

Kerry finds his voice on religion

WASHINGTON - On the first day of November 2007, U.S. Sen. John Kerry finally gave a roomful of religion reporters the speech they waited to hear from him during the 2004 presidential campaign, when he was the Democratic nominee.

In an informal session sponsored by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Kerry acknowledged mishandling questions about his Catholic faith during the campaign and said that since then, he has made a point of seeking out "a number" of cardinals to discuss the confluence of faith and politics.

The Massachusetts senator said he learned the hard way how important it is for presidential candidates to talk about how their faith shapes them - and warned it may already be too late in the election cycle for current candidates to do that without seeming to pander to voters.

"The time to do it is not the heat of the last three months of a presidential campaign, the time to do it is now," he said.

Candidates from both parties have gone to greater lengths than ever this year to define themselves as people of faith. But Kerry acknowledged that the Democratic Party is still less comfortable than the GOP with the idea of candidates talking about their religion.

"A Republican can do a speech like that more easily than a Democrat," he said.

Kerry said he was wrong not to talk more about his Catholic faith during the campaign, especially after a handful of bishops said they would deny him Communion because of his support for legal abortion.

St. Louis Archbishop Raymond L. Burke put Kerry's Catholicism at the forefront of the campaign for some voters when he said early in 2004 that he would deny Communion to the candidate if he came before him.

(Archbishop Burke reiterated that position when asked this year whether he would apply the same standard to former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, a Republican and Catholic who also supports legal abortion.)

Kerry noted that only a handful out of 180 bishops said anything akin to Archbishop Burke's admonition in 2004. In fact, he added, other bishops were quite clear in saying they didn't think such an approach was supportable by canon law.

Kerry said he was surprised at how the controversy over whether he was "Catholic enough" became important during the race. His campaign had a religious outreach effort, he said, and he himself went back and reread religious texts, particularly the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, in anticipation of faith-themed discussions.

During the campaign, Kerry answered criticism of how his public policy stances contrasted with church teaching on abortion with responses such as this one in an October 2004 debate:

"I was an altar boy," he said. "But I can't take what is an article of faith for me and legislate it for someone who doesn't share that article of faith, whether they be agnostic, atheist, Jew, Protestant, whatever."

After the election, Kerry said at the Pew Forum, he sought out several U.S. cardinals to talk about the role religion played in the campaign. In one of those conversations, Kerry said he explained to the cardinal, whom he declined to identify, that he saw the difference in their roles this way: "You have a position on abortion, but you don't have a policy. I have to have a policy."

Kerry said the cardinal acknowledged the difference in their roles, with that of the church leaders being to teach. He accepts the church's teaching on the subject of abortion, Kerry said, and understands that the U.S. bishops' role is teaching that all life is sacred.

But he also said he doesn't think it's a contradiction to say he is both "pro-choice" and "anti-abortion."

One can have a deeply held belief that all life, including of unborn infants, is sacred, he said, while also accepting that in a pluralistic society making all abortions illegal would constitute an unfair imposition of those beliefs on others.

On the other hand, he said, those who believe in the sanctity of all life have an obligation to work to reduce the number of abortions. The Democratic Party is guilty

of being overly strident on the subject, he said, but support is growing within the party to try to find common ground with abortion opponents over reducing the number of abortions.

In the session at the Pew Forum, Kerry talked about being raised Catholic, largely due to the efforts of his Protestant mother (his father was Catholic), about serving as an altar boy, and being, as an adolescent, “unbelievably engaged in my religion.”

As a young Navy officer in Vietnam during the war, Kerry said his religious faith became more of a “necessary and immediate relationship” with God, joking that it was in the nature of “protect me and I’ll be good.” During more than a year in Vietnam, Kerry said, he came to greatly admire the clergy he met who he thought lived out the teachings of the church.

Since then, he said, “I’d been very comfortable with my faith, until 2004.” The question of whether Kerry should be allowed to receive the sacraments of the Catholic Church because of his support for keeping abortion legal was exploited as a “wedge issue” in the campaign, he said.

“We’re all badly served when religion is reduced to that,” said Kerry.

Especially in presidential politics, because “the presidency is largely about character,” what a candidate believes or doesn’t believe and how religion shaped that “is fair game,” he said.

“If you’re framing what you believe in the context of your gut – who you are, what you believe, what motivates you, what you fight for, what are the principles that guide you – I think it’s fair to go out and say, ‘Here’s how my religion informed my life,’” he said.

That’s not the same however, “as carrying the agenda of your religious group into the halls of Congress,” he said.