

Catholic Democrats assail some bishops: Communion ban "deeply hurtful"

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Catholic lawmakers who resent being targeted by bishops for their support of abortion rights have fired back, with one suggesting that prelates who wade too deeply into politics may risk their tax-exempt status.

In a letter to Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington, 48 Democratic House members who are Catholic said efforts to ban them from communion are “deeply hurtful” and “counterproductive.” “As Catholics, we do not believe it is our role to legislate the teachings of the Catholic Church,” said the May 6 letter, whose signers included House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi of California.

They must, “at times, separate our public actions from our personal beliefs,” the legislators wrote to McCarrick. “We would remind those who would deny us participation in the sacrament of the Eucharist that we are sworn to represent all Americans, not just Catholics.”

The letter—which was made public on May 20—was another salvo in a heated election year tussle between Catholic politicians and a handful of vocal bishops who want to bar them from communion because of their support of abortion rights. It also signaled a continued effort by politicians not to surrender the moral high ground to church leaders.

In April, two Democrats drafted a “research paper” that reportedly showed that their party is more in line with Catholic teaching than are Republicans. “People have been hurt, really deeply hurt” by bishops’ criticisms, said Representative Rosa DeLauro, a Connecticut Democrat who co-wrote the research paper and signed the letter to McCarrick. The letter asked if the bishops would levy equal sanctions against politicians who voted for war in Iraq or the death penalty—both of which have been condemned by Pope John Paul II.

“While we do not question the authority of the bishops, we respectfully submit that each of us is in the best position to know the state of our soul and our relationship to God and our church,” they said. A number of bishops, including McCarrick, have said in the past that they were reluctant to use the Eucharist as a “sanction” against elected officials.

Nevertheless, Archbishop Raymond Burke of St. Louis told presumptive Democratic nominee Senator John Kerry he may not receive communion in Missouri, while other bishops have asked abortion-rights politicians to refrain from the sacrament. Bishop Michael Sheridan of Colorado Springs went further, telling Catholics who vote for politicians who support gay marriage, stem cell research, abortion or euthanasia that they need to go to confession before they can receive communion.

Sheridan has insisted he is not trying to steer Catholics to the Republican Party, but seeking to teach “clearly and fully the objective truth” of church doctrine. One of the letter’s signers, Representative Bart Stupak of Michigan, has a strong antiabortion voting record but suggested Sheridan had breached the wall of separation between church and state. “I truly resent [his action]. Who does he think he is? . . . If that’s his policy, then I think we should take away his IRS tax-exempt status because he’s no longer a nonpartisan, nonpolitical entity,” Stupak said.

Stupak said the bishops’ focus on abortion would “backfire” with voters and ultimately hurt their agenda. “They have to understand that they’re not hurting Kerry, they’re undermining the Catholic Church,” he said.

Church observers cautioned against painting all bishops with a single brush. Tom Reese, editor of the Jesuit magazine *America*, criticized Sheridan’s directive, but said he is one of only a half-dozen bishops who have spoken publicly on the issue. “The problem is that when one bishop speaks, too many people in the public think he speaks for all the bishops,” Reese said. *—Religion News Service*