



UNH Professor: U.S. Catholic Bishops' Debate Of Contraception, Communion And Homosexuals Will Cause Controversy With Laity

Contact: [Lori Wright](#)
603-862-0574
UNH Media Relations

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EDITORS AND REPORTERS: Michele Dillon can be reached at michele.dillon@unh.edu or (603) 862-2925.

DURHAM, N.H. -- When U.S. Catholic bishops gather today at their annual national conference to reaffirm church stands on contraception, communion, and homosexuals, what they discuss is less important than the timing of the discussion -- a majority of American Catholics already disagree with the policies and reinforcing them will cause controversy, but it won't change the minds of many.

Michele Dillon, professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire and author of *Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith, and Power*, says the new statements being debated by the bishops are not revolutionary from a doctrinal perspective, since they reaffirm existing Catholic teaching on contraception, communion, and homosexuals.

"All of these statements, if affirmed, will cause controversy. The contraception statement may be ignored by the laity because it is so out of step with what Catholics believe," Dillon says.

According to the proposed statement "Married Love and the Gift of Life," Catholic couples must use only natural family planning methods and always be open to every "act of intercourse" resulting in "new life." It's the first time since 1968 that the U.S. bishops have addressed the issue in such specificity.

"The bishops' public affirmation of contraception is remarkable insofar as almost all American Catholics believe that one can be a 'good' Catholic and use contraception. That is the status quo among the laity," Dillon says.

"Since the early 1970s, American Catholics' disagreement with the church's ban on contraception has not prevented Catholics receiving communion, and doing so in good conscience. When the bishops' proposed reaffirmation of the ban is linked with the bishops' statement on communion, it raises the question of whether all of those many American Catholics who use contraception (and/or who are divorced, in gay relationships, etc.) will now either stop going to communion; start going to confession more often, such as every time before they receive communion; or neither," she says. "My guess is that most will continue doing what they do."

On the issue of homosexuals in the church, the bishops' statement, "Ministry to Persons With

a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care” includes guidelines on church participation and pastoral support, Catholic teachings about sexuality, and guidelines for sacraments and worship. It reinforces the church’s belief that marriage is only between a man and a woman, and notes that the Vatican does not support adoption by same-sex couples.

“Regarding the statement on gays, there is increasing public and Catholic acceptance of gay relationships and gay civil rights in society. Many Catholics will agree with the bishops but many others will undoubtedly take issue with the thrust of the bishops’ statements, such as that gays should not be allowed to adopt children,” Dillon says.

“What is noteworthy is that the bishops have chosen to refocus attention on these matters at a time in American society when public policy issues surrounding gays, for example, have attention due to proposals regarding same-sex marriage and gay adoptive parents. In this regard, the bishops’ statement on gays, if passed — which is likely — is a reminder to Catholics and Americans in general of church teaching opposing gay sexual relationships,” she says.

The proposed statement, “Happy Are Those Who Are Called to His Supper: On Preparing to Receive Christ Worthily in the Eucharist,” stems from debates during the 2004 presidential election on whether Catholic bishops should publicly bar Catholic politicians from receiving communion because of their stands on abortion.

“Although the renewed attention to communion stems in large part from the political controversies surrounding John Kerry, if the criteria for receiving the Eucharist are taken seriously, many American Catholics, whether politicians or not, would likely not feel worthy of communion,” Dillon says. “But Vatican II affirmed the importance of personal conscience in the individual’s deliberation as to the individual’s own worthiness and communion with the broader church. Hence, as we know, many serious Catholics opt to deviate from some aspects of the church’s teaching while highly valuing other strands that they see as more central to what it means to be Catholic.”

Dillon has written extensively on Catholicism in the United States and elsewhere, and has been especially interested in the institutional and cultural processes that enable Catholics who selectively disagree with aspects of Catholic teaching to remain loyal to Catholicism. She also has examined the political engagement of the Catholic Church, and of other churches and activist organizations in public moral debates in different western countries.