

Biden brings Catholic issues into play: Obama's VP choice will stir debate

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While supporters say Senator Joe Biden provides a crucial Democratic Party link with Catholic voters, others say Barack Obama's choice for his running mate will stir a debate on Biden's position on abortion and Catholic teaching.

Biden regularly attends a Catholic church in Greenville, Delaware. While disagreeing with his church's stance on abortion, Biden is known for supporting other key tenets of Catholic teaching.

"He's very committed to helping working-class folks and poor people, and that's what Catholic social teaching is all about," said priest-journalist Thomas Reese, senior fellow of the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University in Washington. "So I think he takes his faith very seriously."

But shortly after Biden was picked, Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver told the Associated Press: "I presume that his integrity will lead him to refrain from presenting himself for communion, if he supports a false 'right' to abortion."

Chaput is one of a handful of Catholic prelates who entered the political fray in 2004, telling Democratic nominee Senator John Kerry, who supports abortion rights, that he should not receive communion. Chaput has also suggested it's a sin for Catholics to vote for candidates who favor abortion rights.

Biden, who has been in the U.S. Senate since 1972, has long walked the line between church and state, and more specifically between abortion and politics.

"I'm a practicing Catholic, and it is the biggest dilemma for me in terms of comporting my religious and cultural views with my political responsibility," he said in 2007, as he explained his defense of *Roe v. Wade*.

Biden went on to say the Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion encompasses “the only means by which, in this heterogeneous society of ours, we can reach some general accommodation on what is a religiously charged and publicly charged debate.”

Reese said Biden’s stance on abortion is more prohibitive than many Democrats’ positions. “Biden has opposed government funding for abortion, so basically he doesn’t want to put women and doctors in jail, he doesn’t want to criminalize abortions, but nor does he want the government to pay for them,” he said.

In Delaware, the outgoing bishop of Biden’s home diocese, Michael Saltarelli, issued a statement in 2004 saying “it would be more spiritually beneficial” for Catholic public officials supporting abortion to refrain from communion.

Saltarelli also said, “Our Catholic institutions will not honor Catholic politicians who take pro-abortion legislative positions.”

Following those statements, Archmere Academy, the Catholic prep school in Claymont, Delaware, that Biden attended, dropped plans to name a new student center after him.

Wilmington diocesan spokesperson Bob Krebs said Saltarelli has not issued new comments about Biden and stands by his previous statement.

Biden’s religious history, recounted in news reports, includes references to his reliance on his faith in difficult times. He asked doctors to permit him to place rosary beads beneath his pillow when he had brain surgery in 1988.

Rosary beads again came up in 2005, in a far more contentious context.

“The next Republican that tells me I’m not religious,” Biden said, “I’m going to shove my rosary beads down their throat.”

Amy Sullivan, *Time’s* senior political editor, said that comment may indicate that Biden will not take criticism lying down. “Something tells me that if church leaders give Biden grief over his abortion record, he’ll give it right back,” she said. –*Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service*