

US Catholic bishops may press Biden to stop taking communion

by [David Crary](#) in the [June 3, 2021](#) issue



Joe Biden and his wife, Jill Biden, attend mass during Inauguration ceremonies in January. (AP Photo / Evan Vucci)

When the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops holds its next national meeting in mid-June, the bishops will be deciding whether to send a tougher-than-ever message to President Joe Biden and other Catholic politicians: don't receive communion if you persist in public advocacy of abortion rights.

At issue is a document that will be prepared for the USCCB by its committee on doctrine, with the aim of clarifying the church's stance on an issue that has repeatedly vexed the bishops in recent decades. It's taken on new urgency now, in the eyes of many bishops, because Biden—only the second Catholic president—is the first to hold that office while espousing clear-cut support for abortion rights.

Such a stance by a public figure is “a grave moral evil,” according to Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City, Kansas, who chairs the USCCB’s committee on pro-life activities and believes it’s necessary to publicly rebuke Biden on the issue.

“Because President Biden is Catholic, it presents a unique problem for us,” Naumann said. “It can create confusion. . . . How can he say he’s a devout Catholic and he’s doing these things that are contrary to the church’s teaching?”

The document, if approved, would make clear the USCCB’s view that Biden and other Catholic public figures with similar viewpoints should not present themselves for communion, Naumann said.

In accordance with existing USCCB policy, it would still leave decisions on withholding communion up to individual bishops. In Biden’s case, the top prelates of the jurisdictions where he frequently worships—retiring bishop W. Francis Malooly of Wilmington, Delaware, and Cardinal Wilton Gregory of Washington, DC—have made clear that Biden is welcome to receive communion at churches they oversee.

The document results from a decision in November 2020 by the USCCB’s president, Archbishop José Gomez of Los Angeles, to form a working group to address the “complex and difficult situation” posed by Biden’s stances on abortion and other issues that differ from official church teaching. Before disbanding, the group proposed the drafting of a new document addressing the issue of communion—a project assigned to the doctrine committee.

The committee has not released details about its work. Naumann said the matter will be discussed at the USCCB’s meeting in June, and the bishops will vote on whether the committee should continue working on the document so it could be publicly released later.

A two-thirds majority would be needed for work to proceed, Naumann said. But even critics of the initiative, such as Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, predict the endeavor will win overwhelming approval.

Stowe is among a relatively small group of US bishops who worry that the USCCB’s emphasis on abortion is undercutting Pope Francis’s exhortations for the church to also stress such issues as climate change, immigration, and inequality. Stowe also worries that the US bishops are missing a chance to find common ground with Biden on such issues.

“If a politician is targeted as a negative example by his own church, that sets a sad context in which the church can deal with this Catholic president,” Stowe said. “It contributes to the polarization of the church and of society.”

Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego has expressed similar concerns.

“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 . . . to pummel them into submission,” McElroy said during an online forum in February.

Nonetheless, the bishops who want to send a tough message to Biden are determined to press ahead.

American cardinal Raymond Burke has broached the possibility of Catholicism’s ultimate sanction. He says politicians who “publicly and obstinately” support abortion are “apostates” who not only should be barred from receiving communion but deserve excommunication.

The Vatican has not ruled on this specific matter in a major teaching document, though the church’s in-house canon law does say that people in a situation of persistent sin shouldn’t be allowed to receive communion. It has also issued guidelines for the behavior of Catholics in political life, exhorting them to uphold principles consistent with church doctrine.

Archbishop Samuel Aquila of Denver, who has sharply criticized Biden’s abortion stance, said he favors the creation of a national policy on communion, as opposed to the current “patchwork approach.” He said bishops should first have a private conversation with an individual deemed to be in a state of sin and then deny communion if they persist.

Some Catholic scholars are uneasy about the doctrine committee’s document.

“Are you really going to deny communion for the president of the United States?” asked Margaret McGuinness, a religion professor at La Salle University in Philadelphia. “I don’t think this is going to shake his faith. . . . I don’t see anything constructive coming out of it.”

She noted that a majority of US Catholics, according to polls, say abortion should be legal in at least some cases.

Steven Millies, a professor of public theology at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, said the Catholic Church received significant financial support in recent years from conservative philanthropists who are skeptical of Francis and favored Donald Trump over Biden in the 2020 election.

“What we’re seeing now is an effort to please donors who want a church which will wage a culture war,” Millies said.

—Associated Press. Associated Press writer Nicole Winfield in Rome contributed to this report.