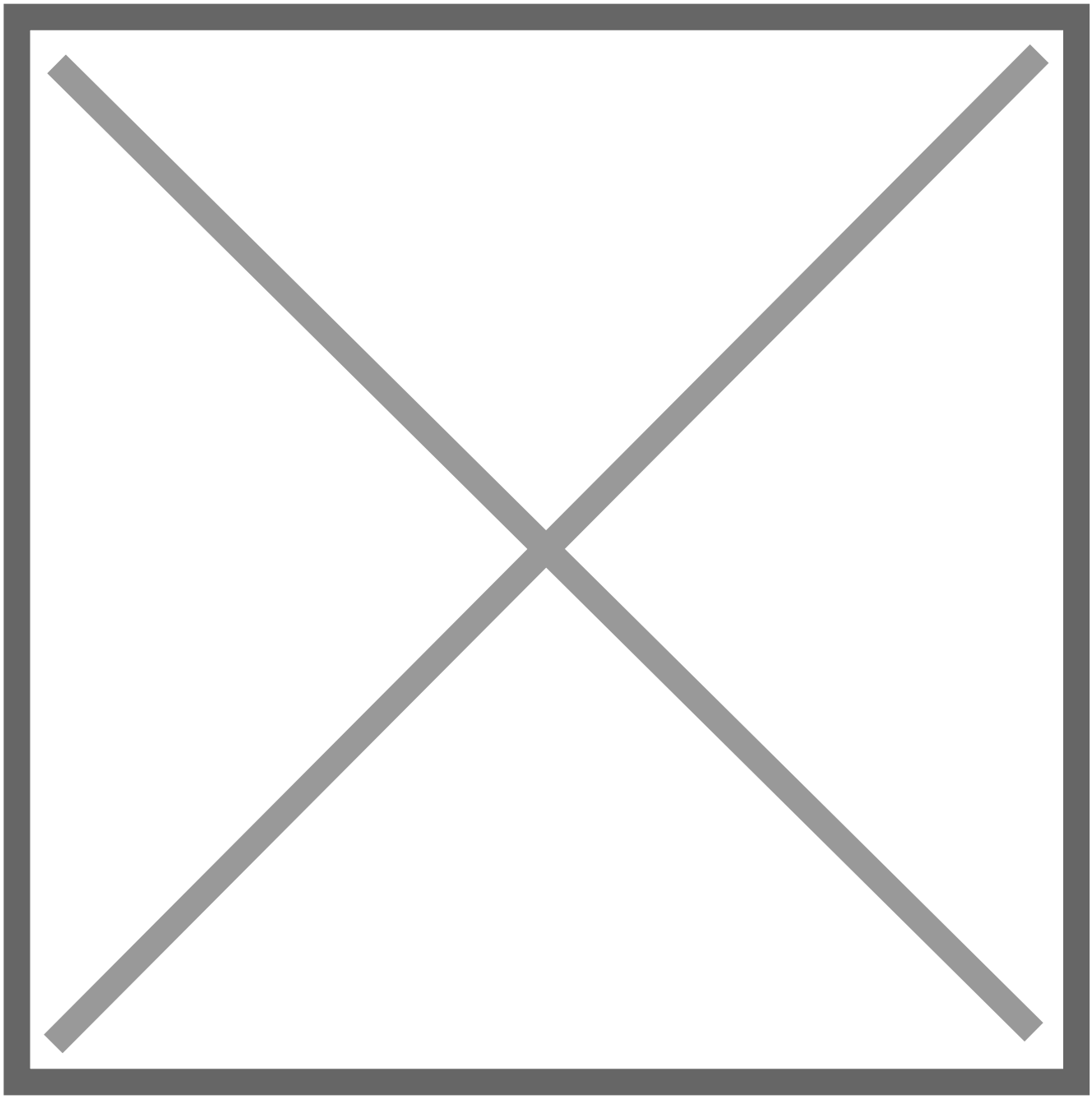
Opinion
News



Jesuit Fr. Edward Reese, president of St. Ignatius College Prep in San Francisco, left and former Vice President Joe Biden listen to speakers during a memorial service for U.S. Sen. John McCain at North Phoenix Baptist Church. (CNS/Reuters/Matt York)



by Michael Sean Winters

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It is too late in the day to express shock at anything that drips from Donald Trump's lips. Nor, upon reflection, am I entirely surprised that Trump apparently holds a pagan understanding of the Godhead, asserting that Joe Biden "hurt God," conjuring an image of Hera hating Heracles because Zeus had sired him with the mortal Alcmene. Which of the president's devoted posse of pastors will inform him that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob cannot be "hurt" by anything we humans do? (And we can be reasonably certain Trump has not been boning up on process theology which argues God can suffer, and we can also be certain he meant "hurt" in the sense of "harm," not "make to suffer." He is a narcissist after all.)

The president's attack on Biden was not unwelcome here at NCR: We had just published my colleague Christopher White's detailed look at how Joe Biden has been shaped by his faith. I know of no profile that has done a better job of capturing Biden's faith. He is what a friend calls "a B+ Catholic" who doesn't miss Mass very often and tries to live up to the Gospel's high ideals, allowing for the fact that, for politicians, turning the other cheek is not exactly a recipe for electoral success.

Then the Biden campaign released a video, apparently part of the biographical sketch that will be shown at next week's Democratic National Convention.

Tweet from MichaelRWear account Aug. 10, 2020

It is quite extraordinary. The image of Biden, Pope Francis and then-Ambassador to the Holy See Ken Hackett, standing together in the Paul VI Audience Hall, all sharing a laugh at something Biden had said, is priceless. His comments about being formed as a young person by the nuns is authentic and politically strategic: Nuns are far more popular than bishops. The message could not be more different from Trump's egomania nor more on point for coping with the pandemic: We are our brother's keeper.

I am sure that the Biden video will send some conservative Catholics into fevered denunciations. Already, Bishop Thomas Tobin of Providence, Rhode Island, sent out a snarky tweet implying Biden was not really a Catholic. At the National Review, Alexandra DeSanctis penned a largely ridiculous article in which this paragraph stood out:

> But when it comes to subjects on which the Left disagrees vehemently with the Catholic Church — where progressivism conflicts with the Church's nonnegotiable dogma rather than merely with the views of some of its prelates on prudential matters such as immigration or climate change — Biden falls curiously silent about its tenets.

Setting aside the improper use of the word "dogma" here, the idea of "non-negotiable" values is not part of the teaching of the Catholic Church. It is a right-wing, political talking point. In a sense, none of the teachings of the church are "negotiable," and all moral teachings involve prudential judgment in their application, so DeSanctis' framing — setting "non-negotiable dogma" against prudential judgment — is flawed at its foundation.

"I have never understood the expression non-negotiable values," said Francis way back in 2013 in an interview with Corriere della Sera. "Values are values, and that is it. I can't say that, of the fingers of a hand, there is one less useful than the rest. Whereby I do not understand in what sense there may be negotiable values."

Biden's position on abortion is untenable from any Catholic perspective: The theological proscription against the intentional taking of a human life is not something that can be set aside for the kind of libertarian argument favored by pro-choice advocates.

It conflicts mightily with the Democratic Party's insistence on the importance of solidarity in every other policy discussion: Here, and only here, Democrats thwart the natural, liberal impulse to extend solidarity to any and all whom our society defines by a lack, an "un," like the unemployed and the undocumented. Only the unborn are denied a whit of human compassion.

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I make no apologies for Biden's position and would not, if asked, help him to try and justify it or make it more political salient. But the reduction of the Catholic faith to this one issue has been a pastoral as well as a political dead-end, a distortion of Catholic moral teaching that must stop.

I am delighted that Biden is not going to allow the abortion issue to keep him from openly discussing his faith. How could he? How could someone who has endured the tragic loss of his first wife and two of his children explain himself without reference to his faith? When Joe Biden says this election is a fight for the soul of the nation, we all know what he means, and most of his political ideas and values are completely compatible with Catholicism. This video shows he will not allow others to shame him into silence about his faith.

Compare this with John Kerry's approach to religion in the 2004 presidential contest. He assiduously avoided discussing his religion on the campaign trail, even when it became a topic of conversation as conservative prelates like then-Archbishop Raymond Burke of St. Louis proclaimed that Kerry should not be given Communion because of his pro-choice stance.

In his third debate with George W. Bush, Kerry could avoid the topic no longer as he was asked explicitly about his deviation from church teaching. "I completely respect [the bishops'] views. I am a Catholic. And I grew up learning how to respect those views," Kerry told the national audience. "But I disagree with them, as do many. I can't legislate or transfer to another American citizen my article of faith. What is an article of faith for me is not something that I can legislate on somebody who doesn't share that article of faith."

Forty-four years earlier, that excessive separationism had worked for John Kennedy, but it was no longer convincing to any but the secular liberals who ran Democratic

Party campaigns. A Pew Research Center study in 2004 showed that 72% of Americans thought it was important for a president to have a strong religious faith, and only 10% thought Kerry would be influenced by his faith.

Kerry failed to explain himself in religious terms as Jimmy Carter had done. He failed to connect his political vision to a narrative with religious inflections that would appeal to the electorate as Ronald Reagan had done. In his acceptance speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Kerry criticized the incumbent: "For four years, we've heard a lot of talk about values. But values spoken without action taken are just slogans." It was a good line but an unconvincing one. His own inability to root his values in any religious texts, or even in the secular, civilizational canon of the Magna Carta, Bill of Rights and Gettysburg Address, led many to suspect he was invoking values because a focus group had said to do so.

In the final swing state of the election, Ohio, Bush won the Catholic vote with 55% to Kerry's 44%. In Florida, Bush captured 57% of the Catholic vote. Nationally, the margin was 52% to 47%, the worst showing by a Democratic candidate among Catholic voters in 20 years.

Whether Biden's different approach proves helpful at the ballot box, it invites a robust debate this autumn about the public significance of Catholic faith. We Catholics should be able to explain how our faith informs all of our decisions, including our political ones. Biden's decision to lean in to the discussion, and not to avoid it, will be good for Catholicism, whether or not it is good for the Democrats.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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