

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 10, 2004

BY COURIER

His Eminence Theodore Cardinal McCarrick
Chairman, Task Force on Catholic Bishops
And Catholic Politicians
Archdiocese of Washington
P.O. Box 29260
Washington, DC 20017-0260

Your Eminence:

We the undersigned are Catholic Members of Congress who are increasingly concerned about statements made recently by some members of the Catholic hierarchy indicating that the sacrament of communion should be withheld from certain Catholic legislators because of their votes on public issues. The focus has been on legislators' pro-choice position on abortion but this raises much broader issues that concern all of us.

We firmly believe that it would be wrong for a bishop to deny the sacrament of holy communion to an individual on the basis of a voting record. We believe that such an action would be counter-productive and would bring great harm to the Church.

Our concerns about the apparent threat of withholding a sacrament in order to influence how a legislator acts go beyond the issue of pro-choice or pro-life, as indicated by the fact that some of the undersigned have "pro-life" voting records. While some of us differ on this issue, each and every one of us is committed to the basic principles that are at the heart of Catholic social justice - helping the poor and underprivileged, protecting the most vulnerable among us, and insuring that all Americans of every faith are given meaningful opportunities to share in the blessings of this great country.

We also emphasize that legislators viewed as "pro-choice" can and do take steps every day in their Congressional lives to advance respect for life and respect for the dignity of every human being. In fact, many of us became members of Congress to do just that. That commitment involves different things for different legislators but includes pushing for real health care reform, reluctance before war and promoting alternatives to abortion, such as adoption. Some of those who are viewed as pro-choice have voiced opposition to capital punishment, and are active on other issues affecting life, including hunger relief and human

rights. At the same time, we live in a nation of laws and the Supreme Court has declared that our Constitution provides women with a right to an abortion. Members who vote for legislation consistent with that mandate are not acting contrary to our positions as faithful members of the Catholic Church. We also do not believe that it is the obligation of legislators to prohibit all conduct which we may, as a matter of personal morality, believe is wrong. Likewise, as Catholics, we do not believe it is our role to legislate the teachings of the Catholic Church. For any of us to be singled out by any bishop by the refusal of communion or other public criticism because we vote in what we believe are the requirements of the United States Constitution and laws of our country, which we are sworn to uphold, is deeply hurtful. We would remind those who would deny us participation in the sacrament of the Eucharist that we are sworn to represent all Americans, not just Catholics. Church leaders must recognize, as did the great Catholic theologian and scholar John Courtney Murray, that in public life distinctions must be made between public and private morality. Because we represent all of our constituents we must, at times, separate our public actions from our personal beliefs.

As the bishops of the United States recently emphasized in the publication *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility*, "In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue; participation in the political process is a moral obligation." As legislators chosen by the people we represent, we take that moral obligation seriously. This means that we are called to represent the views of our constituents even when those views may conflict with some of our personal views.

If Catholic legislators are scorned and held out for ridicule by Church leaders on the basis of a single issue, the Church will lose strong advocates on a wide range of issues that relate to the core of important Catholic social teaching. Moreover, criticism of us on a matter that is essentially one of personal morality will deter other Catholics from entering politics, and in the long run the Church will suffer. For many years Catholics were denied public office by voters who feared that they would take direction from the Pope. Opponents to John F. Kennedy expressed the view that, if elected, his first act would be to build a tunnel from the White House to Rome. While that type of paranoid anti-Catholicism seems to be a thing of the past, attempts by Church leaders today to influence votes by the threat of withholding a sacrament will revive latent anti-Catholic prejudice, which so many of us have worked so hard to overcome.

Nor do we see how the bishops could limit this punishment to the pro-choice issue alone, and we are troubled by the possible consequences of proceeding down this road. Both the Holy Father and members of the U.S. hierarchy have condemned the death penalty, as well as the war in Iraq. Will an individual bishop decide to deny communion to a legislator - Republican or Democrat - who has voted in favor of the death penalty? Will another bishop decide to deny communion to a legislator who authorized the war in Iraq? Such conduct would foster division within the Church as well as division between the

hierarchy and the laity. And allowing a bishop to take actions that lead to involvement in partisan politics would be detrimental to the Church. As the USCCB recognizes in *Faithful Citizenship*, "The Catholic community is large and diverse. We are Republicans, Democrats, and Independents." Unfortunately, the threats of some bishops to withhold communion from "pro-choice" legislators has the effect of miring the Church in partisan politics and allowing the Church to be used for partisan purposes.

All of us firmly believe that we can be good Congresspersons and Catholics and we respectfully submit that, while sometimes difficult, each of us has the responsibility and the right to balance public morality with private morality without pressure from certain bishops. While we do not question the authority of the bishops, we respectfully submit that each of us is in the best position to know the state of our soul and our relationship to God and our Church. Therefore, each of God's children should be the final judge as to whether it is appropriate for them to receive the sacrament of communion.

We raise these issues, not just to address the immediate reports about the pro-choice issue, but to underscore the importance of Catholic teachings to all of us. It is reflected in the broad range of issues where we have so much affinity with the Church. The Church has played a central role in all our of lives and instilled in us a value system that drives us to fight for a better life for all Americans. We value the Church, its teachings and are proud to be Catholics.

We thank you for your attention to this important issue. When your schedule permits, representatives of our group would appreciate the opportunity of meeting with you and if, you feel it appropriate, other members of your task force, so that we may begin a dialogue on these issues which are so important to the Church and to us. In the meantime, feel free to share this letter with your fellow bishops.

Sincerely,