News



A priest prepares to distribute Communion during Mass in Washington in this 2011 photo. (CNS/Bob Roller)



by Katie Collins Scott

Former Staff Reporter

View Author Profile
kcscott@ncronline.org

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Susan Doty still remembers vividly her first Communion. She'd mistakenly eaten a piece of chocolate before the sacrament and felt certain God would punish her as she consumed the consecrated host. The 81-year-old recalls spending the remainder of Mass thanking Jesus for being merciful.

Over the next 75 years, Doty said, she's participated in the Liturgy of the Eucharist without distress — until earlier this month.

The Colorado Catholic was one of two women who say a priest denied them Communion when they wore rainbow masks to a Feb. 11 Mass at All Souls Parish in Englewood, a city just south of Denver.

"I was trying not to cry as I walked back to my pew," Doty told NCR. "I couldn't believe what just happened."



Susan Doty said a priest at All Souls Parish in Englewood, Colorado, denied her and another woman Communion Feb. 11. (Courtesy of Susan Doty)

Doty — a former Regis University professor who holds a doctorate in Scripture and a master's degree in theology — said the rainbow face coverings were intended "to show empathy and compassion" for Maggie Barton, who the Denver Archdiocese fired from her teaching job last month at All Souls School after learning she was in a same-sex relationship.

"Our purpose was not to be disruptive in any way because it's the Mass," said Doty. "But when I pulled down my mask and held out my hands for Communion, the priest shook his head 'no.' "

The priest was All Souls' parochial vicar, Doty said.

NCR contacted the parish for comment and was directed to the archdiocese. In response to several questions, Kelly Clark, archdiocesan spokesperson, emailed NCR a statement previously shared with secular news outlets:

> Anyone who considers themselves a lifelong Catholic knows that the communion line is not the place for any political statement, especially when such statements highlight that the person is not in communion with Christ. If anyone believes they were wrongly denied communion, we encourage them to speak to the pastor of their church who, unlike secular media, is better equipped to answer their concerns and help them be brought back into communion.

Canon 912 of the church's Code of Canon Law states that "any baptized person not prohibited by law can and must be admitted to holy Communion." Canon 915 says those "obstinately persevering in manifest grave sin are not to be admitted to holy Communion."

Related: Pope Francis says he has never denied Communion, warns against politicizing Eucharist

Elizabeth Sweeny Block, an associate professor of Christian ethics at St. Louis University, believes wearing a rainbow mask was "a quiet, respectful form of solidarity with Maggie Barton."

"It is difficult to see how one could classify the wearing of masks on this one occasion as 'obstinately persevering in manifest grave sin,' " said Block, who is writing a book on conscience, social sin and moral agency. "If in their consciences these mask-wearing women believed they were being faithful to their relationship with God, how can anyone argue otherwise? How did the priest know their intentions? There is no prohibition against wearing rainbow attire at Mass."



Elizabeth Sweeny Block, an associate professor of Christian ethics at St. Louis University, said the Eucharist should not be weaponized. (Courtesy of Elizabeth Sweeny Block)

> 'When did we become so perfect that we can judge others' faithfulness and ability to receive the Eucharist?'
> —Elizabeth Sweeny Block
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Ultimately, "the Eucharist should never be weaponized — period," Block said. "When did we become so perfect that we can judge others' faithfulness and ability to receive the Eucharist? The Eucharist unifies and heals."

Most discussions around denying Communion in recent years have been related to Catholic politicians who publicly affirm legal abortion, with some bishops deciding such individuals cannot receive the sacrament.

Whether it involves a pro-choice politician or women supporting a fired teacher, "denial of Communion disrespects the person's conscience, which the church teaches is sacred and inviolable," Block said.

Doty, Jill Moore, 64; Cindy Grubenhoff, 48; and Sally Odenheimer, 71, wore masks with multicolored horizontal stripes to the Mass at All Souls Church. Odenheimer had invited the friends to wear LGBTQ-supportive attire to the Mass after she'd learned of Barton's firing.

Their intention, said Doty, was to support Barton and members of the parish and school who have rallied around the teacher.

"We wanted them to know they weren't alone, that we were there with them," she said.

Denver Archbishop Samuel Aquila speaks at a March 12, 2022, pro-life rally in Denver.

Denver Archbishop Samuel Aquila speaks at a March 12, 2022, pro-life rally in Denver. Aquila a few years ago approved diocesan guidelines for Denver Catholic schools that address sexual orientation and gender identity (CNS/courtesy Denver Catholic)

Barton taught technology at All Souls for the past six years and said she lost her job Jan. 26 after she was told the Denver Archdiocese — headed by Archbishop Samuel Aquila — had obtained a photo of her kissing a woman, according to The Denver Post.

A statement issued by the archdiocese said it was necessary to "conclude the teacher's employment because she did not honor the commitments she agreed to in her contract."

All teachers in the archdiocese's schools sign a contract at the start of each year, said the statement, and in it they pledge to personally exemplify "the characteristics of Catholic living," which includes, "refraining from taking any public position or conducting himself or herself in a manner that is contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church."

Block said Catholic schools often are well within their legal rights to terminate teachers whose behaviors appear to violate church teaching.

"It is clear that Catholic schools pick and choose, though, focusing primarily on sexuality and gender," she said. "Morally, this is highly problematic. The message it sends to our children is that we do not welcome the marginalized; instead, we continue to discriminate against and exclude anyone who differs from us."

Block said it also teaches children that the most important thing about a person is their sexual orientation. "Barton taught at this school for six years, a substantial length of time," she said. "To fire her renders unimportant the goods of community relationship, and solidarity that ought to be front and center in a Catholic school."

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A few years ago, Aquila approved guidelines for Denver Catholic schools that address sexual orientation and gender identity. It is one of the most far-reaching such documents of the more than 30 approved by dioceses across the United States, and unlike most others it addresses same-sex relationships in detail.

Enrolling a child of a same-sex couple at a Catholic school "is likely to lead to intractable conflicts," says the Denver document. If a child of a same-sex couple is enrolled, the "school should make clear that it can recognize a couple that is a mother and a father for the child, but cannot recognize 'two mothers' or 'two fathers' as a family structure."

Doty said she donned the rainbow mask not only to support Barton and her allies, but also to honor her late brother, who was gay.

"I did this partially for Timmy; he suffered a lot because he was gay and Catholic," said Doty, adding she hopes Aquila might "reconsider his point of view" about LGBTQ people "because of all the feedback around this incident."

"I don't know if that's possible," she said. "But my hope endures."

A version of this story appeared in the **March 17-30, 2023** print issue under the headline: Denver-area Catholic women say priest denied them Communion over rainbow masks.