



FAITH

Rhoades: 'There's a great need to better understand Eucharist's centrality'

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The Eucharist rests on a paten at the altar in the Cathedral of St. Peter in Wilmington, Del., May 27, 2021. (CNS photo/Chaz Muth)

In the months leading up to the U.S. bishops' spring general assembly held June 16-18, headlines in both secular and Catholic media focused primarily on one issue: the potential of a document on eucharistic consistency and what that would mean in the political sphere.

Since the bishops' vote to move forward with drafting the statement, media attention has become even more acute – and confusing.

In an interview with *Our Sunday Visitor*, a national Catholic newsweekly based in Huntington, Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana, who chairs the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine and who also is chair of the OSV board of directors, explained why the bishops voted to write a teaching document on the mystery of the Eucharist and what it means for all U.S. Catholics.

Our Sunday Visitor: Can you explain why a document on the Eucharist, including a section on eucharistic consistency, is so important in our current time and culture?

Bishop Rhoades: As the bishops discussed at our meeting, there is a great need for a eucharistic revival in the church, a deeper understanding of the eucharistic mystery and its centrality in our life. The doctrine committee has been entrusted with the task of preparing this document. The outline we presented to the body of bishops uses the outline followed by Pope Benedict XVI in his apostolic exhortation "Sacramentum Caritatis" ("The Sacrament of Charity"): the Eucharist as a mystery to be believed, a mystery to be celebrated and a mystery to be lived. Within the section on the Eucharist as a mystery to be lived, the topic of eucharistic consistency arises. We are called to live what we receive, to live in a way that is consistent with the self-giving love of Jesus that is made present in the eucharistic sacrifice. This is related to our call to be

missionary disciples. In our current time and culture, there is a temptation to privatize our faith or to separate our celebration and reception of holy Communion from our responsibility to live in communion with the church and to live lives that are consistent with the deep meaning of the Eucharist, the sacrament of charity.



Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Doctrine, is seen during a news conference June 17, 2021, the second day of the bishops' three-day spring assembly, held virtually due to concern over COVID-19. (CNS screen grab)

Our Sunday Visitor: Now that the drafting of the document has been approved, what will the process be as it moves forward?

Bishop Rhoades: The doctrine committee will soon be getting to work writing a draft of the document. As was recommended by several of my brother bishops, we will be receiving input from regional meetings of bishops throughout the country. I am looking forward to their ideas and contributions. We will then share the eventual draft with several other committees of the USCCB to receive their suggestions and observations. We will also send the draft document to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, as we always do in preparing doctrinal statements. I think this wide consultation will be very helpful. Most importantly, throughout this process, I am especially praying to the Holy Spirit for an outpouring of his gifts of wisdom and counsel as we prepare the text. I have also asked many of the faithful to pray for us in these coming months.

Our Sunday Visitor: Some media outlets have reported that, with the vote to proceed with the drafting of the document, the bishops have defied the Vatican. Is that what happened?

Bishop Rhoades: No. I am disappointed in that erroneous interpretation. As bishops, we are committed to teaching in communion with the pope. As I mentioned, we will be in consultation with the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith during this process since this will be a teaching document on the Eucharist. I am grateful for the letter Archbishop (José) Gomez received from Cardinal (Luis) Ladaria emphasizing dialogue and unity among the bishops. We are preparing a doctrinal reflection and not drawing up national norms, since such would be beyond the competency of our committee.

Our Sunday Visitor: Some commentators have said that it was "unprecedented" for the body of bishops to push forward on an issue when so many bishops are opposed to it. In the end, though, 75% of the bishops voted to move forward with the drafting – not exactly a narrow majority. In your experience as a member of the conference for almost 20 years, is this decision to proceed with the drafting of the document after such a margin unprecedented?

Bishop Rhoades: I really don't remember since the conference has prepared many documents and statements the past two decades. I am hopeful that, come November, there will be an even larger number of bishops who will support the document that we will have prepared.

Our Sunday Visitor: Several bishops asked, or recommended, that the third part of the statement's outline – the part that includes the section on eucharistic consistency – be removed, but you disagreed with that approach, saying, "I don't think we should ignore what is the actual discipline of the church." What is that discipline, and what is it meant to do?

Bishop Rhoades: First of all, I don't think we can present the full teaching on the Eucharist without including the section on the Eucharist as a mystery to be lived, and, within that section, the call to eucharistic consistency. This is related to the church's discipline which goes back to the New Testament. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor 11:27-29). The church's tradition throughout the ages has included discipline about reception of holy Communion. That discipline is expressed today in Canons 915 and 916 of the Code of Canon Law and Canons 711 and 712 of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches. In our document, we hope to present a clear understanding of why the church has these laws, explaining the profound teaching that is the basis for these canons. Canon 915 regards those who are not to be admitted to holy Communion. Canon 916 regards the necessity of being in a state of grace to receive holy Communion. The church's laws are ordered to the salvation of souls. And these disciplinary laws have a medicinal, rather than punitive, purpose.

Our Sunday Visitor: Many bishops said within the context of the meeting that a pastoral problem has emerged from the fact that the United States now has a Catholic president who is pushing a strong pro-abortion agenda, as well as advocating for many other social issues that are contrary to the Catholic Church's social doctrine – all while still receiving holy Communion. Is it fair to say that this document is a necessary pastoral tool in response to this reality?

Bishop Rhoades: This document will be addressed to all Catholics. All of us are called to continual conversion and to eucharistic consistency. We are all called to go forth from Mass to glorify the Lord by our lives, to bear witness to Christ in our words and actions. We are called to bear witness to the Gospel of life and to respect and defend the life and dignity of every human person, including the child in the womb. The Catechism (of the Catholic Church) teaches that the Eucharist educates us in love and commits us to the poor. Pope St. John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have all written beautifully about the social implications of the Eucharist. I hope that our document will highlight this. It is important that we understand that, as Pope Benedict wrote, "worship pleasing to God can never be a purely private matter, without consequences for our relationship with others: It demands a public witness to our faith."

Our Sunday Visitor: It has become a popular argument in recent months that a document that includes teaching on eucharistic consistency may "weaponize the Eucharist." How would you respond to that?

Bishop Rhoades: I believe that the church's teaching on eucharistic consistency honors the Lord's presence in the Blessed Sacrament and helps us to understand that the Eucharist is a mystery to be lived. The Eucharist is an amazing gift from the Lord that we are called to receive humbly and gratefully and that the Lord has given to us as nourishment for our souls. The notion of eucharistic consistency reminds us that we must be properly disposed to receive the Eucharist. This includes ecclesial communion and assent to the deposit of faith contained in Scripture and tradition, which the apostles entrusted to the church. Eucharistic consistency involves our communion with the mystical body of Christ, the church, which the eucharistic body of Christ builds.

Our Sunday Visitor: What else would you like to add that might help bring clarity to the proceedings?

Bishop Rhoades: We are striving to write a document that will contribute to a real eucharistic revival in the church in our nation by highlighting the truth about the amazing gift Jesus gave us on the night before he died, the importance of beauty and reverence in our celebration of this great mystery, and the wonderful graces we receive in the Eucharist to grow in our Christian lives. Though there are some disagreements among us bishops, I pray that, with our common faith in this great sacrament of the body and blood of the Lord, we will be united as shepherds and teachers and help our people to grow as faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus.

CNS: You mentioned in your comments that this is not solely a matter of abortion. Someone who is a white supremacist or who is a human trafficker could be challenged as well. Critics have asked if you also would include Catholic leaders who support the death penalty or who have approved executions in the course of their duties?

Bishop Rhoades: In a document addressed to all Catholics, it will cover the broad range of Catholic social teaching. All of us as Catholics will be able to find ourselves in this teaching.

CNS: Many bishops have expressed concern about the impact of this debate on the unity of the conference and the church. To what extent will this be a concern of the drafters of the document, and what guidance will you give them in this regard as they are drafting it?

Bishop Rhoades: What we saw last week was a passionate dialogue about how much the Eucharist means to my brother bishops. The love for the Eucharist and the gratitude that we all feel and want to share in meeting the real presence of Jesus Christ in holy Communion are powerfully unifying realities for the entire body of Christ. Important discussions about the details of conference process still won't distract from the bond we share in Christ. As the dialogue and consultation continue in the weeks ahead, we will embark on them prayerfully and together. I hope we can serve as model for a society that needs to address difficult issues with greater civility

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