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**President Biden and Catholic Social Teaching**

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The secular world has shown a good deal of interest in President Biden’s Catholic faith. For example, the *Washington Post* published an article with the headline “Joe Biden’s Catholicism is all about healing” that highlighted his Irish-Catholic faith as a source of comfort and healing in facing the tragedies of life, especially the death of his first wife and baby daughter and, more recently, the death of his son Beau. The article quoted Biden as saying: “For me, faith, it’s all about hope and purpose and strength,” adding “Faith sees best in the dark.” We now have for the first time a president who regularly goes to Mass on Sundays and Holy Days, who carries a rosary in his pocket and who often makes references to Catholic saints and hymns.

Other secular sources have emphasized President Biden’s commitment to Catholic social teaching. For instance, *The New Yorker* published an article by Georgetown scholar Paul Ellie, who quotes Biden as saying that Catholicism’s message about the perils of the abuse of power has “always been the governing force in my political career.” During the 2020 campaign, Biden traced his view on immigration to the Church’s “preferential option for the poor.” In a eulogy for George Floyd, he cited “Catholic social doctrine, which taught me that faith without works is dead.”

In a *New York Times* Op-ed, the conservative Catholic convert Ross Douthat observed that President Biden has “elevated his own liberal Catholicism to the center of our national life.” For Douthat, liberal Catholicism is a “culture,” or way of being Christian, that appeared to be in decline a decade ago but has been revitalized by Pope Francis. It represents the spirit of Vatican II and the consistent ethic of life espoused by Catholic social teaching. Douthat, who is extremely critical of Pope Francis, goes on to say that liberal Catholicism is an “interesting candidate to claim the religious center” that could influence public policy discussions in the United States. He even suggests some of its positive qualities: a fundamental respect for traditional institutions, in contrast to the individualism typical of American Protestantism; an increasing appreciation of “multiethnic diversity,” which imitates societal developments; and a “fervent inclusivity” open to diverse viewpoints. According to Douthat, the challenge for liberal Catholicism, now given a prominent voice by President Biden, is to avoid partisanship and to give priority to religious convictions over liberal or conservative positions.

Thus, we see that secular sources are playing the welcomed role of expanding awareness of Catholic Social Teaching (CST), sometimes called the Church’s “best kept secret” because it is too seldom preached and too little practiced within the Catholic community. President Biden has an opportunity to demonstrate practical applications of CST in ways that the American bishops do not. Some of his important political proposals, on climate change for instance, reflect the social teachings of Pope Francis as well the U.S. hierarchy. His explanations of his positions often include phrases common in CST, such as the “dignity of work” and the importance of the “common good.” Some Catholics will hear more about their Church’s social teaching from their president than from their pastor.

Throughout Christian history there have always been faithful believers who live the social gospel, who reach out to the needy and who work for justice and peace. Their good example forms the background for Catholic social doctrine and makes it credible. Modern CST began in 1891 when Pope Leo XIII published the encyclical with the Latin title *Rerum Novarum,* which opened up, for the first time, a mutually beneficial dialogue between Church teaching and the modern world. That dialogue has been enriched by subsequent papal encyclicals, including *Pacem In Terris* (1963) by John XXIII, *Centesimus Annus* (1991) by John Paul II and *Laudato Si* (2015) by Francis. Modern CST also includes the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II and the American bishops’ Pastoral Letters: “The Challenge of Peace” (1983) and “Economic Justice for All” (1986). In many cases, the official statements of the hierarchy reflect the practices of ordinary Catholics already committed to creating a more just, peaceful and verdant world. For example, Catholics in the United States were already participating in labor unions before Pope Leo XIII approved them in 1891.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has identified seven major themes in Catholic social doctrine.

1. Life and Dignity of the Human Person. The conviction that human life is sacred forms the foundation of a moral society and of Catholic social doctrine.
2. The Call to Family, Community and Participation. Since human beings are not only sacred but also social, we must support and strengthen social institutions, especially marriage and the family.
3. Rights and Responsibilities. Every human being has a right to life and to things required for human decency, which creates corresponding duties and responsibilities.
4. The Option for the Poor and Vulnerable. A fundamental test for our nation is how we treat the most vulnerable members. For Christians, this principle is rooted in the teachings of Jesus, who identified himself with the needy (Matt 25: 31-45).
5. The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers. Work is a form of a participation in God’s continuing creation. Workers have the right to join unions and earn a fair wage.
6. Solidarity. As members of one human family, we must seek justice and peace for all.
7. Care for God’s Creation. We show our respect for the Creator and manifest our faith by protecting our planet and its inhabitants.

On this last theme, there is a remarkable alignment between the Biden Administration’s policy on climate change and the environmental encyclical *Laudato* *Si.*  The president and the pope both agree with the scientific consensus that global warming is a serious existential threat to our earth and the human family. Francis publicly offered early and consistent support for the 2015 Paris Agreement to limit global warming, and President Biden immediately issued an executive order returning the U.S. to the Agreement. *Laudato Si* calls for coordinated efforts to deal with the problem, and Biden has appointed former Secretary of State John Kerry, who helped negotiate the Paris Agreement, to a cabinet level position on the National Security Council charged with coordinating a national and international effort to deal with the crisis.

The pope and the president both see a fundamental connection between the climate crisis and the social crisis that threaten the wellbeing of many people, especially the poor. Francis calls for an “integral ecology” that reduces global warming and provides humane living conditions where human beings are secure and can flourish. The Biden “Plan for a Clean Energy Revolution and Environment Justice” argues that reducing our carbon output is not only crucial to saving our earth but also to creating millions of good paying jobs; for example, producing wind and solar energy sources and building electric cars. The president’s plan echoes many other important points in the pope’s encyclical, suggesting the practical relevance of Catholic Social Teaching on this issue.

On the contentious issue of immigration reform, the U.S. bishops have already signaled support for some of President Biden’s proposals: for example, returning refugee admissions to previous levels, putting a moratorium on some deportations, and providing a path to citizenship for the “Dreamers” brought to this country as youngsters. The bishops are open to cooperating with the Biden administration on comprehensive immigration reform that respects national borders, the rule of law and the plight of vulnerable refugees. On immigration, there is a good chance that the president and the bishops can continue to cooperate for the common good.

President Biden’s proposed “American Rescue Plan,” designed to help those suffering physically, emotionally and economically from the COVID pandemic, reflects the spirit and intent of the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable theme central to Catholic Social Teaching. CST strives to provide a religious and moral perspective for forming public policy. It does not claim expertise on the precise provisions of legislation. People of good will, including Catholics influenced by CST, may disagree with all or some of the Biden Plan. At this point, the American bishops, acting through their Committee on Domestic Justice, have applauded the administration’s extension of the moratorium on housing evictions and its expansion of nutrition assistance. The option for the poor and vulnerable provides a moral framework for drafting legislation to assist those suffering the most from our current crisis.

On abortion policy, the president is clearly not in tune with the bishops. In his letter congratulating President Biden on his inauguration, Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles, president of the USCCB, commended him for his longstanding commitment to the poor, but criticized him for supporting policies that violate human dignity and advance the moral evil of abortion, the “preeminent priority” of the Catholic bishops. Despite this fundamental criticism, the bishops called for a continuing conversation with the new president, seeking “the common good with all sincerity” under the “watchful eye of God, who alone knows and can judge the intentions of our heart.” This statement of Archbishop Gomez has received criticism from some bishops and commentators for its confrontational tone, comparing it unfavorably with the more gracious and conciliatory messages of congratulations sent by Pope Francis. Whatever the merit of these criticisms, the official statement does keep open the possibility of on-going dialogue and collaboration between President Biden and the USCCB that can serve the common good of our whole country.