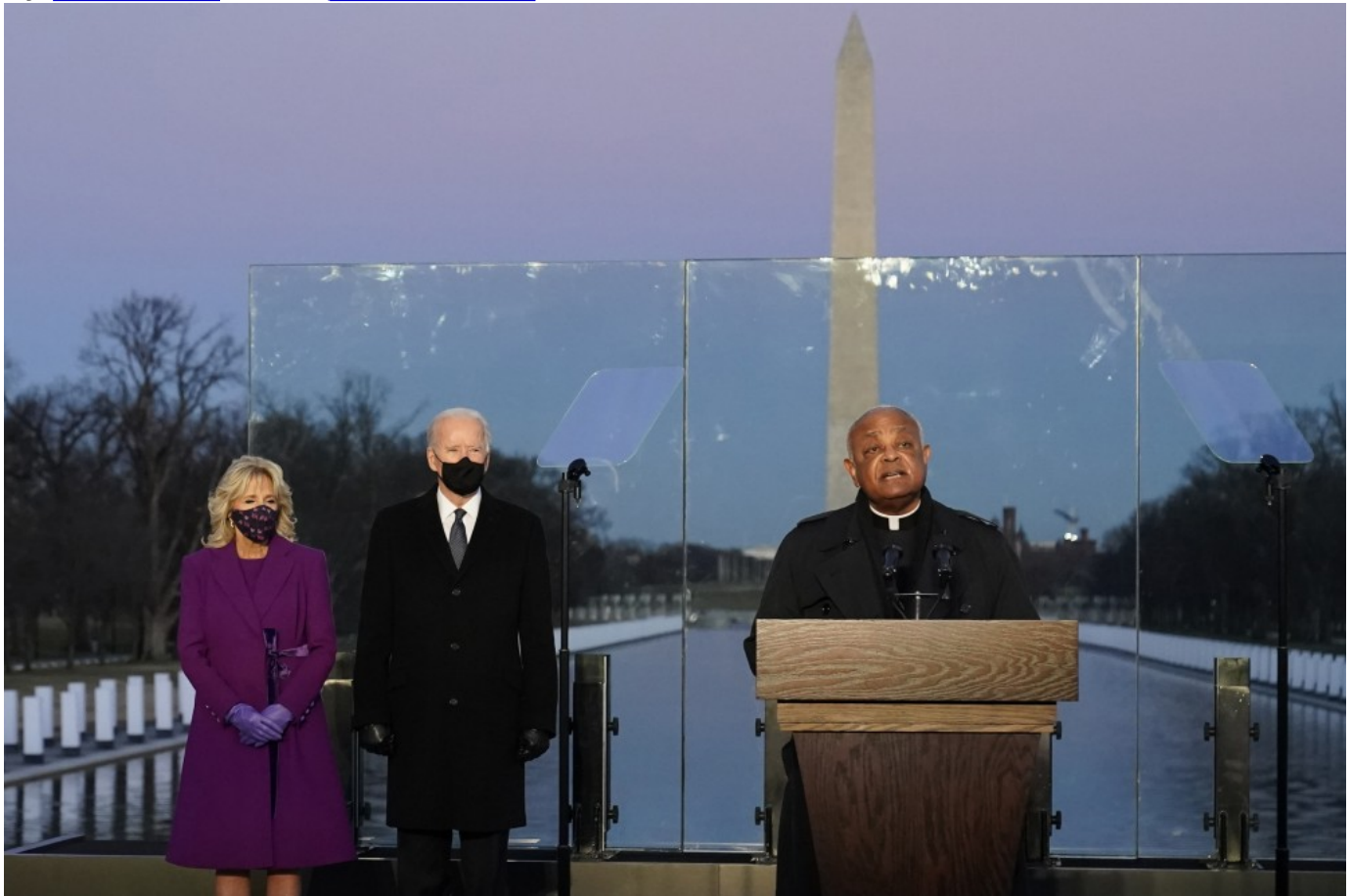


US Catholic bishops OK steps toward possible rebuke of Biden

by [David Carr](#) in the [July 14, 2021](#) issue



President-elect Joe Biden and his wife, Dr. Jill Biden, listen as Cardinal Wilton Gregory, archbishop of Washington, delivers the invocation during a COVID-19 memorial at the Lincoln Memorial. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

The US Catholic bishops overwhelmingly approved the drafting of a “teaching document” that many of them hope will rebuke Catholic politicians, including President Joe Biden, for receiving communion despite their support for abortion rights.

The decision, vehemently opposed by a minority of bishops, came despite appeals from the Vatican for a more cautious and collegial approach to the divisive issue. And it raises questions of how closely the bishops will be able to cooperate with the Biden administration on issues such as immigration and racial injustice.

The result of the vote—168 in favor and 55 against—was announced on June 18 near the end of a three-day meeting of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops that was held virtually. The bishops had cast their votes privately the day before after several hours of impassioned debate.

Supporters of the measure said a strong rebuke of Biden is needed because of his recent actions protecting and expanding abortion access, while opponents warned that such action would portray the bishops as a partisan force during a time of bitter political divisions across the country.

As a result of the vote, the USCCB's doctrine committee will draft a statement on the meaning of communion in the life of the church, a statement that will be submitted for consideration at a future meeting, probably an in-person gathering in November. To be formally adopted, the document would need the support of two-thirds of the bishops.

One section of the document is intended to include a specific admonition to Catholic politicians and other public figures who disobey church teaching on abortion and other core doctrinal issues.

Biden, who attends mass regularly, says he personally opposes abortion but doesn't think he should impose that position on Americans who feel otherwise. He's taken several executive actions during his presidency that were hailed by abortion rights advocates.

During a June 18 White House event on the COVID-19 pandemic, Biden was asked about the possibility that the bishops would approve a document suggesting that his abortion stance should disqualify him from receiving communion.

"That's a private matter, and I don't think that's going to happen," the president said without elaborating.

The chairman of the USCCB doctrine committee, Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana, said no decisions have been made on the final contents of the proposed document. He said bishops who are not on the committee will have chances to offer input, and the final draft will be subject to amendments before it is put up to a vote.

Rhoades also said the document would offer guidelines rather than imposing a mandatory national policy.

That would leave decisions about communion for specific churchgoers up to individual bishops and archbishops. Cardinal Wilton Gregory, the archbishop of Washington, DC, has made it clear that Biden is welcome to receive communion at churches in the archdiocese.

Gregory was one of nearly 70 bishops who signed a letter to USCCB president and Los Angeles archbishop José Gómez urging him to delay the communion discussion until the bishops convene in person, but that request was not granted.

The USCCB has identified the fight against abortion as its “preeminent” priority. But the bishops’ collective stance is at odds with the views of many Catholics in the United States.

In recent polls by the Pew Research Center, about 56 percent of US Catholics surveyed said abortion should be legal in most or all cases, and 67 percent said Biden should be allowed to receive communion during mass.

On the latter issue, Pew found a sharp partisan divide: 55 percent of Catholics who identify with the Republican Party said Biden’s abortion stance should disqualify him from communion, compared with 11 percent of Catholics who lean Democratic.

Sixty Catholic Democratic members of the House of Representatives issued a statement on June 18 urging the USCCB to drop any effort to exclude politicians from communion over the abortion issue.

“No elected officials have been threatened with being denied the Eucharist as they support and have supported [other] policies contrary to the church teachings,” the statement said, “including supporting the death penalty, separating migrant children from their parents, denying asylum to those seeking safety in the United States.”

David Campbell, a political science professor at the University of Notre Dame, said the bishops’ vote “reflects the fact that the same fault lines dividing all American voters also divide American Catholics—and Catholic leaders.”

“The more attention the bishops focus on the communion question, the more the church will be perceived as being in the political fray, which risks driving some Catholics away,” Campbell said. —Associated Press

