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Then-Democratic U.S. presidential nominee Joe Biden arrives to attend a morning service at St. Joseph's on the Brandywine Catholic Church in Greenville, Del., Sept. 20, 2020. Church observers had speculated Biden and other Catholic politicians who support legal abortion would be banned from receiving Communion in a statement on the Eucharist from the U.S. bishops. But such sanctions were not part of the document they approved during their fall general assembly in Baltimore. (CNS/Reuters/Mark Makela)



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Communion was a big topic in the Catholic Church this year, after the U.S. bishops initiated a discussion about the sacrament at their June meeting and then overwhelmingly approved a statement on it five months later.

But in the months in between, there was plenty of speculation about what the statement might say, specifically about denying Communion to Catholic politicians who support abortion.

Ultimately, the document did not call out these Catholic political leaders. Instead, it highlighted the seriousness of the sacrament frequently described as a gift to the church.

Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana, told the bishops Nov. 16 during their fall assembly in Baltimore that the statement, "The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church," is addressed to all Catholics in the United States and "endeavors to explain the centrality of the Eucharist in the life of the church."

The bishop, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Doctrine, which drafted the statement, also said this work was meant to be a theological contribution to the bishops' upcoming eucharistic revival "by providing a doctrinal resource for parishes, catechists and the faithful."

The eucharistic revival, which begins next year and will end with a National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis in 2024, will feature eucharistic processions and other events of adoration and resources for parishes to increasing Catholics' understanding of what the Eucharist really means.

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Part of the impetus for both the statement on the Eucharist and the eucharistic revival was a Pew study in the fall of 2019 that showed just 30 percent of Catholics understand the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

This study, which some have faulted for its wording, struck a nerve with many U.S. bishops, who described this lack of understanding as a catechetical crisis.

"This should be a wake-up call to all of us in the church," said Auxiliary Bishop Robert E. Barron of Los Angeles, founder of the Catholic evangelization organization Word on Fire, soon after the survey was published.

John Grabowski, associate professor of moral theology and ethics at The Catholic University of America, told Catholic News Service this summer he hoped efforts by

the bishops, including the planned eucharistic revival, "can move the needle in a significant way so that more than just one-third of Catholics in the United States recognize the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist."

He said he viewed the Pew survey as a way to ultimately help Catholics, because the results provide an opportunity for the church to respond.

A few months before the bishops' document was presented, Timothy O'Malley, director of education at the McGrath Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame, told CNS: "If you pay attention to what the bishops are saying to recent revisions and outlines of drafts of the document, you don't see it 'being sort of political.'

"This is the source and summit of our faith. It's the source and summit of our commitment to the world and to each other," he said about Communion.

And in its final form, the bishops' statement, which is full of references from Scripture, prayers of the church and Second Vatican Council documents, specifically references this "source and summit of the Christian life" description of the Eucharist from the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church").

The bishops' statement also notes that, as Catholics understand what the Eucharist means, they should more fully participate in Mass and also reach out to serve those in need, citing the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which says: "The Eucharist commits us to the poor."

Toward the end, the statement mentions how Catholics should show reverence in receiving the Eucharist and also recognize that if they have "knowingly and obstinately" rejected the doctrines of the church or its teaching on moral issues, they should refrain from receiving Communion because it is "likely to cause scandal for others."

This section, while pointing out the seriousness of receiving the sacrament, does not specifically say the bishops will deny Communion to public officials, a topic that gained momentum among some bishops after the election of President Joe Biden, the second Catholic to be elected president.

A working group of bishops formed right after Biden's election said there needed to be a document "addressed to all of the Catholic faithful on eucharistic coherence."

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As speculation increased during the year about the possibility of Biden being denied Communion over his support of legal abortion, a reporter asked the president after his Oct. 29 meeting with Pope Francis if this was discussed.

"We just talked about the fact he was happy that I was a good Catholic, and I should keep receiving Communion," Biden responded.

The pope, during a flight from Bratislava, Slovakia, Sept. 15, was asked about the possibility of U.S. bishops denying Communion to Catholic politicians who support abortion.

Pope Francis said that while there is no question that "abortion is homicide," bishops must take a pastoral approach rather than wade into the political sphere.

His message echoed what Cardinal Luis Ladaria, prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, told the bishops in a letter sent to them prior to their spring meeting.

Cardinal Ladaria urged the bishops to proceed with caution in developing a national policy "to address the situation of Catholics in public office who support legislation allowing abortion, euthanasia or other moral evils."

During that June meeting, which took place virtually due to the pandemic, some bishops said a strong rebuke of Biden should be included in their Communion statement, while others warned that this would portray them as partisan.

Their more subdued discussion during the November meeting about the Communion document was likely due to the work the bishops had put into the document between June and November.

Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori said the initial discussion about the Communion document was a valuable one that led the bishops to "what kind of a document we actually needed and wanted, and it emerged clearly, for me at least, that it was to

be pastoral document."

The lack of intense debate about the document during the November meeting didn't surprise Bishop John E. Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, who saw it already "moving in that direction."

He said there was a desire among the bishops for unity and that their executive session before the public sessions gave them the chance to discuss and work things out among themselves.

Archbishop Lori said that even though the issue of possibly denying Communion to Catholic politicians was highlighted in the media, the bishops' statement was much broader.

"This had an eminently pastoral intent and it deals with the question of worthiness to receive holy Communion in a way that applies to all of us," he said.

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