

‘Everyone’s Entitled To Dignity’: A conversation with Joseph R. Biden Jr.

Matt Malone, S.J., September 29, 2015

On Sept. 17, 2015, Matt Malone, S.J., president and editor in chief of America Media, spoke with Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. at the office of the vice president in Washington, D.C., about his faith, his family and his public life. A complete video recording can be found at americamagazine.org. The following text contains edited excerpts.

<https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/everyones-entitled-dignity>

Matt Malone, S.J.: It’s well known that at least two of your predecessors as vice president, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, were not big fans of the Jesuits. A mere 50 years ago, we had a debate in this country about whether a Catholic could be elected president, should be elected president. The United States established diplomatic relations with the Vatican only in the 1980s, and now this Jesuit pope is coming to address a joint session of Congress. What does that say about our country?

Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr.: I think it’s sort of the history of the journey of this country. If you think about it, it’s always been in the direction of inclusiveness, always been in the direction of acceptance, always been in the direction of expanding rights and recognizing differences. I think whether it’s the civil rights movement, whether it’s the attitude toward the Catholic Church, whether it’s the attitude toward minorities, it’s a constant progression. I think it’s what makes America the unique country in the world. It’s about policy. It’s about the whole idea that anything is possible, and it’s about progression. Maybe that sounds too nativist, but it really is who we are. In the not too distant future, Father, Caucasians of European descent are going to be an absolute minority in America. It’s a reflection of who we are. So it’s not at all surprising.

MM: And that will change not only the face of the country, but also the church in this country.

JB: It will change the face of the church. You and I both know that there are some real differences within the church in terms of tone and direction and just how far we should reach out. I got to meet this pope at his inauguration, where I had the great pleasure of representing the United States of America. My sister was with me and I sat at the altar; and afterwards, as you know, Father, you line up in alphabetical order in the basilica and the Holy Father stands at the foot of the altar, and he greets every head of state. The United States, we’re at the very end. So I walked up, and there was a wonderful Irish monsignor who had sat in with me in a long discussion I had with Pope Benedict just several months earlier. He turned [and introduced me to Pope Francis], and the pope reached out and he grabbed my hand and he said, “I know, Mr. Vice President, you’re always welcome here.” That is the message that he’s sending to the world.

MM: And that is the tone that he’s striking everywhere, isn’t it?

JB: Absolutely. That’s why he’s the singular most popular figure in the world today. And not just in Catholic nations, across the board. And you know it’s because he’s the embodiment of the

Catholic social doctrine I was raised with. The idea that everyone is entitled to dignity, that the poor should be given special preference, that you have an obligation to reach out and be inclusive. I mean, look at the encyclical on climate change. It's all about, we have responsibilities, we have to husband this planet. I'm excited, quite frankly, as a practicing Catholic, I am really excited by [the fact that] the whole world is getting to see what are the basic essential elements of what constitutes Catholicism. We can argue about dogma, we can argue about some of the de fide doctrine that's been declared, but this is below it and above it. This is something much larger.

MM: And he's going to address this joint session of Congress, the first time a pope has ever done so. It's going to be really interesting to watch.

JB: I'll be sitting right behind him.

MM: You're going to be sitting right behind him, and you and Speaker John Boehner, both faithful Catholics, have different political perspectives. Have you and Speaker Boehner talked about the optics of this? For example, are you going to stand, are you going to sit, are you going to clap?

JB: Not in terms of the Holy Father. We've now done seven State of the Union addresses and we joke with each other, and John will say, "Don't stand on everything, will you please?" and I say, "Well I gotta stand on the parts I had something to do with in terms of arguing for them." John's a good guy, you know, I think we'll be sitting there with a great deal of pride.

MM: And Pope Francis will have something to say, in that joint session, that will challenge and affirm everyone in that room.

JB: I think what people confuse, Father—I've read a lot of what you've written; you don't [do this]—is the idea that fundamental religious convictions, in all the confessional faiths, not just Catholicism, are incapable of being separated from politics with a small "p," not a capital "P"; not Democrat-Republican, liberal-conservative. And it goes back to what I said about Catholic social doctrine. We say everyone is entitled to be treated with dignity. I don't know what the pope will say, but I would be surprised if he didn't enunciate the principles underlying all the major confessional faiths and particularly ours, and imply that there is a collective obligation to try to give meaning and life to those principles we all say we agree to.

MM: And you mention the encyclical "Laudato Si'," which had an enormous impact. Some folks in this country, some of the candidates for president, are saying the pope should stay out of politics.

JB: He did stay out of politics. He made it clear, it is not the papacy's role to be the scientist in chief and/or the political arbiter. But what he talked about are basic fundamental assertions. Look, the way I read it, and I read it, is it was an invitation, almost a demand, that a dialogue begin internationally to deal with what is the single most consequential problem and issue facing humanity right now.

Even our Department of Defense has written long papers talking about what a danger to national security failing to deal with this is. Sea levels rise another foot, you've got tens of millions of people being displaced. You think there is a migration problem in Syria; watch what happens when hundreds of millions of people in South Asia are displaced and trying to find new territory to live. Look what's happened with Darfur. Darfur is all about climate change. It's about arable land being evaporated, figuratively and literally, and warring over land. So I think it's a total misrepresentation of the pope's encyclical to say it's a political document. It's a human document.

MM: You read this encyclical both as a public servant and as a Catholic. I wonder over the course of your public life how you have navigated those different parts of yourself, the space between them?

JB: Well you know, before we sat down we were talking about a mutual friend, Fr. Leo O'Donovan, who I have a great admiration for. When he was president of Georgetown University, he asked me to address a retreat at Georgetown, and I said I'd be happy to. Then he gave me the topic. He said he'd like me to talk about how my faith has informed my public policy. And I had never talked about it those terms before. But I worked really hard on it. And when you actually put the words to paper, it forces you to really focus. And the way I was raised and the social doctrine and the religious theology I was taught were totally consistent.

It was summed up best as I thought about it: all the things that animated my passions were all about what my father would say. My father would say, "The cardinal sin of all sins, Joey, is the abuse of power." Whether it's a man raising a hand to a woman, whether it's economic power being invoked and asserted over someone else, whether it is the government abusing its power. And that's how I look at what this is all about, why my faith is so consistent with the public policy.

I'm a practicing Catholic. I believe faith is a gift. And the first obligation we all have is, "Love your God," the second one is, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus Christ was sort of the human embodiment of what God wanted us to do, and everything Jesus did was consistent with what, generically, we were supposed to do. Treat people with dignity. Everyone's entitled to dignity, that's a basic tenet in my household.

But when you look at it, whether talking about the pope's encyclical, or the poor, or our obligations to others, it's all about fighting this notion of abusing power, no matter what form it is in, including the power of the church, or institutions. I am so excited about this pope, and it's not that I didn't have great respect and reverence for the last two popes. I got to meet them. I had four private meetings with Pope John Paul. But the thing that I think is so electric about the holy father is that he's taking it all back to what my dad would say: we have an obligation to fight against the abuse of power. I find that totally, thoroughly, consistent with everything that a Democrat or a Republican can try to implement in terms of policy. Now, we'll disagree on a policy basis how best to deal with that abuse where we think it exists, or if it exists, but I don't think there's any fundamental disagreement that we hold these truths self-evident, that all men

are created equal. You can say it another way, the way the pope says it: every human being is entitled to be treated with dignity.

MM: And yet there have been times, when talking about specific public policies, where you've had to take positions that were at odds with the bishops of this country on contentious questions like abortion. Has that been hard for you?

JB: It has been. It has been hard, in one sense, because I'm prepared to accept de fide doctrine on a whole range of issues as a Catholic, even though, as you know, Aquinas argued about, in his Summa Theologica, about human life and being, when it occurs. I'm prepared to accept as a matter of faith, my wife and I, my family, the issue of abortion, but what I'm not prepared to do is to impose a precise view that is born out of my faith on other people who are equally God-fearing, equally as committed to life, equally as committed to the sanctity of life. I'm prepared to accept that at the moment of conception there's human life and being, but I'm not prepared to say that to other God-fearing, non-God-fearing people that have a different view.

Even—I don't want to start a theological discussion, I'll get in trouble, it's above my pay grade, although it's my avocation, but there's, you know, there's even been disagreement in our church, not that—abortion is always wrong, but there's been debate, and so, there's, for me, at a point where the church makes a judgment, as we Catholics call, de fide doctrine, said, this is what our doctrine is. All the principles of my faith, I make no excuse for attempting to live up to—I don't all the time. But I'm not prepared to impose doctrine that I'm prepared to accept on the rest of—and I actually had that discussion with Pope Benedict. I had a wonderful meeting with him several months before he stepped down. It was like going back to theology class. And by the way, he wasn't judgmental. He was open. I came away enlivened from the discussion.

MM: Is there a place in the Democratic Party for people who are pro-life?

JB: Absolutely. Absolutely, positively. And that's been my position for as long as I've been engaged.

MM: I wonder if we could talk for a moment about how you've had to live a lot of your faith in public view. You've spoken about the role that loss and tragedy have played in your life, and I wonder if that has been difficult, too. There's a certain loneliness in every mourning, and you talk about how you feel comforted by your faith, by your family, by your friends. But it must be a very difficult thing to do that publicly.

JB: Well, it's kind of a double-edged sword, Father. If you forgive me, I know you lost a brother. [Editor's Note: Father Malone's brother was killed in an automobile accident in 1984, a topic he wrote about in these pages, "The Father of Mercies," 3/7/2005].

MM: I did.

JB: I can't imagine your father, having been a first responder, responding to an accident to find out it's his own son that he's lost. So many people have gone through what your father went through. So many people have gone through so much more than I have without the support structure I have. And ironically, Father, the situation relating to the public side of this is, so many

hundreds of thousands of people affirming the inspiration that my son provided is uplifting. And we've all decided, Father, that we don't want to talk so much anymore about—publicly or even privately—about the loss. Jill, Hunter, Ashley, my children, we all decided that we should focus on the inspiration he provided.

Regardless of what I do in public or private life, we are not going to walk away from the things that made Beau's life beyond his family worthwhile. So we've set up a foundation. He felt so strongly about the abuse of children and women. We set up a foundation in his name, raising millions of dollars to help children in distress. He cared deeply about the notion that there was a need for the equal application of the law across the board.

So, no matter what we do, all of us, as a family, are going to stay engaged and work on those things that Beau inspired people to care about. And so doing that in public, quite frankly, is the best way to avoid what we all feel self-conscious about. We feel self-conscious about the focus on us. I don't want anybody feeling sorry for me or the families. Again, so many people have gone through so much more, with so much less support, yet they get up every morning, Father, and you saw it. They put one foot in front of the other and they move on.

My dad used to have an expression. Whenever you got knocked down, whether it was a football field, or you got turned down for the date, or you didn't win the prize or something bad happened to you, he'd say two things: "Joey, where's it written that life owes you a living?" And the next one was, "Just get up, pal. Get up." And that's what Beau wants us to do. That's what Beau expects his father to do. So we're just getting up and moving on. We're going to do good things in his name.

MM: That's also a gift of our faith, as Catholic Christians. In the journey from Good Friday to Easter Sunday, you begin to experience the people that you've lost in your life, not just as an absence but also as a presence, right?

JB: Yeah. I've said this before. My wife, Jill, when she wants to leave a message that she wants to sink in, she literally Scotch-tapes it on my mirror while I'm shaving. She taped a Kierkegaard quote, where he said, "Faith sees best in the dark." That's the gift of faith. That's the gift God gives you, that you're able to see best, faith works best, when you know the least, when you are most frightened, concerned, not sure of where to go. And I find it extremely reassuring.

I hope I don't sound like I'm proselytizing. Every major confession of faith has the same basic tenet. In our church, the way I was raised, you think of it in terms of the Holy Ghost. Now Holy Spirit, but we used to say Holy Ghost. That's the source of the faith. Christ dying on the cross was a heroic act; but the way my mom would translate it is that, "bravery lies in every man's heart and at some moment will be called upon." Can you step up for things that matter? Can you sacrifice for things that mean a great deal to you? The way I was raised, the way priests had raised me, the nuns, my mother, my father, it was never in terms of heroic notions. It was just basic principles. Basic principles.

It wasn't about you give to the poor and you sell all your belongings and follow Jesus. It was just practical stuff, just practical things. Somebody needs help. My entire time that I lived with my

parents, we had, with the exception of two years, a relative living full-time with us in a three-bedroom house. It was wonderful for kids; I don't know how my parents did it. I guess what I'm trying to say is that translating my faith was never discussed or viewed in dogmatic or heroic terms. It was just part of the experience. And that's why I get back, I end where I began. Catholic social doctrine. The bishops say it very well in seven points they lay out, but it just gets down to basic things. Dignity. The poor. Inclusiveness. You know, reaching out. It's not that complicated. It's hard; it's not that complicated.

MM: Final question. Has anything changed in your thinking since your last public statements about whether you would seek the Democratic nomination?

JB: No, Father. And you know, I know from experience, like you know from your experience, and millions of Americans know, it comes or it doesn't. I've just got to be certain that if I do this I'm able to look you in the eye and everyone else and say I'm giving it all my passion and all my energy and I will not be distracted. And secondly, equally as important, the other piece is this: Is this the best thing for the family as a unit? Every person who decides or considers running for president, Democrat, Republican, it doesn't matter, both sides of the aisle. Everybody thinks it's all about what do the numbers say. That's a calculation, whether you think it's possible.

But it all gets down to personal considerations. Because you have no right, as an individual, to decide to run. Your whole family is implicated; your whole family is engaged. And so for us, it's a family decision, and I just have to be comfortable that this'll be good for the family. In the past, all our political efforts have actually strengthened the family. A local Delaware magazine called *Delaware in a Day*, years ago, when Beau got elected, said "Family Business."

You know, it's not quite there yet. And it may not get there in time to make it feasible to be able to run and succeed, because there are certain windows that will close. But if that's it, that's it. But it's not like I can rush it. It either happens or it doesn't happen. I know that's not satisfying to anybody. But people who've been there, I know they understand.