

# DENYING HOLY COMMUNION

## A CASE HISTORY

**The Most Reverend Rene Henry Gracida, DD  
Bishop Emeritus of Corpus Christi**

“So you wish to stray and be lost? How much better I do not also wish this.  
Certainly, I dare say, I am unwelcome. But I listen to the Apostle who says:  
‘Preach the word; insist upon it, welcome and unwelcome.’  
Welcome to whom? Unwelcome to whom?  
By all means welcome to those who desire it; unwelcome to those who do not.  
However unwelcome, I dare to say: ‘You wish to stray, you wish to be lost;  
but I do not want this’ For the One whom I fear does not wish this.  
And should I wish it, consider His words of reproach:  
‘The straying sheep you have not recalled; the lost sheep you have not sought.’  
Shall I fear you rather than Him?  
‘Remember we must all present ourselves before the judgment seat of Christ’  
I shall recall the straying; I shall seek the lost.  
Whether they wish it or not, I shall do it.”

(St. Augustine, *Sermo*46, 1-2: CCL 41, 529-530)

The controversy over denying Holy Communion to pro-abortion politicians has generated a lot of heat and very little light. Sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church have spoken clearly on the subject, but some either do not understand what has been said, or worse, have chosen to ignore it.

Saint Paul said: “This means that whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily sins against the body and blood of the Lord. A Man should examine himself first, only then should he eat of the bread and drink of the cup. He who eats and drinks without recognizing the body eats and drinks a judgment on himself.” (1 Corinthians 11:27-29) The prohibition found in the declarations of the Magisterium is based on this divine revelation. The Church is not free to enact positive ecclesiastical laws which would oppose this revealed doctrine.

“Therefore it is the shepherd’s task not to keep silent, and it is your task, even if we the shepherds are silent, to hear the words of The Shepherd from the Scriptures.” (St. Augustine, *Sermo* 46, 20-21)

The Magisterium repeats the injunction of Saint Paul in Canon 916 of the Code of Canon Law: “A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to celebrate Mass or to receive the Body of the Lord without prior sacramental confession unless a grave reason is present and there is no opportunity to make an act of perfect contrition, including the intention of confessing as soon as possible.” The Code of Canon Law of the Eastern Churches has a parallel canon: “Those who are publicly unworthy are forbidden from receiving the Divine Eucharist” (can. 712).

According to the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts in that Council’s June 24, 2000 Declaration on the question: “Should a priest deny Communion to a Catholic who is an obstinate public sinner?” The answer is “yes.” The reason cited by the Pontifical Council is: “In effect, the reception of the body of Christ when one is publicly unworthy constitutes an objective harm to the ecclesial communion: it is a behavior that affects the rights of the Church and of all the faithful to live in accord with the exigencies of that communion” (No. 1).

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Code of Canon Law clearly states that “Those upon whom the penalty of excommunication or interdict has been imposed or declared, and others who obstinately persist in manifest grave sin, are not to be admitted to Holy Communion” (can. 915). Significantly, in the light of the current controversy in the United States, the Pontifical Council further stated:

Any interpretation of can. 915 that would set itself against the canon’s substantial content, as declared uninterruptedly by the Magisterium and by the discipline of the Church throughout the centuries, are clearly misleading. One cannot confuse respect for the wording of the law (cfr. Can. 17) with the improper use of the very same wording as an instrument for **relativizing** the precepts or emptying them of their substance.

**Relativism** is a philosophical term describing a theory that conceptions of truth and moral values are not based on objectivity and the absolute, but instead are baseless and grounded on that which is relative and subjective to the persons or groups holding them.

I suggest that those who maintain that they cannot support the refusing of Holy Communion to pro-abortion politicians because the time of

the distribution of Holy Communion is a time of unity in the Body of Christ are indeed **relativizers** of the objectively established precepts. Further, their belief that it would therefore be wrong to make it a time of confrontation and discord by refusing Holy Communion to anyone is indeed **relativizing** the precepts, but moreover, emptying them of their substance as well.

Those who **relativize** the belief that it would be wrong to make the time of receiving Holy Communion a time of confrontation and discord are guilty of **relativizing** the objectively based precepts, which are based on Ultimate Truth Himself. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. To **relativize** or compromise the objectively based precepts is to directly **relativize** Truth Himself!

The position of those who are opposed to the implementation of Canon 915 for the reasons just cited is untenable. First, because most priests have had to refuse Holy Communion to someone at one time or another for reasons having nothing to do with that person's beliefs. No priest, upon seeing a person standing before him whom he recognizes as having profaned the host on another occasion would give the host to that person again.

Similarly, most priests, on recognizing that the person standing before him is not a Christian, would not give that person Holy Communion but would simply give the person a blessing and ask the person to see him after Mass. To do otherwise in either case would gravely scandalize the congregation.

Some have indicated their unwillingness to act under the provisions of Canon 915 because they say that they are not in a position to judge another person's thinking or conscience on the subject of abortion, euthanasia and fetal experimentation. This is another example of **relativizing** the precepts or emptying them of their substance. This is another example of attacking the Truth Himself, Who is the objective foundation for these precepts, and Who IS the Holy Communion being attacked!

“...when you hear Me say anything, you shall warn them for me. If I tell the wicked man that he shall surely die, and you do not speak out to dissuade the wicked man from his way, he shall die for his guilt, but I will hold you responsible for his death. But if you warn the wicked man, trying to turn him from his way, and he refuses to turn from his way, he shall die for his guilt, but you shall save yourself” (Ezekiel 33:7-9).

The Pontifical Council clearly stated that: “The phrase ‘and others who obstinately persist in manifest grave sin’ is clear and must be understood in a manner that does not distort its sense so as to render the norm inapplicable. The three required conditions are:

- a) grave sin, understood objectively, being that the minister of communion would not be able to judge from subjective imputability;
- b) obstinate persistence, which means the existence of an objective situation of sin that endures in time and which the will of the individual member of the faithful does not bring to an end, no other requirements (attitude of defiance, prior warning, etc.) being necessary to establish the fundamental gravity of the situation in the Church.
- c) The manifest character of the situation of grave habitual sin.”

There can be no doubting that most of the major political figures who are on record publicly as favoring abortion-on-demand, euthanasia, cloning or fetal experimentation qualify under those three conditions for censure. They qualify for being denied Holy Communion because they have a direct impact on the moral or immoral structure of a government, inasmuch as they are the direct agents in matters pertaining to legislation which forms a structure of sin, or a structure of goodness.

It is true that the Pontifical Council stated that: “Naturally, pastoral prudence would strongly suggest (emphasis added) the avoidance of instances of public denial of Holy Communion.” Those who seize upon this statement to justify their refusal to act under the provisions of Canon 915 **relativize** the Canon and rob it of all its force. Note that the Pontifical Council used the word suggest rather than the word demand.

Prudence as defined by Aristotle is the virtue which deals with contingency and gray areas (*cf.*, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1144a-1145a). What prudence strongly suggests in one contingent scenario might be totally different from another contingent scenario. In an ideal world, we would

always avoid confrontational instances. We are obviously not in an ideal world.

There is no need for public denial of Holy Communion. There is no need to reduce the need for public denial of Holy Communion to the worst case scenario: the minister of Holy Communion loudly refusing to give the Host to a loudly protesting pro-abortion politician in front of a church full of people. The implementation of Canon 915 can be carried out in complete privacy and confidentiality.

Here is a real case history of implementation of the Church's prohibition against politicians who are publicly notorious for their promotion of abortion, euthanasia, cloning or fetal experimentation.

In 1993 a State Representative, a member of the House of Representatives of the State of Texas Legislature who maintained a domicile in the Diocese of Corpus Christi, gave an interview to the Corpus Christi Caller-Times, the major newspaper in South Texas. The paper profiled the State Representative on two full pages.

The Corpus Christi Caller-Times has always been, and remains today, a strongly pro-abortion newspaper. The wife of the founding publisher was one of the founders of Planned Parenthood of Corpus Christi. The paper was eager to reveal to the world that the State Representative, who had voted in the Legislature for pro-abortion legislation was a "practicing Catholic."

In the course of the interview, as reported in the newspaper, the State Representative admitted being a practicing Roman Catholic who felt justified in supporting abortion-on-demand.

Recognizing the scandal to the faithful which the publication of this interview would cause, I realized that it was my duty, as Ordinary of the Diocese of Corpus Christi, to write to the State Representative. I pointed out to the State Representative that grave scandal had been given in that interview. I proposed a meeting to discuss the matter with a view to obtaining a retraction which could be published. Here is the text of that letter:

June 3, 1993

Dear XXXXXXXXXXX,

I recently read in the Corpus Christi Caller-Times, Local News Section (May 20, 1993), a story entitled “Abortion Amendment is Defeated” in which you are quoted as having said that you consider yourself “a very good Catholic.” If you are a Catholic I am confident that you will understand that I am writing to you as the Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Corpus Christi, and therefore as your pastor.

I am most disturbed to learn about your views regarding abortion. I am writing this letter to offer you an explanation why no Catholic can be for abortion in any manner and be a Catholic in good standing. The arguments against abortion can be seen from two perspectives, from natural law and from faith. Natural law refers to the fact that when God created us, he made unwritten laws which bind all human beings in virtue of our nature regardless of any particular beliefs they may have. From natural law we have the norm “Thou shalt not kill” which is binding upon all citizens in any human society. This norm of natural law respects all innocent human beings from the moment of their conception in the womb of their mothers to the time of their natural death. Medical science is very clear in showing that the origin of each human being in the womb of his/her mother is the moment of conception. After conception normal development occurs until the baby is actually born. Therefore from the perspective of natural law abortion is a grievous offense against this norm which binds all human beings.

But we Christians have an even greater responsibility to respect human life from conception until natural death. Our faith sheds additional light on this issue. I am speaking now of the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. We are told in the Scriptures that when the angel Gabriel came to Mary, she conceived of Jesus Christ and the Word became flesh. In other words, Jesus Christ became man from the moment of His conception in His mother’s womb. As Christians we proclaim the truth in the Apostles’ Creed that Jesus Christ our Savior became man when he was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary. He did not become man when he was born, but when he was conceived in the womb of Mary. And if this is true of Jesus, Lord and Savior of the human race, then clearly it is true of every human being who God creates through conception in the womb of its mother. The Church has always taught that Jesus was like us in every way but sin. We even have a feast day we celebrate in the Catholic Church to proclaim that Jesus became man at the moment of Gabriel’s greeting and Mary’s response. This feast is called the Annunciation and it celebrates the fact that God became man at the Annunciation.

(Here followed a paragraph devoted to the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth).

(Here followed a paragraph devoted to teaching that “...no Catholic man or woman can say ‘I believe that a woman has a right to chose to kill the baby in her womb.’”)

I realize that civil law can go against God’s law. This was a problem for the early Church when Christians were willing to die at the hands of the Roman state rather than disobey God’s laws. As Catholics we know that God’s law is to be followed even when civil law fails to recognize it or even legislates against it. God’s law expressed through the Bible and in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church has a greater value than civil law. This is particularly true of God’s law concerning abortion.

(Here followed a paragraph explaining that abortion is a mortal sin and that automatic excommunication from the Church immediately befalls anyone directly procuring an abortion.)

(Here followed eight paragraphs further detailing the Church’s teaching on the subject of the sacredness of human life.)

In light of the important teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on human life beginning at conception, I would like to meet with you personally about this issue. The position which you presented in the Caller-Times as a “Catholic” is contrary to the teachings of Jesus as expressed in His Church. As Bishop of this Diocese and the Shepherd of the souls entrusted to my care by the

Lord and by the successor of Saint Peter, I have the responsibility to resolve this serious scandal which your public position on abortion has created.

I will be looking forward to visiting with you about this matter. Please call my office (XXX-XXX-XXXX) and ask for an appointment to meet with me.

Sincerely in Christ,  
Most Reverend Rene Gracida  
Bishop of Corpus Christi

There was no response to this letter.

On Sunday, January 30, 1994, the Corpus Christi Caller-Times published another interview with the State Representative in which it was stated that the Representative, “a devout Catholic” had not backed away from advocacy of abortion rights. On February 4, 1994 I sent the Representative the following letter:

Dear XXXXXXXXXXXX

I am writing concerning the article entitled “Upbringing Shaped XXXXX’s Career” on the front page of the Sunday edition of the Corpus Christi Caller-Times dated January 30, 1994. I am most distressed that the article notes “XXXXXX, a devout Catholic, has not backed away from advocacy of abortion rights.” If the article accurately states your beliefs and your status as a Catholic, then I am confident that you will understand that I am writing to you again as the Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Corpus Christi, and therefore as your pastor.

My earlier letter to you dated June 3, 1993 was a teaching letter explaining why no Catholic can be for abortions and be in good standing in the Catholic Church before the eyes of God. In my earlier letter, I had asked you to see me about your views, but I never received a response from you.

I regret that now I am compelled by the pastoral good of the local Church and for the salvation of souls to take the followings actions. I am attaching to this letter a copy of the teaching letter I wrote to you on June 3, 1993. Secondly, I am writing to inform you that your public position for abortion is in violation of Canon 1371 which forbids any Catholic to teach a doctrine condemned by the Roman Pontiff or by an ecumenical council. Both Pope John Paul II and the Second Vatican Council have condemned abortion as a grievous offense against the law of God. Thirdly, I am by this letter giving you a formal warning according to Church law that unless you repent of your position, I will have no other choice for the good of the Catholic Church and for the salvation of souls to impose the penalty of forbidding you from receiving the sacraments of the Holy Eucharist and the Anointing of the Sick.

As Bishop of this Diocese and the Shepherd of the souls entrusted to my care by the Lord and by the successor of Saint Peter, I have the responsibility to resolve this serious scandal which your public position on abortion has created.

I pray that God will give you the grace to repent and retract your advocacy of abortion. I do want to hear from you about this matter. Please call my office (XXX-XXX-XXXX) and ask for an appointment to meet with me.

Sincerely in Christ,  
Most Reverend Rene Gracida

Again, there was not response from the State Representative. Accordingly, On November 9, 1994 I signed and mailed to the State Representative the following decree of Interdiction:

DECREE OF CANONICAL PENALTY

In the name of God, Amen!

His Holiness John Paul II, Supreme Pontiff, Gloriously Reigning

I, Rene H. Gracida, Bishop of the Diocese of Corpus Christi, am issuing this decree to you, XXXXXXXX, concerning the matter of your advocacy of “abortion rights” as reported in the Corpus Christi Caller-Times dated May 20, 1993 and January 30, 1994. I am distressed that you have not responded to my two letter dated June 3, 1993 and February 7, 1994 (copies of which are attached to this letter). My letter to you dated June 3, 1993, was a teaching letter explaining why no Catholic can advocate abortions and be in good standing in the Catholic Church. My letter dated February 7, 1994, was a pastoral warning, asking you again to meet with me and calling you to repent and retract your advocacy of abortion. To both of these letters, I have never received a response from you.

As Bishop of this Diocese and the Shepherd of the entrusted to my care by the Lord and by the successor of Saint Peter, I have the responsibility to resolve this serious scandal which your public position on abortion has created. Having failed to obtain a retraction from you, I regret that now I am compelled by the pastoral good of the local Church and for the salvation of souls to take the following action.

In virtue of the fact that your promotion of abortion is in violation of Canon 1371 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law, and in virtue of the fact that Pope John Paul II and the Second Vatican Council have condemned abortion as a grievous offense against the law of God and in virtue of the fact that you have not responded to my two letters nor made known to me any intention or effort to repent and retract your advocacy of abortion, I, as Bishop of the Diocese of Corpus Christi, have no choice but, by this letter, to formally impose upon you the penalty of forbidding you to receive the sacraments of the Holy Eucharist and the Anointing of the Sick.

I continue to pray that God will give you the grace to repent and retract your advocacy of abortion. If you come to a change of heart on this matter, please call my office (XXX-XXX-XXXX) and ask for an appoint to meet with me. It is with deep sadness and with much regret that I am required for the good name and pastoral well being of the Catholic Church to affix my signature to this decree, on this the Seventh Day of November 1994.

(sig)  
Rene Henry Gracida  
Bishop of Corpus Christi

(sig)  
Reverend Deacon Roy M. Grassedonio  
Chancellor

I never heard from the individual, who died in 2001, while still under Interdiction. I never publicized the Decree of Interdiction. It was a matter

between me, the individual and God. Whether or not the individual ever received Holy Communion after having been Interdicted, I do not know, and it is not important that I should have known since it was a matter of the internal forum. If the individual did receive Holy Communion while under a Decree of Interdiction it would have been a further sacrilege.

Some will argue that the Decree of Interdiction should have been made public at the time it was issued. I disagree. The Corpus Christi Caller-Times would have exploited the news just as they had exploited the three Decrees of Excommunication I had earlier issued against three abortionists in Corpus Christi who chose to make their excommunication known publicly. If it had been reported to me that the individual was receiving Holy Communion after receiving the Decree of Interdiction I would have published the decree in the Diocesan Newspaper.

In summary, every bishop has the duty and obligation to implement the provisions of Canon Law in accordance with the Declaration by the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts. There is no need for confrontation at the altar rail during the distribution of Holy Communion. The Canons can be implemented without public confrontation at the time Holy Communion is being distributed.

**The Most Reverend Rene Henry Gracida, DD**  
**Bishop Emeritus of Corpus Christi**  
**PO Box 217**  
**Tynan, Texas 78391-0217**  
**Fax: 361-547-0855**  
**Email: [rhg1923@hotmail.com](mailto:rhg1923@hotmail.com)**  
**24 September 2004**