

Massimo Faggioli has just published required reading for understanding the crucial if complex relationship of Catholicism to American public culture. *Joe Biden and Catholicism in the United States* offers a deeply nuanced and perceptive analysis of how Biden (and the Church he loves) fits into the rough-and-tumble game of American politics. With his usual lucid and engaging historical style, Faggioli offers a compelling “long view” of what Biden’s presidency means for American Catholics—a view often missed by the mainstream media. Go out and buy this book.

■ **MARK MASSA, S.J.**, *Director, Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life, Boston College*

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A must-read for anyone who truly wants to understand Joe Biden.

■ **JULIAN COMAN**, *Associate Editor, **The Guardian***

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Massimo Faggioli analyzes our U.S. Catholic Church divided between right-wing cultural warriors and Vatican II, Pope Francis Catholics. President Biden enters this scene as a fully engaged, knowledgeable, and faithful progressive Catholic. The president’s call to compassion and healing is a gospel challenge to the entire nation, but especially the Catholic hard-liners. Read this book now, and then keep it at hand for future reference as the 46th President of the United States follows his call to embody faith in this political engagement... and riles some of the far-right leadership in the conservative Church.

■ **SR. SIMONE CAMPBELL, S.S.S.**, *Executive Director of NETWORK, Lobby for Catholic Social Justice*

Our rosary-carrying second Catholic president, who sprinkles his speeches with references to popular hymns and quotes from saints, is sure to “evangelize” in a way few other public Catholics have. Massimo Faggioli’s in-depth examination of Joe Biden’s Catholicism is helpful and necessary as we embark on this historic presidency.

■ **HEIDI SCHLUMPF**, *Executive Editor, National Catholic Reporter*

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Part political scientist, part theologian, and part savvy cultural critic, Massimo Faggioli gives Catholics and non-Catholics alike a book full of insight into the way faith and religion have shaped President Biden—and will surely shape his administration’s decisions and policies. With crisp prose and a unique point of view, Faggioli captures the conundrum that is any faithful person, any family, and any church, and points hopefully toward many possible reconciliations that our world—and the Catholic Church—desperately need.

■ **GREGORY W. JORDAN**, *Executive Director of the Slattery Center for the Ignatian Humanities at The University of Scranton; author of **The Saints Are Coming** and **Willie Mays Aikens: Safe at Home**; screenwriter and producer of the forthcoming feature film **The Royal***

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This is a very important book on a very timely topic by a very thoughtful and informed theologian. Hopefully, Massimo’s reflections will help challenge U.S. Catholics and the Biden administration to seek ways to work together to advance the common good in a divided Church and nation.

■ **JOHN CARR**, *Director, Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life, Georgetown University*

JOE BIDEN  
*and* CATHOLICISM *in*  
*the* UNITED STATES

Massimo Faggioli

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# Introduction: Catholicism and Public Life in the United States

## **1. *From Kennedy to Biden, by Way of The West Wing***

During the first 230 years of history of the United States, the great majority of the nation's presidents were members of Christian churches other than Catholic; most were Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, or Baptist. Joe Biden is the second Catholic president, after John F. Kennedy's brief term sixty years ago. That alone made the 2020 U.S. election historically notable, distinctive in both the political and religious history of the United States. But in addition to this, another set of circumstances made it an extraordinary election: Biden was elected during the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic, after months of nationwide protests against racially motivated violence, and following a presidential administration that threatened and struck real blows against the rule of law and world order. All this was happening while the newly elected president's own Church has

endured internal divisions among its American members like no other church and like never before in modern history.

Biden's presidency arouses not only political expectations but also religious, even salvific ones. This Catholic president is now called upon to heal the moral and physical damage inflicted upon the nation by Trump, the pandemic, and globalization. He is the fourth Catholic to run for the American presidency (besides Kennedy, after Al Smith in 1928 and John Kerry in 2004). It is an office that is political but also moral and religious, and he begins it in a moment of delicate transition for both the nation and the Catholic Church.

The election of a Catholic to the presidency has historical value not only because this is only the second time it has happened but also because it allows us to closely examine *the* Catholic question in the United States: *What does it mean to be both Catholic and American?* Throughout American history, in ways not faced by members of other Christian churches, Catholics have had to engage in a certain kind of negotiation and mediation with their own Church, both on the national level and in terms of their relationship with the Vatican.

Biden's election is part of a particular historical moment of acceleration in the cultural and religious diversification of the country, including its politicians. This was evident in the swearing-in ceremonies of the new members of Congress in January 2019. While many were sworn in as they held their hands on the traditional Christian Bible, others among the new elect swore on the Koran, the Hebrew Bible, the Vedas of Hinduism, or the Buddhist Sutras.

But this is also a particularly *Catholic* moment. Biden's election is the culmination of a rise of Catholics in American political life. As of January 20, 2021, the president of the United States, the Speaker of the House, the chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, and five other Supreme Court justices (six out of nine in all) are Catholic. To be sure, the clear division of Catholics into two different ideological and political camps means that any talk of a Catholic takeover in America is misplaced. Catholicism has come far in two centuries in the context of the nation's political life, but it is also very different from what it was at the time of John Kennedy. For the first Catholic president, his being Catholic was a problem for important sectors of the Protestant establishment of the nation; for the second one, the country has no problem with his being Catholic, but a not insignificant segment of the American Church—from among its bishops, its clergy, and its faithful—has a problem with his Catholicism.

Having won numerous elections as a senator since 1973, two national elections to the vice presidency (2008 and 2012), and now one as president in 2020, Joe Biden lacks no political legitimacy. And yet significant sectors of the Catholic (and otherwise Christian) electorate question his moral legitimacy. In the political history of the United States, Biden was not the first Catholic to run for or be elected to the presidency, but he is the first to do so while rising above and overcoming deep divisions within the American Catholic Church.

From the point of view of popular culture, as a Catholic president, Biden follows the most famous president in enter-

tainment history, the fictional Jed Bartlet of *The West Wing*, the television drama conceived by Aaron Sorkin that aired for eight seasons (1999–2006) on NBC. An economist, Nobel laureate, and University of Notre Dame alumnus, the Bartlet character—played and, at least in his Catholicism, modeled by the Catholic actor Martin Sheen—never had to deal with the political and religious polarization within U.S. Catholicism that exists today. Bartlet’s liberal and at the same time devoted Catholicism is not unlike Biden’s. But the American Catholicism depicted in *The West Wing* is closer to Kennedy’s—at ease with the mainstream, ambivalent about the morality of abortion and the death penalty, but with ambivalence that remains on the level of individual conscience rather than fueling fundamental divisions within the Church or between the Church and society. It is Catholicism as it was before the neoconservative and neo-traditionalist storm that was developing at the time depicted in the show and that has now reached a new theological, cultural, and political stage. It’s the long wave and the American Catholic version of the “revenge of God” about which Gilles Kepel wrote three decades ago.<sup>1</sup>

In a country where political faiths have taken on a theological and dogmatic intensity, the renewed consideration of America as a political and moral project sees in American Catholicism a particular case study, one that includes convulsions within the

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<sup>1</sup> See Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God. The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the Modern World*, Penn State University Press, 1993, new edition Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007 (original French: *Revanche de Dieu. Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde*, Paris: Seuil 1991).

body of the Church that reflect the external crisis of globalization and world order. The links between theology and politics on the national and international scenes is one of the primary interests of this book, which starts from a specific interest in *American Catholicism* but can't fail to consider the turbulence being experienced by *global Catholicism* in these first decades of the twenty-first century.

At the same time, there is a national context from which we must begin. Why does the election of a Catholic president deserve so much attention? On one hand, there is the visible role that Biden's Catholicism played in this election. One struggles to keep track of the times in which he, as a candidate, made direct or indirect references to his Catholicism. In his speech to the nation on December 14, after the certification of the electoral college vote, Biden concluded by referring to the prayer popularly connected to St. Francis of Assisi: "So, as we start the hard work to be done, may this moment give us the strength to rebuild this house of ours upon a rock that can never be washed away, as in the prayer of Saint Francis, for where there is discord, union, where there is doubt, faith, where there is darkness, light. This is who we are as a nation. This is the America we love. And that is the America we are going to be. So, thank you all. May God bless you, and may God protect our troops and all those who stand watch over our democracy."<sup>2</sup> In his pre-Christmas

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2 "Biden Speaks after Electoral College Certification Results," PBS News Hour website, December 14, 2020: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/biden-speaks-after-electoral-college-certification-results>.

speech, delivered on December 22, Biden quoted the German Jesuit Alfred Delp, an important figure in the Catholic resistance against Hitler, executed by the Nazis in February 1945, at the age of thirty-seven: “He wrote, ‘Advent is a time for rousing.’ Delp believed, at first, we are shaken to our depths, and then we’re ready for a season of hope. As a nation, we’ve certainly been shaken to our depths this year. Now it’s time to wake, to get moving, a time for hope. We’ve gotten through tough times before in this nation. We’ll get through these difficult times as well. We’ll do it by coming together, by working with one another.”<sup>3</sup>

Biden made his Catholic faith a central part of the campaign, and he proved once again that Catholicism has a prominent place in the American project—a political, civil, social, and cultural project. On the other hand, it is a Catholicism that has found itself in conflict in a variety of ways and at various times on some key issues in public life in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

## **2. Six Key Issues for American Catholicism in the Public Square**

The first issue is about *the compatibility between “papist” Catholicism and Protestant America*, founded as a religious project

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3 “Joe Biden Speech Transcript Before Holidays December 22,” <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/joe-biden-delivers-remarks-before-christmas-holiday-transcript-december-22>.

4 Two summaries of the issues are Margaret M. McGuinness and James T. Fisher, eds., *Roman Catholicism in the United States: A Thematic History* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019); Margaret O’Brien Steinfels, ed., *American Catholics, American Culture: Tradition and Resistance*, 2 vols. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

of Christians who had rejected the national churches of Europe but also rejected Catholicism. In 2020, Joe Biden was the fifteenth Catholic to be named (along with Vice President Kamala Harris) “Person of the Year” by *Time* magazine. Past recipients include Kennedy in 1961, Pope John XXIII in 1963, Pope John Paul II in 1994, Newt Gingrich in 1995, and Pope Francis in 2013. (Francis also made the cover of *Rolling Stone* the following year). But this acceptance of Catholicism by the American mainstream is not to be taken for granted. As the historian Mark Noll has noted, well into the twentieth century, “to most American Protestants, Catholicism seemed as alien to treasured political values as it was antithetical to true Christianity.”<sup>5</sup>

Anti-Catholicism in the United States has a long and bloody history. The hegemony and power of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants led to a marginalization of the French and especially Spanish Catholicism that was present in the northern part of North America well before the arrival of the Pilgrims in the early seventeenth century. In the pre-Civil War period, white Protestants often mounted violent protests against Catholic immigrants over the perceived threat of “papism” influencing the way Catholics might vote.

Recognition of the compatibility between American society and the Catholic faith was slowed by the mid-nineteenth-century “Romanization” of American Catholicism, which emphasized a

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5 Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 18. Cf. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

spirit of obedience to the hierarchical authority of the Church and loyalty to the papacy. In these years, pro-Roman ultramontanism prevailed over a Catholicism inspired by the American liberal tradition of intellectual independence and adapted to the European Catholic model.<sup>6</sup> Until the mid-twentieth century, a clear anti-Catholic prejudice existed in America, an aura of suspicion of those who populated the Catholic subculture (the so-called “Catholic ghetto”). This suspicion only dissipated in the period between World War II and the Second Vatican Council.

During the same time period at the Vatican, American Catholicism was a source of concern and treated as an experiment to be viewed with caution. It is only since 1908 that the Catholic Church in the United States has no longer been designated by Rome as among the “mission territories” that fall under the jurisdiction of the Vatican dicastery known as Propaganda Fide, and not until 1984 did the United States and the Holy See open diplomatic relations at the highest level. The bridge over the Atlantic, stretching between the Vatican and the United States, is still fairly new. Historically, the sensitivity of Catholics on international politics and defense issues can be well understood only in the context of the delicate question of the American Church’s relationship with the Vatican and suspicion of a “conflict of loyalty.”

A second issue involves *the relationship between Roman Catholicism and American democracy*. It is a story that includes

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6 Cf. Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church: New York’s Irish and German Catholics, 1815–1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

both American political prejudices against nineteenth-century ultramontanism, on one hand, and papal distrust—or, as in Pius IX’s 1864 *Syllabus of Errors*, outright rejection—of democracy and the separation between church and state on the other. There is a tension, if not contradiction, between nineteenth-century Catholicism and the democratic ethos of the American project. Until the twentieth century, both the Vatican and liberal Catholics in Europe looked with caution at the American experiment, sometimes distancing themselves—as in the 1899 condemnation of Americanism by Leo XIII in *Testem Benevolentiae*—and at other times identifying public Catholicism in Europe by its differences from the American model (as in the reconstruction after World War II).

At the same time, American Catholics, who have always lacked their own political party (unlike in Europe in the twentieth century) and identified with the Democratic party in the century between the Civil War and the 1970s, did not shirk from the task of contributing to “sustained effort to bind Catholic social thought to democracy, human rights, and religious freedom.”<sup>7</sup> Beginning in the late 1930s, European Catholic exiles in America urged Catholics to recognize the moral importance of democratic politics and civil liberties, an effort that greatly impacted Catholic political culture both in America and in Europe. The cautious acceptance of Catholicism in America after the Second

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7 John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 194.

World War was still based largely on the anti-communist political credentials the Cold War demanded. It was a Catholicism struggling both with American anti-Catholicism and with leadership in Rome uncomfortable with its tendency to adapt to American pluralism.

In the 1960s, Jesuit John Courtney Murray (silenced by the Vatican for nearly a decade prior to Vatican II for his theological work on religious freedom) urged Catholics to find a more temperate balance between Catholic principles and public consensus. Kennedy's election in 1960, despite an anti-Catholic campaign fueled by leaders of the Protestant establishment, brought peace (or at least an armistice) between Catholicism and political modernity. The Second Vatican Council's contribution to reconciliation between Catholicism and constitutional democracy—especially through its Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, and its Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*—also helped to bring American Catholics out of the shadow of suspicion. But today, traditionalist and neo-fundamentalist Catholics offer critical re-interpretations of both Vatican II and Murray, making no secret of their desire to delegitimize that history. Biden's election represents a vindication of the history of American Catholicism as a history of the search for a compatibility between the Church and a pluralist constitutional democracy.

A third issue concerning American Catholicism in the public square is that of *the relationship between the Church and racism*. The churches of Europe, while compromised by the colonial sys-

tem until the mid-twentieth century and certainly not exempt from theological rationalizations of racism (especially toward Jews), never had to deal with the intertwining of Christianity with ideologies and practices of racial supremacy in the same way that was common in the United States. At key moments—especially in the century between the Civil War and the civil rights movement—Catholic opposition to slavery and segregation in the United States was far from univocal. The movement against racial segregation evoked the specters of a social and cultural revolution that was for some Catholics too close to the French Revolution; Catholic abolitionists were identified by some of their own coreligionists with the anti-Catholicism of many of the most prominent abolitionists.

Today, racial justice questions fuel an internal division within Catholicism that became prominent during the Obama and Trump presidencies, thanks in part to the diversification of the country from an ethnic and cultural as well as religious point of view. Like Kennedy before him, President Biden—elected by a party that has reunited in opposition to “white supremacy”—will be forced to deal with the issue of racism not only as a Democratic president but also as a Catholic.

A fourth issue: America continues to grow in diversity thanks to *immigration*, the phenomenon that historically defines American Catholicism and makes it the nation’s largest church today, despite a rapid loss of believers occurring at the same time. Attitudes of many Catholics toward immigration are out of sync with the support voiced by American bishops and the services provided by

their institutions. It is one of the areas of convergence between the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and Pope Francis. “The [American] Catholic Church,” writes theologian Timothy Matovina, “is the largest, and possibly the most effective, pro-immigration organization in the country. This has everything to do with strategic and pastoral planning, reflecting the fact that Latinos constitute a growing number of U.S. Catholics.”<sup>8</sup>

But in the eyes of the Catholic electorate, the immigration question has changed; it is one of the issues on which American Catholicism has found itself exposed to the winds of the crisis of economic globalization and the appeals of nationalism. In fact, the immigration issue must be understood in the context of the issue of racial justice. Biden will have to confront the self-narrative of Catholics who became mainstream Americans during the twentieth century but who fail to recognize that the children and grandchildren of European Catholic immigrants became Americans only by “paying the price of the ticket,” as the African American writer and polemicist James Baldwin put it—that is, by becoming white.<sup>9</sup> The ethno-racial manifesto of Trumpism—a reaction to several movements, of which “Black Lives Matter” is only the best-known—and the support these movements have received from many believers have prompted many Catholics to rethink what it really means to be Catholic and American.

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8 Timothy Matovina, *Latino Catholicism: Transformation in America's Largest Church* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 202.

9 Cf. Matthew J. Cressler, *Authentically Black and Truly Catholic: The Rise of Black Catholicism in the Great Migration* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

Fifth, the issue of racial justice touches on another key problem for the relationship of Catholics with the United States: *the role of government and the state*. In the nineteenth century, beginning especially with Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), Catholics rejected the *laissez-faire* doctrine of the liberal system. Father John Ryan, a Catholic priest and theologian, was instrumental in shaping the economic strategy of the Catholic Church in America. A true political insider in Washington, Ryan helped to develop President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal and was also important in creating the alliance between Catholics and progressives on economic questions.

But with the passage of time, during the second half of the twentieth century American Catholics found themselves at a crossroads between two cultures: an American culture that had always been skeptical of a state/government active in social matters (religion, economy, education) and a Catholic culture that understood the state as playing a key role in the protection and promotion of the common good.<sup>10</sup> Beginning with the Reagan presidency, the shift of Catholics toward the Republican party has also shifted their conceptions of state and government toward a more liberal, free-market economic model. This has been clear in the interpretation given to social encyclicals, from John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* (1991) to Francis's *Laudato Si'* (2015), by neoliberal and neoconservative American Catholics

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10 Cf. John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960).

with strong ties to the nation's political and economic elites. Now, in confronting the question of racial justice, the state is the only institution powerful enough to reject a particularly virulent form of institutionalized racism that dates back to the introduction of slavery on the American continent. A similar question also arises for Biden on environmental issues, since trusting society and the market to address the threat of climate change without the influence of government or international institutions is illusory.

But conservative and progressive Catholics suddenly reverse their positions on the role of government when it comes to the sixth and most divisive issue of the last half century, *sexual morality and abortion*. In this reversal, conservatives favor an interventionist state regulating social realities with legislation inspired by the traditional Church doctrine, and liberals speak a more libertarian language. This reversal is the result of the end of the alliance between Catholics and progressives on economic issues, an alliance forged in the early twentieth century and very influential starting in the 1930s. Even then, the divisive potential of questions of gender and sex (contraception and abortion) was visible in a Catholic militancy that in America tended (and still tends) to force some very different practices—contraception, forced sterilization, euthanasia, and abortion—into the same category of morally abominable practices.

These issues remained in the background for a long time. After the Second World War, Catholicism in America became “indistinguishable from Protestantism and Judaism in terms of

political, social, and moral positions.”<sup>11</sup> Everything changed in the late sixties and early seventies, between Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968) and the U.S. Supreme Court’s legalization of abortion (1973).<sup>12</sup> And here is the most significant difference in the political and cultural context between Kennedy’s presidency and Biden’s. Today as then, one of the charisms of the Catholic Church in America is a marked sensitivity—greater than other churches in America and in the world—on the question of religious freedom, though the terms of the question have changed significantly, both in the United States and around the globe, since the years of John Courtney Murray and Vatican II.

The history of the relationship between Catholics, culture, and politics in the United States is a history of collaboration and disruption, of debts and contributions to the American mainstream. The historical moment of Biden’s presidency includes a Catholic Church in which different and contradictory religious and political identities coexist precariously. On issues of sexual morality and the defense of life, a specific Catholic culture emerged more prominently between the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. This Catholic culture was distinctive in part because of its own internal divisions on these matters, divisions that were only exacerbated by the sexual abuse scandal, which arose in the context of a crisis of author-

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11 Mark S. Massa, *Catholics and American Culture: Fulton Sheen, Dorothy Day, and the Notre Dame Football Team* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 23.

12 Cf. Mark S. Massa, *The Structure of Theological Revolutions: How the Fight over Birth Control Transformed American Catholicism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

ity of the magisterium that began two generations earlier on the question of contraception. But for a long time on issues of social and economic justice, the Church was visibly united.

Biden's election signals an attempt to find a new solution to the equation between the two American and Catholic questions *par excellence*: social-economic justice and disputes over the moral and identity issues underlying the "culture wars." In order to capture the relevance of the presidency of Joe Biden, it is important to locate the election of 2020 in the historical context of the last one hundred years, when four different Catholics ran for president of the United States and the proposed solutions to the Catholic political equation varied significantly.