News
Vatican



President Joe Biden at the White House in Washington Jan. 20, after his inauguration as the 46th president of the United States. At right (CNS/Reuters/Tom Brenner)



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The Vatican is more than 4,000 miles away from the White House, but on Wednesday it was much closer to the nation's second Catholic president than the leadership of the U.S. hierarchy.

As millions of viewers tuned into the inauguration Jan. 20, Joe Biden's Catholicism was on full display with a morning Mass; quotes from the pope, St. Augustine and Scripture during the ceremony; and a photo of Biden with Pope Francis in his newly outfitted Oval Office.

By the end of the day, however, that faith was under serious scrutiny by some stateside leaders of his own church.

As is the Vatican's custom, Francis sent a telegram to Biden congratulating him and urging him to pursue policies "marked by authentic justice and freedom." The statement, which encouraged Biden to work toward the common good, came two months after the pope personally called to congratulate him on his election win and after Francis sent Biden a signed copy of his new book.

By contrast, the president of the U.S. bishops' conference, Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez, issued a 1,200-word statement offering his prayers for Biden but also outlining areas of policy disagreements, particularly on the issue of abortion, writing, "Our new President has pledged to pursue certain policies that would advance moral evils."

The statement went on to double-down on the U.S. bishops' stance that "abortion remains the 'preeminent priority'" of the bishops' conference, echoing language that was adopted in 2019 ahead of the U.S. presidential election, with the justification that the nation was on the heels of overturning *Roe* v. *Wade*.

"We cannot stay silent when nearly a million unborn lives are being cast aside in our country year after year through abortion," Gomez wrote in his Inauguration Day statement.

Gomez's statement was quickly endorsed and shared by a number of prelates, including San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone, whose press officer sent out a statement under the headline "+Cordileone praises +Gomez: abortion is 'preeminent priority' " and the Knights of Columbus, which described the statement as "balanced and prophetic."

Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich, a close collaborator with Pope Francis, disagreed.

In a public rebuke of Gomez and the bishops' conference, Cupich said the statement was "ill-considered" and noted that there was no precedent for issuing one.

"The statement was crafted without the involvement of the Administrative Committee, a collegial consultation that is normal course for statements that represent and enjoy the considered endorsement of the American bishops," he said.

San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy also issued a statement saying that Francis offered a model for how the U.S. bishops should engage the new administration.

"Pope Francis' message to President Biden fundamentally speaks to him in his humanity, a man of Catholic faith striving to serve his nation and his God," wrote McElroy. "This is how we, the bishops of the United States, should encourage our new President: by entering into a relationship of dialogue, not judgment; collaboration, not isolation; truth in charity, not harshness."

In Rome, a senior Vatican official told America magazine that Gomez' statement was "most unfortunate and is likely to create even greater divisions within the church in the United States."

Throughout Inauguration Day, many other bishops from around the country issued statements, most offering prayers for the new president and the country. Catholic Charities, one of the country's largest charitable operations, also said it looks forward to working with the Biden administration.

As for Biden's new local pastor, Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory, no specific statement was issued; however when Biden arrived in the capital on Tuesday for his official event, Gregory was on hand to greet him. At a memorial service for the 400,000 Americans who have died during the pandemic, Gregory offered the invocation. Included in his prayer: a plea for unity.

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