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Politicizing Communion harms interests of the church

Thomas P. Melady | Mar. 26, 2009

It was only a few decades ago that no one questioned a fellow Catholic?s decision either to receive or not to receive the Eucharist. This tradition has been slowly and regrettably compromised over the past 20 years. Holy Communion has become, in some circles, a political football.

The trend is unmistakable:

- The vice president of the United States was told by the bishop of his native city that he should not present himself for Communion there. The full body of the U.S. bishops at its general meeting in November 2007 approved an election guide called ?Faithful Citizenship? intended for all U.S. Catholics. However, the bishop of the vice president?s diocese said he did not regard it as ?official.?
- A former Republican official is circulating a petition among Catholics urging all bishops to bar Gov. Kathleen Sebelius of Kansas, President Obama?s nominee to head the Department of Health and Human Services, from receiving Communion in every diocese in the country, including Washington.
- Most recently, disturbing statements have been made severely criticizing the archbishop of Washington and the bishop of Arlington, Va., because they refuse to politicize the Eucharist. A few individuals claiming to be ?courageous and dedicated Catholics? have publicly criticized these two fine shepherds for allegedly violating their responsibilities to respect the sanctity of holy Communion. How disappointing it is when there is every appearance that the motives of those criticizing these bishops are political.

I?ve had some personal experience with those who question the motives instead of the ideas of their political opponents.

Column by Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estes: Political Catholicism vs. Christ?s Catholicism[1]

In the early stages of the 2008 presidential election, a few of us noticed the bitter tones being used by some Catholics to describe several prominent candidates. They were openly referred to as ?baby killers.? A friend and I coauthored a statement on civility, which called on both sides of the partisan aisles to be frank, candid and forceful in their analysis of the candidates, emphasizing, however, that a respectful tone ought to be used in presenting their findings in the public square.

The statement was warmly greeted by many, though my wife Margaret (who authored a book on Pope John Paul II) and I were publicly informed by one rabid partisan that we were ?damned to hell? for advocating civility in

the discussion of these issues.

I fear that the situation is getting out of control. Many had hoped that once the presidential elections took place, Republicans, especially Catholic Republicans, would practice engagement with the Obama administration and those on the other side of the political aisle ? that we would present our ideas without the rabid emotionalism that serves only to question the integrity of our opponents. Our role, in the best traditions of a pluralistic democracy, would be that of the loyal opposition.

Pope Benedict XVI modeled this sort of behavior when he met in mid-February with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a Catholic who favors abortion rights. The Holy Father spoke clearly and candidly in calling the Speaker?s attention to the responsibilities of Catholic public officials to support Catholic teachings on life. There was no mention of not being allowed to receive Communion.

Likewise, when Benedict visited the United States last year, a few partisan activists wanted the Holy Father to forbid a select few Catholic members of Congress who attended the papal Mass from receiving the Eucharist. That, of course, did not occur.

As a lifelong Republican, I am concerned by the actions of a few party activists who claim that the Republican Party is the only party appropriate for Catholics. Their method has been to involve a few Catholic prelates in criticizing Democratic candidates. This small group of lay Catholic Republicans is actively campaigning to pressure the bishops with petitions to ban certain high Democratic officials from receiving Communion. This is not their responsibility.

Bishops, like all citizens, have the right and duty to engage in public debate on all issues. But the activity of a very few is harming the influence of a majority of bishops who are seeking to engage the opposition in a civil manner. When these actions are combined with those of a few lay Catholics who use the church?s teachings to achieve political goals, it harms the long-term interests of the church.

I suggest that we carefully study and follow the official position of the U.S. Catholic bishops as pronounced in their November 2007 statement on ?Faithful Citizenship.?

Further, I urge all American Catholics to look to the inspiration of Pope John Paul II. The Holy Father was very clear on the teachings of the church when it came to the life issues and to questions of marriage. He was, however, never uncivil or negative in describing individuals who were not following the teachings of Christ in these matters.

He set a high standard for civility and human decency. It is one we should all aim to emulate.

Dr. Thomas Patrick Melady is the former U.S. ambassador to the Vatican. He was also ambassador to Burundi and Uganda. The president emeritus of Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Conn., he also served in the administrations of three Republican presidents.

The companion essay to this commentary is **Civility, respect should be our aim** [2] by Nicholas P. Cafardi .

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