

Rightwing Attacks New SF Bishop

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 8, 2010 | Distinctly Catholic

It didn't take long for the [more extreme elements](#) [1] in the pro-life movement to criticize the appointment Tuesday of Msgr. Robert McElroy as an auxiliary bishop of San Francisco. Bishop-elect McElroy's sin? He wrote [an article in America magazine](#) [2] pointing out the unfortunate consequences of denying communion to politicians who are pro-choice.

McElroy's article is an exemplary examination of the issue, which first raised itself during the 2004 election when such prominent prelates as Archbishops John Myers of Newark and Raymond Burke of St. Louis voiced their support for such restrictions. He starts by acknowledging that the fact that so many Catholics do not support the Church's teaching on abortion: "The continuing decision of American Catholic politicians and voters to contravene the tenets of their faith is a major failure in church life." And, he goes further, stating better than those who advocate the policy, the benefit it would yield: "Sanctions will function as a moral call to arms, by which individual Catholics will be forced to choose whether they value more their Catholic faith or the political/philosophical commitments that tie them to political action supporting abortion. The denial of the Eucharist will say in a unique manner that the church cannot continue to be a house divided any longer, half pro-life and half pro-choice."

I do not believe that the Church is as divided on abortion as that sentence seems to suggest. Most of the progressive Catholics I know find abortion deeply abhorrent, but they do not see a way to legislate that abhorrence in any effective way. They recognize that if *Roe v. Wade* were overturned tomorrow, almost every state in the nation would rather quickly codify its provisions. And, if through some miracle, a constitutional amendment were to pass making abortion illegal, it would not take long for the stories of back alley abortions to push the debate back towards the liberal abortion laws we currently have.

The fact that the bishops who are most vocal on the issue often have no idea what they are talking about was amply demonstrated last year when Bishop Thomas Tobin of Providence appeared on [MSNBC's ?Hardball](#) [3]. (If you never watched the clip, take the time to do so. It is like watching a trainwreck.) Tobin has gotten himself involved in a tussle with Rhode Island's Congressman Patrick Kennedy, whom the bishop had asked to stop going to communion. The host, Chris Matthews, repeatedly asked Tobin what kind of pro-life laws he was advocating, did he think women who procured abortions should go to jail? Should the doctors? After all, if abortion is murder, why not treat those who procure them as murderers? The bishop protested that he was not a legislator and so it was not his job to craft the necessary legislation, but Matthews pointed out that Tobin was criticizing Kennedy for his support of bad laws, not for writing a theological treatise. It was one of the most embarrassing interviews with a public figure I have ever watched.

McElroy cites four "unintended consequences" of denying politicians communion because of their political stances. First, the denial of communion will be perceived as coercive. He shot down the oft-stated but thoroughly erroneous belief that such sanctions would raise church-state issues: The Church has every right to set its own membership rules. But, he noted that the Church in America "all the churches actually" have, in the interest of civil peace, pledged themselves to persuasion not coercion. "What does matter enormously is that

Americans will in general recoil from the use of the Eucharist as a political weapon, and will reassess their overall opinion of the church's role in the political order," wrote McElroy.

Second, "Eucharistic sanctions will further identify abortion as a sectarian Catholic issue and thus play into the hands of those who falsely accuse the pro-life movement of imposing specifically religious tenets upon the American people." There is a dualistic assumption at work in McElroy's observation, but he is a devoted follower of John Courtney Murray, S.J. so this is to be expected. But, McElroy is undeniably correct that even at the level of pragmatic strategy, turning abortion into a "Catholic issue" is a recipe for disaster.

Third, McElroy rightly asserts that any sanctions policy would result in a "reductionism" of the Church's integral, comprehensive social teachings. He notes that "the sanctions movement has already made clear that it advances a two-tier notion of political imperatives for Catholics, one that centers upon life issues and another for all other political and social questions. The life issues will be deemed essential to the fullness of Catholic faith and thus to participation in the Eucharist; all other issues—including war and issues of economic justice, over which the United States exercises unparalleled influence because of its political and economic power—will be relegated to secondary status." Such a division of the Church's teachings was explicitly rejected by Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical "Caritas in Veritate."

Finally, Bishop-elect McElroy argued that the adoption of the sanctions policy would cast the Church in an explicitly partisan role. He laments the fact that neither party enjoys the moral consistency of the Church. "Republican political leaders in the United States are more reflective of the church's stance on abortion, euthanasia, cloning and marriage, while Democratic political leaders are more likely to reflect Catholic values on issues pertaining to war and peace, the poor, the death penalty and the environment," McElroy wrote. "Such a schism in our political culture places Catholic voters who wish to follow church teaching in a very difficult position."

Of course, all this is heresy to the people at LifeSiteNews. They mistakenly said that the sanctions policy is "the Catholic Church policy" when, in fact, it is a minority position held by at most a dozen U.S. bishops. They say that according to Archbishop Burke, now the head of the Apostolic Signatura in Rome, bishops have "no choice" but to deny communion to politicians that do not "wait, politicians that do not do what" Burke, like Tobin, is never very precise about what the law should be. Does he support imprisoning women who procure abortions? Does he think that will work?

It goes without saying that the Apostolic Nuncio was aware of McElroy's writings when he submitted his name to the Vatican Congregation for Bishops. (In addition to the article on communion, McElroy wrote [an article](#) [4] arguing that the Iraq War did not meet the criteria of Just War theory and calling for a withdrawal of U.S. troops.) As well, when McElroy wrote his article on communion, his archbishop in San Francisco was then-Archbishop, now Cardinal, William Levada. But, if you write for LifeSiteNews, you know that the magisterium of the Church is wherever you want it to be, and that usually it is found on the Platform Committee of the Republican Party.

McElroy strikes me as a thoughtful and highly intelligent man, one who does not distort a differing opinion in order to shoot it down, and who understands that a pastor has many arrows in his quiver and should not lightly have recourse to something so drastic, and so at odds with our tradition, as denying communion to politicians. The fact that he failed to garner the Good Housekeeping seal from LifeSiteNews is a badge of honor.

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