



A MATTER OF RECEPTION: ABORTION, HOLY COMMUNION, AND CATHOLIC POLITICIANS

ISSUE

Should Catholic politicians who publicly support abortion rights receive Holy Communion? What principles apply to this situation?

RESPONSE

All Catholics who reject the Church's moral teaching concerning the evil of abortion and/or advocate or promote abortion rights should not receive Communion until they repent of their position and are restored to full communion with the Church. This is based on the fundamental Right to Life and, more specifically, the Church's perennial teaching that direct abortion is always a grave offense against the Right to Life. It is also based on traditional teaching regarding the worthy reception of Holy Communion.

Additional factors come into play in the case of Catholic politicians. According to Church law, they may even be denied Communion if they persist in their public support of abortion rights.

DISCUSSION

Abortion is the most flagrant and widespread offense against the basic Right to Life of all human persons in the United States. A country that "legally" kills over a million of its children each year is fundamentally disordered and, despite any material or technological successes, cannot be considered peaceful or just, let alone the moral authority in world affairs.

Since the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade* (1973), as well as subsequent cases that have affirmed and expanded the ruling, such as *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992) and *Stenberg v. Carhart* (2000), abortion has been considered a constitutional right by its proponents. This situation is abhorrent not only to Christians but also to many others who recognize and value the Right to Life of the unborn child.

Sadly, many of the legislators and judges who
A SERVICE OF CATHOLICS UNITED FOR THE FAITH

have upheld, and even championed, abortion publicly identify themselves as Catholics. We do not presume to judge the sincerity or motives that underlie their position, nor do we fail to recognize some of the positive values these individuals seek to uphold in other areas. It is simply an empirical fact that there are prominent politicians who publicly identify themselves as practicing Catholics who nonetheless support—some more zealously and completely than others—the so-called “right” to abortion. Some even seem to use their Catholic heritage to their political advantage while advancing the goals of their pro-abortion constituents.

Following the 2004 presidential candidacy of John Kerry, the U.S. bishops issued a statement entitled *Catholics in Political Life*, which identifies the key principles upon which the Church's response must be based. The ascent of Joe Biden, who is notoriously pro-abortion, to the presidency and the recent USCCB vote to proceed in drafting a document on the Eucharist has thrust the issue back into the

Pro-Abortion, Reception of Communion

national spotlight. That spotlight does not necessarily lighten the dark corners of this issue.

In the midst of widespread controversy and popular misunderstanding, CUF is resolved, “to teach clearly” regarding the Church’s “unequivocal commitment to the legal protection of human life from the moment of conception until natural death,” and to set forth what that means for Catholics in the political arena (Catholics in Political Life).

CHURCH TEACHING ON ABORTION

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (nos. 227075) clearly spells out the Church’s perennial teaching that abortion is always and everywhere a grave offense against human life. Paragraph 2271 of the Catechism provides:

Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable. Direct abortion, that is to say, abortion willed either as an end or a means, is gravely contrary to the moral law.

The same paragraph of the Catechism also quotes Vatican II’s *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et Spes*), which similarly does not mince words:

God, the Lord of life, has entrusted to men the noble mission of safeguarding life, and men must carry it out in a manner worthy of themselves. Life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception: abortion and infanticide are abominable crimes.

In his 1995 encyclical letter *The Gospel of Life* (*Evangelium Vitae*), Pope John Paul II confirmed “by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his successors, and in communion with the bishops of the Catholic Church,” that “the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral” (no. 57). It is a grave act of disobedience to God, the author of human life, and “contradicts the fundamental virtues of justice and

charity” (*ibid.*). The Pope says that no authority can legitimately recommend or permit such an action.

In the specific context of legislation that favors abortion rights, the Holy Father further writes:

There is no obligation in conscience to obey such laws; instead there is a *grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection*” (*ibid.*, no. 73, original emphasis).

The Pope recognizes that upholding the Right to Life of the unborn may be difficult for the Catholic legislator, perhaps even requiring “the sacrifice of prestigious professional positions or the relinquishing of reasonable hopes of career advancement” (*ibid.*, no. 74). Even so, Catholic politicians who actively promote abortion rights are cooperating in evil actions. “This cooperation can *never* be justified either by invoking respect for the freedom of others or by appealing to the fact that civil law permits it or requires it” (*ibid.*, emphasis added).

Much more can and must be said concerning the dignity and value of each human person, created in the image and likeness of God. CUF also affirms the absolute need to present this teaching charitably, sensitively, and in a way that promotes reconciliation and healing in the Church. However, for our purposes here, it is important to highlight at the outset the Church’s firm, unchanging moral teaching concerning abortion.

When it comes to pro-abortion politics, two moral evils can come into play. First, it is a grave sin against faith and against the First Commandment to reject or obstinately doubt the Church’s definitive teaching on the subject (cf. Catechism, nos. 2087-89; Code of Canon Law, canon 750). Second, proabortion advocacy entails some degree of cooperation with the abortion industry and, as *Catholics in Political Life* points out, this is a serious sin against Justice and Charity.

WHO RECEIVES COMMUNION

Leaving aside the subject of abortion for a moment, let’s turn to the Eucharist, the source and summit of the Christian life (Catechism, no. 1324). Catholics believe that the Eucharist is truly the Body,

Pro-Abortion, Reception of Communion

Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Christ Himself, the Bread of Life come down from heaven (Jn. 6:51; Catechism, no. 1374).

The sincere desire of every Christian is that one day we can all be fully united with each other in perfect communion with the Holy Trinity. Yet, as Pope John Paul II reminded the faithful in his 2003 encyclical letter on the Eucharist, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, the Eucharist “presupposes that communion already exists, a communion which it seeks to consolidate and bring to perfection” (no. 35).

In simpler terms, this means that only those who are both in “visible” and “invisible” communion with the Church should receive the Body and Blood of our Lord. The visible bonds of Communion are profession of the apostolic faith, the sacraments of the Church, and ecclesial governance (*ibid.*, no. 38; Catechism, no. 815). In other words, one should be Catholic.

Yet, there’s also an invisible component. This means that a Catholic who receives Holy Communion should be in a state of grace. In other words, if the communicant is aware of having committed a mortal sin, he should go to Confession prior to going to Communion (cf. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, nos. 36-37). Scripture warns us:

“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself” (1 Cor. 11:27-29).

One who is conscious of grave sin actually compounds his sin by committing the sin of sacrilege if he receives the Eucharist without first reconciling with the Church (cf. Catechism, nos. 1385, 1457).

LOADING THE CANONS

Considering the Divine Law and doctrines noted above, Holy Communion should be withheld from Catholic politicians who support abortion. Doing so protects the Eucharist against the profanation that

occurs whenever Our Lord is received without the proper dispositions and protects the person from further, grave sin. There are other considerations associated with the communal nature of the sacrament as well. Three are considered here.

(a) There is an ongoing, public advocacy of grave evil taking place that distinguishes their conduct from that of most private individuals, whose sins (and religious practices) are not a matter of public record and media scrutiny.

St. John Chrysostom, (347-407), patron of preachers and a distinguished doctor of the Church, once wrote to one of his priests:

If some public figure, or some wealthy person who is unworthy, presents himself to receive Holy Communion, forbid him. The authority that you have is greater than his. Consider if your task were to guard a clean spring of water for a flock, and you saw a sheep approach with mire on its mouth— you would not allow it to stoop down and pollute the stream. You are now entrusted with a spring, not of water, but of blood and of spirit. If you see someone having sin in their hearts (which is far more grievous than earth and mire), coming to receive the Eucharist, are you not concerned? Do you not try to prevent them? What excuse can you have, if you do not?

St. John then explains that he’s not speaking “of some unknown sinner, but of a notorious one.” He advocates withholding Communion only with respect to

...those who sin openly. For if we amend these, God will speedily reveal to us the unknown also; but if we let these flagrant abuses continue, how can we expect Him to make manifest those that are hidden? I say these things, not to repel sinners or cut them off, but I say it in order that we may bring them to repentance, and bring them back...

Pro-Abortion, Reception of Communion

(b) The pro-abortion advocacy of Catholic politicians and lawmakers is a source of scandal and confusion to Catholics and, indeed, to society as a whole. Some dissident Catholic politicians who fiercely oppose the pro-life agenda and who even support the grisly procedure known as “partial-birth abortion” make a point of receiving Communion to demonstrate that they are Catholics in “good standing” with the Church. When Church officials take no ostensible action, people are led to believe, to their spiritual detriment, that one can be both a “good Catholic” and fervently pro-abortion. It has come to the point that some secular commentators have wondered aloud whether the Church will change her infallible teachings on controversial moral issues, in part because she does not seem committed to them in practice.

One positive step taken by the U.S. bishops in this regard is the statement in *Catholics in Political Life*, which says that the Church “should not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles. They should not be given awards, honors, or platforms which would suggest support for their actions.”

(c) Catholic lawmakers, because of the secular authority they wield, are obliged by Divine Law, “to work toward correcting morally defective laws, lest they be guilty of cooperating in evil and in sinning against the common good” (*Catholics in Political Life*).

Those Catholic politicians who are on the forefront of promoting, defending, and expanding abortion are thus complicit in an ongoing assault against our culture. This assault has already claimed tens of millions of innocent lives. Given the gravity of this situation, it’s eminently understandable that Church leaders would see this as an extraordinarily serious matter that could justify a range of pastoral, disciplinary responses.

As provided in Canon 915 of the Code of Canon Law (see also canon 712 of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches):

“Those who have been excommunicated or interdicted after the imposition or declaration of the penalty and others

obstinately persevering in manifest grave sin are not to be admitted to Holy Communion.”

In his 2003 encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Pope John Paul II interprets this canon for us. He writes:

The judgment of one’s state of grace obviously belongs only to the person involved, since it is a question of examining one’s conscience. However, in cases of outward conduct which is seriously, clearly, and steadfastly contrary to the moral norm, the Church, in her pastoral concern for the good order of the community and out of respect for the sacrament, cannot fail to feel directly involved. The *Code of Canon Law* refers to this situation of a manifest lack of proper moral disposition when it states that those who “obstinately persist in manifest, grave sin” are not to be admitted to Eucharistic communion.

Pope John Paul II envisions the application of canon 915 where there is outward conduct that is “seriously, clearly, and steadfastly contrary to the moral norm.” Especially given other statements from the Holy Father on the “Gospel of Life,” the case of Catholic lawmakers who obstinately persist in proabortion advocacy would fall well within the purview of this Canon.

Similarly, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the Vatican, gave similar advice to leading American prelates, based on Canon 915:

Regarding the grave sin of abortion or euthanasia, when a person’s formal cooperation becomes manifest (understood, in the case of a Catholic politician, as his consistently campaigning and voting for permissive abortion and euthanasia laws), his Pastor should meet with him, instructing him about the Church’s teaching, informing him that he is not to present himself for Holy Communion until he brings to an end the objective situation of sin, and warning him that he

Pro-Abortion, Reception of Communion

will otherwise be denied the Eucharist. When “these precautionary measures have not had their effect or in which they were not possible,” and the person in question, with obstinate persistence, still presents himself to receive the Holy Eucharist, “the minister of Holy Communion must refuse to distribute it” (cf. Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts Declaration “Holy Communion and Divorced, Civilly Remarried Catholics” [2002], nos. 3-4). This decision, properly speaking, is not a sanction or a penalty (Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “Worthiness to Receive Holy Communion: General Principles).

Indeed, some bishops, explicitly citing canon 915, have denied Communion to pro-abortion politicians within their diocese. The U.S. bishops as a body have acknowledged this possibility by leaving it to the individual bishop to make such pastoral decisions in concrete circumstances.

RESPONDING TO OBJECTIONS

Catholics of good will can come to different conclusions as to the best way to address Catholics’ complicity in the Culture of Death. A problem arises when some Catholics ascribe political motives to a bishop who courageously speaks out on the subject. Often there is a misunderstanding of the underlying issues. And sadly, many Catholics, even bishops, have supported abortion “rights” and pro-abortion candidates for decades. Any proactive intervention by a bishop in this area predictably meets opposition. Let’s examine a few of the more common objections.

- (a) The Eucharist shouldn’t be used as a “weapon” or “sanction.”

Those who make such statements do not want to withhold Communion from pro-abortion politicians. Some who are more partisan on the subject accuse bishops who withhold Communion—and sometimes even those who merely exhort pro-abortion politicians not to receive—of politicizing the issue. Sometimes critics, Catholic and nonCatholic alike, make *ad hominem* attacks of such

bishops and accuse them of being “extreme,” even though they are simply manifesting the “pastoral concern for the good order of the Communion” and “respect for the Sacrament” that Pope John Paul II asks of all bishops.

Withholding Communion from pro-abortion lawmakers in keeping with Canon 915 is not technically a “sanction” under Church law as is made clear in the above quote by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. Rather, the action flows from the inherent nature of the Eucharist, which requires visible communion with the Church (cf. Raymond Cardinal Burke, “Prophecy for Justice,” *America*, June 21-28, 2004, 13-14).

More centrally, such a complaint ignores the Divine Law on the subject, and the obligation of a bishop to protect the Most Holy Sacrament, souls, and the right order of the community. Weapons do not have to be wielded with the intention to harm. Weapons can also be used to *protect and defend*. The proper application of Canon 915 is a spiritual weapon that a bishop can wield to protect the souls of all entrusted to his care. This includes the individual denied Holy Communion, who is not harmed by the action but *protected* from compounding his sin and invited to repent and return to communion with Christ’s Church.

- (b) The Catholic Church isn’t “single issue.”

That’s for sure! Anybody who has read the periodic documents of the U.S. bishops on the subject, such as *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility* (September, 2003), knows that Catholics are rightly concerned about the broadest possible range of issues. No organization has presented a more comprehensive and coherent approach to the complex issues our society faces than the Catholic Church. And it should further be noted that the Church as a matter of principle does not align herself with particular candidates or political parties (cf. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 76).

Yet, not all issues are created equal. Pope John Paul II made clear in *Christifideles Laici*:

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Pro-Abortion, Reception of Communion

Above all, the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights—for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture— is false and illusory if the Right to Life, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition for all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination (*Christifideles Laici*, no. 38).

Abortion is distinctive because it violates the fundamental Right to Life, a right without which other rights are rendered meaningless. Further, because it is an intrinsic evil that can never be justified, and given the Church’s definitive, unequivocal witness to this truth, it does not admit of a plurality of legitimate positions. Catholics are not pro-abortion under any circumstances.

This is one of the exceptional issues (same-sex “marriage,” cloning, and euthanasia being other exceptions) where Catholic moral teaching—and the natural law—requires uniformity. On most issues, Catholic Social Teaching informs the issue without compelling a particular approach or position. For example, the Church has a “preferential option for the poor,” but Catholics may take vastly different approaches to addressing this important societal concern.

The vast majority of the time, the “single issue” rhetoric is used by those who want to justify voting patterns that support pro-abortion politicians—sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. An example of the latter might be someone whose views on education, housing, gun control, or countless other issues, align him with candidates who support abortion.

It should be noted that the “single issue” argument cuts both ways. Pro-abortion politicians—including, sadly, some prominent Catholics—routinely apply a pro-abortion litmus test of their own when it comes to scrutinizing judicial nominees. The fact of the matter is that everyone has particular issues that are most significant to him. The Church is far from “single issue,” but her principled views on abortion are clear and are given the priority they

deserve without ignoring other issues. Abortion is not the only issue, but it’s a decisive issue.

(c) The Church must not “impose” her teaching upon the American public.

Some accuse the Church of violating the “separation of Church and state” in its pro-life advocacy. A closer look reveals that this is another example of an “intolerant secularism” that is meddling with intra-ecclesial affairs. The situation of a pastor (i.e., bishop) addressing voluntary members of his flock (i.e., certain pro-abortion lawmakers) does not bring into play constitutional issues. The Church has the right to function and to determine the conditions for receiving Communion. Those who assert otherwise are the ones who are running afoul of the U.S. Constitution.

Further, bishops have the sacred duty to teach and to inform the consciences of the faithful. In challenging Catholic politicians to “think with the Church,” the bishops are fulfilling their solemn duty. In fact, the Catechism notes that “assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience” and “rejection of the Church’s authority and her teaching” can in fact be “at the source of errors of judgment in moral conduct” (no. 1792). Catholic politicians who attack the bishops for speaking out are in essence saying, “I’m happy with my ill-formed conscience. Leave me alone.”

While the Church recognizes the rightful autonomy of temporal authority,, she has the right and obligation to proclaim the truth about human life and dignity in the public square. Abortion is not merely a “Catholic” issue but a human rights issue, rooted in the Natural Law, that brings together people of diverse cultural and religious perspectives.

Lastly, every law to some extent reflects the morality and values of somebody, so the idea that a Catholic politician must check his or her “personal” morality at the door is simply an abdication of responsibility for the moral fabric of society. Laws don’t make people good, but good people should be counted upon to make good laws.

(d) The Church doesn’t judge the worthiness of a person who presents himself for Communion.

This objection entails a confusion of the internal and external forums (see generally, Fr. Thomas Williams, L.C., “Bishops and the Communion Conundrum,” *National Catholic Register*, June 13-19, 2004, p. 9).

“Internal forum” concerns one’s subjective state before God, as might be confided to a confessor or spiritual advisor. The “external forum” refers to Church governance and matters of public record.

These fora roughly correspond to a person’s private and public areas of life.

Some suggest that the denial of Communion necessarily entails a judgment of a person’s subjective moral status and thus wrongly crosses the line from external forum to internal forum. This is simply not true. The issue under discussion is a public issue. Politicians in the United States do not vote in secret on abortion related bills, nor do they receive Holy Communion in secret.

As noted earlier, Canon Law explicitly provides for refusing Communion under certain conditions. (See also Declaration by the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, June 24, 2000.)

Sin has both an objective and subjective element. The Church is obliged to judge the former. Without making a judgment about a person’s soul, the Church may refuse Communion to persons who persist in objectively grave sinful action (i.e., “grave matter”) of a public nature with no external signs of repentance. That’s what canon 915 of the Code of Canon Law is all about.

(e) What is needed is more sound teaching, not harsh discipline.

No one denies the importance of sound teaching on this issue, as clearly we have a whole generation of Catholic lawmakers—and citizens—who have not been formed well in the Faith. To the extent withholding Communion is seen as “discipline,” it’s a restorative and educative measure. The goal is to correct the sinner and protect the community from scandal. Authentic zeal impels Catholics to seek the full restoration of those who wander from the truth. Indeed, it’s a spiritual work of mercy.

CONCERNS OF CATHOLICS UNITED FOR THE FAITH

CUF has several concerns with regard to Catholic politicians who support abortion. Before listing such concerns, it is necessary to emphasize that these concerns are completely divorced from partisan considerations. It is not our place as a lay Catholic apostolate to advocate affiliation with a particular political party or to take a collective stand on matters in which Catholics rightfully reflect a diversity of opinion. However, abortion as the most pressing human rights issue today. The Holy Father emphasizes our “moral duty” to oppose laws that legitimize the direct killing of unborn children and thus deny the equality of everyone under the law (*Evangelium Vitae*, nos. 72, 74). Given this context, CUF identifies the following concerns:

(1) The salvation of the Catholic politician: Our faith tells us that Catholic politicians who support abortion are participating in a grave offense against God and against human life. Without judging the destiny of any particular Catholic politician, prudence and charity dictate that we be concerned about the state of his or her soul.

(2) The scandal to the faithful: Catholics who publicly champion the cause of abortion give grave scandal to the faithful. Obviously it is confusing to the laity to see a politician maintain such views while purporting to be a Catholic in good standing. Catholic students are taught one thing in their religion class and then hear another message from their Catholic heroes or leaders. Eventually the faithful become desensitized to the discussion, and believe—along with their elected politicians—that it’s okay for a Catholic to favor abortion and still receive Communion. Further, many faithful Catholics are dismayed when their pastors seem to provide little or no direction in the face of such widespread scandal.

(3) Ecumenical and evangelistic concerns: When it comes to abortion, many Catholic politicians stand with the secularists over and against devout Christians who strive to instill a sense of morality in our culture. This is exactly the type of counterwitness discussed in *Gaudium et Spes*. After identifying atheism as one of the most serious

Pro-Abortion, Reception of Communion

problems of our day, this Vatican II document says that believers “have more than a little to do with the rise of atheism. To the extent that they are careless about their instruction in the faith, or present its teaching falsely, or even fail in their religious, moral, or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than to reveal the true nature of God and of religion” (no. 19).

(4) Violence in society: A society that countenances the killing of one class of vulnerable citizens will surely set its sights on other classes as well, such as the elderly and handicapped. At some point we must reverse the cycle of violence that manifests itself in so many ways today.

(5) Future generations: The ongoing support and expansion of Roe v. Wade on the part of some Catholic legislators places at grave risk future generations of Americans who will be unjustly deprived of the fundamental Right to Life if these Catholic legislators do not have a change of heart.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO OUR MEMBERS

CUF acknowledges the gravity of this situation and the need for action. And, CUF recognizes the plentitude of God’s grace and the need for prayer. This outlook enables us to encourage all those who share our fundamental goals and concerns to take the following practical steps:

(1) Strive for holiness: Our zeal must first of all be directed to the renewal of our own hearts. We all need to be more deeply converted. As necessary as pro-life judges, journalists, and legislators are, even more we need pro-life saints, such as St. Maximilian Kolbe and Pope John Paul II, St. Gianna Beretta Molla and St. Teresa of Calcutta. We exhort all CUF members to strive for holiness as their first and foremost duty as Christians.

(2) Pray fervently and daily for all those in public office (cf. 1 Tim. 2:1-4), especially for our fellow Catholics: We must resist the temptation to harbor uncharitable thoughts about Catholic politicians who fail to uphold the Right to Life, and instead we should offer extra prayers and mortifications for their conversion on this issue.

(3) Share the Church’s teaching: When the opportunity to discuss this issue presents itself, do not waste precious time criticizing a bishop’s response. Instead, we must relentlessly proclaim the Church’s non-negotiable teaching regarding the evil of abortion, the grave responsibility of Catholic politicians to defend life, the need to be properly disposed to receive the Eucharist, and the obligation of our bishops to apply Canon 915 properly. Our greatest opportunity to pass on these teachings is within the home. The next generation of Catholic lawmakers is already receiving its formation within the family, and we must ensure they are being formed in the authentic teachings of the Church.

(4) Engage in the political arena: In *Familiaris Consortio* Pope John Paul II writes: “The social role of families is called upon to find expression also in the form of political intervention: families should be the first to take steps to see that the laws and institutions of the State not only do not offend but support and positively defend the rights and duties of the family” (no. 44). This responsibility can be fulfilled in a myriad of ways that extend beyond merely voting. Contact your local, state, and national representatives to voice your opinions on issues, especially in the defense of the unborn. You can also volunteer for political campaigns, participate in local town hall and school board meetings, and more.

(5) Contact your Bishop: Pastors of souls have a right and a duty to refuse Holy Communion to anyone who meets the criteria of Canon 915. The same is true for lay extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. The lay faithful play an important role by praying for their bishop and encouraging him with respectful communications to take appropriate, decisive action to protect the flock entrusted to him. CUF’s sister apostolate, the Saint Joseph Foundation, has a resource on the canonical recourse available to the faithful who are harmed by the scandalous reception of Communion by pro-abortion politicians in their diocese. Please contact our office to request a copy.

It is our prayer that, united in Christ and ever faithful to His bride, we will help the “Gospel of Life” flourish in our beloved homeland, so that all people,
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Pro-Abortion, Reception of Communion

without exception, may enjoy the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” which our

Founding Fathers sought to guarantee for future generations.

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