

6-3-08 - For an 'Obamacon,' Communion Denied

By E. J. Dionne Jr., Washington Post

Word spread like wildfire in Catholic circles: Douglas Kmiec, a staunch Republican, firm foe of abortion and veteran of the Reagan Justice Department, had been denied Communion.

His sin? Kmiec, a Catholic who can cite papal pronouncements with the facility of a theological scholar, shocked old friends and adversaries alike earlier this year by endorsing Barack Obama for president. For at least one priest, Kmiec's support for a pro-choice politician made him a willing participant in a grave moral evil.

Kmiec was denied Communion in April at a Mass for a group of Catholic business people he later addressed at dinner. The episode has not received wide attention outside the Catholic world, but it is the opening shot in an argument that could have a large impact on this year's presidential campaign: Is it legitimate for bishops and priests to deny Communion to those supporting candidates who favor abortion rights?

A version of this argument roiled the 2004 campaign when some, though not most, Catholic bishops suggested that John Kerry and other pro-choice Catholic politicians should be denied Communion because of their views on abortion.

The Kmiec incident poses the question in an extreme form: He is not a public official but a voter expressing a preference. Moreover, Kmiec -- a law professor at Pepperdine University and once dean of Catholic University's law school -- is a long-standing critic of the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision.

Kmiec, who was head of the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel in the late 1980s, is supporting Obama despite the candidate's position on abortion, not because of it, partly in the hope that Obama's emphasis on personal responsibility in sexual matters might change the nature of the nation's argument on life issues.

Kmiec has drawn attention because he is one of the nation's leading "Obamacons," conservatives who find Obama's call for a new approach to politics appealing. Kmiec started life as a Democrat. His father was a soldier in the late Mayor Richard J. Daley's Chicago political machine, and Kmiec's earliest political energies were devoted to Robert F. Kennedy's 1968 campaign.

But like many Catholic Democrats, Kmiec was profoundly attracted to Ronald Reagan. For him, five words in Reagan's 1980 acceptance speech summarized the essence of a Catholic view of politics: "family, work, neighborhood, peace and freedom."

In an interview over the weekend, Kmiec argued that 35 years after *Roe*, opponents of abortion need to contemplate whether "a legal prohibition" of abortion "is the only way to promote a culture of life."

"To think you have done a generous thing for your neighbor or that you have built up a culture of life just because you voted for a candidate who says in his brochure that he wants to overturn Roe v. Wade is far too thin an understanding of the Catholic faith," he said. Kmiec, a critic of the Bush administration's Iraq policy, added that Catholics should heed "the broad social teaching of the church," including its views on war.

Kmiec shared with me the name of the priest who denied him Communion and a letter of apology from the organizers of the event, but he requested that I not name the priest to protect the cleric from public attack.

The priest's actions are almost certainly out of line with the policy of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. In their statement "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," issued last November, the bishops said: "A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who takes a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, such as abortion or racism, if the voter's intent is to support that position."

The "if" phrase in that carefully negotiated sentence suggests that Catholics can support pro-choice candidates, provided the purpose of their vote is not to promote abortion.

Already, Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann of Kansas City has played an indirect role in the 2008 campaign by calling on Kathleen Sebelius, the popular Democratic governor of Kansas who has been mentioned as a possible Obama running mate, to stop taking Communion because of her "actions in support of legalized abortion."

But because Kmiec is a private citizen and has such a long history of embracing Catholic teaching on abortion, denying him Communion for political reasons may spark an even greater outcry inside the church.

Kmiec says he is grateful because the episode reminded him of the importance of the Eucharist in his spiritual life, and because he hopes it will alert others to the dangers of "using Communion as a weapon."