

More on January 22nd and Abstaining from Communion

The [full text of my January 22nd homily](#) is reprinted in this issue of The Catholic Herald. As Diocesan Bishop, I was speaking to our Catholic people, doing so in our Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament from my "cathedra," or teaching chair. No media were known to be present.

When the media contacted me later that day, I assured them that it was not my intention to "take on" the governor, but to teach and clarify the faith. That is an important part of my charge as Bishop of the Diocese. I mentioned the governor specifically only because he has chosen to make his Catholic credentials a public matter on a number of occasions in the context of the abortion issue. Before Christmas he made widely quoted comments that many Catholics hold his proabortion views, leaving the impression that such is acceptable.

Because of the real possibility of confusion in the minds of some about what is the authentic Catholic teaching on the Gospel of life, I felt obligated to set the record straight. Among other things, I stated: "As your bishop, I have to say clearly that anyone – politician or otherwise – who thinks it acceptable for a Catholic to be proabortion is in very great error, puts his or her soul at risk, and is not in good standing with the Church. Such a person should have the integrity to acknowledge this and choose of his own volition to abstain from receiving Holy Communion until he has a change of heart."

I did not intimate that we would refuse Communion to someone who approaches. After instructing people, we respect them and strive to treat them as adults. We prefer to trust in their sincerity and goodwill. That is why I stated that a person of integrity should "choose of his own volition to abstain from receiving Holy Communion until he has a change of heart."

There is nothing new in this. St. Paul articulated the principle: "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. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself." (1 Cor 11: 27 - 29)

In this way, Paul sets the standard at the very beginning: every Catholic must examine himself beforehand by the measure set out by the community of the Church with a view to judging whether he is worthy to receive Communion or not, and then take the necessary action.

Thus, in our Catholic understanding, we are to receive Communion worthily and be properly disposed. We are also to be free of serious sin – going to Confession first, if need be.

For somebody who takes a very public stance that is contrary to the teaching of the Church on some matter of great importance, there is the additional obstacle of giving public scandal. This would certainly be the case of a public official who makes a public point of being Catholic and also proabortion or speaks against Church teachings in other important matters. They have a duty as disciples not to use their public office to confuse their brothers and sisters in Christ.

There is a third factor. For Catholics, receiving Communion is not simply a private act. It is not something merely "between God and me."

We are members of the Body of Christ, the Church. When we receive Communion, while we believe that we truly receive the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus, we also publicly express by our action that we are in union with (in communion with) the Body of Christ, the Church.

If one is not, in fact, in union with the Church on an important matter, such as the Gospel of life, then one is proclaiming a fundamental contradiction by the very act of receiving Holy Communion. This principle is also applied in ecumenical relations. We do not admit non-Catholics to Holy Communion, in major part because they are not in full communion with the Catholic Church. In our Catholic understanding, it would not be authentic and fitting to receive Communion without being in union with the Church on all important matters.

Catholics generally take seriously the injunction to receive Communion worthily and to be properly disposed. They not only want to be in the state of grace and free of serious sin, but also to be at harmony with the teachings of the Church on major issues. Their "Catholic sense" is to refrain from receiving Communion if this is not the case. In the meantime, they will study and seek advice; they will pray for the Spirit's light and for the grace to accept the guidance of the Church, the sacrament of Christ. When some in the body are not able to fully participate in the Eucharist, it is a cause of great sadness. We thus enhance our efforts at reconciliation and increase our prayer for unity in the Lord.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the many hundreds of letters, faxes, e-mails and telephone messages received from so many of you. These messages have been overwhelmingly positive and supportive. Thank you so much for the encouragement and affirmation. I hope that you will understand that it would be difficult for me to answer each of your messages individually.

There have been a few negative responses, also, but some seem to be based on misinformation about what I actually said on January 22. The full text of my homily should be of help to these respondents. A number, however, say they hold views similar to those of Governor Davis and seem to be confused about what the Church teaches or about what is required of one who is Catholic. To anyone in this situation, I would urge you to study, consult, and pray.

On our pilgrimage "in this present era" (Lumen Gentium, 9 par. 3) every one of us will face dilemmas, both ethical and moral. We resolve them, as a matter of course, by the judgements of a conscience formed according to the measure of the Church's ancient teaching and tradition. We are sustained by faith. We are enlightened by prayer. We are strengthened by abiding in the communion of God's Pilgrim People.