NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Obama tells church faith 'keeps me calm'

Adelle M. Banks Religion News Service | Jan. 18, 2010

President Barack Obama delivers a eulogy the funeral Mass for Sen. Edward M. Kennedy at the Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help In Boston Aug. 29.

WASHINGTON -- President Obama addressed how his faith guides him and the importance of hard work as he marked the birthday of the late Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. at a Washington church on Sunday, Jan. 17.

"Folks ask me sometimes why I look so calm," he said at Vermont Avenue Baptist Church, a historic congregation that was visited by King. "I have a confession to make here. ... There are times when it feels like all these efforts are for naught, and change is so painfully slow in coming, and I have to confront my own doubts. But let me tell you during those times, it's faith that keeps me calm. It's faith that gives me peace."

The president spoke for almost half an hour in the usual spot for the sermon on the church's program, addressing about 500 people gathered in the Family Life Center of the congregation founded by freed slaves in 1866. At times he spoke like a preacher, opening his speech with "Good morning. Praise be to God," and concluding with "through God all things are possible."

He

spoke of holding the kind of "faith that breaks the silence of an earthquake's wake with the sound of prayer and hymns sung by the Haitian community," as the congregation applauded in agreement.

King visited the church in 1956, Obama noted, "as a 27-year-old preacher to speak on what he called the challenge of a new age."

At the time of King's visit the Supreme Court had ruled that the desegregated bus system in Montgomery, Ala., he opposed was unconstitutional. The high court had also ruled in Brown v. Board of Education against school segregation but schools and states had "ignored it with impunity," Obama recalled.

"Here we are more than half a century later, once again facing the challenges of a new age," he said. Even with "fits and starts," he said there has been progress over bigotry and prejudice.

"It's that progress that made it possible for me to be here today, for the good people of this country to elect an African-American the 44th president of the United States of America."

He said the civil rights movement in particular and the country in general have been successful when all Americans are responsible and work hard.

"In this country, there's no substitute for hard work," Obama said. "No substitute for a job well done, no substitute for being responsible stewards of God's blessings."

Obama, who attended with first lady Michelle Obama and his daughters Malia and Sasha, sat up front with the pastor, singing along when the congregation broke out in "We Shall Overcome" and joking with the pastor about how he might permit his new nephew to meet the pastor's new granddaughter in about 30 years.

It was obvious that this was not a typical service at Vermont Avenue, with the pastor, Rev. Cornelius Wheeler, offering warnings to worshippers before it began about not leaving the area of their seats for exuberant worship or photos.

In the last year, Obama has visited three other Washington churches: the Washington National Cathedral for his inaugural prayer service; St. John's Episcopal Church across Lafayette Square from the White House on the day of his inauguration and on Easter; and Nineteenth Street Baptist Church the Sunday before his inauguration. Last July he said he may attend "a number of different churches" and enjoys "powerful" sermons from the chaplain who leads services at the chapel at Camp David, the presidential retreat.

As he introduced Obama, Wheeler said he was "peacock-proud and tickled pink" to present him and assured the president his congregation was proud of his inauguration and "got your back."

Acknowledging it might not be politically correct to say so, Wheeler added: "It took them eight years to mess it all up. I can't see why they don't have a little bit of patience while you're fixing it."

Recently retired usher John S. Harrison said at age 87 he made a special effort to be there.

"I got out of my bed to come down here and see this because this is history," said Harrison, who was part of the church when King spoke there.

Source URL (retrieved on *04/16/2014 - 23:43*): http://ncronline.org/news/spirituality/obama-tells-church-faith-keeps-me-calm