



TAKING THE OATH: Joe Biden is sworn in as the 46th president of the United States, becoming only the second Catholic president

PICTURE: AP

Holy row as bishops lose plot over new president

MY wife was genuinely shocked when a commentator mentioned during the US presidential inauguration that Joe Biden was just the second Catholic president in the history of the United States.

As you might expect, Britain's record is not much better; Boris Alexander de Pfeffel Johnson is the first baptised Catholic to become prime minister since the office came into being in 1721. As in so many areas of his life, he has drifted and was confirmed an Anglican in his teens.

It shouldn't matter what religion a political leader is – as long as prejudice isn't the reason for exclusion.

In the United States there's supposed to be separation of Church and State – though you wouldn't know that from the inauguration ceremony. God plays more than a bit part.

In Britain, sectarianism is engrained in the constitution. There is a state Church, and the Act of Settlement says the monarch can neither be, nor marry, a Catholic. We'll let that pass. It won't be an issue for 50 years or so.

More interesting is Biden's election, and what it tells us about the state of the Catholic Church in the United States, and the battle being waged against the pope by a coterie of bishops in the US.

The Catholic component of the US electorate split 50:50 for Trump and Biden during the November poll. The country is clearly split, and at one level there is no reason why Catholic voters should not also be split.

But when you apply the 'what would Jesus do?' test to US politics, you can be damned sure he wouldn't be voting for Trump – though he would certainly try to save him from himself.

There have been shocking images of nuns adorned with pro-Trump scarves at his rallies, and bishops have been cuddling up to the disgraced, now

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former, president, and aligning themselves with far-right extremists and conspiracists, and with racists and hate-mongers.

Their rationale is 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'. The pro-life debate is the pretext. But this runs deeper than pro-life. In the fading weeks of Trump's administration, we saw a Catholic US Attorney General and Catholic Supreme Court justices send damaged people to their deaths by execution.

This is about power. Things came to a head on inauguration day itself when, in an ill-judged shot across the new president's bows, Archbishop Jose Gomez, the president of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, said Biden's election put the Church in a "difficult and

complex situation".

He said the bishops were setting up a working party to see how they would deal with the Biden presidency, and informed sources said it was possible the group would discuss whether President Biden should be barred from taking holy communion.

The press release was completely at odds with the pope's warm and uninhibited message of congratulations.

One US archbishop, Cardinal Blasé Cupich of Chicago, called Gomez to account saying his message was "an ill-considered statement on the day of President Biden's inauguration". He said it was unprecedented and "came as a surprise to many bishops". Good on him.

What is playing out in the US is a battle over the future of the Catholic Church between white middle-aged men who want to retain their supremacy, and a pope who believes the Church has become hooked on the corrupting drugs of power and money.

In part too, it is a brazen attempt by forces in the first world Church to hold onto power in the face of a demographic and (small-p) political shift to the developing world. Francis's roots in South America, and his vision of a Church of the poor, offend their sensibilities.

It may be that the Trump rump in the US Church has overshoot itself. It needs to be called out, and quick.

It is not the job of the Church to support insurrectionists who would deny democracy. That they would support a would-be tyrant against one of their own congregation is close to unforgivable.

Confession is good for the soul, but if they don't recant they should remember that there is room yet in Dante's eighth circle of hell – reserved for those in the Church who put their own interests before those of others.

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ON THIS DAY

JANUARY 25 1921

Gun battle between Police and Specials

LIGHT has now been thrown on the extraordinary shooting affair at Clones (County Monaghan) during the early hours of Sunday morning when a man who turns out to have been a Special Constable from Belfast was killed and another Special Constable named Archdale from Enniskillen was dangerously wounded.

Dublin Castle states: 'A party of police from Clones turned out at 3.30am in response to a report that armed burglars were in a local shop. They intercepted the alleged burglars and shots were exchanged. Later a party of Special Constabulary from Newtownbutler (Fermanagh) found on the street one man killed and one seriously wounded.' (It will be observed that it is not stated whether the men found on the street were civilians or not.) Messages from Clones set out the facts. On Thursday night the licensed premises of Mr Macauley in Fermanagh Street were forcibly entered and an attempt was made to break open the safe. The visitors were disturbed by a local man who alerted the RIC but the burglars had decamped.

At three o'clock on Sunday morning about 15 armed men are stated to have arrived in the town in a motor lorry from Newtownbutler. They drove into Fermanagh Street and drew up outside the licensed premises of Mr John O'Reilly. Sentries were placed at the entrance and the remainder called on Mr O'Reilly and Mr Charles McEntee to come down. The men then proceeded to break in the door. In the meantime the two occupants had escaped in their night attire and succeeded in reaching the local RIC barracks. About 12 RIC men turned out and also some soldiers and, approaching Mr O'Reilly's house, they called on the raiders to surrender. The reply was a volley of shots.

The RIC replied with their rifles. An Ulster Special named McCullough from Belfast was killed and another named Archdale dangerously wounded. Eleven prisoners were captured.

Colonel C G Wickham, Commissioner of the Special Constabulary, stated yesterday that the public might rest assured that the authorities would take the strongest possible steps to stamp out indiscipline or improper conduct in the new force. Already any man found guilty of any offence had been severely punished and dismissed the force. In the case of the Clones occurrence, he said, the entire party had been put under arrest and those to whom any offence was brought home would be tried by court-martial.

Coming after the sectarian incident in Enniskillen where Specials had fired shots at the local Catholic church, the actions of the new force in Clones – then a mainly Unionist market town – did not inspire confidence.

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