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Biden's Catholicism adds to ticket, but raises questions too

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Democratic vice presidential choice Sen. Joe Biden highlights his Catholic faith as a major part of his identity. And if his pro-choice stance on abortion makes him vulnerable to criticism from church leaders, his religion is also seen as boosting the chances of the ticket Democrats are ratifying in their national convention here this week.

Sen. Barack Obama's selection of the Delaware senator as his running mate in the race for the White House is likely to be very helpful in wooing undecided Catholic voters, said Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese, a senior fellow at Georgetown University's Woodstock Theological Center and an expert on Catholics' role in politics.

Biden, who would become the first Catholic vice president in U.S. history, is ?a solid, middle-class Catholic with working-class roots, which is exactly what the ticket needs in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Missouri, Michigan -- those key swing states,? Reese said. ?It's no secret that Obama had trouble getting the Catholic vote during the primaries.?

Biden is from the part of the party that has urged Democrats to chuck the idea that respecting the separation of church and state means keeping quiet about the faiths on which their values are based. In the summer of 2006, while campaigning to win for himself the nomination Obama has since wrapped up, Biden said faith was one of two major concerns his party would need to emphasize to win. The other was national security.

Religious people need to know the party respects them, Biden said, according to an Associated Press report on the New Hampshire event. ?If we can't negotiate the faith issue, forget it, we won't win.?

In his first speech as Obama's running mate, and in a YouTube video sent to Obama supporters by e-mail Sunday, Biden touted his Irish Catholic cultural roots. ?I come from a big Catholic family with a strong tradition of service,? Biden said in the three-minute video, naming that identity first before making any mention of the Senate service and foreign relations experience that he brings to the ticket.

Obama campaign staffers present the pairing as two people of deep faith working on issues of concern to Catholics, such as universal health care, support for working families, making college affordable, and achieving equal pay for women. A new crop of Catholic organizations with politically progressive agendas agrees.

Catholics United and the Catholic Democrats Political Action Committee have released statements celebrating

Obama's pick. On the other hand, Fidelis, a Catholic-based antiabortion group, has called the selection offensive.

As the news of Biden's new role spread, the senator attended Mass Sunday with his family at St. Joseph on the Brandywine Church near Wilmington, Del. A missionary priest from southern India handled the homily, but the pastor, 72-year-old Monsignor Joseph F. Rebman, told *NCR* he took the opportunity to publicly pray for Biden to experience ?an increase in holy wisdom.? When some parishioners in the largely Republican parish questioned whether the pastor meant his prayer as an endorsement of Biden's candidacy, Rebman assured them that his public discussion of politics only extends to offering opinions on issues, not candidates.

Describing himself as a committed pro-lifer, Rebman told *NCR* his prayer was more along the lines of seeking for Biden ?a conversion experience? related to his abortion stance.

Biden's pro-choice stance is more limited and nuanced than Obama's, judging by their voting records. Biden consistently opposes late-term abortions and public funding of abortions. Biden also differed with both the church and Obama on the original authorization for the war in Iraq.

Obama and Pope John Paul II were both against America's invasion, while Biden voted for its authorization. By 2005, Biden had become a critic of the war, saying President Bush failed to properly plan or carry out the use of force authorized by Congress. The senator's son, Joseph R. ?Beau? Biden, attorney general in Delaware and a captain in the legal corps of the state's National Guard, is scheduled to be deployed to Iraq in October.

Raised in Scranton, Penn., Biden, 65, went to Catholic school, grew up in a largely Catholic neighborhood, and appreciated the open, questioning, philosophical discussions triggered among Catholics by the reforms of Vatican II. In junior high school, he briefly considered becoming a priest, but his mother suggested he should do some dating before getting too serious about that. He told the *Christian Science Monitor* last August that his Catholicism permeates his views of family, community and the world.

?My views are totally consistent with Catholic social doctrine," he said. "There are elements within the church who say that if you are at odds with any of the teachings of the church, you are at odds with the church. I think the church is bigger than that."

In his personal life, he has said his faith saw him through the despair of losing his first wife and baby daughter in a traffic accident during his first term of office, and it was again a comfort to him when he underwent brain surgery for an aneurism. The six-term senator carries a rosary and attends Mass regularly.

As the convention got underway in this city, Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver told The Associated Press that Biden's integrity should "lead him to refrain from presenting himself for Communion, if he supports a false 'right' to abortion." Chaput was among the dozen or so bishops who said the same of Sen. John Kerry when he was the Democratic presidential nominee in 2004.

Meanwhile, hundreds of bishops refrained from any such pronouncements, both then and now, and denial of Communion isn't being done in Delaware, Biden's pastor said. It's probably counter-productive, he said.

This year, for the first time, the Democratic Party platform specifically addresses ways to provide support to pregnant women who want to carry their pregnancies to term. The platform promotes accessible pre- and post-natal health care, help with parenting skills, income support and adoption programs.

Pastor Rebman, while noting that he hasn't personally voted for a Democrat for president in years because of the abortion issue, said he understands that economic factors are often involved in decisions not to have a child. Efforts to reduce abortions through support services for pregnant women as the Democrats suggest have moral

legitimacy, he said.

If denial of Communion returns as a tactic among outspoken bishops, Bill Roth of the Catholic Democrats Political Action Committee recommends engaging the issue. ?The fact of the matter is criminalization doesn?t work. Conservative bishops on the religious right have been saying for the last 30 years that the thing to do is to make abortion illegal and it will just disappear, when in fact the data shows that that?s not true,? Roth said.

?If this issue comes up, Biden and all Catholics should challenge the conservative bishops by saying, 'Let?s find a way to work together to decrease the number of abortions in this country.' The Obama-Biden ticket will be all about finding common ground to achieve the common good, and that?s the approach they ought to take."

Reese, the Georgetown scholar and former publisher of *America* magazine, doesn't think the tactic of threatening to deny Communion would be effective in swaying the voting public this year. In 2004, it had some shock value and news value. These days, he said, it's old news.

Mary Barron is a freelance writer from Colorado who is covering the Democratic Party for NCR *during this year?s presidential race.*

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