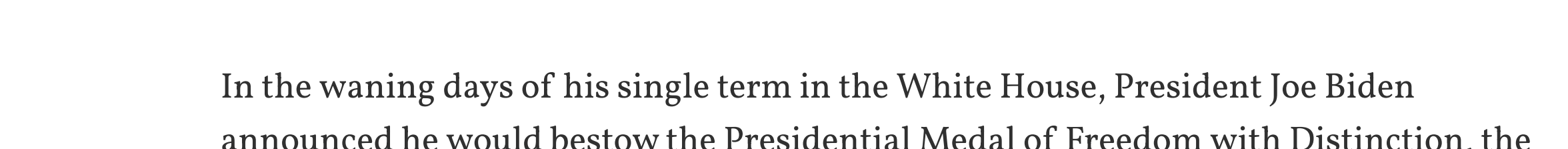


Biden’s Catholic faith both key and complex part of his legacy

KATE SCANLONJan 13, 2025Voices



U.S. President Joe Biden delivers a speech at the State Department in Washington Jan. 13, 2025. (OSV News photo/Evelyn Hockstein, Reuters)



In the waning days of his single term in the White House, President Joe Biden announced he would bestow the Presidential Medal of Freedom with Distinction, the nation's highest civilian honor, to Pope Francis.

The move highlighted how Catholicism is an integral albeit complex part of Biden's story, both in his overt public observance of the faith and in areas where his public policy sometimes diverged from Church teaching.

“Joe Biden's Catholicism is a huge part of his story,” John White, a professor of politics at The Catholic University of America in Washington, told OSV News.

Unlike that of his only Catholic predecessor in the job, John F. Kennedy, Biden's Catholicism, White said, “was embedded both in his persona growing up, in the tragedies that have marked his life. It is a huge part of his persona, in a way that's unlike Kennedy, who was quite private.”

Robert Schmuhl, professor emeritus of American studies at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, who critically observes the modern American presidency, told OSV News that the public perception of having a Catholic president vastly shifted in the decades between the Kennedy and Biden presidencies.

“When John Kennedy was elected in 1960, Catholics united behind him,” Schmuhl said. “There was pride among the Catholic faithful that one of their own had reached the White House. Since the 1960s, millions of Catholics are now Republicans. There's far less unity.”

Biden's practice of Catholicism in his public life was the subject of debate and scrutiny. As commander-in-chief, Biden was a regular Massgoer, both on Sundays and holy days of obligation. He often wears his late son's rosary beads on his wrist and has discussed how his faith shaped some of his policy views, such as being one's brother's keeper, and how it has served as a consolation in his bereavement. Biden's first wife, Neilia, and 13-month-old daughter, Naomi, were killed in a car accident in 1972, shortly after his election to the U.S. Senate. The couple's sons, Beau and Hunter, were seriously injured but survived. Beau Biden later died in 2015 after battling brain cancer.

Different areas of President Biden's administration's public policy were met with praise or condemnation by the U.S. bishops. Biden was sometimes at odds with the U.S. bishops, most notably over his administration's abortion policy, with some suggesting that he should be denied Communion due to his public support for abortion.

During Biden's term, abortion was a key political issue. The U.S. Supreme Court issued a historic decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* June 24, 2022, undoing nearly a half-century of its own precedent on the issue, and returning abortion lawmaking to state legislatures. Biden sharply rebuked that ruling, pledging in a statement the same day that his administration “will use all of its appropriate lawful powers” to restore the legal standard set by Roe.

“On every life issue, Biden's positions sharply diverge from Catholic teaching,” Kenneth Craycraft, a professor of moral theology at Mount St. Mary's Seminary and School of Theology in Cincinnati and author of “Citizens Yet Strangers: Living Authentically Catholic in a Divided America,” told OSV News.

He criticized Biden's policies on several issues, including his support for legislation promoting what the bishops call “gender ideology,” and the weakening of conscience protections for health care workers who object to certain procedures, such as abortion.

“He has been a strong advocate for abortion on demand, for example, not just as a policy position but as the morally proper one,” Craycraft said.

White said Biden's relationship with the U.S. bishops was “delicate and rather precarious” as a result. Pope Francis also weighed in, he said, reportedly telling Biden in 2021 he should continue to partake in the Eucharist. However, in a 2022 interview, Pope Francis also called Biden's support for legal abortion an “incoherence.”

Tensions were apparent between Biden and Catholic leaders from his first day in the Oval Office. In an Inauguration Day 2021 statement from Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles, the then-president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops called Biden “our first president in 60 years to profess the Catholic faith” and commended him for “his longstanding commitment to the Gospel's priority for the poor,” before saying he was compelled to “point out that our new President has pledged to pursue certain policies that would advance moral evils and threaten human life and dignity, most seriously in the areas of abortion, contraception, marriage, and gender.”

“Of deep concern is the liberty of the Church and the freedom of believers to live according to their consciences,” he added.

The Pillar reported at the time that the statement, issued from the USCCB, was delayed after intervention by the Vatican Secretariat of State and that it stirred controversy among the U.S. bishops themselves.

Biden “had to deal with a very divided Catholic Church, not just in the polls, but also a very divided hierarchy, bishops, especially when it's about how to deal with a president who's a Democrat, whose party has become more and more focused on abortion and on gender,” said Massimo Faggioli, a professor of historical theology at Villanova University and author of “Joe Biden and Catholicism in the United States,” published in 2021.

Faggioli likened the relationship between Biden, the U.S. bishops and Pope Francis's Vatican as “a very strange triangle, where one side of the triangle was quite strong,” referring to Pope Francis.

Biden last met with Pope Francis at the Group of Seven summit in Puglia, Italy, June 14, where they had a “brief private bilateral meeting,” according to Catholic News Service.

Prior to that meeting, the two met at the Vatican Oct. 29, 2021, when Biden “thanked His Holiness for his advocacy for the world's poor and those suffering from hunger, conflict, and persecution,” according to the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See. He also “lauded Pope Francis's leadership in fighting the climate crisis, as well as his advocacy to ensure the pandemic ends for everyone through vaccine sharing and an equitable global economic recovery,” the embassy said. They would have met once more this month, but Biden canceled his trip due to the California wildfires.

Biden won some bishops' praise on refugee and climate-related policies, and he received mixed responses on his policies on immigration. The bishops praised a Biden administration policy expanding refugee resettlement, for instance, but expressed disappointment in an executive order aimed at reducing unauthorized border crossings by asylum-seekers.

Biden was also the subject of a last-minute push by opponents of the death penalty to follow through on his campaign promise to end the federal use of the practice. Although he did not do so, on Dec. 23, 2024, he commuted 37 of 40 existing federal death sentences but declined to commute the sentences of those convicted on charges related to terrorism or mass shootings. That cause gained the attention of Pope Francis, and Biden's announcement followed a phone call between the pair earlier the same month.

“Many of the Biden policies show a social concern that aligns with Catholicism,” Schmuhl said. “His views on abortion were criticized, but to be a national figure in the Democratic party in 2025 almost requires a pro-choice stance.”

American Catholics' perception of Biden and his faith depends on “which Catholics are you're asking,” said sociologist Tricia Bruce, director of Springtide Research Institute, who studies American Catholics' attitudes and behavior.

“Catholics themselves are so divided, both in terms of the ways that they see and practice their Catholic identity, and also the ways that they practice their political identities,” she said. “And Catholics are pretty divided politically. In fact, they look not that dissimilar to the U.S. population overall, which is what makes them a pretty powerful voting block.”

In his rhetoric, Biden would frequently cite certain elements of Catholic teaching, such as the belief, rooted in the Book of James, that “faith without works is dead.” He also often cited the Catholic hymn “On Eagle's Wings,” such as in his 2020 victory speech, and more recently in his eulogy for the late President Jimmy Carter.

In the course of his public life, which included decades in the U.S. Senate representing Delaware, Biden also became the first Catholic vice president. As Biden leaves office on Jan. 20, Vice President-elect JD Vance will become the second.

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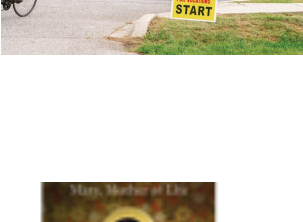


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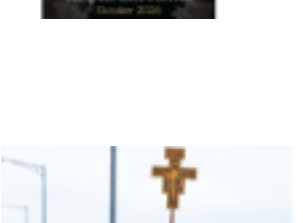
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