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Joe Biden is sworn in as the 46th president of the United States during his inauguration at the

Joe Biden is sworn in as the 46th president of the United States during his inauguration at the Capitol in Washington Jan. 20, 2021. (CNS/Reuters pool/Andrew Harnik)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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"For there is always light," poet Amanda Gorman recited at today's inauguration of our country's second Catholic president, "if only we're brave enough to see it / If only we're brave enough to be it."

Earlier that day, while attending Mass at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle, Joe Biden heard from the prophet Isaiah that "the light shall break forth like the dawn." He would echo that theme in his hope-filled inaugural address, urging Americans to write an American story of unity, healing and decency. He even quoted Psalm 30 that "weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."

As someone who has drawn on his Catholic faith throughout his personal and political life, President Biden and the events surrounding what was likely the most Catholic inauguration in our history reflected Biden's belief both in democracy and in a God of resurrection. And he accomplished something our own church leaders have been unable to do: He reminded the American public that the church can be a force for good.

From the remembrance of the dead at Tuesday evening's memorial, to his decision to start Inauguration Day with morning Mass, and with references to Scripture and saints throughout, Biden captured the need for the country to pivot from the chaos and destruction of the past four years toward the unity necessary to fight the pandemic, racism and economic challenges.

As "empathizer in chief," Biden launched the inaugural events with an inaugural eve public ritual of remembrance of the more than 400,000 Americans who have died from COVID-19. Americans lit candles in their homes, as the Washington Monument's reflecting pool was illuminated by 400 lights. At the memorial service Jan. 19, Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory prayed that we might "strengthen our awareness of our common humanity and our national unity."

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Biden echoed that call for unity in his inaugural address Jan. 20. Declaring that democracy had prevailed, he asserted that "disagreement must not lead to disunion" and called for Americans to "start afresh."

"Let's begin to listen to one another again, hear one another, see one another, show respect to one another," Biden said. "Politics doesn't have to be a raging fire, destroying everything in its path. Every disagreement doesn't have to be a cause for total war. And we must reject the culture in which facts themselves are manipulated and even manufactured."

It wasn't just words. Biden gave a special shout-out to former Vice President Mike Pence, who unlike his boss, had the decency to attend the inauguration. Biden hugged former President George W. Bush as well as former President Barack Obama. He modeled how to bring people together.

Can we, in a church whose very name implies universalism, live up to this call for unity? Can we set aside our differences, at least for a moment, to acknowledge that which we share in common: our belief in Jesus Christ and his call to care for the least among us?

Can we, as Biden said, put our "whole soul in it?"

Unity is not a value that surpasses all others; and unity without justice can be dangerous. But at times of crisis, unity is a necessary prerequisite to addressing a problem as big as a pandemic or as deep as racism. There are certain things we can only achieve if we do them together.

In Gorman's prolific and prophetic poem, she noted that "Somehow we've weathered and witnessed / A nation that isn't broken but simply unfinished." May we Americans — and especially we American Catholics—help do that finishing work toward a more perfect union.

This story appears in the **Inauguration 2021** feature series. View the full series.
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