



President Joe Biden addresses the nation from the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, D.C., July 24, about his decision to drop his Democratic presidential reelection bid. (OSV News/Evan Vucci, pool via Reuters)



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President Joe Biden's decision to willingly, perhaps grudgingly, surrender power is rare in politics. Politics is always about a society's ideals and limits, its history and its possibilities, its formal norms and expressions of popular will, and how all that shakes out pragmatically in real-life decisions. Politics is also about the acquisition and exercise of power. Letting go of that power, especially when one has reached the pinnacle of the political pyramid, is not easy.

The speech Biden [gave Wednesday night](#) explaining his decision to end his reelection campaign reflected all those aspects of the art of politics. Interestingly, one way to understand Biden's speech is by viewing it through the lens of his Catholic faith.

The president said, "But in the defense of democracy, which is at stake, I think it's more important than any title. I draw strength, and I find joy in working for the American people. But this sacred task of perfecting our union is not about me. It's about you. Your families, your futures. It's about we the people."

At several times, he touched on that theme, that the country's political life is a collective effort. "You just have to keep faith — keep the faith — and remember who we are. We are the United States of America, and there are simply nothing, nothing beyond our capacity when we do it together."

Those words echoed words [he used in his message](#) last Sunday announcing his decision to leave the race: "There is nothing America can't do — when we do it together."

Pope Francis wrote in *Fratelli Tutti*: 'Once more we realized that no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together.' Biden did not quote that text but he gave voice to it.

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In one sense, this is American political boilerplate. But at a deeper level, we Catholics believe that salvation comes to us as a people, not as individuals, something that sets us apart from our evangelical brothers and sisters for whom the personal, individual experience of grace is the sole source of religious authority.

Pope Francis, [*in Fratelli Tutti*](#), linked this soteriological insight to the affairs of this world: "True, a worldwide tragedy like the COVID-19 pandemic momentarily revived the sense that we are a global community, all in the same boat, where one person's problems are the problems of all. Once more we realized that no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together." Biden did not quote that text but he gave voice to it.

The relationship of virtue to political norms is complicated in liberal democracies, and it always has been. Our founding fathers did not view human nature through rosy lenses, and they focused on limiting the power of anyone to cause harm or impose tyranny. But they saw the necessity of virtue among the people to the success of democracy.

Our Catholic view of human nature is less dark. We know that humankind is fallen, but that we also share in the dignity of having been created in God's image and in the special dignity that came through the Incarnation. We view government as a positive good.

Biden leaned into his Catholicism in his speech. "We have to decide: Do we still believe in honesty, decency, respect, freedom, justice and democracy? In this moment, we can see those we disagree with not as enemies but as, I mean, fellow Americans — can we do that? Does character in public life still matter?" he asked. "We are a great nation because we are a good people," Biden added.

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Later in the speech, Biden channeled Ecclesiastes. "I know there was a time and a place for long years of experience in public life. There's also a time and a place for new voices, fresh voices, yes, younger voices. And that time and place is now."

He introduced that passage with the image of passing the torch, borrowed from the first Catholic president, John F. Kennedy.

Intergenerational solidarity is implicit in the very word "catholic." The individual churches that make up the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic" church are not only in communion across the boundaries of nations and culture. We are in communion with the church of the first century, and the fourth, and the 11th, and the 16th.

"We are all created equal, endowed by our creator with certain inalienable rights: life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness," Biden said. "We've never fully lived up to it — to this sacred idea — but we've never walked away from it either. And I do not believe the American people will walk away from it now."

This sensibility is not only true as a matter of history and hope. Those of us who go to confession are familiar with the phenomenon: Ideals are not vitiated because humans fall short in meeting them.

My favorite part of the speech had nothing particular to do with Biden's Catholicism but a great deal to do with the democracy he is so concerned to preserve. In speaking about Vice President Kamala Harris, the president said, "In just a few months, the American people will choose the course of America's future. I made my choice." He described her as "experienced," "tough," and "capable."

Then he said, "Now the choice is up to you, the American people." Biden really does trust the American people to make the right choice but, right or wrong, he is committed to making sure their choice is honored. He won't be seeking to overturn November's results no matter what they are.

Biden did not make the sign of the cross. He did not mention his Catholic faith. But his Catholicism informs this man's understanding of the moment, of himself, and of our nation. Not perfectly, but surely. And we are all the better for it.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)