

Comment: From Obama, a quiet, humble faith

Cathleen Falsani Religion News Service | Feb. 4, 2011

Speaking at the National Prayer Breakfast on Thursday (Feb. 3), President Obama made a compelling case for something terribly unusual: humble faith.

Historically, Obama has been reticent to speak at length publicly about his Christian faith. As a result, he's faced intense scrutiny by skeptics who would seek to disprove his professed beliefs.

During the prayer breakfast, the president gave more than just a glimpse into his spiritual life -- he detailed the how, when and what of his daily prayer life, and spoke eloquently and intimately about his love and devotion to God.

The president explained that his daily prayer life regularly centers around three themes -- petitions for strength, humility, and a desire to walk closer with his God, a prayer, he said, that encompasses all others.

Particularly when faced with tragedies such as the shootings in Arizona, Obama's prayer is to draw closer to God, he said. "It's in these times that we feel most intensely our mortality and our own flaws and the sins of the world that we most desperately seek to touch the face of God," he said.

"My prayer this morning is that we might seek his face not only in those moments but each and every day ... that we might every so often rise above the here and now and kneel before the eternal."

Of his prayers for humility, Obama said in part:

"It's useful to go back to Scripture to remind ourselves that none of us has all the answers; (for all) of us -- no matter our political party or station in life -- the full breath of human knowledge is like a grain of sand in God's hands, and there are some mysteries in this world that we cannot fully comprehend. As it's written in Job, 'God's voice thunders in marvelous ways. He does great things beyond our understandings.'"

And this is where Obama acknowledged his humble humanity.

"The challenge I find then is to balance this uncertainty, this humility, with the need to fight for deeply held convictions, to be open to other points of view, but firm in our core principles. I pray for this wisdom every day. I pray that God will show me and all of us the limits of our understanding and open our ears and our hearts to our brothers and sisters with different points of view."

What Obama said Thursday reflects, in both its content and even more powerfully in its spirit, the faith of the state senator who sat down with me six years ago in a Chicago coffee shop to talk about his eternal concerns.

That interview remains the most exhaustive discussion of his spiritual life that Obama has granted to date. It has been dissected and studied by pundits more closely than a fetal pig in a high school honors biology class. Some read it and see what I see. Others read it and conclude that Obama is a charlatan and a fraud, an unbeliever

posing as a follower of Christ.

But what I heard in Chicago so many years ago is precisely what I heard again in Thursday's prayer breakfast address: Obama not only is a genuine Christian, but he is also its rarest kind: a humble follower of Jesus Christ who is all too aware of his shortcomings and responsibilities, a disciple who places his life (eternal and otherwise) in the hands of a gracious God.

I believe what Obama says about his faith, but he knows many others do not.

My Christian faith has been a sustaining force for me over these last few years, all the more so when Michelle and I hear our faith questioned from time to time. What really matters is not what other people say about us, but whether or not we're being true to our conscience and true to our God, he said Thursday.

Along with verses of Scripture, Obama laced his address with humorous personal anecdotes. God uses the first lady to teach the president humility when, for instance, she reminds him of chores left undone, or questions the wisdom of watching my third football game in a row on a Sunday. He prays for strength to carry out the duties of his office, but also for the patience to raise two daughters.

Obama presented himself as a real, human believer -- clinging to faith and, sometimes, stumbling. He restated how he came to know Jesus Christ ...and embrace him as Lord and Savior more than 20 years ago. But he added, My faith journey has had its twists and turns. It hasn't always been a straight line. In the wake of failures and disappointments I've questioned what God had in store for me and been reminded that Gods' plans for us might not always match our own shortsighted desires.

The president concluded his remarks by describing his nightly prayers.

I wait on the Lord and ask him to forgive me my sins, look after my family and the American people, and make me an instrument of his will.

Amen, Mr. President.

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