

# **Bishop McElroy: Denial of Communion to pro-choice politicians by bishops' conference would be 'destructive'**

Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego told a virtual panel Monday that it would be “destructive” for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to move to deny holy Communion to pro-choice Catholic politicians such as President Joe Biden.

“I do not see how depriving the president or other political leaders of the Eucharist based on their public policy stance can be interpreted in our society as anything other than a weaponization of the Eucharist,” said Bishop McElroy, who argued that such a move would cast the bishops' conference as partisan.

“The conference has no right role in this,” Bishop McElroy said, adding that the matter of giving or denying Communion was a matter for the president's local bishop, Cardinal Wilton Gregory of Washington, D.C.

The bishop made his comments during a virtual dialogue, hosted by Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life, on how best to promote Catholic principles in a divided Church and nation. Biden's reception of Communion has been a topic of much debate even before his inauguration. In October 2019, Biden was denied Communion while attending Mass during a campaign stop in South Carolina – a move that [drew a wide range of opinions within the Church](#).

While not addressing the matter of whether pro-choice politicians like Biden should be given Communion, fellow

panelist Helen Helen Alvaré, a professor at the Scalia Law School at George Mason University, emphasized that the Church in its 2,000-year history has held that abortion is the direct taking of innocent life.

“If so, that has to be reacted to with special horror,” said Alvaré, who noted that bishops in the past excommunicated Catholics for refusing to desegregate schools during the Civil Rights era. Where Catholics can have differences of opinion on prudential matters in public policy, Alvaré stressed that abortion, by its very nature, is seriously different.

“As a Church of reason and faith, we’re going to owe it to our people to be even more clear than usual to say our teachings are exactly what is required to promote actual freedom, actual love, actual compassion,” Alvaré said.

Against a backdrop of growing political polarization that culminated in the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol, Bishop McElroy, Alvaré and other panelists spoke about the need to seek common ground, dialogue and political engagement while not ignoring disagreements over fundamental issues such as the right to life, marriage, family, gender and human sexuality.

“We have to find a way to work together to advance values we share, and to contain some of the differences over priorities and approaches,” said John Carr, the founder and co-director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life.

Carr, who served for more than two decades as director of Justice, Peace, and Human Development for the USCCB, said the country’s Catholic community needs to focus on being “principled but not ideological” and “civil but not silent,” while engaging in dialogue without being used by any side.

Carr also commented on the divisions in the American Church, which rose to the surface on Jan. 20, the day of Biden’s inauguration, when Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago criticized as “ill-considered” [Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez’s statement](#) where Gomez, acting in his capacity as president of

the bishops' conference, underscored Biden's positions on abortion, contraception, marriage and gender.

"At the very moment when we should be coming together to make our case for human life and dignity, we were showcasing our divisions," said Carr, who later suggested that Catholics should be trying to persuade people, "not just condemn them." Carr added, "We need to spend a lot more time talking about the humanity of the unborn child and less on whether Joe Biden can go to Communion."

Alvaré told the Georgetown panel that the nation's bishops are sophisticated and realistic when dealing with politicians, as they support every presidential administration in some areas while challenging them in others.

But when dealing with a president such as Biden, the nation's second Catholic president who often speaks about his faith but holds public positions at odds with the Church's moral teachings, Alvaré said that Catholics who take seriously those teachings want to know that his local bishop will have those conversations with him.

"Tell us you're doing it, and tell us you're having that pastoral interaction," said Alvaré, who added that Biden would have to be "theologically corrected" in public if he or his administration couched his positions on issues such as the contraceptive mandate or codifying *Roe v. Wade* in religious terms.

"We're not going to escape the differences and arguments," said Alvaré, a member of the Vatican Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life who advises the USCCB. "There's not going to be unity" on some matters, said Alvaré, who added: "There's going to be respectful dialogue. I think that's what we can hope for."

Anne Thompson, who covers the Catholic Church and is the chief environmental affairs correspondent for NBC News, told the

Georgetown panel that she sees “much more opportunities” for dialogue between Biden and Pope Francis, who she said always looks for common ground with political leaders.

“The discussion over abortion and contraception and same-sex marriage has become so fraught and so angry that it seems people aren’t looking for common ground. They just seem to be yelling at each other all the time,” said Thompson, a practicing Catholic who added that while that approach might make for a good newspaper story, it doesn’t “do a whole lot of good” for people of faith.

Said Thompson: “How do you get beyond the yelling? I think that’s the challenge for the Catholic Church today.”

*Brian Fraga is a contributing editor for Our Sunday Visitor.*