. bishops conference to accomplish their objective of overturning *Roe v. Wade* and making abortion illegal in the United States. Consequently, the USCCB has actually politicized the church's teaching on abortion.

However, the limitations of this approach to the issue of abortion are evident. Catholics are bound in faith to accept the church's teaching on abortion, but they are not bound in faith to accept or agree with the U.S. bishops' political agenda or their public policy endorsements. Kansas City Archbishop Joseph Naumann's claim that Joe Biden is teaching in the name of the church and confusing Catholics on the church's teaching on abortion only has validity if you identify the church's teaching on abortion with the U.S. bishops' political agenda. When Catholic politicians advocate for the rights of the citizens of this country, even those rights of which the church does not approve, they are not teaching church doctrine or acting in the name of the church. Consequently, it cannot be claimed that a Catholic politician who does not follow the political policies advocated by the bishops on abortion, or other issues, is denying the Catholic Church's teaching on abortion.

One solution for Catholic politicians on a personal level is that they can accept the Catholic Church's teaching on abortion as presented by Pope Francis and dissent from the U.S. bishops' teaching on the "preeminent priority" of abortion. If a Catholic accepts Pope Francis teaching that abortion and all the church's teachings on respect for life are "equally sacred" as the authentic teaching of the Catholic Church on abortion, then the U.S. bishops' justification for refusing them communion becomes irrelevant. They can, therefore, continue to receive communion even if the USCCB formally and publicly issues a document asking them not to present themselves for communion. This, of course, would not totally solve the problem

However, it might help if the USCCB would take more responsibility for causing the divisions within the church in the United States on the issues of abortion and the reception of communion. In the interests of full disclosure and the unity of the church the U.S. bishops could explain why they accepted their teaching on the "preeminent priority" of abortion which seems

to be contradictory to Pope Francis' teaching. Why did they reject Pope Francis' teaching on abortion? If they think that the two are somehow compatible, this could be explained. They also have a responsibility to inform Catholics in the United States that they can dissent from the bishops' view on the "preeminent priority" of abortion and accept Pope Francis' view that abortion and all the church's teachings on respect for life are "equally sacred." Or, they could find a way to reconcile their view with the teaching of Pope Francis.

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