

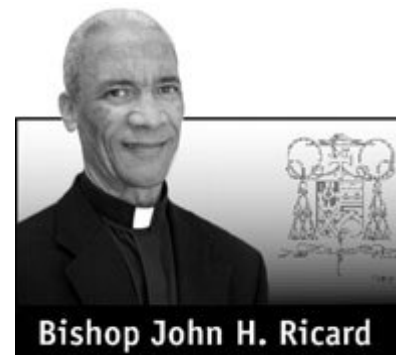
The Florida Catholic

Pensacola-Tallahassee Edition - Bishop's Statement

Concerning Catholics in public life

My dear friends in Christ,

Recently there has been growing concern about the reception of the holy Eucharist by Catholics in public office who support abortion on demand. Without a doubt, this is an issue which has generated a lot of discussion and debate both within and outside the church, and requires a great deal of reflection and sound pastoral judgment. The denial of holy Communion to a Catholic under any circumstance is a grave matter which cannot be taken lightly.



In discussing this question, it would be useful to review the teaching of the church in matters of faith and morals concerning the dignity of the human person and the sacredness of human life. The church has a wealth of teaching on the dignity of human life, marriage and family, war and peace, the needs of the poor, and the demands of justice. The church's teaching concerning the sacredness of human life from the first moment of conception to natural death is of unique importance. We teach that the destruction of the unborn child is always a moral evil and can never be justified. And it follows that public officials have a duty under God to correct morally defective laws and create a legal climate which upholds and protects unborn human life.

Recently, I was appointed by Bishop Wilton Gregory, the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, to a task force on Catholic Bishops and Catholic Politicians. Its purpose was to explore the issue of the duty and obligation of Catholic elected officials relative to defending the life of the unborn and protecting our elderly and sick from the threat of euthanasia. Much of what I am saying here is contained in a statement issued by the bishops following their June meeting; it was released June 18. That statement is based largely on the task force's interim report and highlights the following points:

- First, we need to continue to present clearly the moral teaching of the church and assist Catholic leaders to make an unequivocal commitment to the legal protection of human life in all of its stages.
- Second, we need to do more to persuade all people that human life is of immense value and that human

dignity must be defended.

- Third, there is a need for Catholics to act in support of the principles surrounding human life and encourage policies that promote human dignity. The bishops call on the laity to assume their rightful position in the marketplace in carrying out this mission of transforming a culture of death into a culture of life.
- Fourth, the Catholic community and Catholic institutions must not honor those who act in defiance of the church's fundamental moral principles concerning human life.
- Fifth, we as bishops must commit ourselves to establishing and maintaining communication with public officials who are in positions to make decisions that touch human life, human dignity and public policy.

There are those who believe the best way to handle those who dissent from church teaching and doctrine is to place the priest and those who assist him with the distribution of holy Communion in the role of judge. Such a change of role would require ministers of Communion to determine the worthiness of those coming forth to receive the body and blood of Christ. Moral theologians and canon lawyers warn the bishops that such steps could raise serious questions about Catholic teaching. There is the additional concern about the impact of such practices on faithful legislators, the Catholic community and the role of the church in public life.

Some advocates of a more severe approach to these issues go so far as to suggest that anyone who votes for a candidate who supports abortion on demand commits a serious and grave sin. It is important to note that recently the Holy See has made it clear that a Catholic would be guilty of a grave sin only if he or she were to deliberately vote for a candidate precisely because of the candidate's permissive stand on abortion on demand. In every circumstance, a Catholic voter must consider his or her grave obligation to uphold human life and most especially the life of the unborn when one enters the voting booth.

It is my position not to encourage or support in any way confrontations in the Communion line before God's altar with the sacred body and blood of the Lord Jesus. I have a significant concern for the sacred nature of the holy Eucharist and do not support calling upon ministers of Communion to make judgments about the worthiness of those in the Communion line. These judgments are more rightly and appropriately made by each person. Everyone who comes to receive Communion is expected to be properly disposed. This disposition is fostered by serious self-examination and reflection prior to and as one comes forward to receive the holy Eucharist. I do not support those who would want to turn the reception of the holy Eucharist or the Communion line into a partisan political battleground.

I conclude by quoting from the statement issued by the bishops after their Denver meeting:

"The Eucharist is the source and summit of Catholic life. Therefore, like every Catholic generation before us, we must be guided by the words of St. Paul. 'Whoever therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord' (I Cor 11:27). This means that all must examine their consciences as to their worthiness to receive the body and blood of Our Lord."

The full text of the U.S. Bishops' June 18 statement on Catholics in Political Life can be found on the Web at <http://usccb.org/bishops/catholicsinpoliticallife.htm>.

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