

Abortion and Communion

Homily Delivered by Father James Poumade, May 30, 2004

Saint Mary Catholic Church, Alexandria, Virginia

For better or worse, there has been much controversy lately regarding Catholic pro-abortion politicians and their reception of Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist. Even in our parish, emotions run high for some people on this issue.

Perhaps, in the interest of understanding and unity, it would be a good idea to look at whether or not there is a possibility of denying Communion to those who publicly advocate abortion, not as a polemic, but simply as a walk-through of what the Church says and teaches about this in Her documents and in Her moral theology. This is not an attempt to address any specific politician or political party. I will not make recourse to the opinions of individuals, even among the US bishops, but only the express and uncontestable teaching of the Church. Although some may be impatient about this, I ask only for your mature and courteous tolerance in the interest of greater understanding.

The first question that has to be addressed is: how do we balance faith with political obligations when the two clash? There are two valid approaches. St Thomas More, royal chancellor of England and patron of our diocese, chose his faith over his political office when faced with a decision regarding the recognition of unlawful marriage, declaring that he was the king's good servant – but God's first. Pontius Pilate was personally opposed to executing Jesus, and may even have come to believe in Him, but didn't wish to impose his belief on the crowd. He also, however, didn't ask to go to Mass. He knew what his decision meant. Those are two consistent courses of action. In each of them, the officeholder made a decision, and accepted its consequences. It is *inconsistent* to claim that one can reject the faith publicly and still be Catholic. Those who try to do so are the only ones truly guilty of mixing politics and religion. Being a practicing Catholic means following the will of God as revealed to us through Scripture and Tradition and the teaching authority of the Church.

How can the Church say such a thing? There are some basic principles of morality that are based on common sense which apply here.

Some things are always wrong and can never be right, such as slavery, murder, and forcible rape, just to name a few. To make such things legal is in itself wrong. If something is evil, really wrong, it is wrong for everybody. Voting for slavery or the extermination of the Jewish people does

not make them right. By choosing to be a member of the Catholic Church, a person says that they freely abide by the Church's God-given understanding of what is right and wrong. If someone thinks that slavery or racism or abortion are not wrong, they are not being honest in claiming to be Catholic, since part of being Catholic consists precisely in identifying oneself with a particular view of what is right and wrong. As Catholics we believe that God has instilled in each human being, *whether or not they are religious*, an instinctive knowledge of the basics of right and wrong – a thing we call “natural law.” Even atheists know it is wrong to kill and lie, and not simply because society says so. Because of this, there are some things that all men can agree on as being wrong, if we are honest with ourselves. The problem, of course, is that sometimes we do not want to be honest with ourselves. But if we are, then we can apply this principle and see that we cannot try to have it both ways, saying that I believe something is always wrong for everybody – but OK for you. We would not say, for example, that we are personally opposed to domestic violence as evil, but that we don't want to impose that belief on others. If it's evil, it's evil. Someone may not *realize* that it is evil, but then the proper response would be to stop the wrongdoing first and then explain the reason, not simply to shrug and let it happen. This is true no matter what always-wrong thing we pick.

Some things are not always wrong. Capital punishment is not always wrong. There may be only very limited cases where it can be used, but the Catechism allows it to be used. War is not always wrong. Sometimes it is permitted or even encouraged. The Pope has made it clear that he considers the war in Iraq to be a mistake, but he has not formally declared it an unjust war. There is room for debate on that question. But there is no room for debate on abortion. It is always and everywhere wrong, and Church teaching makes it clear that there are no exceptions. That is why the question of denying Communion to Catholic politicians centers on that issue alone.

There are two particularly relevant documents about this issue: The Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life, and Canon Law. The Doctrinal Note reminds us that it is wrong not only to perform an abortion but also to support legislation that enables an abortion. It does state that the legislator has a “clear and grave obligation to oppose such legislation.” The Doctrinal Note also says that teachers of the faith must instruct the faithful that not only is the commission of an abortion an evil action but the support of legislation that permits abortion is in itself wrong. Therefore, it explicitly says that the position “personally I am opposed to

abortion but I believe people should have a choice” is wrong. The Doctrinal Note also says that “For them, as for every Catholic, it is impossible to promote such laws or to vote for them.”

Canon 915 of the Code of Canon Law mandates the denial of Communion to all “manifest, obstinate, persistent sinners,” including but not exclusive to politicians. This not only protects the faithful from scandal, but also protects the Eucharist from sacrilegious reception. This is a point all too often neglected – that receiving Communion improperly, most of all in the state of mortal sin, is disrespecting Christ. Jesus Himself is being insulted when that happens. It breaks unity, rather than increasing it. In our concern for the rights of others at the altar, it is paramount to remember the rights of God as well. Additionally, although it may seem like a snub to deny someone the Eucharist when they are not in the proper state to receive, it is for the person’s own spiritual welfare. In this the Church follows Saint Paul, who wrote to the Corinthians: “...whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. For he that eats and drinks unworthily eats and drinks judgment to himself.”

Looking again at the text of the Canon, it’s important to understand what ‘manifest, obstinate, persistent’ means. Many wrongly think it applies only to politicians. This is not so. If a Catholic is a ‘*manifest*’ sinner, that means he is ‘known,’ or ‘public.’ This must be differentiated from the Catholics who are in the state of ‘*private*’ grave sin, whose sin is known only to themselves and God. The private grave sinner cannot be denied the Eucharist because their sin is unknown to the bishop, and his priests. If a Catholic is gravely ‘*manifest*’ and ‘*obstinate*’ in his sin, that means he continues to ‘persist’ or ‘stand firm’ in grave sin that is ‘public’ in nature and causes scandal to others. This is quite different from those who persist in ‘private’ sin. Catholic pro-abortion politicians are certainly manifest, obstinate and persistent sinners and they are thus subject to the provisions of c.915. This is the clear teaching of the Church. It was recently confirmed by Francis Cardinal Arinze, who stated when asked that a pro-abortion politician should not be receiving Communion. That is important because Cardinal Arinze is the head of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments. In other words, the Pope delegates his authority regarding the Sacraments of the Church to Cardinal Arinze. When Cardinal Arinze speaks publicly and officially on the Sacraments, it is very close to a declaration of the Pope’s thought on the matter.

What about the role of conscience? Doesn’t individual conscience affect this decision? In fact, some may say, didn’t Vatican II say that individual conscience had to be respected above all? The Second Vatican Council was, in fact, abundantly clear on this matter. The Council’s document

Gaudium et Spes on the Church in the Modern World declares: “Nor, on the contrary, are they any less wide of the mark who think that religion consists in acts of worship alone and in the discharge of certain moral obligations, and who imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life. *This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age.* Long since, the Prophets of the Old Testament fought vehemently against this scandal and even more so did Jesus Christ Himself in the New Testament threaten it with grave punishments. Therefore, let there be no false opposition between professional and social activities on the one part, and religious life on the other... to the Church belongs the right always and everywhere to announce moral principles, *including those pertaining to the social order*, and to make judgments on any human affairs to the extent that they are required by the fundamental rights of the human person or the salvation of souls.” For this reason, the Vatican has said plainly: “A well-formed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals.”

Why? Because primacy of conscience and church-state separation do not and can not mean “anything goes.” If that mistaken idea were so, then if one’s conscience said it was okay to hate Jews and blacks, you could do that and it would be just fine morally. But we can’t do that. It’s wrong. And if there were an election involving whether or not Jews and blacks should be treated as human beings, then such a misunderstanding of church-state separation and the freedom of conscience, would mean that the Church could not say anything about the dignity of Jewish and African-American people, simply because a politician had mentioned it, or our consciences did not feel guilty. The Civil War and the Second World War give us ample historical proof of the folly of such a line of thought. We can only follow our conscience if it is in line with truth, with moral truth. That moral truth is expressed by the formal teachings of the Church. If our consciences are opposed to that, then our consciences are stunted. Morality is not something debated and made up. It is conformity to the will of God for us and for society. God decides what is moral, not man. No election can determine what is right and wrong – only if we as a nation will choose to follow the right path – or the wrong one.

On the Day of Pentecost, two thousand years ago, the Apostles gathered in the upper room, closing themselves off from the world out of fear of the Roman government. But when the fire of the Holy Spirit filled their hearts with the love of God, they rushed out into the public squares to

proclaim the truth of the Gospel without fear – and the Empire was converted. May the power of the Holy Spirit give our Catholic politicians – and we who vote for them - the same courage.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Thy faithful, and enkindle in them the fire of Divine love. Amen.