
Issue devoted to various bishops’ statements on Catholic politicians and abortion. Most of these statements come in the wake of the U.S. bishops June 14-19, 2004 meeting in Denver, which issued a statement on Catholics and the Political Life. Individual statements include those of Most Reverends Dennis Schnurr, the Atlanta, Charleston and Charlotte Bishops, F. Joseph Gossman, Robert Carlson, John Kinney, David Ricken, and Victor Galeone. The bishops exhibit a considerable difference of opinion and practical judgment about how best to proceed in this issue.


States that any Catholic “serving in the public life espousing positions contrary to the teaching of the Church on the sanctity and inviolability of human life, especially those running for or elected to public office, are not to be admitted to holy communion in any Catholic church within our jurisdictions: the Archdiocese of Atlanta, the dioceses of Charleston and Charlotte. Only after reconciliation with the church has occurred, with the knowledge and consent of the local bishop, and public disavowal of former support for procured abortion, will the individual be permitted to approach the sacrament of holy eucharist.


Calls into question some of the efforts of bishops to force Catholic politicians to adopt certain positions vis-a-vis the abortion debate.

Rev. John P. Beal is associate professor, School of Canon Law, The Catholic University of America.

This is an excellent article by a Dutch Jesuit theologian, Franz Josef van Beeck, who has lived and taught for most of his professional life at Loyola University in Chicago. It is a very thoughtful piece looking at the issue of using denial of Communion as a means for trying to force politicians to adopt certain legislative stances. One of the best single articles on this current issue.


Speaks approvingly of the North Carolina pastor, Rev. Jay Scott Newman, who told his parishioners who had voted for Obama or other “pro-abortion” candidates that they were guilty of wrongful cooperation with evil and should go to confession before attempting to receive Holy Communion. Brugger considers as an antecedent problem those bishops who allow, “as a matter of prudential pastoral opinion,” pro-choice candidates to receive Communion. Brugger goes on to claim that pro-choice Catholic politicians are obviously in manifest grave sin (cf. CIC 915) and therefore giving them Communion constitutes formal scandal.

Brugger is Associate Professor of Moral Theology at St. John Vianney Theological Seminary in Denver. A shortened version of this article appeared as a “Culture of Life Brief” published in 2009 by the Culture of Life Foundation.


Citing Canon 915 of the Code of Canon Law which requires that those who "obstinately" persevere "in manifest grave sin are not to be admitted to holy Communion" Burke, who is a canon lawyer, argues that this is the canon to apply in the case of Catholic politicians who do not actively oppose laws that support abortion in one way or another. However, Bishop Dennis Schnurr points instead to Canon 912 of the Code which states that “Any baptized person who is not prohibited by law can and must be admitted to holy communion.” See Schnurr’s “Catholic and the Political Life.” Origins 34:12 (2 September 2004): 185; 187-188.

When Burke was bishop of La Crosse, Wisconsin he denied access to communion to three Catholic politicians in his diocese. One of them, Congressman David Obey, explains his own position in “My Conscience, My Vote” America (16-23 August 2004): 8-12. Burke went on to become archbishop of St. Louis, where he continued his attacks on Democratic politicians, denying them Communion. Before the 2008 presidential election he was then “promoted” to Rome as head of the Apostolic Signatura, which removed him from the American scene.

Callahan, who states she voted for Bush in 2000 on the basis of his opposition to abortion, explains why she can no longer support him.

Callahan is a psychologist who also writes on contemporary Church moral issues, and is well-known for her strong pro-life/anti-abortion stance.


While admitting that a particular candidate or political party cannot be endorsed from the pulpit the bishop states that no one can “vote for a politician who is pro-abortion ... and remain Catholic in good standing.” Furthermore, in his diocese “those who act in defiance of these fundamental principles of life should not be honored or invited to speak at Catholic colleges, schools or parishes or hold any office such as lector, eucharist minister, usher, parish council member or religious education teacher.”

Carlson is Bishop of Sioux Falls, SD.


Argues that a proponent of abortion could not be a Catholic in good standing anymore than a racist could be member in good standing of the NAACP and goes on to express the hope that “those candidates who consistently vote in support of abortion have enough integrity to willingly exclude themselves from receiving the eucharist.” Galeone also denies that the same judgment would apply to those Catholic politicians who support the death penalty in contradiction to Church teaching since “the church does not deny that the state continues to have the right to impose the death penalty.”

Galeone is bishop of St. Augustine, FL.


This is a brief article by an Orthodox theologian that calls into question some of the US Bishops selective use of one issue rather than others to deny Communion to certain Catholic politicians.

Notes that the November 2002 Congregation for the Faith Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life does not give sanctions against those who may fail to live up to their obligation to oppose laws that might seem to attack human life. Each person has the “personal obligation to examine his or her conscience,” but goes on to note the “long-standing practice in the church not to make a public judgment about the state of the soul of those who present themselves for holy communion” and states that this will continue to be his own position.

Gossman is bishop of Raleigh, N.C.


Article by Germain Grisez supporting denial of Communion to Catholic politicians who do not oppose laws allowing for abortion choice.

Grisez is a well-known lay professor of moral philosophy and theology at Mt. St. Mary’s in Emmitsburg, MD.


Reflection by Gregory Kalscheur, S.J. on the thought of John Courtney Murray, S.J. and how it might shed light on the debate over bishops using denial of Communion to try and force Catholic politicians to take certain anti-choice stands.

At this writing Kalscheur taught at the Boston College School of Law, and subsequently went on to become Dean of the Boston College Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences.


Kaveny re-organizes and re-works many of her articles and blog posts that have appeared in Commonweal and elsewhere on a wide variety of contemporary moral topics. The Introduction provides a good framework for interpreting contemporary American moral society and proposes the notion of “culture of engagement” as the preferred stance for conducting moral discourse in contemporary civil society. Part 1 examines Law as a Teacher; Part 2 considers Religious Liberty and Its Limits; Part 3 engages in Conversations about Culture; while Part 4 continues Conversations about Belief; Part 5 then concludes with looking at a range of Cases and Controversies. Particularly helpful is her Chapter 28, “A Flawed Analogy: Prochoice Politicians and the Third Reich,” pp. 140-142 in which she outlines the several ways in which being a pro-choice politician is not morally equivalent to supporting the Jewish Genocide by the Nazis in the Third Reich.
Kaveny holds a joint appointment in law and theological ethics at Boston College.

Kaveny takes a careful look at the status of public moral discourse in America. In Part One she considers analyses offered by Alasdair MacIntyre, John Rawls, and Stephen Carter and concludes that despite many insights and merits each thinker shares certain assumptions which ultimately fall short of a more complete evaluation of both the history and current practice of moral discourse in large parts of American civil society. In particular all three overlook the mode of religious and political discourse termed the jeremiad, with its stress on prophetic denunciation and moral indictment. Analysis of the social issues of abortion and torture in the 2004 presidential contest between the Democratic challenger John Kerry and the Republican incumbent George W. Bush is used to illustrate contrasting approaches taken by those who utilize prophetic denunciation (especially in regards to abortion) and those who prefer a closer investigation of the relevant moral features using what Kaveny terms “moral deliberation” in coming to decide whom to support in the election.


States that he refuses “to allow the eucharistic liturgy to become politicized. What I mean is that I will not allow holy communion to be used as a weapon in ongoing political and ideological battles. For this reason it is not my intention to reject anyone who comes forward in a respectful manner to receive the body and blood of Christ.” While reaffirming the Church’s teaching that only those in the state of grace should receive communion, Kinney states that “no human is capable of judging someone else’s relationship to God, and that the Church recognizes that it is for each individual to examine his or her own conscience in this regard,” and that he presumes that “those who come forward to receive the body and blood of Christ have done so and honestly believe they are not in the state of grave sin.” The bishop goes on to say that while he admires “efforts to preserve the integrity of holy communion, I caution against allowing the communion procession to become an occasion for pointing out the supposed sins of others.”

Kinney is bishop of St. Cloud, MN.


*From the publisher’s blurb:* “The 2016 presidential election was unlike any other in American history. Polls tell us that millions of American Catholics who care about moral
issues and who descended from immigrants supported Donald Trump. Why didn't
Trump's rhetoric on immigration and his promises to close the borders trouble more
American Catholics? Steven P. Millizes uncovers the history of how and why the so-
called “Catholic Vote” went the way it did in 2016 and offers some practical reflections
on ways to put Catholic faith to better use in American politics.

Reviewed by James T. Bretzke, S.J. in Theological Studies (forthcoming) and Leslie
Woodcock Tentler as “Courting the Catholic Vote: How We Got from ‘Roe’ to Trump,”
Commonweal (posted August 9, 2018) at
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/courting-catholic-vote


Obey is one of the politicians denied Communion by then Bishop Raymond Burke of La
Crosse, Wisconsin (later Archbishop of St. Louis and then in 2008 transferred to Rome
and made a Cardinal). Obey explains the complexities of concrete political choices
which sometimes led him in conscience to support specific pieces of legislation that
contained provisions that accepted abortion. Burke explained his own position in an
earlier article in “Catholic Politicians and Bishops,” America (21-28 June 2004).

Obey has represented Wisconsin’s Seventh Congressional District as a Democrat since
1969.


States that “[i]t seems that the only position a Catholic politician can take if he is to hold
public office at all is to renounce allegiance to his Catholic faith, at least in the public
exercise of his office.” He also goes on to say that the “constitutional question in Roe v.
Wade has never been examined,” and these and similar surprising affirmations seem to
call for a special hermeneutic of interpretation. Ricken notes that “[t]yranny always
flourishes under cover of law... Abortion is simply one more form of violence done in
the name of someone else’s right under the law.” Ricken states that the “only honest thing
a Catholic politician can do is to uphold the Catholic teachings in his public and private
life or not pretend to be a Catholic and declare himself so. If he insists upon holding
publicly what is contrary to the teaching of his church, he should not be surprised if there
are public consequences to his action.”

Ricken is bishop of Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Schlesinger, Kira. Pro-Choice and Christian: Reconciling Faith, Politics, and Justice. Louisville
From the publisher’s blurb: “Despite the claim by many Christian leaders that the pro-life/antiabortion position is the only faithful response to the debate about reproductive rights, many people of faith find themselves in a murky middle of this supposedly black-and-white issue. Christians who are pro-abortion rights are rarely pro-abortion. However, they view the decision to carry a pregnancy to term as one to be made by the woman, her medical team, her family, or personal counsel rather than by politicians. Pro-Choice and Christian explores the biblical, theological, political, and medical aspects of the debate in order to provide a thoughtful Christian argument for a pro-choice position with regard to abortion issues. Kira Schlesinger considers relevant Scriptures, the politics of abortion in the United States, and the human realities making abortion a vital issue of justice and compassion. By examining choice from a Christian perspective, Schlesinger provides a common vocabulary for discussing faith and reproductive rights.

Reviewed by James T. Bretzke, S.J. in Theological Studies (forthcoming)


Argues for making a careful distinction in terms of assessing formal cooperation with the evil of abortion, noting the different levels of responsibility of those who actively promote and support individual abortions as contrasted with politicians. He also notes Canon 912 of the Code which states that “Any baptized person who is not prohibited by law can and must be admitted to holy communion.” For a contrary view see Archbishop Raymund Burke’s “Catholic Politicians and Bishops,” America (21-28 June 2004).

Schnurr is bishop of Duluth, Minnesota.


Argues that voting GOP is highly unlikely either to overturn Roe v. Wade or end abortion in America. Instead, for those “who are truly committed to a culture of life – all life – [need] to work together to oppose those injustices that drive women to seek abortion: injustices that are largely exacerbated precisely by the people who are mistakenly lauded as pro-life heroes. It’s time to realize that pro-life and social justice belong together, and never should have been separated.”