

Denying Eucharist debated

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Six months before Election Day, the question of how the church should handle relationships with politicians whose public actions conflict with Catholic teaching was being played out in U.S. and Vatican forums.

The combination of civil politics and religion already was a simmering issue in the United States, where the presumptive Democratic Party nominee for president, Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, is a Catholic whose votes conflict with the church's opposition to abortion and fetal stem-cell research.

One bishop commented in January that he would not give Kerry the Eucharist if he came up in line for Communion in his diocese.

At the Vatican April 23, Nigerian Cardinal Francis Arinze stirred the story when reporters at a press conference asked whether Kerry should be denied Communion.

Cardinal Arinze refused to answer that specific question. However, when asked more generally if a priest should refuse Communion to a politician who supports abortion, Cardinal Arinze said, "Yes."

The Vatican document said that "anyone who is conscious of grave



Reuters/CNS

Cardinal Arinze

sin should not celebrate or receive the body of the Lord without prior sacramental confession, except for grave reason." It did not speak about withholding the Eucharist. The president of the U.S. bishops' conference, Bishop Wilton D. Gregory of Belleville, Ill., said denying Communion to a politician who supports legalized abortion must be the last resort in a process to convince the politician to uphold moral truths when voting.

St. Joseph High School in South Bend withdrew its invitation to Gov. Joe Kernan to speak at his alma mater's graduation ceremony because he supports legal abortion. Bishop John M. D'Arcy of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, was quoted by The Associated Press as saying he directed the school's principal to withdraw the invitation because theology teachers at St. Joseph believed having Kernan speak there

would contradict the moral truths they teach.

In New Jersey, the new bishop of the Camden Diocese, Bishop Joseph A. Galante, told reporters April 29 that Gov. James McGreevey would not be welcome to receive Communion at his installation ceremony.

McGreevey supports legal abortion and has advocated bringing fetal stem-cell research to the state. Bishop Galante told reporters his decision was based largely on McGreevey's remarriage without an annulment. McGreevey's spokesman said later that the governor has never publicly discussed whether his first marriage was annulled.

Father James Coriden, a professor of canon law at the Washington Theological Union, said he thinks the bishops are justified in taking a strong stand with politicians who do not act in accord with church teaching on abortion. But even a doctrinal note on Catholics in public life released by the Vatican in 2003 "allows for freedom of conscience and political thought," he said.

"But to take that and say 'these people are no longer permitted to take Communion,'" he said, "I don't think it gives that authority."

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