

# New Australian prime minister has Catholic roots

SYDNEY, Australia – Kevin Rudd, the Catholic-born leader of Australia's Labor Party, was sworn in as Australia's prime minister Dec. 3.

Throughout a year of electoral campaigning, Rudd worked to familiarize the Australian people with how his view of Christian values informed his policies.

The youngest of a Catholic family of four children in rural Queensland, Rudd said the death of his father, a dairy farmer, from complications arising from a car accident had the greatest transforming effect on him when he was just 11 years old.

When his father died in 1969, Rudd was the only child living at home. His older brother was away in the army, his sister was a novice at a Mercy sisters' convent, and his 14-year-old brother was boarding at the Marist College Ashgrove in suburban Brisbane.

With the family evicted from their farm, Rudd recalled that he and his mother spent a night in their car before being taken in by other family members. The eviction, said Rudd, aroused "my earliest flickering of a sense of justice and injustice. ... I just thought it was plain wrong that that could happen to anybody or that you didn't have anywhere to go and stay."

While his mother retrained as a nurse, Rudd joined his older brother at the Marist boarding school. Rudd does not have happy memories of the two years he spent there and "the tough, harsh, unforgiving, institutional Catholicism" he said he found at the school.

When his mother was back on her feet, he moved back home with her and attended the local public high school.

At the Australian National University in Canberra, Rudd excelled in Chinese language and history. He met his future wife, Therese Rein, a practicing Anglican, at the university. Although he "never sought to formally separate himself from his

Catholicism," Rudd married in the Anglican Church and attends Anglican services with his family.

"Families that pray together, stay together," Rudd said.

Of his disenchantment with Catholicism, he said, "It was necessary to step out of the tradition I'd grown up in, in order to reflect on it and to reflect what actually lay underneath it."

In a 2005 essay on the role of a Christian in contemporary politics, Rudd said he sees the Gospel as "an exhortation to social action," arguing that the continuing principle shaping the church's engagement with the state "should be to take the side of the marginalized, the vulnerable and the oppressed."

"Catholic social teaching," he wrote, has "long argued for a proper balance between the rights of capital and labor, in a relationship based on mutual respect as well as legal protection."

Opposing former Prime Minister John Howard's controversial Work Choices legislation, Rudd has said the Christian churches, including the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, exposed the unfairness of Work Choices legislation as "a redistribution of power from the weak to the strong."

"This is part of the continued prophetic mission of the church however politically uncomfortable. The purpose of the church is not to be socially agreeable; it is to speak robustly to the state on behalf of those who cannot speak effectively for themselves," he said. "Decency, fairness and compassion are still etched in our national soul. Despite a decade of oxygen deprivation, Christians can breathe them afresh into the great debates now faced by our country and the international community."

Rudd and the Labor Party defeated Howard's Liberal-Nationalist Party coalition Nov. 24 and swept the Labor Party back into the federal government after nearly a dozen years in opposition.

Now buoyed by his electoral mandate, Rudd, 50, promises to repeal Work Choices. He also said he will enact a revolution in school, trades and university education in

Australia and reactivate the reconciliation movement with Australia's indigenous people. He has put climate change firmly onto the federal agenda by creating a new ministerial portfolio to deal with it, as well as ratifying Australia's commitment to the Kyoto Protocol on global emissions.

Rudd also has announced that he will recall Australia's combat troops from Iraq by the middle of 2008.