

Kennedy says RI bishop banned him from Communion

By RAY HENRY, Associated Press Writer Ray Henry, Associated Press Writer— NOV 22 2009

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Roman Catholic Bishop Thomas Tobin has banned Rep. Patrick Kennedy from receiving Communion, the central sacrament of the church, in Rhode Island because of the congressman's support for abortion rights, Kennedy said in a newspaper interview published Sunday.

The decision by the outspoken prelate, reported on The Providence Journal's Web site, significantly escalates a bitter dispute between Tobin, an ultra orthodox bishop, and Kennedy, a son of the nation's most famous Roman Catholic family.

"The bishop instructed me not to take Communion and said that he has instructed the diocesan priests not to give me Communion," Kennedy told the paper in an interview conducted Friday.

Kennedy said the bishop had explained the penalty by telling him "that I am not a good practicing Catholic because of the positions that I've taken as a public official," particularly on abortion.

He declined to say when or how Tobin told him not to take the sacrament. And he declined to say whether he has obeyed the bishop's injunction.

The paper said the bishop's spokesman declined to address the question of whether he had told Kennedy not to receive Communion. But the bishop's office cast doubt on Kennedy's related assertion about instructions to state priests.

"Bishop Tobin has never addressed matters relative to public officials receiving Holy Communion with pastors of the diocese," spokesman Michael K. Guilfoyle told the paper in an e-mailed statement.

Kennedy did not return messages left on his cell phone by The Associated Press, and his staff refused to make the congressman available for comment. Tobin's spokesman told the AP that the bishop would not comment on the issue.

Church law permits Tobin to ban Kennedy from receiving Communion within the Diocese of Providence, which covers Rhode Island, but he cannot stop Kennedy from receiving Communion elsewhere. It was unclear whether bishops overseeing Washington and Massachusetts, where Kennedy's family has a seaside compound, would issue similar bans.

Kennedy could appeal the decision to officials in the Vatican, but the hierarchy of the Catholic church is unlikely to overturn a bishop, said Michael Sean Winters, a church observer and author of "Left At the Altar: How Democrats Lost The Catholics And How Catholics Can Save The Democrats."

"It's really bad theology," said Winters, who opposes abortion. "You're turning the altar rail into a battle field, a political battlefield no less, and it does a disservice to the Eucharist."

The dispute between the two men began in October when Kennedy in an interview on [CNSNews.com](#) criticized the nation's Catholic bishops for threatening to oppose a massive expansion of the nation's health care system unless it included tighter restrictions on federally funded abortion.

Kennedy voted against an amendment to a Democratic health care plan sought by the bishops. But he voted in favor of a health care plan that included the amendment he opposed.

Tobin, the spiritual leader of the nation's most heavily Roman Catholic state, demanded an apology from Kennedy after learning of his remarks and requested a meeting.

"While I greatly respect the Catholic Church and its leaders, like many Rhode Islanders, the fact that I disagree with the hierarchy of the church on some issues does not make me any less of a Catholic," Kennedy wrote in a letter to Tobin, agreeing to a sitdown. "I embrace my faith which acknowledges the existence of an imperfect humanity."

Their meeting fell apart. While Tobin called it a mutual decision, Kennedy accused Tobin of failing to abide by an agreement to stop discussing the congressman's faith publicly.

Tobin followed up with a biting public letter published in a diocesan newspaper.

"Sorry, you can't chalk it up to an 'imperfect humanity.' Your position is unacceptable to the Church and scandalous to many of our members. It absolutely diminishes your Communion with the Church," Tobin wrote.

In subsequent interviews, Tobin said Kennedy should not receive Communion like other Catholic politicians who support abortion rights. Still, the bishop stopped short of ordering Kennedy not to receive the sacrament.

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