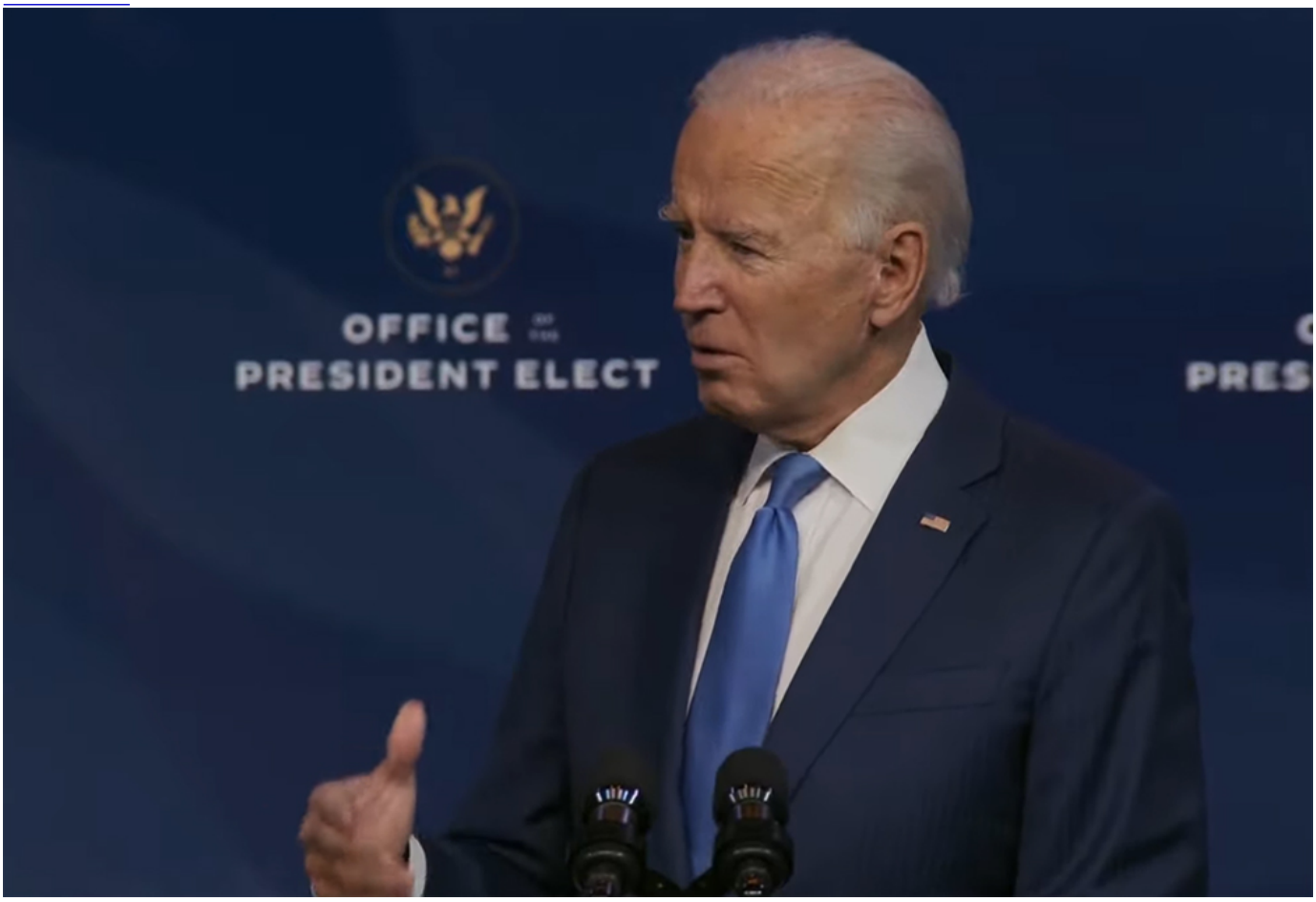
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President-elect Joe Biden speaks during a Dec. 11 livestreamed event in Wilmington, Delaware, to announce members of his administration. (NCR screenshot/YouTube/Joe Biden)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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If the United States is still a democracy 100 years from now, it will be, at least in part, thanks to NCR's Catholic Newsmaker of the Year, President-elect Joe Biden.

When he was elected in November, Biden made history as only the second Catholic in our country's 244-year history to be chosen to lead from its highest office. When he is inaugurated in January, it will mark 60 years — six decades! — since the last, and first, Catholic president, John F. Kennedy.

So the election of a churchgoing, rosary-carrying, prayer-quoting Catholic as president would itself be historic in a normal year.

But 2020 has not been a normal year. Our citizens are threatened by a global health pandemic, which current national leaders have downplayed and ignored to our peril, and our democracy is threatened by a president who has regularly sought to subvert the rule of law. As we write this, Donald Trump has still not conceded in an election he clearly lost, and instead urges an overturn of the results of a free and fair contest, the cornerstone of a democracy.

The true winner of that election is Biden — originally a seeming longshot in a crowded primary that pitted progressives Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders against younger moderates Pete Buttigieg and Amy Klobuchar. Some had already declared Biden's candidacy dead before his February win in the South Carolina primary launched a comeback, one initially fueled by African American voters who rightly trusted him for having played second to the nation's first Black president.

Then the coronavirus hit. While Americans quarantined, social distanced and, sadly, became infected and died in proportions greater than most other countries, the current resident of the White House told lie after lie: The virus was a hoax. It would go away on its own. Masks don't protect people from the virus.

Biden — in a contrast too stark to miss — listened to scientists, hailed measures that mitigated the virus, and modeled sacrifice by wearing a mask, refusing to gather crowds and, yes, even staying in his basement. And when the nation erupted in protests against police violence toward Black Americans, Biden's anger was directed at racial injustice — not at those demanding an end to such injustice.

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In a year beset with chaos, crisis and conflict, overseen by a leader who seemed to revel in his own cruelty, Biden was a symbol of responsibility, professionalism and decency. That is who he has always been, and it's what our country craves after four years of a narcissist-in-chief.

Much of Biden's character flows from his Catholic faith, which, as our national correspondent Christopher White described in his July profile of Biden, "first took seed in parishes and parochial schools in Pennsylvania and Delaware," where he absorbed lessons about the human dignity of all and solidarity, especially with the poor and working class.

"Biden's faith is cited on the first page of his 2007 memoir, *Promises to Keep*, firmly situating himself in the context of an Irish Catholic family and a working-class community that revolved around the family's religious practices — and not just on Sunday," White wrote.

Unlike so many Democrats, Biden is comfortable talking about his faith — and practicing it. He is that guy in the back of church, whose eyes close at the homily, because he's either deeply meditating on the explanation of the Scriptures or catching a nap. No one knows but God and him. What we do know is that he's there, every Sunday, and sometimes even during the week. And he was there, in his parish church in Delaware earlier this month, on a Tuesday holy day of obligation, the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

Yes, cynics will say it was all for show. They would note Biden's stance on abortion, figure he's trying to make it up with all those fellow Catholics who didn't vote for him.

That would be a lie. Biden has always been there, according to all accounts, quietly, in the back of the church, whether it be home in Delaware or, as a globe-trotting vice president and senator, in some foreign capital, far removed from domestic public scrutiny.



President-elect Joe Biden arrives to attend Mass in Wilmington, Delaware, Dec. 5. (CNS/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

Biden's faith clearly has had an impact on his greatest political gift, that of public empathy, weaving his own struggles of the deaths of his children and first wife with the stories of public loss from pandemic or violent mass killings. It is no small thing. Think of what we haven't had for the past four years. We will now have a gifted

public empathizer to console in all the tragedies that are sure to come.

At a time when Catholics fret that the church has become less important in public life, that an entire baptized generation has moved to the "nones" category of denial of any Catholic connection, we have our second Catholic president, who goes to church, who quotes St. Francis of Assisi and who knows that the Immaculate Conception refers to Mary, not Jesus.

He is by all accounts the most overtly church-affiliated leader we've had since Jimmy Carter taught Sunday school. He won't need a military escort to tear gas a crowd before holding up a Bible in front of a church. Biden himself would surely note that doesn't make him more holy, more morally upright, a more astute political leader than his predecessors or his critics.

But it does make him a witness to Catholic faith in a way we have never experienced before in public life at such a high level. We have a true, albeit flawed, witness to Catholic faith in the most prominent place in the world. Biden himself would probably loathe the description, but he is by nature of his new job the most prominent American Catholic — dare we say? — inadvertent evangelizer, in that he models how to live out his faith in his everyday life. He may even help rescue the church's reputation of only being aligned with the alt-right.

Biden is not perfect. His party's position on abortion is extreme, and he has, so far, acquiesced to it rather than work to shift it. He also was part of an administration that used drone strikes like video games.

But even before his first acts as president, Biden has already done something incredibly significant: He answered the call, late in life and after taking a respite from political life to heal from his grief, to serve his country. He ran a clean, dignified campaign in a messy time, and he reached across the chasms of polarization to build a coalition that garnered the most votes ever received by a presidential candidate. And he chose the first woman of color as his running mate, the first woman to be elected to the executive branch.

As we await his inauguration and prepare to challenge him to represent all Americans fairly, we thank Biden for what he has already done. For his character, for integrating his faith into his public life, for his ability to bring together Americans at a time of deep division and for rescuing our democracy from an era of deceit and

callousness, Joe Biden is our 2020 Catholic Newsmaker of the Year.

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