



U.S. President Joe Biden delivers his farewell address to the nation from the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 15. (OSV News/Pool via Reuters/Mandel Ngan)



by Michael Sean Winters

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@michaelswinters](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

January 17, 2025

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

President Joe Biden's term as president ends on Monday at noon. Many evaluations of his presidency have been penned in virtually every news outlet. Today, I pose a question most outlets have not: How did Biden do as only the second Catholic president?

It is an odd question. No one ever asked how Richard Nixon did as a Quaker. Donald Trump's adherence to the tenets of Presbyterianism is not an issue. Barack Obama had to distance himself from some of the incendiary remarks made by his pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, but Obama's fidelity to the tenets of the United Church of Christ was never a point for examination.

Catholics are not the only ones whose faith teaches social ethics, but Catholics and Jews have the most fully elaborated teachings on matters relating to the right ordering of society. And Catholics, unlike Jews, have a magisterium that defines those teachings in an authoritative manner.

In a pluralistic democracy, of course, religion can and should shape a person's worldview and serve as a source of values, but it cannot dictate each and every policy. "The Sermon on the Mount is the last word in Christian ethics. Everyone respects the Quakers," wrote Winston Churchill in his war memoirs. "Still, it is not on these terms that Ministers assume their responsibilities of guiding states." Evaluating Biden as a Catholic president must allow for the fact that politics is the art of the possible, and not everything to which our values aspire is possible.

On the whole, Biden was faithful to most, but not all, of the Catholic Church's moral teachings. And that fidelity is meaningfully responsible for his most significant achievements.

[In his inaugural address](#), Biden said, "Many centuries ago, St. Augustine, a saint of my church, wrote that a people was a multitude defined by the common objects of their love. What are the common objects we love that define us as Americans?" He listed them: opportunity, security, liberty, dignity, respect, honor and truth. It tells

you a lot about Biden's worldview that he chose to articulate the nation's highest values by framing them with a quote from Augustine.

Advertisement

Biden's largest political success was the banishment of neoliberalism from the Democratic Party. Trump slayed the political cachet of neoliberalism in the Republican Party (while maintaining the kind of pro-corporate policies that neoliberalism enshrined) and Biden did so for the Democrats. As David Leonhardt [noted](#) in The New York Times, "the Biden shift on economic policy remains virtually a consensus within the Democratic Party." The easy acceptance of neoliberal orthodoxy as a necessary consequence of globalization is dead.

That is no small achievement and while it is impossible to say Biden's industrial policy or his use of government power to lower drug prices were inspired specifically by Catholic social teaching, such a reorientation of our economic policy surely grew out of Biden's concern to combat income inequality and promote a more just economy. That concern, for Biden, is grounded in and reinforced by his familiarity with Catholic social teaching which always views economics through the lens of justice not gross domestic product or other technocratic paradigms.

In his 2013 programmatic encyclical [Evangelii Gaudium](#), Paragraph 53, Pope Francis said of neoliberal economies, "Such an economy kills." It will drive pro-lifers nuts to acknowledge that in slaying neoliberalism Biden was defending life, but it is true.

Catholic social teaching is also clear in its defense of the dignity of work and of workers. From the seminal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 through St. Pope John Paul II's 1981 encyclical *Laborem Exercens* to Pope Francis' 2015 *Laudato Si'*, work is always seen as conferring dignity on those who perform it, and demanding that their dignity be respected by employers.

Biden spoke about "restoring the dignity of work" not only in his Labor Day addresses, but also in the [2023 State of the Union address](#). And he cited policies that would affect such a restoration, such as ending "non-compete" agreements that prevent workers from leaving one company to work for a competitor, supporting efforts by workers to organize into unions, and calling for a living wage, not just a minimum wage. On the campaign trail and in the White House, Biden [often cited](#) his

father, saying, "My dad used to tell me a job was about more than a paycheck — it was about being able to look your kid in the eye and tell them it was going to be OK." He understood the dignity of work at a profound level.

In his efforts to address climate change and his tireless efforts to bring peace in the Mideast, Biden aligned American government policy with the hopes of Pope Francis. The president's [commutation of almost all of the death sentences](#) for federal prisoners may well have been the direct result of pleas from his coreligionists and from the pope himself.



U.S. President Joe Biden departs from St. Joseph on the Brandywine Catholic Church, on the day of the anniversary of the death of the president's first wife and daughter who died in a car accident in 1972, in Wilmington, Delaware, on Dec. 18, 2024. (Reuters/Nathan Howard)

What about abortion? Church teaching could not be clearer. Our progressive pope and his more conservative predecessors always insist that concern for the most

vulnerable must extend to the unborn. The furthest Biden could go [was to say](#), "I'm a practicing Catholic. I'm not big on abortion." But he would go no further. Standing up to his own party on an issue that had become so neuralgic was a bridge too far. The art of the possible overruled one of Catholicism's most basic, and foundational, moral teachings. He doesn't get a pass on abortion; he got it wrong. Still, his inability to find a way to reconcile his religious beliefs with his politics on this issue was not unique. And the fact he was wrong on this issue, important though it is, gives no one the right to label him a disgrace to his religion.

The thing I most admired about Biden's Catholicism these past four years was not his embrace of Catholic social ethics. It was his observance of our cultic ethic. Biden always carries a rosary in his pocket. He never missed Mass. The White House press pool would issue the reports: "POTUS entered St. Edmond's church at 4:01" when he was at his home in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, or "POTUS departed Holy Trinity church at 9:57" when he was in Washington. When there was no such notice from the press pool, you knew a priest had gone to the White House to say Mass for the first family. It is a comforting and very Catholic fact that the most powerful person on earth said every week, "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and I shall be healed."

There is an apparently apocryphal story which, like most such stories, should be true whether it is or not. After President John F. Kennedy, the first Catholic president, was killed, a reporter reputedly told Kennedy's sister Eunice that he intended to write a book about the late president's religion. She replied, "That's going to be a short book." No one would make that quip about the nation's second Catholic president.

Biden's faith not only sustained him personally, it helped form his worldview in important, and mostly successful, ways. Our nation is the better for his presidency. His presidency was better because of his Catholicism. On the whole, he did us Catholics proud.

[Related: Biden awards Pope Francis with Presidential Medal of Freedom](#)