

President, Lady Bird Johnson had long association with Catholics

WASHINGTON - Lady Bird Johnson, an Episcopalian, died just after a Catholic priest finished reciting the litany of the saints with her family at her bedside in Austin, Texas.

This ecumenical interaction July 11 was not unusual for the former first lady or for her husband, former President Lyndon B. Johnson, a member of the Disciples of Christ.

Their closest Catholic relationship was with their daughter, Luci Baines Johnson Turpin. It was Turpin who called Paulist Father Robert Scott, a senior minister at St. Austin's Parish in Austin, Texas, and at the University of Texas Catholic Center, to come to the LBJ Ranch when it became clear her mother was close to death.

In an interview with Catholic News Service July 12, Father Scott said he has known Turpin and her family for 25 years. He said Johnson attended every first Communion, confirmation and graduation for her Catholic grandchildren. And when Turpin's daughter, Nicole Nugent, was preparing for her confirmation, Johnson invited the whole class out to the LBJ Ranch for a retreat.

In the shock and confusion following the assassination of the nation's first and only Catholic president, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson took the oath of office as chief executive Nov. 22, 1963, placing his hand on a Catholic Bible aboard Air Force One. Johnson asked for God's help in performing his duties in his first public statement following his swearing in.

Like Kennedy before him, Johnson seemed to be popular among Catholics. A Gallup Poll in 1963 said nine out of 10 Catholics questioned said they would vote for President Johnson, a Democrat, over Republican Sen. Barry Goldwater in a presidential election.

National Catholic News Service coverage of Johnson's association with Catholics dates back to his vice presidency, when he met with Pope John XXIII. NCNS, the precursor to CNS, enthusiastically followed Luci Johnson's conversion to Catholicism at age 18, a decision her mother praised as sincere and serious.

Luci's marriage to Patrick John Nugent in 1966 was widely covered, as she was the first daughter of a president to marry in a Catholic church. Her marriage at the

National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception also marked the first time a president had visited the church. (The national shrine was named a basilica in 1990.)

The Nugents, who had four children, divorced after 13 years of marriage. The marriage was annulled in 1979. Now 60, Luci has been married to Canadian financier Ian Turpin since 1984. Her sister, Lynda Bird, 63, is married to Charles S. Robb, a former Virginia governor and U.S. senator.

According to the 1982 book "The Politician: The Life and Times of Lyndon Johnson" by Ronnie Dugger, daughter Luci encouraged her father to pray to her "little monks" at St. Dominic Church in Washington when he was worried about the progress of the war in Vietnam.

President Johnson was known for making nocturnal visits to Washington area churches, such as St. Dominic, during his presidency. He also occasionally attended Mass at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Stonewall, Texas, when he was at his ranch. He would typically attend a second, Protestant service on the same day, NCNS reported.

Dugger said that Johnson, who had a close relationship with Baptist evangelist the Rev. Billy Graham, prayed about a dozen times a day. At a prayer breakfast in 1968, Johnson said, "America never stands taller than when her people go to their knees." On several occasions during his presidency, Johnson established national days of prayer for causes such as peace and racial harmony.

When President Johnson met with Pope Paul VI, he asked him to pray for U.S. efforts for world peace. The pope did so, and also prayed for the U.S. leader's quick recovery after his 1965 gall bladder operation.

When he died, several Catholic leaders spoke highly of the former president.

NCNS ran a story Jan. 23, 1973, the day following Johnson's death, that included quotes from Cardinal John J. Krol of Philadelphia.

Cardinal Krol, then president of what is now called the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, called Johnson a "dedicated American whose leadership of our country, in years of conflict and controversy, manifested his deeply held personal commitment to the well-being of our nation and to the achievement of human rights."

Upon hearing of Lady Bird Johnson's death, Austin Bishop Gregory M. Aymond honored the lifelong environmentalist by saying she was "truly a Texas treasure."

"She found and spread God's beauty in the simplicity of wildflowers and nature," he said. "In faith, we trust she is resting in comfort in the Lord's garden."