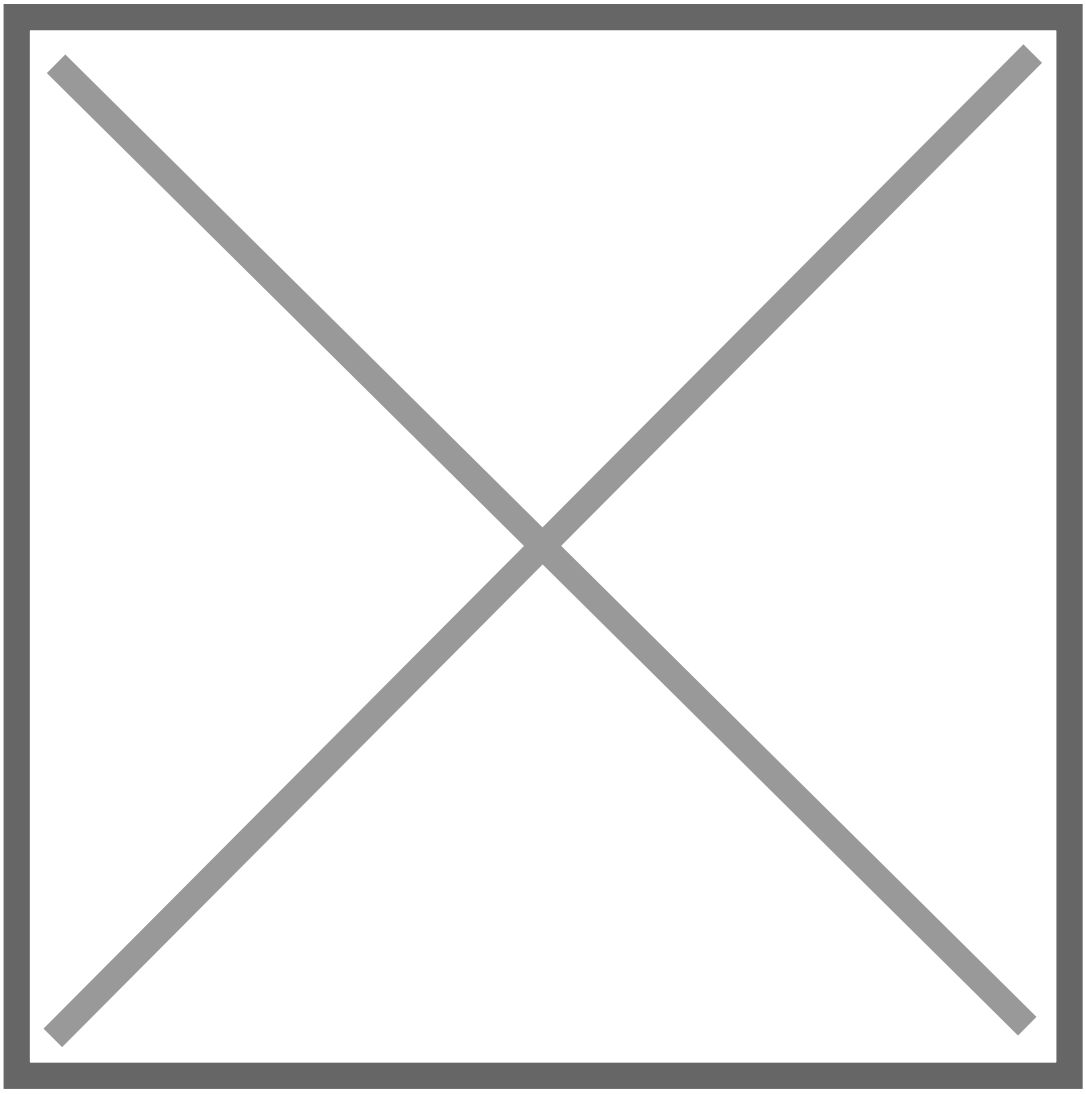
News



Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, is seen in this Nov. 20, 2019, file photo. (CNS/Courtesy Archdiocese of Los Angeles)



Dennis Sadowski

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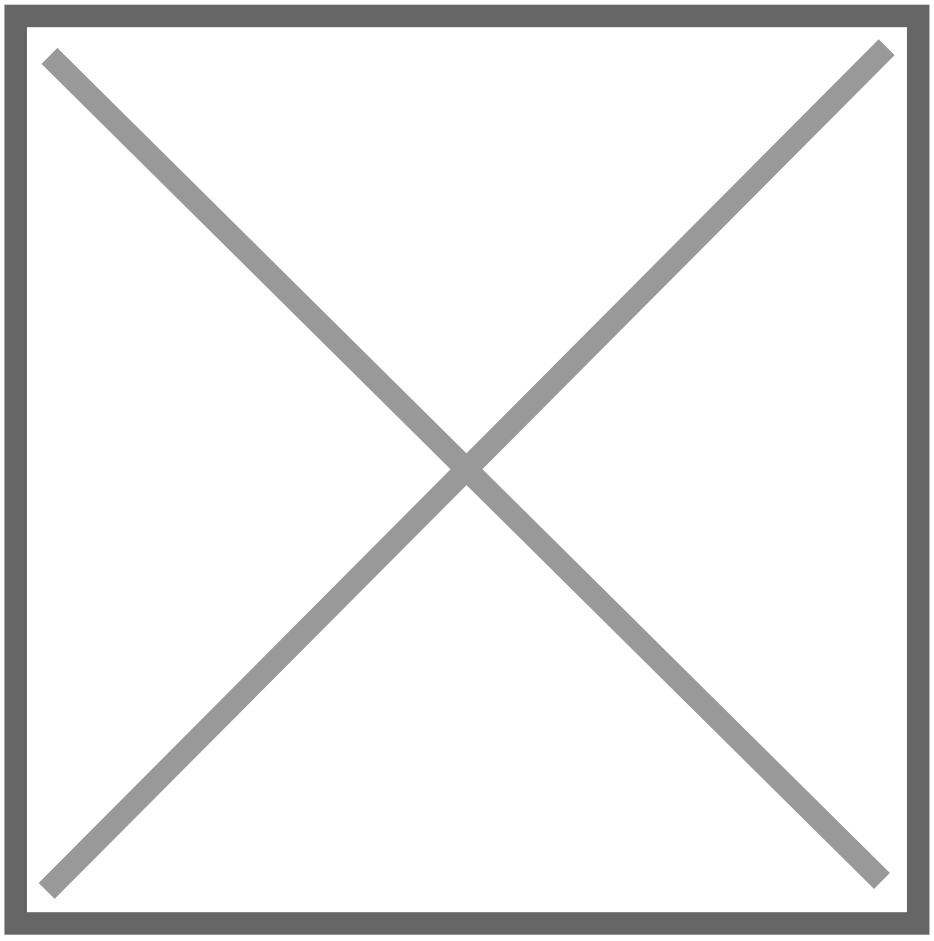
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Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, is seen in this Nov. 20, 2019, file photo. (CNS/Courtesy Archdiocese of Los Angeles)

After receiving an unprecedented letter from 67 bishops appealing for a delay in a discussion during the bishops' upcoming spring general assembly on whether to prepare a teaching document on the reception of Communion, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' president explained in a memo the procedure followed in bringing the question to a vote during the June 16-18 virtual meeting.

The back-and-forth messages follow an increasingly public debate among the bishops about Catholic politicians who support keeping abortion legal and whether they should be denied access to the Eucharist.

In a May 22 memo to fellow bishops, Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles explained that the bishops' Administrative Committee approved a request from Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana, for the discussion on drafting a document to examine the "meaning of the Eucharist in the life of the church."

The Administrative Committee includes conference officers and all of the committee chairmen. It set the spring assembly agenda during its meeting in March.

Rhoades chairs the bishops' Committee on Doctrine, which would draft the document if approved by the full assembly.

Archbishop Gomez's memo came in response to a May 13 letter, which was obtained by Catholic News Service, to him from 67 bishops who asked that any discussion on "eucharistic coherence" be removed from the assembly agenda.

The letter cites May 7 correspondence from Cardinal Luis Ladaria, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the Vatican, to Archbishop Gomez.

The bishops wrote that "we respectfully urge that all conference-wide discussion and committee work on the topic of eucharistic worthiness and other issues raised by the Holy See be postponed until the full body of bishops is able to meet in person."

Four cardinals are among those signing the letter: Cardinal Blase J. Cupich of Chicago, Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory of Washington, Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley of Boston and Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin of Newark, New Jersey.

Gomez said the bishops' conference rules require that the body of bishops first be asked whether to issue a document on a particular topic. Rhoades took such a step

by asking the Administrative Committee to include time on the spring agenda to discuss such a question. The committee agreed.

The process, the memo explained, involves the creation of an "Action Item" for the bishops to consider.

"Importantly, the Action Item does not ask the body to approve a final statement, but only whether drafting of a text may begin," the memo said.

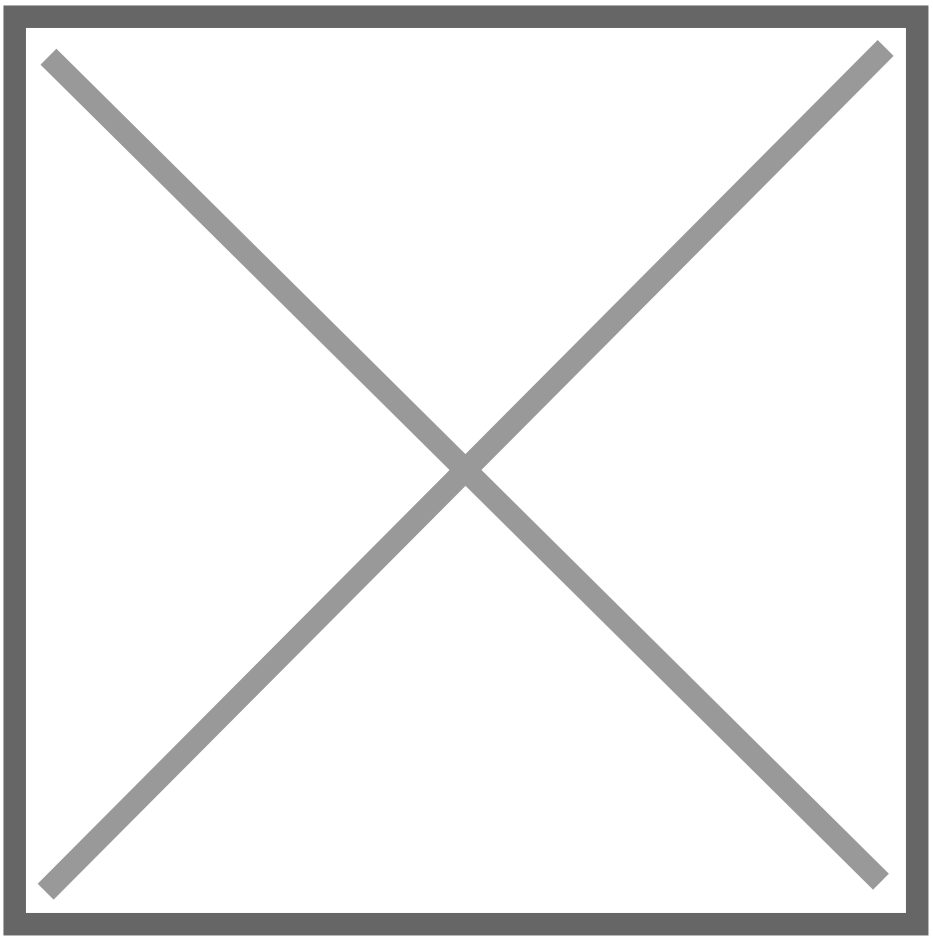
It added that if the action is approved, the doctrine committee would begin its work, subject to the conference's "usual process of consultation, modification and amendment" when presented for consideration at a future general assembly.

"As you will note, the focus of this proposed teaching document is on how best to help people to understand the beauty and mystery of the Eucharist as the center of their Christian lives," the archbishop wrote.

Gomez's memo included a draft, dated May 14, of an outline of a possible document with the proposed title "The Mystery of the Eucharist in the life of the Church: Why It Matters."

It outlines three parts, subtitled "The Eucharist, A Mystery to be Believed," "The Eucharist, A Mystery to be Celebrated" and "The Eucharist: A Mystery to be Lived."

Each part has three topics that would be addressed including, respectively, the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in Communion, unity, beauty and identity as the "fount and apex of the whole Christian life," and moral transformation, eucharistic consistency and missionary discipleship.



A priest holds a host as he concelebrates Mass at St. Agnes Cathedral in Rockville Centre, N.Y., in this 2005 file photo. (CNS/ Long Island Catholic/Gregory A. Shemitz)

The letter from the bishops was sent on letterhead of the Archdiocese of Washington. The archdiocese did not respond to a CNS email seeking comment.

The bishops said the serious nature of "eucharistic worthiness" and other issues raised in Cardinal Ladaria's letter requires the bishops to "forge substantive unity," something which they said is "impossible to address ... productively in the fractured and isolated setting of a distance meeting."

"The high standard of consensus among ourselves and of maintaining unity with the Holy See and the universal church as set forth by Cardinal Ladaria is far from being achieved in the present moment," the prelates wrote.

"Moreover, as the prefect's sound theological and pastoral advice opens a new path for moving forward, we should take this opportunity to reenvision the best collegial

structure for achieving that," the letter said.

Ladaria in his letter urged the U.S. bishops to proceed with caution in their discussions about formulating a national policy "to address the situation of Catholics in public office who support legislation allowing abortion, euthanasia or other moral evils."

The cardinal also reiterated what he had said he had told several groups of U.S. bishops during their 2019-2020 "ad limina" visits, namely that "the effective development of a policy in this area requires that dialogue occurs in two stages: first among the bishops themselves, and then between bishops and Catholic pro-choice politicians within their jurisdictions."

Archbishop John C. Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico, one of the 67 signatories of the letter to Gomez, said the correspondence was not meant to be divisive, but was in fact "in keeping with Cardinal Ladaria's exhortation for an extended and serene dialogue."

"The letter is basically a direct response to Cardinal Ladaria's intervention," Wester told CNS May 26.

"The letter asked Archbishop Gomez to share it with the Administrative Committee. It is trying to use the processes of the conference," Wester said, noting that the Administrative Committee must set the final agenda for the June plenary assembly.

Wester said the letter was "meant to create unity among the bishops" in advocating for a better time to have this discussion. The June meeting will be virtual, which means that 275 bishops will be in a giant Zoom meeting, he said.

The ability to talk both formally and informally with brother bishops is "very, very constrained on Zoom," he noted. The November plenary session of the U.S. bishops' conference is likely to be in person, which Wester thought would be more conducive for the kind of extended discussion envisioned by Ladaria in his letter.

Meanwhile, two archbishops issued statements May 25 in support of keeping the discussion on a possible document focused on the Eucharist on the June general assembly agenda.

Archbishop Samuel J. Aquila of Denver and Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone of San Francisco called for work on a document on eucharistic coherence to continue and

the discussion to take place during the bishops' June spring general assembly.

Gomez has followed the correct procedures to facilitate "this critical discussion as a body of bishops," Aquila said.

Without citing who, Aquila said "there have been some who have misrepresented" what Ladaria's letter said, "but it was clear from it that the USCCB's plan to discuss and debate this important issue is warranted and encouraged."

In contrast," he continued, " the publication of the letter calling for a halt to discussion at our June meeting on this vital issue risks creating an atmosphere of factionalism, rather than unity among the bishops."

Cordileone said he was "deeply grieved by the rising public acrimony among bishops and the adoption of behind-closed-doors maneuvers to interfere with the accepted, normal agreed-upon procedures of the USCCB."

"Those who do not want to issue a document on eucharistic coherence should be open to debating the question objectively and fairly with their brother bishops, rather than attempting to derail the process," Cordileone said.

He said he was looking forward to "serene dialogue," as Ladaria urged in his letter, during the upcoming June general assembly "so that we may discern 'the best way forward for the Church in the United States to witness to the grave moral responsibility of Catholic public officials to protect human life at all stages."

Cordileone issued a pastoral letter May 1 focusing on the unborn, Communion and Catholics in public life. It emphasized that "those who reject the teaching of the church on the sanctity of human life and those who do not seek to live in accordance with that teaching should not receive the Eucharist."

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Contributing to this report was Greg Erlandson in Washington.

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This story appears in the **Bishops, Biden and Communion** and **USCCB Spring Assembly 2021** feature series.