

Why Bishop Tobin is Truly Wrong

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 23, 2009 NCR Today

Bishop Tobin and Congressman Kennedy are engaged in an unseemly public spat. We now know that in 2007, the bishop of Providence told Kennedy that he should refrain from presenting himself for communion because of his pro-choice position on abortion. That edict was not publicized until now and Tobin says that he did not even share the information with any other pastors.

I cannot bring myself to defend Congressman Kennedy. I think his explanations for maintaining a pro-choice stance are among the worst I have ever heard, a tired re-hashing of arguments put forth better, but unconvincingly, by Governor Mario Cuomo in 1984. Even if a congressman or a governor thinks that representative democracy demands that they exercise their vote and their veto in a manner that accords with the wishes of their constituents, they have an obligation to raise their voice on behalf of the unborn and try and convince their constituents, and their fellow Democrats, that we got the abortion issue wrong in the 1970s.

But, I do wish to defend our Church's theology of the Eucharist. Just before we approach the altar, we say, "Lord I am not worthy to receive you?" (Actually, I usually attend Latin Mass so I say, "Domine, non sum dignus?") None of us is worthy to receive the Eucharist which is why it and the other sacraments are called grace. The posture of those who wish to employ Canon 915 in the manner first suggested by Archbishop Burke in 2004 and now by Bishop Tobin suggests that receiving communion is a kind of reward for a good voting record. The argument that people are confused about the Church's teaching because pro-choice politicians receive communion is lame: Everyone knows what the Church teaches about the immorality of abortion.

Tobin and others who seek to deny communion to politicians based on their voting records fail to appreciate the difference between procuring abortion and voting to keep it legal. Congressman Kennedy is not an abortionist. And while we may disagree with his position, certainly it is not difficult to think of a variety of reasons why, in a pluralistic culture such as ours, a member of Congress would think that there is no practical way to apply the Church's teaching in civil law without violating other important principles.

The key issue here is not the role of bishops in politics, nor the relative role of abortion in the hierarchy of values Catholics should hold, nor the obligations of a Catholic legislator. The key issue is the Eucharist and whether or not it should be politicized. The bishops, quite rightly, refuse communion to those who approach communion wearing rainbow sashes because the sash-wearers are trying to turn the most sacred rite of the Church into a political statement. But, it is just as wrong to introduce politics from the other side of the altar rail.

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