News
Vatican



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Cardinal Peter Turkson, left, is interviewed by Axios journalist Mike Allen, right. (photograph courtesy of HBO)

ROME — U.S. President Joe Biden should not be denied Communion, said Cardinal Peter Turkson, warning that the denial of the sacrament should only take place in "extreme cases."

"The Eucharist should not in any way become a weapon," Turkson said in an interview with AXIOS on HBO, which aired Oct. 3. "If you say somebody cannot receive Communion, you are basically doing a judgment that you are in a state of sin."

When asked directly by journalist Mike Allen if that applied to Biden, only the second Catholic president in U.S. history, Turkson replied "no." In discussing the "extreme cases," Turkson offered an example of a priest denying Communion to a known murderer, which he implied would be a legitimate grounds for denying it.

The Ghanian cardinal's remarks come ahead of a high stakes meeting of U.S. bishops next month where the body is expected to vote on a new document on "eucharistic coherence." The controversial document is being drafted in response to calls from some conservative Catholic bishops to deny Communion to Biden and other Catholic politicians who support legal abortion. The Vatican has previously urged caution on proceeding ahead with such a proposal.

While not directly weighing in on the situation in the United States, Pope Francis said last month that priests and bishops should be pastoral and not political when it comes to the issue of Communion. The pope also said he had never denied the sacrament to anyone.

"What should a shepherd do? Be a shepherd and not going around condemning or not condemning," Francis said. "They must be a shepherd with God's style. And God's style is closeness, compassion and tenderness."

Turkson, who heads the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and works in close collaboration with Pope Francis, went on to address a number of other topics in the wide-ranging interview, including climate change, women's ordination, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, racism and the COVID-19 pandemic. As the two men bounced from topic to topic, they appeared to be talking over each other at various points in the exchange.

"They can and they need to do more," said Turkson of the vaccine distribution efforts of larger, wealthier countries.

The cardinal said he wanted "to encourage heads of state and leaders in Africa to also explore traditional therapies for this," saying that if "local heads of state were to promote local herbal medication, our dependence will not be 100% on vaccines." He did not deny the effectiveness of vaccines.

Turkson is the head of the Vatican's COVID-19 commission, established in April 2020, and has previously argued that the world must reject "vaccine nationalism" and instead embrace a mindset of global solidarity when it comes to vaccine access.

On racism in the Catholic Church, Turkson acknowledged that "certainly, the church can do more."

"There was a time when church institutions owned slaves because it was the turn of the time, as it were," he said.

When asked what the church should do to make up for that, he said that "What is past is past. Reparation if it can be made, can be made. But then it, it's also a call for the resolve to not repeat past errors."

The cardinal said he faces no personal struggles with the church's teaching against ordaining women to the priesthood. He went on to wonder aloud whether it is a question of rights.

"Not even men who are ordained consider that to be a right," he said. When asked his response to the fact that women make up half of the human population, he said that "if anybody would answer that to me and say, 'You're depriving them of rights,' then I would be worried about denying anybody, right? Because to deny anybody's right, it also diminishes dignity."

On Afghanistan, the cardinal said he "is not judging anybody," but looking back to the initial invasion in 2001, he said the "U.S. went in there with vengeance."

"If U.S. had gone in first not even with a militant posture but to talk, we'd be living with a completely different situation now," he added.

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