
United States. Biden appeals for unity, but the Catholic Church is divided

The new president's inauguration amidst surprises: thus began the Biden era at the White House.

The pre-inaugural Mass of thanksgiving at St Matthew's Cathedral was the first event of the day, with journalists not allowed to attend, kindly asked to remain outside as it was a private occasion. No official photos were taken, in contrast to previous presidents who had chosen to attend St John's Episcopal Church and capture those moments in pictures. The private service was also attended by the leaders of the Republican Party, some of whom had protested the outcome of the polls. Biden took everyone by surprise. He openly expressed his joy at the swearing-in of the first female US vice-president. In his address he spoke about the need to unify the nation and to heal, together, the wounds caused by divisions. Much awaited words, delivered with great serenity, even offering virtual 'hugs' to Bush and Obama, and devoid of vitriolic attacks. *Institutional sobriety that had been neglected until recently.* Biden entrusted his dream of shared democracy to a young African-American poet, and invited a Jesuit to deliver the opening prayer and a Methodist for the closing prayer at the podium. Also surprising was the zeal with which the new president began his first day in the Oval Office, signing 17 executive orders with the aim to set a clear course for the country from the outset. Finally, not unnoticed was the snapshot of him holding a grandchild in his arms. **The Church also followed this event.** Notably, **Pope Francis'** message to the second Catholic president in the history of the United States. *"I pray that your decisions – Pope Francis writes in his message - will be guided by a concern for building a society marked by authentic justice and freedom, together with unfailing respect for the rights and dignity of every person, especially the poor, the vulnerable and those who have no voice."* In contrast, however, the message to the new US President by the President of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops **Josè Gomez**, on a day dedicated to unity, risked sparking off friction also within the American Catholic community. In an unusually long statement, the archbishop of Los Angeles assures Biden of his prayers and prays that God grant him "wisdom and courage to lead this great nation", helping him "to meet the tests of these times, to heal the wounds caused by this pandemic, to ease our intense political and cultural divisions, and to bring people together with renewed dedication to America's founding purposes, to be one nation under God committed to liberty and equality for all." In his statement, the Bishops' President goes on to clarify the position of the Church, stating that "Catholic bishops are not partisan players in our nation's politics" and that their judgments and positions "do not align neatly with the political categories of left or right or the platforms of our two major political parties." "We work with every President and every Congress", writes Msgr. Gomez, "on some issues we find ourselves more on the side of Democrats, while on others we find ourselves standing with Republicans." But the next paragraphs are marked by strong criticism. *"I must point out that our new President has pledged to pursue certain policies that would advance moral evils and threaten human life and dignity, most seriously in the areas of abortion, contraception, marriage, and gender", writes the President of US bishops, voicing "deep concern " over "the liberty of the Church and the freedom of believers to live according to their consciences."* **Those words reopened the rift** between the Democratic Party and a part of the Church, which during the election campaign had accused Biden of having changed his longstanding position on the Hyde Amendment, a measure banning federal funding for abortion except to save the life of the woman, or to prevent pregnancy as a result of incest or rape. Chicago Cardinal Blaise Cupich issued a swift response, describing the Bishops' Conference statement as "ill-considered", pointing out that first of all "there is no precedent for doing so", and that the statement, "critical of President Biden, came as a surprise to many bishops", many of whom received it just hours before it was released to the press. *The cardinal of Chicago, who is very close to Pope*

Francis, said he looked forward "to contributing to all efforts to that end, so that, inspired by the Gospel, we can build up the unity of the Church, and together take up the work of healing our nation in this moment of crisis." Newark Cardinal Joseph Tobin also voiced trust in the new White House leader, calling on everyone to give the new president a chance, not to "use harsh words and not to break off all communication with the president" just because they disagree on certain issues. In their messages, some of the bishops took sides in defence of Gomez, or preferred to remain neutral. Thus, Biden's call for unity in the country extends to everyone, including the Catholic Church, to which he himself belongs. Perhaps the agenda of the second Catholic president of the United States could hold some surprises in store also in this respect.

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