



ABORTION AND SACRAMENTAL LIFE:
Excerpts from USCCB Statements

A brief remark by Pope Benedict during his recent Latin American trip prompted a variety of public comments about abortion, the reception of the Eucharist and excommunication. Some of these commentaries misinterpreted or confused certain aspects of Catholic teaching and Church law. These excerpts from documents of the U.S. bishops may be helpful in clarifying the issues.

Worthiness to Receive Holy Communion

The Church teaches that we must be properly disposed to receive the Eucharist worthily, making use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation prior to the reception of the Eucharist if we have committed a serious sin (I Cor. 11: 27-29). The Catholic Bishops of the United States said:

[A]ll must examine their consciences as to their worthiness to receive the Body and Blood of our Lord. This examination includes fidelity to the moral teaching of the Church in personal and public life (*Catholics in Political Life*, 2004).

As the U.S. bishops further said in 2006:

Some Catholics may not fully understand the Church's doctrinal and moral teaching on certain issues. They may have certain questions and even uncertainties. In these situations of honest doubt and confusion, they are welcome to partake of Holy Communion, as long as they are prayerfully and honestly striving to understand the truth of what the Church professes and are taking appropriate steps to resolve their confusion and doubt. Individuals who experience serious difficulties or doubts about Church teaching should carefully study those Church teachings from authentic sources and seek advice from a confessor or pastor.

If a Catholic in his or her personal or professional life were knowingly and obstinately to reject the defined doctrines of the Church, or knowingly and obstinately to repudiate her definitive teaching on moral issues, however, he or she would seriously diminish his or her communion with the Church. Reception of Holy Communion in such a situation would not accord with the nature of the Eucharistic celebration, so that he or she should refrain.
(*Happy Are Those Who Are Called to His Supper: On Preparing to Receive Christ Worthily in the Eucharist*, 2006)

In his remarks the Holy Father reaffirmed the Church's longstanding conviction that respect for the right to life of the unborn child is one of these fundamental moral teachings.

Denial of Holy Communion

The pastoral teaching referred to above, addressed to all who approach the Eucharist, is distinct from the question as to when a bishop should feel obliged to deny the Eucharist to someone who approaches to receive it. In 2004 the U.S. bishops commented:

The question has been raised as to whether the denial of Holy Communion to some Catholics in political life is necessary because of their public support for abortion on demand. Given the wide range of circumstances involved in arriving at a prudential judgment on a matter of this seriousness, we recognize that such decisions rest with the individual bishop in accord with the established canonical and pastoral principles. Bishops can legitimately make different judgments on the most prudent course of pastoral action. Nevertheless, we all share an unequivocal commitment to protect human life and dignity and to preach the Gospel in difficult times. (Catholics in Political Life, 2004)

The Holy Father in his recent remarks did not specifically address the denial of Holy Communion.

Cooperation in Evil

The bishops are also clear about the implications of Church teaching for those who cooperate in evil:

It is the teaching of the Catholic Church from the very beginning, founded on her understanding of her Lord's own witness to the sacredness of human life, that the killing of an unborn child is always intrinsically evil and can never be justified. If those who perform an abortion and those who cooperate willingly in the action are fully aware of the objective evil of what they do, they are guilty of grave sin and thereby separate themselves from God's grace... It is with pastoral solicitude for everyone involved in the political process that we will also counsel Catholic public officials that their acting consistently to support abortion on demand risks making them cooperators in evil in a public manner. We will persist in this duty to counsel, in the hope that the scandal of their cooperating in evil can be resolved by the proper formation of their consciences. (Catholics in Political Life, 2004)

Excommunication

The question of readiness to receive the Eucharist is distinct from the question regarding excommunication, a most serious canonical penalty whose consequences extend beyond the denial of the Eucharist. A Catholic who is excommunicated **“is barred from celebrating or receiving the Sacraments,”** though it is important to remember that even this penalty **“is imposed as a remedy for serious sin, not as a punishment”** (*United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, 2006, p. 512). The penalty of excommunication is incurred automatically (*latae sententiae*) by those who willfully and deliberately act to ensure that a particular abortion takes place. For very serious reasons it may also be imposed by a bishop, after prior warning, in cases of certain serious and obstinate public sins or attacks on the Church that are causing grave scandal. The goal is to restore justice where it is harmed, prevent others from being led into sin, and call sinners to repentance and full communion with God and the Church. For this reason, there are procedures in Church law to lift the penalty of excommunication. All of us fall short of God's goodness, and all are in need of that mercy He is so ready to bestow.

See: *Catholics in Political Life*
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004

*Happy Are Those Who Are Called to His Supper: On Preparing to Receive Christ
Worthily in the Eucharist*
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006