

CLINTON AND COMMUNION

As everyone knows, President Clinton received Holy Communion from a South African Roman Catholic Church on March 29. Unfortunately, initial news reports were misleading and a true account barely surfaced. But perhaps the real story in all this was how the White House handled the matter once it broke.

Most news reports said that Clinton took Communion because he was invited to do so by a priest who acted on behalf of instructions from the South African bishops. This is twice wrong: a) it was the Clinton staff that approached the priest, requesting that the president be allowed to receive Communion, and b) the bishops gave no such authorization.

On April 5, the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference issued a press release explaining what happened. The statement said that "the staff of the U.S. President asked, prior to the Mass, whether the President and Mrs. Clinton could receive Holy Communion, if they wished to do so." The priest mistakenly agreed. There has been no word from the White House why this president, who graduated from Georgetown University, would want his staff to make such a request.

"The local Bishop had not been asked, as required by church practice," the release said, "whether in his opinion it would have been appropriate under the circumstances, to administer Holy Communion to the presidential couple." The final comment said that "It is doubtful that the priest applied his mind to the conditions that needed to be fulfilled as stated in the 1993 norms published by the Holy See and repeated by the SACBC Ecumenical Directory."

A Vatican spokesman, Bishop Geraldo M. Agnelo, said of President Clinton, "Since this person is not a Catholic, he cannot be admitted to Eucharistic Communion." At a press conference, Cardinal Bevilacqua commented that "The Eucharist

is a sign of membership in the church," noting that the circumstances under which a non-Catholic can receive Communion "are extremely rare." Cardinal O'Connor told Catholics at St. Patrick's that "Holy Communion is not to be given or received as an act of courtesy," stating that he wanted to counter the mistaken belief that "if one has enough prestige or money anything goes."

When news of Cardinal O'Connor's remark hit the White House, press secretary Mike McCurry weighed in with a sermon to the New York Archbishop. "Cardinal O'Connor may not be familiar with the doctrinal attitude toward the Holy Eucharist that the conference of bishops in South Africa bring to that question," said the Methodist. Joe Zwillling, the spokesman for the archdiocese, wrote McCurry a letter informing him of Cardinal O'Connor's qualifications.

The pundits had a field day with this issue. Cokie Roberts, who is Catholic (her mom is the U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican), and her husband, Steve, who is Jewish, showed no more shame than McCurry when they wrote that "Cardinal O'Connor seems to be ignoring the most basic of Catholic doctrines that a sacrament is a source of grace." [Note: It was Steve Roberts who made the silly comment about inclusiveness that is the subject of this month's "President's Desk."]

Janet Reno's brother, Robert, who writes for *Newsday*, outdid everyone by suggesting that what Cardinal O'Connor did was to provoke a religious war. William Donohue shot back saying that "it is Reno who wants to light fires, and he does so with characteristic cowardice." Donohue also noted that Reno's diatribe appeared in the Business section of the newspaper.

By the way, when Bill and Hillary took Communion, Jesse Jackson stayed seated.