

Kerry may survive Rome's hard line: Two bishops say Communion shouldn't be withheld

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Although a leading Vatican cardinal states that Catholic teaching is clear about denying communion to a politician who supports abortion rights, two key U.S. bishops say withholding the sacrament from a dissenting Catholic like Massachusetts Senator John Kerry is not a likely option.

Kerry, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, has been able to receive the communion elements so far. And Bishop Wilton Gregory, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said in Rome that barring participation to a pro-choice Catholic political figure should be the last resort considered. Speaking to Catholic News Service, Gregory said, "In the nature of the church, the imposition of sanctions is always the final response, not the first response, nor the second or maybe even the 10th."

Gregory made the remarks April 23, the same day that Cardinal Francis Arinze, head of the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, declined to comment directly on Kerry's case at a news conference. But then asked if any politician, not Kerry in particular, "is known to take a pro-abortion stance, should a priest refuse him communion," Arinze replied with a flat yes. Yet moments earlier, he said that while "the norm of the church is clear," he added that there are bishops in the U.S.—"Let them interpret it."

Indeed, a seven-member task force of U.S. bishops headed by Washington Cardinal Theodore McCarrick is considering how to deal with dissenting politicians. McCarrick has expressed doubt that communion should be used as a "sanction." In addition, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of Boston recently said the archdiocese has a policy of not denying communion to anyone.

Echoing many other European Catholic church leaders, the new archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, said firmly that “the Eucharist must not become a political battleground.” Martin, a former Vatican diplomat, said he would like to see people make a conscientious decision themselves, but felt it would be “very difficult” for priests to judge the soul of parishioners presenting themselves for communion.

As Arinze and Gregory made their comments, Kerry was telling supporters in the U.S.: “We deserve a president who understands that a stronger America is where women’s rights are just that—rights, not political weapons to be used by politicians of this nation.” Two days later, Kerry spoke on similar themes to a women’s group in Washington, D.C., as hundreds of thousands assembled in the capital’s mall for an abortion rights rally.

It has long been a thorny issue when high-profile Catholic figures in government, such as former New York Governor Mario Cuomo, support abortion rights.

But a Catholic university was the most recent to come under heavy criticism from antiabortion advocates. Seton Hall University in New Jersey announced April 20 that as a Catholic institution it should not have conducted an awards ceremony the previous week involving two judges whose decisions have supported abortion rights.

On April 16 U.S. Third Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Maryanne Trump Barry received the Sandra Day O’Connor Medal of Honor, an award sponsored by three student groups at Seton Hall University School of Law. O’Connor, the first female U.S. Supreme Court justice, was there to present the award. University spokeswoman Natalie Thigpen subsequently said: “As we have always stated, Seton Hall’s commitment to the gospel of life is absolute. The conferral of awards to people who publicly espouse views that are contrary to the university’s fundamental Catholic identity is a serious lapse. There will be a thorough review of all aspects of this matter, and the policies involved.”

Whether the 11-year-old award in O’Connor’s name will be discontinued was uncertain. Past recipients include Hillary Rodham Clinton and Christine Whitman, both of whom favor abortion rights. When Whitman, then New Jersey governor, won it in 1998, school officials forced the event off campus because of her views on abortion.