Opinion
News
Vatican
NCR Voices



President Joe Biden arrives at Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Washington Aug. 29. (CNS/Reuters/Al Drago)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

October 27, 2021
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Friday morning, when President Joe Biden has an official audience with Pope Francis, some heads will explode. For a certain kind of Catholic, Biden represents a repudiation of their understanding of their own Catholic identity, and that kind of Catholic tends to be less than enthusiastic about Francis! Photos of the two together will be too much.

Catholic University of America theology professor Chad Pecknold told the Associated Press that the meeting "could actually highlight the urgent need to unite around a clear and coherent view of how the bishops should respond to politicians who publicly hold the Church's teaching in contempt while presenting themselves for Holy Communion."

What is he talking about? Pecknold ignores the difference between disagreeing about the legal applicability of a particular church teaching in a pluralistic society and "hold[ing] the Church's teaching in contempt."

Almost always, Biden is clear that he accepts the church's teaching on abortion but doesn't think it right to legislate that teaching for the country. I think he is wrong and his argument is weak, but I have never seen contempt in Biden for this or any teaching of the church. Still less has Biden shown contempt for the church itself, and the church is always more than the sum total of its moral teachings.

What is more, all sides of the abortion debate are about to find out just how complicated it is to draft legislation that can withstand juridical and public scrutiny. It is one thing to think abortion is wrong but something else to craft legislation that makes it illegal. Difficult questions will arise. Interests and competing moral visions will need to be balanced. In politics, as opposed to moral theology, compromise is the coin of the realm, and it is the art of the possible, not the arc of justice, that rules the day.

> Instead of softening any judgment of Biden, the president's fidelity to the practice of the faith makes the professional pro-life chorus detest him all the more.
>
> Tweet this

Why, then, does Biden provoke such fury? Every weekend, we see a photo of the president emerging from Holy Trinity Parish in Washington or St. Joseph's on the Brandywine Parish in Delaware. We have seen him with the smudge of ashes on his forehead every Ash Wednesday. We know he carries a rosary with him. We have heard the tales of the nuns who taught him as a boy. We know that his schedulers are reminded that if it is a holy day of obligation, the president needs to find a church no matter where he is traveling. How many Catholics do you know who never miss a holy day of obligation?

Instead of softening any judgment of Biden, the president's fidelity to the practice of the faith makes the professional pro-life chorus detest him all the more. Bad enough when Bill Clinton, the Baptist, and Barack Obama, who attended a United Church of Christ Church in Chicago for years, supported legal abortion, but to have a Catholic do it? This drives some of our coreligionists crazy.

Phil Lawler, at the CatholicCulture.org website, expressed a similar disgust when the pope met with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. "Less than a month ago the Pope told journalists that 'abortion is murder.' Now he greeted one of America's leading supporters of the practice," Lawler opined. "His meeting with Pelosi was markedly warmer than his grim-faced meeting, some months earlier, with former President Trump."

For Lawler, the fact that Pelosi is a grandmother, that she goes to Mass regularly, that she cares about many of the same things the pope cares about, none of that matters because they differ on abortion.

Or consider George Weigel, who is all in a lather about the president taking the Eucharist. In a commentary at the Catholic World Report about whether or not to deny holy Communion to pro-choice politicians, Weigel wrote, "The subjective moral condition of the pro-abortion politician — Is this person in a state of mortal sin? — is not the crux of the matter."

Who says? If the person is not in a state of mortal sin, why should they not be able to receive holy Communion? Surely Weigel recalls that his hero, St. Pope John Paul II, gave holy Communion to pro-choice politicians.

I do not understand how a Catholic can completely reduce their sense of Catholic identity to being opposed to abortion, any more than I can understand how a Catholic can dismiss the church's profound teaching about the inviolability of human life and embrace abortion rights as some kind of progressive triumph.

Advertisement

Biden seems to be a conflicted person, and conflictedness is usually a sign of moral seriousness. The abortion zealots, both pro- and con-, are the ones who really stand outside the Catholic moral and intellectual tradition, which recognizes complexity and is allergic to any Kantian approach to ethics.

We Catholics never fail to recognize the need to apply all moral principles to concrete circumstances with the use of prudential judgment. And we recognize that prudential judgment is not a "get-out-of-jail-free" card for anyone who invokes it to adumbrate the fact that they dissent from the teaching of the church.

There is one other kind of response to the Biden visit to the Vatican that we should be suspicious of, and that is the narrative that these two men are two peas in a pod. In The Washington Post's curtain raiser, Matt Viser wrote breathlessly:

> But the resonance is also personal, given the similarities between the 84-year-old pope and the 78-year-old president, who have in a sense become allies. Both attained ultimate leadership late in their lives and quickly moved in a liberal direction. They have faced internal resistance. Both are treated warily by conservative American bishops.

This reduction of the two men to any perceived political similarities misses the fact that one of the two is not a politician and, in fact, really wants the church to stay out of politics. So, in what sense are they "allies"? But Francis is not a liberal by American standards because the Catholic Church has never endorsed any concept of rights independent of an accompanying concept of responsibility.

Viser's article also misses the most important similarity between the two men: They haven't given up on the organizations they lead. Francis does not pine for the 1950s as a golden age we need to recover. Biden does not indulge the America-bashing so common on the left. Both men have more hope than the younger members of the constituencies they lead, and they have more hope because they have more wisdom.

Francis will welcome Biden and treat him the way he seems to treat almost everyone who approaches him, as a human being, with faults and failings as well as with gifts and dignity. The pope does not expect a politician to deliver the eschaton nor does the president expect the pope to resolve all the conundrums that afflict our political life.

I hope they find areas of collaboration because there are urgent moral tasks that will benefit from such collaboration. I hope, too, they are frank about their differences, as adults should be. In short, no one's head should explode about this meeting, but some will. The explosion will have next to nothing to do with the meeting itself.

Read this next: How does a meeting between a pope and president happen?