

CATHOLIC POLITICIANS AND THE CHURCH

The media are awash with stories on the tension between Catholic GOP presidential candidates and their fidelity to Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment. It is a story worth exploring. But an even juicier story is the decades-long rejection of papal authority by Catholic Democrats in Washington on issues such as abortion.

In recent years, Vice President Joe Biden, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, former Congressman Patrick Kennedy, and former Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius, have all gotten into public clashes with their bishop; in some cases as many as 26 bishops have publicly rebuked them. Some of these Democrats were summoned to meet with their bishop—more than once—while others were told to refrain from receiving Communion. Their public support for abortion rights was, in every instance, the issue that provoked the reaction. Yet their dissent, and subsequent reprimands, were never cast by the media as cause for concern.

Catholics are expected to give their assent to papal teachings, but it is not true that all pronouncements are morally equal. In 2004, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) was explicit about this: "Not all moral issues have the same moral weight as abortion and euthanasia. For example, if a Catholic were to be at odds with the Holy Father on the application of capital punishment or the decision to wage war, he would not for that reason be considered unworthy to present himself to receive Holy Communion."

It goes without saying that climate change is not on the same moral plane with the intentional killing of innocent human beings. It was striking nonetheless to see long-time dissident Catholic journalists—those who rail against Church teachings

on sexuality—lining up single file to express their absolute allegiance to what the pope said on climate change.