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New Book by Historian Massimo Faggioli is First In-depth Exploration of Joe Biden's Catholicism in the Context of American Politics

President Faces Challenges of a Divided Nation and a Divided Catholic Church

Elected in the midst of a global pandemic during a year of extraordinary challenges, Joseph R. Biden, Jr., the second Catholic president of the United States, now begins the work of rebuilding the nation and, as his campaign promised, “restoring its soul.” A noted bridge-builder throughout his political career, Biden is in a unique position to meet the challenges of a divided nation—and to face similarly deep divisions within the American Catholic Church. Historian and theologian Massimo Faggioli, a professor at Villanova University, offers the first in-depth exploration of Biden’s Catholicism in the context of American politics in his new book, ***Joe Biden and Catholicism in the United States*** (Bayard, Inc., \$22.95 paperback, January 20, 2021).

Faggioli presents the historical and theological context for the Biden presidency, and a look at the man’s devout faith. Biden made his faith a central part of the campaign, peppering his speeches with Catholic references, quoting Pope Francis’s latest encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, the popular hymn “On Eagle’s Wings,” and the prayer of Saint Francis. Biden countered Trump’s new libertarianism with an emphasis on the common good, a central concept of the centuries-old Catholic social tradition.

Biden’s faith is credible because it is more lived than proclaimed, making him culturally compatible with many Americans who may be more conservative but not right-wing—enhancing his ability to cross divides. “Biden’s presidency arouses not only political expectations but also religious ones,” Faggioli says. “He is now called upon to heal the moral and physical damage inflicted upon the nation by Trump, the pandemic, and globalization.”

Among the challenges he faces is an American Catholic church divided by culture wars. The first Catholic president John F. Kennedy’s religion was a problem for the Protestant establishment; for Biden, it’s a problem for a group within his own church. Biden’s liberal views could revive the “wafer wars” of 2004, when some bishops threatened to refuse Eucharist to Catholic candidate John Kerry.

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Pope Francis himself called Biden to congratulate him and to discuss areas of potential cooperation, but there are signs that Biden will encounter resistance from the anti-Francis wing of the American church. Already, the reception from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has been chilly: “The signals sent by the USCCB to the new president, a regularly practicing member of their flock, were clearly hostile. These included the creation of a commission charged with examining the problem represented by a pro-choice Catholic in the White House. Yet that same bishops conference was unable to find its voice to speak out about Trump’s attempt to overturn the election result through legal maneuvers,” Faggioli writes.

In this detailed yet compact book, Faggioli presents a history of Catholicism in American political life, from the virulent anti-Catholicism that faced the first Catholic to run for president, Al Smith, in 1928, through the campaigns of John F. Kennedy in 1960, John Kerry in 2004, and Biden in 2020. He unravels the current tense state of relations between the U.S. and the Vatican left behind by the departing Trump administration; explains the Catholic crisis of globalization, and illustrates Biden’s liminal position between the past and future of American Catholicism.

Faggioli sees hopeful signs in the election of Biden, “the rejection of a political culture which in Francis’s words, often consigns the fate of entire peoples to the grasp of small but powerful groups.” Just as he is the president of all Americans, “Biden will be called to be the Catholic president of all Catholics— a more challenging undertaking.”

Massimo Faggioli is professor of theology and religious studies at Villanova University. He is a contributing writer for *Commonweal* and a columnist for *La Croix International*. His books and essays have been published in more than ten languages.

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by Massimo Faggioli

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