

With our return to in-person worship, we have been settling into new routines around some very old practices. Liturgy, by design, roots us with its rhythms, repetition, and routines. I suspect that for some the return churned up a good deal of emotion that may not have even been recognized until the moment the feelings flooded in. Reception of communion topped the list for those who spoke to me about the return, reflecting the deep meaning and connection that so many feel when receiving the sacrament of the altar. Thus, I was intrigued by the subject of this week's podcast, *The Argument: Joe Biden and the Communion Wars*. Host, Jane Coaston, discusses the pros and cons of using communion as punishment with Ross Douthat, a Times Opinion columnist, and Heidi Schlumpf, the executive editor of National Catholic Reporter. [You can read it here.](#) While the discussion focused on the abortion issue where certain Catholic Bishops believe Biden possesses an untenable position--personally opposed but supportive of Roe v. Wade and laws passed to ensure choice--and should be punished by not receiving communion, the conversation is one that I highly encourage people to listen to. It models conviction and argumentation that is respectful, civil, and constructive. I was so struck by the conversation that I am moved to hold a conversation after the 10:00 AM service this Sunday for those interested. (You can find the link in the calendar below and in tomorrow's email of Sunday events.)

Douthat is the Catholic conservative, and he calmly outlines the logic behind Catholic teaching on abortion and how it might make a foray into the public square generally and how it could impact individual politicians specifically. Schlumpf is the soft-spoken, more progressive voice who offers up nuanced responses that, at times, converge with Douthat, and, at times, diverge. The issues are not just abortion and communion. The conversation moves to how we see communion, who can (or cannot) receive, and the way in which you try to engage those who are outside of your community, belief system, and faith. What follows are some wonderful snippets that the interview offered:

Schlumpf (on worthiness as it pertains to communion): *I think this idea of an emphasis on worthiness to receive communion, which, first of all, we all say that we're not worthy, but the idea that we do what's necessary to approach the sacraments, that is important. But this emphasis on it, I don't think it fits with what I would see as a traditional theology of the sacraments. That is that sacraments are ways that we receive grace. And grace is unearned, so not this "prize for the perfect," as Pope Francis has said.*

Coaston (on where is grace in communion): *And so, in the Catholic tradition, there's this debate about approaching communion if you're not in a state of grace. But then we have Pope Francis saying that in some senses, receiving the Eucharist is about receiving that grace. Heidi. . .how does this figure into the debate about what communion is for and who communion is for?*

Schlumpf (on punishment as a way to change people): *I don't think an emphasis on the punish side of how to get people to do what you want them to do is very effective. And I say this both as a former teacher and as a parent. My friend, John Carr, who is at Georgetown now, formerly with the Bishops Conference, always says we need to make abortion unthinkable before we make it illegal. And I don't think the bishops are doing a very good job of persuading people about that.*

Schlumpf (on why allowing communion to a transgressor may be the right thing to do): *And with William Barr, I pray for his conversion on that issue [the death penalty]. And I think he's less likely to convert on that issue if he's not receiving communion. I can speak personally about the importance of receiving the Eucharist in my own life and how I think it's been transformative. So the idea of denying that to someone seems counterproductive.*

Douthat (on if people in the past had been denied communion): *Well, I mean, when St. Ambrose barred the Roman emperor Theodosius [circa 390 CE] after a particular egregious massacre from communion, they did have the desired effect. And I think you can multiply examples from the Catholic past. But yeah, I think in a context where the church is sort of culturally powerful and widely respected, I think this is more likely to work, right? And we're obviously not living in that world. And so it's less likely to be effective, absolutely.*

Schlumpf (on Pope Francis' preference for accompaniment): *my answer to that [i.e. what would work to bring people to the faith] is Pope Francis. Because he has a whole different philosophy, or at least, way, about dealing with people who are not there yet in terms of the fullness of the Catholic faith. So this idea of accompaniment, of meeting people where they are, and trying to move them through an attitude of mercy, towards a more full belief or acceptance or practice of the faith and of ethics and morals, I think that's way more effective than the bring a hammer to the table, kind of how can I punish you into submission of thinking what I want you to think.*

Douthat (on the future decline of the church and its implications): *I mean, look, the church is institutionally weak and likely to get substantially weaker over the next 20 or 25 years, as the baby boom generation passes away, and the church is going to go through a painful period of contraction that's already started, but is likely to continue. And the church in the future, I think looks like a bunch of different bishops, all trying different things to figure out what Catholic renewal looks like. And some of them will look more liberal, and some of them will look more conservative. But they will be experimenting in different ways. And the idea of sort of a singular national Catholic authority offering pronouncements already seems archaic, I think. I think it will look more archaic in a generation.*

Schlumpf (on that same future): *we talked about our church leaders, but we are the church. And the fact that you had two lay Catholics on this show coming from different perspectives, but*

*having a civilized conversation and many points of agreement, I think does portend well for the future of the church, too,*