



U.S. President Joe Biden presents the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jesuit Fr. Greg Boyle during a ceremony at the White House in Washington May 3. Boyle established Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles in 1992 to improve the lives of former gang members. (OSV News/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein)

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Jesuit Fr. Greg Boyle, founder and director of Homeboy Industries, and former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi were among 19 Americans awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, on May 3.

The White House said the award is given to "individuals who have made exemplary contributions to the prosperity, values, or security of the United States, world peace, or other significant societal, public or private endeavors."

In comments at a ceremony to award the medals, Biden said Boyle "changed countless lives" through his former gang member rehabilitation ministry.

Biden joked that he was educated by Norbertines who worried their students would go to Jesuit colleges because "you guys were too liberal."

"Thank God for the Jebbies," Biden said, quipping, "That's what my staff hates me doing, ad-libbing."

Boyle established Homeboy Industries in 1992 to improve the lives of former gang members. The organization has evolved into the largest gang intervention, rehab and reentry program in the world.

He was previously pastor of Dolores Mission Church in Boyle Heights, then the poorest Catholic parish in Los Angeles, which also had the highest concentration of gang activity in the city, which inspired his ministry.

Homeboy Industries wrote on X, formerly Twitter, "Congrats, Father G. You deserve it."

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Pelosi made history as the first and only woman to serve as speaker of the House, leading the chamber 2007-2011 and again 2019-2023. She became known for her ability to bring together various factions within her party to pass some of her party's major legislative goals, including 2010's Affordable Care Act and 2021's Bipartisan

Infrastructure Law.

Pelosi's tenure was marked by both accomplishment and controversy, including her Catholic faith. Pelosi frequently discusses her Catholic faith on a variety of issues including immigration, poverty and the climate. She sometimes found herself at odds with Catholic bishops on some of her public policy positions, most notably on abortion, something she has in common with Biden, who is the nation's second Catholic president.

Biden called Pelosi "a brilliant, practical, principled, determined leader" and said her accomplishments are "overwhelming."

In a statement, Pelosi said, "It is with great appreciation that I accept the Presidential Medal of Freedom from our great and patriotic President of the United States Joe Biden."



U.S. President Joe Biden presents the Presidential Medal of Freedom to former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., a Catholic, during a ceremony at the White House in Washington May 3. (OSV News/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein)

"The Medal is an honor that is respected because it is about America's highest value: freedom," Pelosi said. "Freedom was the vision of our founders, has been the goal of our men and women in uniform, and is our promise to our children. It is with reverence for freedom and respect for all who have received it that I am deeply honored and forever grateful. Thank you, President Biden."

Other recipients include former Vice President Al Gore, Rep. James Clyburn, D-S.C., whose 2020 endorsement of Biden in that year's Democratic primary is seen as helping Biden win his first contest in the Palmetto State, as well as Elizabeth Dole, a former Republican senator from North Carolina and former secretary of both the Labor and Transportation departments, and John Kerry, a former U.S. secretary of state.

Recipients also included Michelle Yeoh, the first Asian to win the Academy Award for Best Actress, and Olympian swimmer Katie Ledecky, who is another high-profile Catholic recipient.

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In a statement announcing the honorees, the White House said, "President Biden often says there is nothing beyond our capacity when we act together."

"These nineteen Americans built teams, coalitions, movements, organizations, and businesses that shaped America for the better. They are the pinnacle of leadership in their fields," their statement said. "They consistently demonstrated over their careers the power of community, hard work, and service."

In the closing days of his presidency in January 2017, then-President Barack Obama surprised Biden, his vice president, with a Presidential Medal of Freedom. Biden was moved to tears at the ceremony, telling those in attendance he had "no inkling" he would also receive the award.

In 2004, then-President George W. Bush presented the award to Pope John Paul II during a visit to the Vatican in Rome.

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