News



From left: A priest gives the Eucharist in a 2020 file photo; President Joe Biden speaks at the White House March 2 in Washington. (CNS photos/Gregory A. Shemitz; Kevin Lamarque, Reuters)



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When Irish voters approved a referendum repealing a constitutional amendment banning abortion in 2018, Catholic bishops throughout the country deemed it a devastating blow to a faith that has long been a hallmark of the country's identity.

What the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference did not do is suggest that the Catholic politicians who were in favor of overturning the country's longtime pro-life protections be denied Communion.

"There may have been a handful of bishops who thought that quietly, but no one said it out loud," said Irish theologian Suzanne Mulligan. In fact, one bishop did suggest after the vote that Irish Catholics, which made up the majority of the electorate, who voted in favor of it may consider going to confession.*

In the lead up to the vote, the country's Catholic bishops made their statements, both collectively and individually, in what she described as "part of their duty as upholders of the magisterium."

"By and large it was done as presenting magisterial teaching and saying, 'this is what we believe as Catholics,' but there was never really a sense that if you're a Catholic you must vote in a certain way, and there was never any threat of a politician or public legislator being told that if you vote for a particular legislation, you would be denied Communion," Mulligan told NCR. "That was never on the table."

As the U.S. Catholic bishops consider a new document to address Catholic politicians who support legal abortion — a proposal about which the Vatican's doctrinal office has urged them to proceed with caution — a range of historians and theologians describe the U.S. church-state confrontation as one lacking much precedent.

"I think it really is pretty distinctively American," said University of Notre Dame historian John McGreevy. "I don't have a sense of bishops in any country doing anything like this."

"It's part of the American bishops getting wrapped up in the culture wars," McGreevy told NCR, adding that an effort to draft a blanket statement on Catholic politicians and Communion seems to "go against the tenor of what Pope Francis is trying to

do."

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>
> —John McGreevy
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'Dialogue with other episcopal conferences'

When Cardinal Luis Ladaria, head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, wrote to the U.S. bishops earlier this month, he encouraged that "every effort should be made to dialogue with other episcopal conferences as this policy is formulated in order both to learn from one another and to preserve unity in the universal church."

Mulligan, who teaches at the Pontifical University of St. Patrick's College in Maynooth, said that Ladaria seemed to signal to the U.S. bishops that a survey of how other episcopal conferences approach Catholic politicians who differ from church teaching on policy issues will show that the "tone and approach is quite different."

Anna Rowlands, the St. Hilda Associate Professor of Catholic Social Thought and Practice* at Durham University in England, concurred, saying that "from Europe it looks dangerously like the American Church is propagating, whilst thinking it is doing the opposite, a species of ecclesial individualism."

"Communion becomes a reward for individual virtue, but virtue narrowed without attention to moral complexity," Rowlands, the former deputy director of the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University, told NCR.

For Rowlands, a helpful point of comparison is the 2013 passage of same-sex marriage legislation by Parliament in the United Kingdom. While she said that the debate over gay marriage led to some "soul searching" among Catholic politicians, the political debate in the country has "not had the same sort of ecclesial focus."

Related: Villanova conference elevates calls for Biden to be denied Communion

"There's no straight line between church teaching and the role of a representative politician in a liberal democracy," she told NCR, adding that in England, "we haven't had the same sort of tensions between Rome and our bishops' conference."

"It does feel as if this is a uniquely American question," Rowlands continued. "It feels from a distance like watching a battle within the soul of American Catholicism and culture over the relationship between the church and politics."

"Politics has never been made preeminent in this way," she warned, adding that the way the Communion debate seems to be shaping up in the United States runs the "risk of distorting the Catholic tradition."

While the concluding document of the meeting of the 2007 General Conference of Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean notes that Catholic legislators and politicians "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 family are encouraged," historian Daniel Levine says he does not recall any specific showdowns where denying Communion was specifically threatened.

Levine, author of *Politics, Religion and Society in Latin America*, said that while there are historic tensions in Latin America between bishops' conferences over a range of political battles, including divorce laws and increasingly, a relaxation on abortion restrictions, said "it's hardly risen to the level" of bishops threatening to deny Catholic presidents, prime ministers and leading politicians Communion.

"I've never seen that type of opposition," he said.



A priest elevates the host in a 2020 file photo. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Past papal precedent

When Rome's mayor, Francesco Rutelli, a high-profile Catholic who also led his party's campaign for liberalized abortion laws, presented himself for Communion at a public papal Mass in 2001, Pope John Paul II personally administered the sacrament to him.

Pope John Paul II, known for his staunch opposition to abortion, did the same when then-U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair attended a private Mass in the pope's apartment. At the time, Blair was not even Catholic and was a noted pro-choice politician. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and then-Massachusetts Senator John Kerry both received Communion at a papal Mass presided over by Pope Benedict XVI during his 2008 visit to the United States.

According to Rocco Buttiglione, author of *Karol Wojtyla: The Thought of the Man Who Became Pope John Paul II,* the late Polish pope "enforced the common doctrine of the

Church" when it came to Communion and the Eucharist.

He believes Pope Francis is doing the same today.

While Buttiglione does not doubt that abortion is a grave sin, he also believes that bishops and priests must remember the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas, the 13th-century Dominican friar whose moral teachings still shape church practice today.

When someone presents themselves for Communion, without having received absolution for a mortal sin, "St. Thomas says that the priest has the duty of giving the Communion in such cases," Buttiglione told NCR.

"He [Aquinas] explains that the priest who refuses the Communion damages the good name of the sinner and this is a sin comparable to homicide."

"It sounds strange to our ears," said Buttiligione, who observes that this is the "medieval equivalent" of Pope Francis' belief that "the confessor must enlighten but not substitute the conscience of the confessant."

President Joe Biden walks into Holy Trinity Catholic Church to attend Mass Feb. 20 in Washing

President Joe Biden walks into Holy Trinity Catholic Church to attend Mass Feb. 20 in Washington. (CNS/Reuters/Ken Cedeno)

Reflecting on President Joe Biden's past comments on abortion, Buttiglione, a professor of political science at Saint Pius V University in Rome, a member of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences and a former European Union minister, said that "Biden is convinced that abortion is a sin," while at the same time, "he does not think that a law should be made in United States to punish abortion with a criminal sanction."

Buttiglione says that a Catholic layman, such as Biden, does not have a duty to enshrine church teaching into law, but instead to see what "further steps towards the good society" that he can help bring about, including providing women with greater access to health care and economic well-being so that they do not have to choose abortion.

If the nation's second Catholic president were to be excommunicated, Buttiglione says it would be a "deep wound to the collaboration between church and state in the

United States" that would also have "dramatic consequences on the relations between the United States and the Holy See."

"A priest cannot take such a difficult decision by himself alone," he added. "A bishop cannot take such a decision alone and not even after a consultation with the U.S. bishops' conference. He should consult and have the approval of the pope."

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Abortion as a partisan issue

Looking back on the history of abortion debates in Western Europe, Notre Dame's McGreevy notes that the issue more or less gets resolved after its legalization in the 1970s, with the establishment of some limits on abortion and greater maternal support for women.

"It doesn't become a partisan issue," he said.

By contrast, McGreevy observed, the Supreme Court's "extreme" decision in *Roe* v. *Wade* overruled 50 sets of state laws and "effectively made abortion legal throughout the pregnancy."

"That helped catalyze an anti-abortion, pro-life movement," he said, adding that by 1980, abortion had become a predominantly partisan issue, with Republicans identifying as the pro-life party and Democrats opposing restrictions on abortion.

"If you asked yourself which party is more pro-choice or pro-life in 1975, it wouldn't have been obvious," he said. But 50 years after the legalization of abortion in the United States, "it's become integrated into the partisan, political system and that doesn't seem to have happened in Western Europe and most of Latin America."

That the professional pro-life movement has become allied with one political party in ways that it has not in other countries has only heighted the nature of the Communion debate, said Rowlands of Durham University in England.

While Catholic bishops in the United States regularly attend and speak at events like the March for Life, including this past January when Archbishop Joseph Naumann, chairman of the U.S. bishops' pro-life committee, used his homily at the annual National Prayer Vigil for Life to criticize Biden's support for abortion, in the United

Kingdom the "bishops' conference is not enmeshed in that kind of politics," Rowlands said.

For Rowlands, the close alignment of U.S. bishops with one political party is one reason why the debate among over barring Catholic lawmakers from Communion risks setting a dangerous precedent for Catholic engagement in political life.

"The risk is looking like a form of cooperation and that looks quite dangerous," she said. "The church doesn't align with any single political movement," but instead prefers to speak about an "integrated set of life issues."

**This story has been updated to condense a quotation for clarity, and to update Anna Rowlands' current title.*

This story appears in the **Bishops, Biden and Communion** feature series. View the full series.

A version of this story appeared in the **June 11-24, 2021** print issue under the headline: Bishops denying Communion an 'American' approach.