

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 16, 2009 at 8:55am

Sebelius, Abortion & Health Care

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NCR Today

Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius gave an interview with the Washington Post in which she discussed her being barred from receiving communion in her home archdiocese. Whatever you think of Archbishop Naumann's decision, and I think it was wrong, it is difficult to accept Sebelius' justification for her pro-choice position as Governor of Kansas.

Well, it [being barred from communion] was one of the most painful things I have ever experienced in my life, and I am a firm believer in the separation of church and state, and I feel that my actions as a parishioner are different than my actions as a public official and that the people who elected me in Kansas had a right to expect me to uphold their rights and their beliefs even if they did not have the same religious beliefs that I had. And that's what I did: I took an oath of office and I have taken an oath of office in this job and will uphold the law.

I will grant that as governor, Sebelius thought that the views of her fellow Kansans had a claim upon her veto, just as those views have a claim on the votes of legislators. But, no one but she has a claim on her own voice. If Sebelius had said, "Look, this is the law of the land and I took an oath to enforce the laws," surely she was obligated nonetheless to try and change any laws she thought were unjust. Did she give a speech at a Democratic Party convention saying the party's commitment to abortion rights was wrong? Liberal Democrats are quick to invoke the 25th Chapter of the Gospel of Matthew "whatever you do for this the least of my brethren, you did for me" as inspiring their commitment to social justice. So, how is it legitimate to jump over the wall of church-state separation on behalf of aid to the poor but to decline the jump on behalf of the unborn?

There is as much cognitive dissonance in Sebelius' stand as there is in that of her Archbishop who recently issued a pastoral letter that applies the Church's social teaching to the issue of health care reform

in a manner that is at best highly selective. But, at least Sebelius gets higher marks than her former archbishop on one point. When the reporter tried to get her to distinguish her position from that of the President, she demurred. When you join an administration, once decisions have been reached, everybody needs to be on board. Archbishop Naumann ignored decades of effort by his brother bishops, acting as a body, when he issued a pastoral letter that could not have been better designed to undercut those brother bishops if that had been its sole motivation.

I hope Sebelius thinks more deeply about the relationship between religion and politics because her reply is so unsatisfying. But, that lack of satisfaction should not cause the rest of us to lose sight of the fact that she re-stated the administration's commitment to achieving a final health care bill that does not fund abortion. The rightwingers in the Church have echoed the claim first made by Professor Robert George that Obama is the "most pro-abortion president in history," a claim made with precious little in the way of factual support. If the President enacts health insurance that does not fund abortion, I hope that George and his followers will have the decency to applaud and to lay aside their baseless claim.

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