

‘A Private Matter’: Joe Biden’s Very Public Clash With His Own Church

Becoming president has brought Biden into direct conflict with conservative Catholics on the most polarizing issue of the moment: Abortion.



Photo by Jim Watson/AFP via Getty Images

By Ruby Cramer, Politico

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GREENVILLE, Del. — As a rule dating back to the election, the reporters who follow the president go everywhere with him but two places: inside his home and inside his church.

When Joe Biden goes to Mass at his home parish in Delaware, the press observes from a designated area on the edge of the property, 50 yards away. Peering through the bars of a black wrought-iron fence, they can see the small parking lot where his motorcade arrives — state troopers first, then the black SUVs. Anyone who strays from the spot is met with surprising speed and firmness by a member of the parish and directed to please return to the perimeter.

The trips to St. Joseph on the Brandywine, the pale-yellow church where Biden has worshiped for decades, are recorded in spare pool reports from the press like this one on a Saturday in the dead of mid-July. “*POTUS left residence at 4:09 p.m. Motorcade is rolling.*”



St. Joseph on the Brandywine Roman Catholic Church in Greenville, Delaware, on July 10, 2021. | Photo by Caroline Gutman

The reports omit the anodyne details of the motorcade’s arrival: how the car doors open, and Secret Service agents spill out, fanning out across the lawn; how he emerges from a darkened backseat, always a few minutes after service begins; how he ducks inside, slipping out of view into a pew near the back without disturbing the congregation. The whole thing happens in 45 seconds. In pictures, the president is always either entering or leaving, viewed from a distance: now in snow, now in sun, now in rain; in a navy suit, a brown sport coat, a blue button-down, shirt sleeves rolled up, sometimes down, aviators, no aviators, masked, maskless. Stack the images together, and you see one endless solitary — and silent — walk to attend Mass.

“POTUS arrived at St. Joseph on the Brandywine at 4:12 p.m.”



Biden, photographed outside his church. | AP Photos

But if you had been standing outside the church when Biden’s car door swung open on this particular Saturday afternoon, you would have heard the shouting. You would have seen Moira Sheridan and David Williams outside the church gates, carrying faded posterboard signs. Both from Wilmington, both in their late 60s, both Catholics, they are a familiar presence at St. Joseph — they have come at least 20 times since the general election — though they rarely make the pool reports.

Williams wore a newsboy hat. “Number one, our concern is for Joe Biden’s soul,” Sheridan told me. They had not come to pray for the president, who is only the second occupant of the White House to share their faith. They had come to block him from participating in the church’s most important sacrament. It is their belief that if Biden is going to receive communion, “then we don’t want him comfortably going in,” said Williams. And it *is* uncomfortable. Last fall, before the election, steps from the Biden family graves behind the church, someone in their small group called out, “Repent for Beau’s soul.”

As they see it, church doctrine demands that Biden be made an example of, called out even when visiting his son’s final resting place. “He’s the most public figure in the world,” Sheridan said. “What he does affects what other Catholics will do. There is no such thing as mainstream, there is no such thing as extreme, and there is no such thing as liberal — *there is Catholic.*”

Joe Biden, the nation’s first Catholic president in more than 60 years, grew up hearing that John F. Kennedy could never win. When he was a young senator, it was anti-Catholic hate mail that showed up at the house in Delaware. When he ran for president at age 77, on the eve of his election, he said he still had “a chip” on his shoulder, “coming from an Irish Catholic neighborhood where it wasn’t viewed as being such a great thing.” He is a president who built his life in politics around the idea of faith, not in some vague way, but in a specifically *Catholic* way. When he explains himself to the world, it is through Catholic social doctrine and the Catholic institutions he loved: the nuns, the schools, the culture. And yet he has arrived in the

White House to discover that he is viewed suspiciously not by non-Catholics for being too Catholic, but rather by members of his own faith for not being Catholic enough. It was his position on abortion — and his decision in the Democratic primary to finally oppose the Hyde Amendment, the measure banning public funding for most abortions, the one thing he resisted for decades — that helped him win the White House after three decades and three presidential campaigns, but immediately made him a target of his own church.

If it is at all jarring to hear two strangers speaking authoritatively about a president's soul, you can find reams of discussion about it on Catholic Reddit, or on the more sympathetic Catholic Twitter, or in incremental coverage by the Catholic media, a lively ecosystem of left-wing and right-wing outlets, where bishops are always popping up in the news to chide Biden, attack Biden or defend Biden. When Biden chose Kamala Harris as his running mate, the Bishop of Providence tweeted that it would be the first time in a while that “a Democratic ticket hasn't had a Catholic on it. Sad.” In February, Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann of Kansas City said the president needed to “stop defining himself as a devout Catholic” and “acknowledge that his view on abortion is contrary to Catholic moral teaching.” Biden, he said, “should know that after 78 years as a Catholic.” In April, Cardinal Raymond Burke, a leading critic of Pope Francis, called Biden an “apostate.”

Then came the most public rebuke of all. This June, in a stunning open debate, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the collection of bishops and cardinals that make up the church's U.S. hierarchy, weighed moving forward with a document providing justification for denying pro-choice politicians from taking communion, the spiritual heart of Catholicism and the fundamental ritual of the faith. The conference, which will continue the debate at its next meeting in November, has labeled his presidency a “difficult and complex situation.”



Ask Biden about this and he will have little to say.

“That’s a private matter,” he told a reporter in June.

“That is just my personal life...”

If it’s personal, it certainly isn’t private. It is a debate in full public view, a collision of religion and politics never seen in the American presidency — with a clash between his stance on abortion and church dogma now unavoidable. The Supreme Court’s decision this week to allow a highly restrictive Texas abortion law to take effect — and Biden’s public statement that the law “blatantly violates the constitutional right established under *Roe v. Wade*” — has put the country’s most polarizing social issue once again at the center of American politics. Biden may soon find that the line he’s walked over four decades of public life — as a politician of ostentatious faithfulness who also insists his faith is a private matter — is no longer available to him.

Questions about the issue tend to grate on the White House. At a press briefing last week, Owen Jensen, a reporter from EWTN, a conservative Catholic news outlet, was loudly trying to ask a question about Biden’s faith. It wasn’t the first time he’d sparred with press secretary Jen Psaki, who turned toward the interruption with a flash of annoyance. “Why does the president support abortion,” Jensen shouted, “when his own Catholic faith teaches abortion is morally wrong?”



Women protest against a Texas abortion law at the state Capitol in Austin, Sep. 1, 2021. | Jay Janner/Austin American-Statesman via AP

“I know you’ve never faced those choices,” Psaki shot back, “nor have you ever been pregnant, but for women out there who have faced those choices, this is an incredibly difficult thing. ... The president believes that right should be respected.”

At St. Joseph’s, Biden emerged from the car dressed in light blue shirt sleeves and walked the familiar path through the graveyard that surrounds the church, within view of the place where he buried his wife, his daughter, his father, his mother, and his son. The shouting accompanied him to the front door.

“JOE BIDEN IS A FAKE CATHOLIC!”

“JOE BIDEN COMMITS SACRILEGE AGAINST THE LORD WHEN HE RECEIVES HOLY COMMUNION.”

“JOE BIDEN IS A FAKE CATHOLIC...!”

The president kept moving, eyes forward, his face inscrutable.



Joe Biden, then the former vice president and Democratic nominee for president, visits the Bethel AME Church in Wilmington, June 1, 2020. | Jim Bourg/Reuters

It is easy to imagine a time when Joe Biden could only hear so much of this before snapping. “The next Republican that tells me I’m not religious,” he once told a crowd in 2005, “I’m going to shove my rosary beads down their throat.”

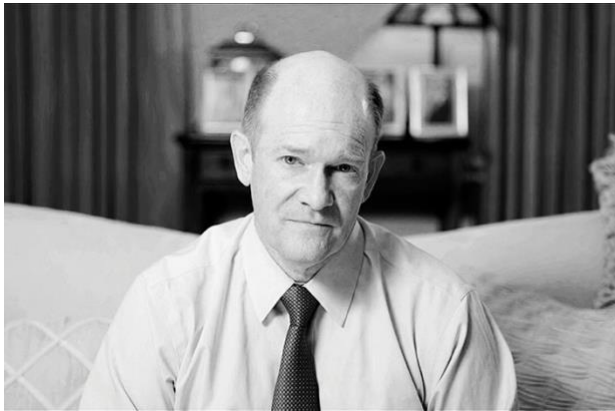
He could be all *God love ya, man* one second, and dead-serious and defiant the next. “This is my church as much as it is the church of a cardinal, bishop, or janitor,” he told the *Christian Science Monitor* during his 2008 run for president, “and I’m not going anywhere.” He is prickly on the subject to the point, in one instance, of becoming “so angry” on behalf of his own opponent when people pressed Mitt Romney to justify his Mormon faith in the 2012 election. “I don’t think it’s anybody’s business,” Biden said, “nor do I think it should matter to anyone.”

And yet the president’s faith is one of the most public things about him. You can read it on his body: the way he turns his eyes upward, or crosses himself, or fingers the rosary around his left wrist, his late son Beau’s, the one he wore before he died. Biden’s faith is always on display, and therefore so is his grief, his Irishness, his Irish-gothicness, his brashness, his quickness to tears, the words he recites from his mother or his grandfather — “Joey, you’re not dead until you see the face of God,” “Joey, keep the faith.” “No, Joey, spread it!” — getting tangled up with his favorite lines from Heaney, Yeats or Joyce. “My idea of self, of family, of community, of the

wider world comes straight from my religion,” Biden wrote in his 2007 memoir. “It’s the culture.”

At the heart of the communion dispute, for Biden, is a question of authenticity and identity. “The implication is that he’s being phony,” said Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Ky., describing the view of the bishops who view Biden as a problem. “That he’s being phony when he travels with a rosary in his pocket or goes out of his way to attend Mass every Sunday. I don’t see any reason not to take him at his word that he’s done that all of his life.” Religious identity was a matter of such publicness that is a measurable reason Biden got to the White House. His campaign built a big and robust faith outreach program, helping him make small gains in the right places: white evangelicals in Michigan and Georgia, Latter Day Saints voters in Arizona, Catholics in Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. They held a Catholic gospel concert. They had endorsements from faith leaders — more than 2,500. “It’s just unheard of for these campaigns, and for Democrats in particular, to get that many people to publicly say, I support this ticket — not because of partisan politics, but because of principle,” said Josh Dickson, a senior adviser in the White House who ran the campaign’s faith engagement program. In the end, Biden won the Catholic vote in 2020, according to exit polls, but only barely.

When the campaign dedicated a prime-time speech to Biden’s faith at the Democratic convention last summer, Sen. Chris Coons got the assignment. Coons grew up in Hockessin, Del., and now holds Biden’s old Senate seat, an office he once served as an intern. Even for a close friend, it was a difficult task. “I will confess I was initially a little hesitant,” Coons told me. He reached out to Biden and his sister Valerie Biden Owens — “just to say, you know, are you sure? And just to say, frankly, this is a very private matter.”



Left: Sen. Chris Coons. Right: Sister Carol Keehan. | Democratic National Convention via AP and Brendan Smialowski/AFP via Getty Images

Everyone reassured him. The speech would be a key piece in a convention that was far more personal than it was ideological: They were making a moral case against Donald Trump. And so Coons set to writing. As he did, the senator called one of Biden’s old press secretaries, “just to ask, give me a window into what you saw of Joe’s actual lived faith experience,” Coons said.

The story she told him went as follows: When Biden was in the Senate, he was a regular guest on the Sunday shows, often while traveling. It was this press secretary's job to make sure she knew a parish nearby where he could attend Mass before or after his TV hit. She also came from an Irish Catholic family and had worked with Biden for years — she was comfortable with him. One day she turned to him, joking, and said, “You know, senator, it's not like there's some nun up in the sky who's got a chalk blackboard and is keeping score of how many Sundays you actually make it to Mass.” Instead of needling her back, Biden's face turned serious — “and he said, ‘You haven't had that moment yet where life just kicks the shit out of you. In that moment, and in the days afterward, you make a gut, animal choice: You either turn away from God, or you turn toward God. I'm not doing this because of some nun or some sense of obligation or some rule. I'm doing it because it feeds my soul, and someday I hope you can find that same peace in the Mass.’” The story, not exactly inviting, never made it into Coons' speech. His final draft resembled more standard convention fare, but it matched the same grave tone.

Now that Biden is in the White House, his role as a Catholic president, to the extent that his aides and supporters are willing to admit that such a role exists, is a subject that confounds people when asked to define it.

“One of my favorite yet most painful subjects!” said Tom Perriello, a Catholic and former Democratic Congressman from Virginia who has been critical of the church's U.S. hierarchy. “It's a public role. But it's public in a private way,” said John Carr, who once served as a top staffer to the bishops at the USCCB and now runs Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought. “His soul is a private matter,” said Sister Carol Keehan, former president of the Catholic Health Association who became close with Biden when they worked together on the Affordable Care Act. “His relationship with his God is a private matter — he can share what he wants to share with you, but it's a private matter,” she said. When I asked one of Biden's friends if the president had been bothered by the way the bishops went after him this summer, he became visibly frustrated, taking issue with the word “bothered,” though never quite explaining why. “If you think after 36 years in the Senate and eight as vice president that Joe Biden wasn't expecting a problem with the bishops,” he said, “you'd be wrong.”

Biden and his aides treat the issue of communion as “a moment for him,” said John McCarthy, a White House staffer who led Catholic outreach for Biden's campaign and now works as a special assistant to the president. If Biden is home for the weekend in Delaware, he will almost always go to Mass. If he's in Washington, he will go to Mass. He goes on the campaign trail and on trips abroad. One Sunday during the 2020 election, after a day of campaign events at one church after another, a friend recalled, Biden landed back home at the airport in New Castle, Del., at 4:30 p.m., looked at his watch, turned to an aide and said, “Well, still have time to get to the 5 o'clock.”



President Joe Biden looks on during a casualty return at Dover Air Force Base, Del., Sunday, Aug. 29, 2021, for the 13 service members killed in the suicide bombing in Kabul, Afghanistan, on Aug. 26. | AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster

On what was perhaps the most difficult day in his young presidency, Biden traveled on Sunday, Aug. 29, to Dover, Del., to receive the bodies of fallen U.S. soldiers from Afghanistan, then to FEMA headquarters to monitor the Category 4 hurricane that tore through New Orleans, then to Mass at Holy Trinity in Washington.

“I mean, a moment before God, I couldn't think of a more personal thing,” McCarthy said. “Certainly, to some extent, he is a historic figure in the church. And yes, it is public — because everywhere he goes basically is.”



Joe Biden visits Grace Lutheran Church in Kenosha, Wis., on Sep. 3, 2020, in the aftermath of the police shooting of Jacob Blake. | Jim Watson/AFP via Getty Images

There have only been four Catholic nominees for president from a major party.

The first, Alfred E. Smith, the Irish-Catholic New York Democrat, lost all but eight states in 1928, in some part as a result of anti-Catholic sentiment. The cartoons of the day showed the image of a Catholic president as subservient to the pope, dressed in a butler's uniform, serving Prohibition-era liquor to a table full of prelates. In 1960, Kennedy famously flew to Houston to speak to Protestant ministers, promising "absolute separation between church and state." Forty-four years later, the next Catholic on the ticket, John Kerry, quoted from that same speech. He'd be "a president who happens to be Catholic, not a Catholic president," he said. The original meaning seemed to serve a new audience by then — there were bishops threatening to deny him communion over his pro-choice views — but Kerry's Catholicism was never woven as deeply into his public image. Once, while defending his faith as "separate" from his public life, Kerry said his private oath to God was "defined in the Catholic Church by Pius XXIII," citing a non-existent pope. The joke about Kerry back in 2004, said Carr, the former senior staffer to the bishops, was, "We always knew the second Catholic president would be an Episcopalian."



Left to right: Alfred E. Smith, John F. Kennedy and John Kerry. | AP Photos

Instead, they got Biden, a politician who once thought about joining the priesthood after his wife and daughter died in a 1972 car accident and who has described Catholicism as his “avocation.” He is, as the writer Massimo Faggioli wrote in his book on Biden and the church, “the first Catholic president to publicly express a religious soul — not a vaguely Christian one, but a distinctly Catholic one.”

Biden came up in Catholic institutions in the '40s, '50s, and '60s, a time he's described as “fertile with new ideas and open discussion” about the basic teachings of the church. After his family moved to Delaware in 1953, his heart was set on attending Archmere Academy. It was the best and fanciest Catholic high school around — “the object of my deepest desire, my Oz,” he wrote in his memoir.

Once, in a ninth-grade theology class, the teacher asked the class, “How many of you questioned the doctrine of transubstantiation,” the process in which Catholics believe the bread and wine of the Eucharist become Christ's body and blood. The class sat in silence until Biden raised his hand. “Well,” the teacher said, “we have one bright man, at least.” Biden has described it as a lesson that in the church, “questioning was not criticized,” he said. “It was encouraged.”

By the early '60s, Biden was in college, and the Second Vatican Council was underway, liberalizing the church's view of religious freedom and modernizing the way Mass was held. He was never a marcher, but to the extent that he embodied the liberal ideas of that era, it would have been through Catholic social doctrine. (His dad, he's said, would tell him as a boy, “The cardinal sin of all sins, Joey, is the abuse of power.”)

The neighborhood where he chose to settle his family, Greenville, had the big houses he always admired and the same sheen of prestige as Archmere. It had du Pont money. St. Joseph on the Brandywine, the nearest parish, was built by the du Pont Company in 1841 to serve the Irish immigrants who came over to work in their gunpowder mills. About 159 of the oldest tombstones that surround the church on all sides are marked with an Irish place of origin: Donegal, Tyrone, Cork.

“These were immigrants consciously coming to the United States in search of economic upward mobility,” said Dr. Margaret Mulrooney, a historian at James Madison University who studied the earliest parishioners at St. Joseph for her book about Irish cultural identity in Delaware, *Black Powder, White Lace*. “That would have been a touchstone for him, because it is a working-class parish founded by Irish, even though that's not who the parishioners are today.”



Top: Archmere Academy, the private Catholic high school Biden attended, in Claymont, Del. Bottom: Saint Joseph on the Brandywine Family Center (left) in Greenville, Del., and Walker's Mill on Brandywine Creek in Wilmington. | Caroline Gutman

The locals have a name for the community in Greenville — “chateau country” — and by the time Biden moved into the mansion he bought on Montchan Drive in 1975, the parish at St. Joseph on the Brandywine had achieved a certain affluence. The credit card companies came into Wilmington: MBNA, Citibank. St. Joseph on the Brandywine, known as St. Joe’s to its own parishioners, “became the country club parish,” one longtime member of the congregation told me. There are plenty of Republicans at Sunday Mass — people showed up in Trump T-shirts once, I was told — tracking with the overall conservative shift among white Catholics. (Four in

10 white Catholics were registered Republican in 2008, compared to six in 10 now, according to the Pew Research Center.) But St. Joe's wasn't the kind of place with overtly political sermons.

Biden was sworn into the Senate the same year that *Roe v. Wade* decision made abortion a constitutional right, deepening fissures inside his church over contraception, women's rights, and premarital sex. The abortion case, he told the journalist Kitty Kelley in a 1974 profile, went "too far." At the start of the Reagan years, two years into his second term, [he supported](#) an amendment to allow states to overturn *Roe*. "I'm probably a victim, or a product, however you want to phrase it, of my background," he said at the time, calling it the most difficult decision of his career. Biden voted against the bill a year later. By the time he ran for president the first time in 1988, liberals were falling out with the church, and Biden was already out of step with his party on abortion.

If he has hewed to any consistent line on abortion over the years, it has been to follow Mario Cuomo, who in a 1984 speech at Notre Dame University helped set the standard by which a politician could personally oppose abortion while supporting legislation to make it legal, in part by simply laying out in the open the personal conflict he felt. He was, he said in that speech, "an old-fashioned Catholic who sins, regrets, struggles, worries, gets confused." Biden never wanted to get near a vote on abortion, and he never grappled as publicly or volubly with the issue as Cuomo did in '84.

In 2008, when Barack Obama picked Biden as his running mate, the priest at St. Joe's, Monsignor Joseph F. Rebman, told the Delaware *News Journal* that he didn't know how Biden's faith would impact the Catholic vote. On the issue of abortion, he said only, "We're in a dialogue about that."

Biden held out until he had no choice. In 2019, locked in a Democratic primary of more than a dozen candidates, under intense pressure from progressives and reproductive rights groups, he changed his position on the Hyde Amendment. Everyone from members of his own campaign, including senior adviser Symone Sanders, to the activist and actor Alyssa Milano, who called Biden's campaign manager in late spring, had lobbied him on the issue. "The conversation was direct but friendly," Milano said in an email. "Others inside the campaign were doing the same thing." Repealing Hyde, which disproportionately affects people of color, had been a part of the Democratic platform since 2016. "The tides were clearly turning," said Destiny Lopez, the co-president of All*Above All, an advocacy group that has helped lead the Hyde fight. "I'm not sure that the president wanted to be on the wrong side of history on this one. There was some element of, for lack of a better term, peer pressure."

But many Catholic leaders and bishops who are sympathetic to Biden believe that he was forced into a position he didn't want to take. Some openly speculated that the president would never let a member of his family be party to an abortion. "I'd put my life on that," said Thomas Groome, a laicized Irish priest and a professor of theology at Boston College. "Joe Biden and Jill would never choose abortion, personally. That's his Catholic moral perspective."

“He hung on when almost no one else did,” said Carr. “So I think his reticence is not just that his faith is private. It’s that he’s not comfortable. A lot of us can’t talk rationally or comfortably about abortion.”



San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone, left, celebrates Communion during Easter Mass, Sunday, April 12, 2020. | AP Photo/Jeff Chiu

Just after 9 a.m. on a Sunday in October 2019, Biden walked into St. Anthony Catholic Church in Florence, S.C. He had his last campaign event of the weekend later that morning, a visit to a Baptist church 30 miles up the road, and he wanted to stop for Mass.

The Rev. Robert Morey was waiting for him.

As [first reported](#) in the *Wall Street Journal*, Morey made a point of switching communion lines to come face-to-face with Biden when the presidential candidate arrived at the front of the church.

There are several ways to deny someone communion. A bishop or priest can do it in advance, quietly pulling someone aside in a church. They can do it in a letter, like [the one](#) a state senator in New Mexico received from his pastor in July, warning him that a vote in favor of a bill to

protect abortion access “would constitute a grave moral evil and that he should not present himself for communion,” per a statement from the Las Cruces Diocese. Sometimes, it happens in church, when someone is disorderly. Sometimes, “it’s obvious from their behavior that they’re not Catholic and they’ve never done this before,” Bishop Stowe told me. “We try to do it in a way that’s not embarrassing to the person. Most of us have adopted a gesture where we would just give somebody a blessing instead.”

Morey attempted a blessing, according to the *Journal*, the two men appeared to exchange words and Biden left.

Campaign staffers who were in South Carolina at the time now work in the administration and were afraid to talk about Biden’s reaction to what had surely been an avoidable confrontation. The story leaked quickly in [the local paper](#), the *Morning News*, with confirmation from the priest himself. “Sadly,” his statement began, “I had to refuse Holy Communion to former Vice President Joe Biden,” Morey, who is now retired, told the *Morning News* via email. “Holy Communion signifies we are one with God, each other and the Church. Our actions should reflect that. Any public figure who advocates for abortion places himself or herself outside of Church teaching.”

The priest in South Carolina “probably wanted to either not put the lay minister in an awkward position,” Stowe said of the person administering communion in a separate line, “or wanted to get the attention.” Archbishop John C. Wester of Santa Fe, a bishop who opposed the push to admonish pro-choice politicians for taking part in communion, said that in any situation, “to deny someone that Eucharist would mean that you’re making a judgment on a very personal level.”

Another bishop, Robert McElroy of San Diego, said he could not remember a time when he has denied someone communion.

“The issue of abortion is an enormously grave moral wound in our political life and social life — all of the bishops agree on that,” said McElroy, who said he believes that the communion debate has propelled the church further into partisanship. “The difference comes in how the bishops prioritize it. A very significant number of bishops believe that abortion is the preeminent issue.”



St. Anthony Catholic Church

It was more than a little galling to many Democrats to see their manifestly faithful candidate receive a public rebuke in an election to defeat Donald Trump. The president was pro-choice for much of his life, was known to [mock people](#) for their faith, once described the practice of communion as “my little wine” and “my little cracker,” and would later in the campaign pose outside St. John’s Episcopal Church holding a Bible upside down as he ordered the tear-gassing of people protesting for racial justice. When Trump attacked Biden’s faith during the election, he was barely coherent: “No religion, no anything, hurt the Bible, hurt God, he’s against God, he’s against guns.” Unbelievably, he didn’t seem to know enough to hit the most obvious mark: abortion.

In Biden headquarters, former campaign staffers said, the South Carolina incident was like any upset during a campaign: “We got a lot of feedback from people about what we should be doing,” said Dickson, the former national faith engagement director. But “it didn’t really change anything,” he said. “It was just something where we kind of moved on and the president continued to do what he did his whole career and be who he is.” South Carolina is heavily Baptist, and in parts of the state, one longtime Democratic operative there noted, you’ll still find people who still think Catholicism is a cult. Four months after the visit to Florence, when he won the state by 29 points, no one was talking about the Rev. Robert Morey or Joe Biden’s Catholicism.

Still, a line had been crossed — one that John Kerry had never had to confront.

Tom Vilsack, the former governor of Iowa and a lifelong Catholic now serving as Biden's secretary of agriculture, said he has never been denied communion outright. Once, though, while campaigning with Kerry in 2004 in Dubuque, a church where they had planned to attend Mass gave them a "heads up" that communion "wasn't going to be served." Another time, when his wife ran for Congress in a conservative district, Iowa's 4th, the couple stopped at a Catholic church one weekend where parishioners "literally turned their backs" on them, he said.

"Boy, I've never felt more unwelcome."

It was difficult, Vilsack told me, to put words to the feeling of the confrontation.

"There are two levels to it: There's the level of potential humiliation that you may feel as people are watching. But I don't think that that was probably as much of a concern for Joe Biden, that people would talk about it, or stare at him, or whatever." The second level, the one that would have affected Biden, said Vilsack, was that he didn't receive communion that day. "He didn't have the presence that you get when you take communion as a very faithful Catholic. It's a very personal opportunity to connect with God. It's sort of a magic moment. I'm sure that he felt disappointed that he didn't have that ability to have that, on that particular Sunday."



Biden bows his head in prayer, June 1, 2020. | AP Photo/Andrew Harnik

This summer, in mid-June, bishops from across the country dialed into a Zoom meeting, dressed in their clerical collars, many seated in dimly lit offices. There were nine major items on the agenda, but one consumed the rest. They discussed the possibility that they might be “implicitly giving formal immoral cooperation” to the current president’s abortion policy.

Or as the Rev. Michael D. Pfeifer, Archbishop Emeritus of San Angelo, Texas, put it during the meeting, “our president wants every taxpaying American to pay for that, including everybody taking part in this meeting because we are taxpayers.”

If it was once enough for a Democratic politician to personally oppose abortion while expanding reproductive rights, it wasn’t anymore. It was one thing to have a Democratic Catholic candidate — it was another to have a Democratic Catholic president who supported repealing the Hyde Amendment.

“So much of his agenda, when it comes to helping the downtrodden, when it comes to supporting workers rights to organize, when it comes to more humane approach to immigration, all those things are an expression of his Catholic identity and should be a source of pride for us,” said Stowe, the bishop from Kentucky. “He could have helped himself with Catholic leaders by staying on with Hyde.”



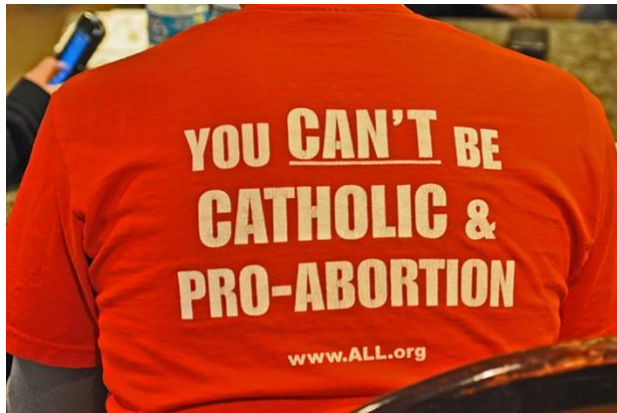
Left: Archbishop John C. Wester. Right: Bishop Robert W. McElroy. | AP Photos

The church already had the massive problem of a plurality of its members ignoring church teaching — more than half of U.S. Catholics say abortion should be legal in all or most cases — and the views of the second Catholic president implicitly push that reality further and further into the realm of the mainstream. (Sixty-seven percent of Catholics also say they believe Biden should be allowed to receive Communion, according to a Pew study from March.)

A senior staffer to one bishop told me he sees the U.S. hierarchy, made up of about 270 cardinals, archbishops, and bishops, split into three camps: There was the Francis party, the Benedict conservatives or “culture warriors,” and a “muddling middle” that refused to deal with the politics of the communion debate, assessing it from a purely theological perspective. He summarized the situation even further into “mercy or spirit followers vs. rule followers.” Or, he tried again, “a field hospital vs. a court room.”

Last November, the president of the conference unilaterally announced the creation of a task force to deal with the Biden administration. The move surprised many bishops who are wary of “weaponizing” the Eucharist at a time when fewer and fewer practicing Catholics believe in the church’s most fundamental teaching. The “great mystery of the Eucharist,” where the bread and wine at mass is transformed into the body and blood of Christ, is not just a personal moment before God, the “Sunday obligation” — it has kept Catholics coming back to the church, even amid a protracted sexual-abuse crisis that has eroded the moral authority of its leadership.

The next time the USCCB met, in June, there was already a desire among the bishops to come up with a document encouraging a “Eucharistic revival in the church,” but the meeting devolved into an hourslong debate, part-procedural, part-political, about whether such a document should address pro-choice politicians, with an obvious target of the president. The USCCB can’t establish church policy or tell individual bishops what to do without the Pope’s sign-off, which they won’t get — and that’s been true from the start — but the issue of pro-choice politicians could still appear in direct or oblique reference in the final document.



Left: A pro-life t-shirt in Washington, D.C. Right: Archbishop Jose H. Gomez. | William Bryan/Getty Images and AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes

White House officials have said they have no plans to meddle with the bishops' process or defend the president to the group. They monitor the conference, they said, the same way they do the Southern Baptist Convention or the United Methodist Church General Conference and have longstanding relationships with USCCB staffers.

President Biden and the USCCB have both since tried to downplay the fight, pointing to the same "[FAQ Document](#)" released by the bishops' conference four days after their June meeting as proof that this is a settled matter. One of the first questions addressed in the one-page document — "Did the bishops vote to ban politicians from receiving Holy Communion?" — begins with a one-sentence answer: "No." The next item on the list — "Are the bishops going to issue a national policy on withholding communion from politicians" — is followed by the same thing: "No."

These were technically true statements — the bishops only debated whether to move forward with the drafting of a document on the question, but the "FAQ" had the effect of pretending the hourslong debate had never happened. "I rolled my eyes," said one bishop, who told me USCCB staff had felt they simply needed to put out the fire. "I don't think anybody took it seriously." The FAQ document, said Perriello, the former congressman who says he sees the USCCB as an "extension of the Republican Party," "is the best example of how the Catholic bishops are acting like politicians and not like bishops: 'Let's put up a trial balloon saying X,' and then they're like, 'Actually, we never said X!' That's what politicians do. That's not what bishops are supposed to do."

Biden's response to the possibility of the USCCB barring him from communion — "I don't think that's going to happen," he told reporters in June — was again technically true, but it ignored the ramifications of the debate. "It has already had tremendously damaging impact in the Catholic community," said McElroy. "I was afraid that this step would be another moment in which this toxic political culture would come into the life of the church and the Catholic community. If there were any exhortation or statement precluding public officials who are pro-choice from receiving the Eucharist, it would do great damage to people's understanding of the Eucharist and to the unity of the Catholic community in the United States. It would be very bad."

The bishops will meet again in November to resolve the issue of the document, gathering in person for the first time since the pandemic. The drafting process is being led by Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, head of the USCCB's doctrine committee, who in 2016 [publicly spoke out](#) against the University of Notre Dame's decision to award Biden with its highest honor, the Laetare Medal, saying it was "wrong" to see the medal in the hands of any pro-choice public official. More recently, Rhoades has said the document will be "addressed to all Catholics." But bishops are also prepared for the meeting to turn into a lengthy series of proposed amendments, where bishops who still feel strongly about Biden — and there are plenty — will try to influence the final document.

Archbishop Wester said he believes Pope Francis is "watching quite closely" and "is very concerned" about the conference taking an exclusionary posture of any kind, especially amid a pandemic. "I do think he wants to see us engaging people, even in these difficult intractable issues," said Wester. "They're messy, and they're, you know, they're cumbersome, and they're a burden. But that's, you know, that's what the call of the gospel is to do — to roll our sleeves up and to work with people and to convince them of the sanctity of human life."

So how does this get resolved?

"Yeah, I don't know," said McElroy, laughing. "I'm praying. We're all praying."



The tombstone of President Biden's son, Joseph "Beau" Robinette Biden III, at St. Joseph on the Brandywine. | Caroline Gutman

At St. Joseph on the Brandywine, after 47 minutes, Saturday Mass ended.

When Biden left, there was a bearded man in a blue shirt standing at the entryway, waiting to open the door. The man was Jason Casper, a member of the parish council who also helps manage the cemetery. Around 7 a.m. that morning, as he often did on days when Biden might come to Mass, Casper had mown the grass around the Biden family tombstones, just in case the president decided to visit.

When I visited St. Joe's on Election Day last year, I searched the headstones, looking for Beau's grave. It is separate from the rest of the Biden family plot, under a slender tree. There, among the fresh flowers and trinkets, on the bottom right corner of the tombstone, someone had secured to the smooth granite a BIDEN-HARRIS campaign sticker, where it looked crooked and dimpled. It was startling to think of someone, possibly a fellow parishioner, kneeling over the grave, smoothing the sticker firmly into place, as if on the back of their own car. There is a level of comfort in that act, and it goes both ways. Biden would have seen it after Mass one day. If the sticker ever bothered him, he never removed it.

At St. Joe's, people know Biden. They know how to deal with a Secret Service sweep, which they've seen in one iteration or another since he became Obama's pick for vice president in 2008. They know he is last to arrive and first to leave, that he sits near the back. A whole generation ago, kids used to play down the road at the rundown mansion he bought in 1975. He was part of the place. St. Joe's was also safe — the parish went out of its way to accommodate him.

The Rev. Rebman, who just retired after 21 years at the parish, never challenged Biden publicly on the issue of abortion; if there was a dialogue between them, it remained private. Rebman defended him against outsiders. The two Biden protesters, Williams and Sheridan, said they had spoken to Rebman "numerous" times and found him helpful on "pro-life issues," according to Sheridan, but that he wanted to avoid "any sort of confrontation" with Biden. Months ago, before the USCCB blow-up in June, they said they spoke with the Bishop of Wilmington, Bishop W. Francis Malooly, also recently retired, who told them the diocese didn't want to "weaponize the Eucharist" or break with a decision by the bishops' conference "to be non-confrontational," Williams said. A spokesman for the diocese declined to make anyone from the church available for an interview. The new bishop of Wilmington, William Koenig, a younger appointee of Pope Francis, hasn't directly weighed in on the bishops' communion debate, though nothing appears to have changed at St. Joseph.

Biden's positions on that most divisive issue have become only more forthright since he took office. He has issued executive orders dismantling Trump-era anti-abortion restrictions. He has released a proposed budget for 2022 that does not include Hyde Amendment language, an omission celebrated by reproductive rights groups as historic. The language traditionally appears in funding bills for the federal government, barring that money from being used for abortion except in certain cases. And he has made unusually forceful statements about the Texas law,

promising a “whole-of-government effort” to challenge legislation he describes as “un-American.”

Some on the religious left hope that he will do for abortion what he did for same-sex marriage in the Obama years: “This is not the first time that Biden, I think, has appealed to the deeper roots of his faith — justice and human dignity — to take a stand that is in opposition to church teaching,” said Jamie L. Manson, president of Catholics For Choice, a nonprofit that approached Catholic politicians by “calling them in,” rather than “calling them out” on the issue of abortion.

“People like Biden are using their faith in this issue in ways that perhaps they don't even realize,” she said.



President Biden walks out after attending mass at St. Joseph on the Brandywine on July 10, 2021. | Caroline Gutman

“POTUS walked out of church at 4:47pm.”

The chants of “Fake Catholic” were gone. Williams and Sheridan had left sometime after Biden slipped through the doors — nobody seemed to notice when. It was quiet except for the press corps gathered on the other side of the fence.

“Did you enjoy the service, Mr. President?” one of them yelled across the church yard.

Biden didn't answer.

He left the way he came, looking straight ahead.