Opinion
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U.S. President Joe Biden speaks next to Shawn Fain, president of the United Auto Workers, as

U.S. President Joe Biden speaks next to Shawn Fain, president of the United Auto Workers, as he joins striking UAW members on the picket line outside the GM's Willow Run Distribution Center in Belleville, Michigan, Sept. 26. Biden became the first known sitting U.S. president to join a labor strike. (OSV News/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Last January, when I looked into my crystal ball and sketched some of the stories I expected to be following in 2023, I predicted:

> If the world of politics in 2022 was characterized by increasing polarization between the left and the right, the political life of the nation in 2023 will be increasingly marked by antagonisms within the ideological groupings that shape American politics. This was on vivid display during the fight over the speakership last week. Secondly, these intra-party fights will largely frustrate most attempts at legislation in the new year, as the margins in both chambers of Congress are so tiny, leaders in the House and Senate

> cannot afford to lose any of their members. Finally, three realities over which politicians have little control will affect our political life in ways it is impossible to predict beyond noting that the effects will be significant: the economy, migration and the war in Ukraine.

Subsequent events showed those predictions to be mostly accurate, but looking back, there were also some other developments that have shaped the political life of the nation I had not foreseen.

Let's start with the good news I did not predict: 2023 has been a great year for organized labor. In September, for the first time ever, a president of the United States joined a picket line when Joe Biden went to Michigan to stand in solidarity with the United Auto Workers. "The fact of the matter is that you guys, the UAW, you saved the automobile industry back in 2008 ... you made a lot of sacrifices," Biden said. "You gave up a lot. And the companies were in trouble. Now they're doing incredibly well and guess what? You should be doing incredibly well." That was a fine, concise statement of the way Democrats — and the official magisterium of the Catholic Church — think economics should work.

The connection between Catholicism and labor is deep. Both stand at the forefront of the fight against neoliberalism, a fight worth having if ever there was one, as labor leader Damon Silvers made clear in a series of lectures I reported on last spring. In May, I called attention to the alliance between church and labor leaders trying to get the New York state Legislature to enact a law that would crack down on predatory vulture funds. The bill passed through committee in the Assembly but did not come to a vote in either chamber. JubileeUSA vowed to try again next year.

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Another source of good news was again feeling pride watching our president represent the nation on the world stage. "It is nice to have a president who does not publicly throw his own intelligence agencies under the bus in order to appease a thug like Putin, as Trump infamously did," I wrote at the time of the NATO summit in July. "It is nice to have a president who understands that NATO is still a necessity, morally and politically."

Biden's grasp of foreign policy was also on display when he made the decision to travel to Israel shortly after the unprecedented terrorist attacks on Oct. 7. By embracing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the president both asserted America's commitment to Israel and placed some limits on what actions the prime minister might want to undertake. It was a bear hug, but there was no doubt who is the dominant partner in the relationship. His management of the relationship with China is more complicated but also combined firmness with collaboration.

As predicted, the economy continued to frame the nation's politics, and most Americans continue to take a dim view of how they are doing. The macroeconomic numbers are strong. Remember how many people predicted there would be a recession in 2023 only to be surprised by the economy's continued strength? The president needs to do a much better job talking about the shape of the economy that has emerged post-COVID. The labor shortage continues to boost wages and so long as prices continue to come down, Biden may have the wind at his back on the issue by election day.

People celebrate the defeat of Issue 1, a Republican-backed measure that would have made i

People celebrate the defeat of Issue 1, a Republican-backed measure that would have made it harder to amend the state constitution, an initiative aimed at helping defeat a November referendum that would protect abortion access in the state, after early results were announced during an election night party at the Columbus Fire Fighters Local 67 in Columbus, Ohio, U.S. August 8. (OSV News/USA Today Network via Reuters/Adam Cairns)

The politics of abortion continues to confound any defensible moral analysis of the issue. Voters have consistently backed more liberal abortion laws whenever the issue is posed directly, in the form of a referendum, but it is not clear that the issue has determined any contest between candidates. Countless commentators pointed to Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear's successful reelection bid in the conservative commonwealth, but Republicans won every other statewide race and Beshear got high marks for his handling of natural disasters and a mass shooting. Pro-life Republican candidates won contests in many states. If Democrats think the abortion issue will propel them to victory next year, they are mistaken. It continues to rank near the bottom of issues cited by voters in Gallup's tracking polls.

At a deeper level, it is disturbing to see so many liberal Catholics adopt a libertarian stance on the issue. Of course, it is complicated. Of course, anomalies will attend any effort to legislate morally complicated issues. That does not excuse the eagerness with which some abandon basic Catholic moral theology which insists, which must insist, that the unborn child possesses human dignity. You cannot erase large facts no matter how inconvenient they may be.

The easiest prediction to make back in January was that the chaos seen in the many ballots needed to elect a speaker of the House evidenced deep tensions within the party, tensions that would likely result in chaos. It was even worse than expected. The fight over efforts to fund the government not only cost Speaker Kevin McCarthy his gavel, but important government functions, like keeping aid flowing to Ukraine, have been sidelined while the clown car continues down the road. They found a new driver, but it is the same chaotic mess.

Former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, R-California, walks back to the speaker's office after h

Former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, R-California, walks back to the speaker's office after he was ousted from the position by a 216-to-210 vote of the House of Representatives at the U.S. Capitol in Washington Oct. 3. (OSV News/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)

The GOP's failure to confront Donald Trump in the wake of Jan. 6, 2021, has left the party in the lurch as they seek a nominee for 2024. Trump remains dominant. Only Gov. Chris Christie consistently points out that Trump is unfit for office, full stop. The nation needs a serious conservative political party, but until the GOP rids itself of Trump, its defining characteristic will be its complicity with Trump's increasingly unhinged and authoritarian proclivities. The party's most defining characteristics are a hostility to migrants and devotion to a law-breaking con artist. That turns what is best about America on its head.

The sad fact is that Catholic social teaching could improve virtually every issue facing the nation, but it only broke through here and there in 2023; there was none of the systematic, thoughtful analysis of our country's polity and culture in the light of the Gospel that we find on display in the writings of Pope Francis or, for that matter, the writings of Popes Benedict XVI and John Paul II. Ours is an unserious age. For a country with such enormous responsibilities, both at home and abroad, unseriousness is not just disturbing, it is deadly.

Friday, we'll look back at the life of the church in 2023.