

HEARTBEATS – Staying Connected

6/19/2021

Dear Friends in Christ,

This week, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops voted to move forward with a process that would call into question the eligibility of politicians to receive Holy Communion. This would include President Joe Biden who is an active Roman Catholic. In particular, the bishops want to withhold Communion from those politicians who are open about their involvement in the Roman Catholic church, while taking positions on issues, in this case abortion, that are in conflict with those of Roman Catholic teachings.

They are wrong.

I say that not from a political standpoint, but from a theological one. I don't want to get into the politics of abortion. I want to talk about the theological flaw in their decision about Communion. The bishops are wrong because they are taking a sacrament, Holy Communion, and making it a lever to force members of the Roman Catholic church, particularly politicians, to support the position of the church on moral issues like abortion. Again, this is wrong. It is wrong because it is making a gift from God something that has to be earned, and that is not what God intended.

Sacraments are gifts from God. In the Lutheran church, we have two Sacraments—Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. The Roman Catholic church currently has seven: Baptism and Communion, as well as Confirmation, Confession and Absolution, Marriage, Holy Orders (becoming a priest or a nun), and the Last Rites. Other denominations have some combination of these, but all understand them to be holy gifts from God to bless those whom God loves. Imagine giving a birthday gift to a child or grandchild or someone else you love, but only if they do something you want. In a sense, they have to earn your gift, and the means it is no longer a gift, but a payment for the thing which you want done. When churches require a certain achievement or behavior before the Sacrament can be received, it changes its status from a gift or blessing from God to something that is earned or achieved by the individual.

The Lutheran church has been guilty of this when it requires Confirmation or some other class before someone can receive Communion. Instruction in the faith is important and valuable, but it should never be a requirement for receiving God's blessings. Even within the Lutheran denomination, there are churches that will withhold the Sacrament of Holy Communion from some who believe exactly what the church teaches about Communion, but who disagree on who can be a leader in the church.

Yet Jesus did not demand some kind of behavior or accomplishment before He gave His life. Jesus did not die just for those who meet certain criteria, like age, or knowledge, or political position, or adherence to a church practice or teaching. Jesus gave His life for all who believe. Period. And belief itself is a gift from God through the Holy Spirit.

The Roman Catholic bishops are wrong when they shift the offering of a Sacrament from what God intended and make it a weapon, if you will, to force some to behave in certain ways. They are wrong when they take this wonderful blessing from our loving God and make it political device to control the personal beliefs of their members. The gifts of God are precisely that—gifts. And it is for us to do all that we can to help others receive these gifts, and not create obstacles to what God wishes to impart. No one of us deserves the blessings of God. Yet God gives them to us anyway and does so that we will know that, above all else, we are loved by our Creator.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey