

# **Prelate: 'Mortal sin' to give communion to pro-choice politician: Archbishop Raymond Burke of St. Louis**

News in the [October 16, 2007](#) issue

A U.S. Catholic archbishop is urging priests and lay eucharistic ministers to deny communion to politicians who support abortion rights, arguing that it's a "mortal sin" to offer the sacrament to "the unworthy."

Archbishop Raymond Burke of St. Louis, a veteran of clashes between Catholic bishops and politicians, has attempted for years to enlist fellow bishops in denying communion to wayward politicians.

Now the conservative cleric is placing the responsibility to safeguard the sacrament on the lay and ordained Catholics who distribute communion.

Drawing on the works of the late Italian Jesuit scholar Felice Cappello, Burke says those ministers are "held, under pain of mortal sin, to deny the sacraments to the unworthy." That argument could place communion ministers on the frontlines of the "wafer wars" as the 2008 presidential race heats up and as bishops debate a document on "faithful citizenship."

"It is clear that church discipline places an obligation on the minister of Holy Communion to refuse Holy Communion to persons known, by the public, to be in mortal sin," Burke writes in *Periodica de re Canonica*, a prestigious journal widely read in seminaries and published by Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University, an elite school for Catholic clergy.

"No matter how often a bishop or priest repeats the teaching of the church regarding procured abortion, if he stands by and does nothing to discipline a Catholic who publicly supports legislation permitting the gravest of injustices, and,

at same time, presents himself to receive Holy Communion, then his teachings ring hollow,” Burke writes.

A former top official in the Signatura, the Vatican’s high court, and a noted expert in canon law, Burke has previously kicked off public debates over policing the communion rail. While bishop of La Crosse, Wisconsin, he ordered clergy to refuse to offer the sacrament to certain pro-choice politicians.

In 2004, Burke and a handful of other bishops said they would refuse communion to then presidential hopeful Senator John Kerry (D., Mass.). Burke also said Catholics who voted for pro-choice politicians such as Kerry should refrain from taking the sacrament until they confessed their “mortal sin.”

In his new article, the archbishop explicitly criticizes his fellow bishops, the majority of whom voted in 2004 to leave the communion decision up to individual bishops.

Burke retorts: “The question regarding the objective state of Catholic politicians who knowingly and willingly hold opinions contrary to natural moral law would hardly seem to change from place to place.”

Richard John Neuhaus, editor of the influential conservative journal *First Things*, called Burke’s article “a scholarly tour de force.” A former Lutheran who became a Catholic priest, Neuhaus said, “The [archbishop’s] concern is not a political concern. The article is about, How does the church preserve the sanctity of the Holy Eucharist?”

But Burke’s article is ambiguous in some areas, said Thomas Reese, a senior fellow at Georgetown University’s Woodstock Theological Center.

If Burke is calling on communion ministers to disobey their bishops and deny communion to Catholic politicians, it would be “revolutionary” and “encourage anarchy,” Reese said.

“Most bishops do not want ministers of communion playing policeman at the communion rail,” he added.

“This is a significant change in focus. Suddenly you’re going to have a few thousand decision makers in parishes across the country.” –*Religion News Service*