

We cannot compartmentalize our public acts from God's will, not even in the name of pluralism, democracy, or compassion, and formal cooperation with the evil of abortion prevents us from being in full communion with Christ and his Church. –Bishop John Folda

Holy Communion and the dignity of life

Every year around this time, the Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, or Corpus Christi. With Masses and processions, we contemplate the incomparable mystery of the Eucharist, which continues to nourish us as followers of Jesus Christ. Especially now, as we emerge from the restrictions of the pandemic, it seems opportune to recall the necessary place of the Eucharist in the Church and in our lives as Catholics. The Eucharist is Christ, sacramentally and really present among us, sustaining us through communion in his sacred Body and Blood. As Pope Benedict XVI taught, “Without the Eucharist, the Church simply does not exist.”

The act of receiving the Eucharist is conventionally called “Holy Communion.” By receiving the Eucharist, we enter into a deeply personal union with Jesus himself, who said, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him” (John 6:56). But receiving the Eucharist is also an act of communion with the Church, which is the mystical body of Christ. When we come forward to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, we essentially declare ourselves to be in full communion with Jesus *and* the Church that he established. And of course, this requires that one must be in a state of grace, i.e. free from mortal sin that cuts us off from God's divine life.

For this reason it is necessary to recall that receiving Holy Communion is not a right but a gift and a privilege. The Church has always taught that one may not receive Holy Communion if in a state of mortal sin, i.e., if one has knowingly and willfully separated himself from Christ and his Church through grave sin. St. Paul, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, tells us clearly: “Whoever eats unworthily of the bread and drinks from the Lord's cup makes himself guilty of profaning the body and the blood of the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:27). With St. Paul's admonition in mind, we must examine our consciences carefully as we approach the altar to receive our Lord and make regular use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation to receive forgiveness and healing whenever this is needed. This is not meant to discourage anyone from receiving the Eucharist, but to encourage everyone to do so in a state of grace.

But now the question arises: what about those who act in ways that are contrary to our faith? What about Catholic officials and public figures who support and advocate for abortion and euthanasia in public policy? Should one who holds such a position be allowed to receive the Eucharist? In point of fact, *any* person who actively promotes or facilitates abortion, whether it be a politician, a voter, a business owner, a health care worker, or a family member, is acting contrary to divine law and makes themselves unworthy to receive Holy Communion. We cannot compartmentalize our public acts from God's will, not even in the name of pluralism, democracy, or compassion, and formal cooperation with the evil of abortion prevents us from being in full communion with Christ and his Church.

Our current President is Catholic, and often described as “devout.” Yet he has vigorously acted to expand provision of abortion not only in this country but in other countries as well. Now he seeks to remove the long-standing prohibition of using public funds for abortion. In other words, abortion could become even more available, and we could be forced to pay for it. This is more than benign toleration of abortion; this is overt and active promotion of a moral act that is intrinsically evil. In terms of moral theology, this can only be viewed as formal cooperation with evil, i.e., consent with the intention of the one who performs the evil act.

This issue has arisen before, and was addressed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI, in a 2004 letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to the bishops of the United States. He wrote: “Regarding the grave sin of abortion or euthanasia, when a person's formal cooperation becomes manifest (understood, in the case of a Catholic politician, as his consistently campaigning and voting for permissive abortion and euthanasia laws), his pastor should meet with him, instructing him about the Church's teaching, informing him that he is not to present himself for Holy

Communion until he brings to an end the objective situation of sin, and warning him that he will otherwise be denied the Eucharist.”

Nor is this question limited to the United States. In their 2007 *Aparecida* document, the bishops of Latin America said, “We hope that legislators, heads of government, and health professionals, conscious of the dignity of human life and of the rootedness of the family in our peoples, will defend and protect it from the abominable crimes of abortion and euthanasia; that is their responsibility... We must adhere to ‘eucharistic coherence,’ that is, be conscious that they cannot receive Holy Communion and at the same time act with deeds or words against the commandments, particularly when abortion, euthanasia, and other grave crimes against life and the family are encouraged.” It is worth noting that a principal author of this document was Cardinal Jorge Maria Bergoglio, who is now Pope Francis.

It is quite simply impossible to be in full communion with the Church while taking a position that is so diametrically opposed to the Church’s most basic moral teaching on the dignity of human life. For this reason, it is inadmissible for anyone who publicly advocates for abortion to receive the Eucharist, which should be an expression of communion with Christ and his Church. This is not a political statement. It is a pastoral judgment based on the public acts of those who call themselves Catholic, and it would be the same regardless of one’s party affiliation. The moral laws of the Church are not optional; they are founded on the Word of God and apply to everyone. Yes, we all fail in our adherence to the divine law because of sin, and God graciously calls us to repentance. But if we openly stand in opposition to God’s law and refuse to repent, then we exclude ourselves from communion with him, especially the communion manifested through receiving the Eucharist.

Let us all examine our consciences and strive to conform ourselves to God’s law, and let us pray especially for our leaders who have a public responsibility to promote the common good and the dignity of every human life, including the unborn.