



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on February 20, 2010

## Biden's Ashes Cause Quite a Stir

It's an annual ritual for millions of Catholics around the world, but when Vice President Joe Biden appeared in public with ashes on his forehead on Ash Wednesday, some newscasters and commentators found it quite remarkable. And at least one, Democratic strategist Bob Beckel, found it quite humorous. Beckel was participating in a Fox News telecast about President Obama's economic stimulus, when Biden appeared on screen. Beckel began to laugh and then offered the following "apology":



"Sorry about laughing," he said, "'but I looked at Joe Biden's forehead, and I know it is Ash Wednesday, but I'm not sure I would wear that ash on the air.'" The comment brought a swift and stern response from Bill Donohue, president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights.

"Bob Beckel's admonishing remark, 'I'm not sure I'd wear that ash on the air,' makes us wonder whether it's the public display of ashes he finds risible, or the religion that sports them," Donohue said in a press release. "In any event, there is no record of Beckel ever lecturing a Jew about wearing a yarmulke on TV or a Muslim wearing a turban. Must be something about Catholicism that bothers this guy. We'd love to know what it is. At the very least a clarification is in order." An anonymous writer on a blog called "Freedom Eden" wondered if Beckel may have found amusing the contradiction between Biden's Catholicism and his decades-long defense of the freedom to abort.

"Is Beckel ridiculing Biden for trying to pass himself off as a practicing Catholic when he has spent his political career in Washington voting against a Culture of Life, in violation of the teaching of his faith, condemning millions and millions of unborn children to death?" the writer asked. "Is Beckel mocking Biden's hypocrisy? Or, is Beckel mocking the practice of wearing ashes as an observance of Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent? Beckel needs to clarify.... It's not cool to be dissing people for practicing their faith."

Another gaffe, less offensive, but possibly more embarrassing, was committed by broadcasters on the London-based satellite news service Sky News. While showing Biden delivering a speech on the administration's recovery program, anchor Kay Burley wondered about the "bruise" on Biden's forehead.

"What's happened to his head?" she asked. "I'm sure that's what everybody's asking at home... It looks like he's walked into a door." Burley and her co-anchor then discussed the possibility that Biden may have slipped on some ice while in Vancouver for the Olympic games. Moments later, Burley, a Catholic, apologized to viewers.



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"Okay, um, I know I'm a very bad Catholic," she said. "I know now that today is Ash Wednesday and that those are ashes on his forehead." She then found merciful refuge in a break in the broadcast. "I hang my head in shame. I'll be back in just a moment."

The point worth discussing is not whether Kay Burley is, in her words, "a very bad Catholic." That is a judgment for only God to make. But it is another example of how out of touch most secular journalists, on both sides of the Atlantic, are about the religious beliefs and practices of millions of their countrymen. Reporters and commentators on world affairs need not be believers, much less devout practitioners, of any faith to realize that religion is an important part of life and matters a great deal to millions of their readers and viewers.

Reporting on ABC News, Karen Travers noted that Biden, the nation's first Catholic Vice President, was wearing the ashes, which she rightly identified as "a symbol of repentance." But she tiptoed very gently about a major point of conflict between Biden and his religion.

"Catholic political candidates have faced significant criticism from within the faith community over questions of whether their political positions align with their religious ones," she reported, adding that Biden has said his political views are "totally consistent with Catholic social doctrine."

But there is no Catholic social doctrine that condones or permits the championing of abortion "rights," a subject Travers nowhere mentioned in her report. She noted instead a 2007 *Christian Science Monitor* article about Biden and his faith in which Biden, then the senior Senator from Delaware, was quoted as follows: "There are elements within the church who say that if you are at odds with any of the teachings of the church, you are at odds with the church. I think the church is bigger than that." Obviously a church that insists on respect for human life is too small for the broadminded Biden.

In the fall of 2008, the Democratic vice presidential candidate, through either ignorance or willful deceit, implied the church's stand on abortion has been unsettled throughout the past two millennia. "I know my church has wrestled with this for 2,000 years," Biden said in an interview with the *Wilmington News-Journal*. In a letter to the editor, Bishop Francis Malooley of the Diocese of Wilmington took the Senator to task for that and other statements in which Biden had "claimed repeatedly that the church has a nuanced view of the subject that leaves a great deal of room for uncertainty and debate." The bishop went on to trace the long history, from pagan antiquity to modern times, of the church's unequivocal teaching that abortion is an intrinsic evil. The roots of that teaching are found in the Judaic faith and were held fast as well by the founders of the Protestant Reformation.

"The teaching of the Catholic Church is clear and not open to debate," the bishop wrote. "Abortion is a grave sin because it is the wrongful taking of an innocent human life."

"I get comfort from carrying my rosary, going to Mass every Sunday," Biden has said. Attendance at Mass on Sunday is a must for Catholics and carrying the rosary is a good practice, though not in itself meritorious. The rosary, after all, is not heavy. But if Biden says the Hail Marys the beads symbolize, he is seeking the intercession of the Mother of the Lord of life. What he prays for is his own business. But he clearly could use some enlightenment on "Catholic social doctrine."

The ashes Biden was wearing on Wednesday are, indeed, a symbol of repentance. They both remind us and give us reason to be humble. To her credit, a humbled Kay Burley admitted her mistake at not recognizing the Ash Wednesday mark. "I hang my head in shame," she said.

Joe Biden should do the same.



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