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Bill de Blasio, New York's new 'spiritual but not religious' mayor

by Sarah Pulliam Bailey by Religion News Service

New York — From its historic black churches to large Jewish enclaves to landmark Catholic and Protestant churches, New York City is the ultimate religious melting pot. And now, overseeing it all is a new mayor whose only religious identity seems to be "spiritual but not religious."

Mayor Bill de Blasio, who took office Jan. 1, is now perhaps the nation's most visible "none," an icon of one of the nation's fastest-growing religious groups -- those without any formal religious identification.

His election could reflect a new kind of American politician -- one who is shaped by religion and religious values but is not expected to talk about or bow to religion as in years past, said Jennifer Jones Austin, co-chairwoman of de Blasio's transition team.

"What drives him are his fundamental beliefs about liberation theology when it comes to social justice, our responsibility to care for all who are on this earth," Jones Austin said. "I heard him on several occasions say 'Amen' when he felt very strongly about something."

The mayor has taken great effort to reach New York's many religious traditions, Jones Austin said, even as he was criticized for initially not including Catholic clergy on his 60-member transition team.

"When I met him, however briefly, he told me he had been baptized and raised a Catholic and he was very proud of the fact that he had an uncle, a priest. What his religious status or health is now, I don't know," New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan told New York's ABC affiliate.

"Would you try and bring him back into the fold?" ABC host Diana Williams asked Dolan.

"Oh, I try to bring everyone back!" Dolan said. "So if he indicates he'll have an interest, I'll be knocking at the door."

In the 1980s, de Blasio worked with Loretto Sr. Maureen Fiedler and others at the Maryland-based Quixote Center, organizing a project called "The Quest for Peace," focused around development and humanitarian aid for Nicaraguans during the nation's bloody civil war. At the time, liberation theology was a frequent topic of conversation, Fiedler said.

Liberation theology came of age in the 1960s and '70s as a Catholic response to the Marxist movements that fought Latin America's military dictatorships in those decades. It affirmed that, rather than just focusing on seeking salvation in the afterlife, Catholics should act in the here and now against unjust societies that breed poverty and need.

"We lived and operated in the spirit of liberation theology, the idea that we're called to enact justice for the poor," said Fiedler, who blogs for *NCR* and now runs a radio show, *Interfaith Voices*, out of the Quixote Center.

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After years of isolation in Rome, that theological current is finding renewed acceptance under Pope Francis, observers say. Fiedler said de Blasio referred to the pope in a brief conversation during the inauguration.

"He said to me and [another former colleague], 'Are you responsible for what Pope Francis is saying? It sounds familiar,' " she said.

De Blasio's grandparents immigrated to the U.S. in 1905 from Italy. His father struggled with alcoholism, left his family and died by suicide. De Blasio has cited his mother, Maria, as the single most influential person in his life, even taking her maiden name as his own.

"Although my mother was raised a Catholic, she did not bring me up in the Church," he said on an online forum on Reddit. "I considered myself a spiritual person but unaffiliated, and I was definitely very influenced by the liberation theology movement in Latin America. And BOY am I a fan of Pope Francis!"

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