

Gingrich talks of journey to Catholicism

Daniel Burke Religion News Service | Apr. 27, 2011

WASHINGTON -- Tilting toward a run at the presidency, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich traced his spiritual journey from Southern Baptist to Roman Catholic at a Catholic prayer breakfast here on Wednesday.

"People ask me when I decided to become Catholic," said Gingrich, who formally converted in 2009. "It would be more accurate to say that I gradually became Catholic and then realized that I should accept the faith that surrounded me."

The twice-divorced former Georgia congressman has labored to assure conservative Christians of his fidelity to traditional values. Just 11 percent of white evangelicals, and 16 percent of white Catholics, favor Gingrich as the 2012 Republican presidential nominee, according to a March Pew Research Center poll.

Gingrich also explained his religious conversion on Tuesday to National Catholic Register, a publication owned by EWTN, a multimedia Catholic network.

"The depth of faith and history contained in the life of the Catholic Church were increasingly apparent to me," Gingrich said Wednesday. "Slowly, over a decade, the centrality of the Eucharist in the Catholic Mass became more and more obvious to me."

Gingrich also noted the spiritual influence of his wife, Callista, a lifelong Catholic, theologian George Weigel and Pope Benedict XVI.

The seventh annual National Catholic Prayer Breakfast, which is organized and largely attended by conservative Catholics, was billed this year as a celebration of Pope John Paul II's beatification on Sunday. About 900 people attended, according to breakfast founder Joseph Cella.

Each of the breakfast speakers, including Virginia Gov. Robert McDonnell, Bishop William Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., and anti-abortion activist Lila Rose, extolled the late pontiff, but none more so than Gingrich.

Gingrich and his wife recently produced a documentary on John Paul's 1979 trip to his native Poland, then under the grip of Soviet Communism. The pope's visit sowed spiritual seeds that pushed communists from power a decade later, Gingrich said Wednesday.

It was another papal visit, Benedict's 2008 trip to the U.S., that finally drew Gingrich into the church. Callista Gingrich, a longtime chorister at Washington's Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, sang for Benedict at the basilica. Afterwards, Gingrich met the pope.

"For me, the joyful and radiating presence of the Holy Father was a moment of confirmation about the many things I have been thinking and experiencing over the last several years," Gingrich said.

That evening, Gingrich said, he told the basilica's rector that he wanted to convert to Catholicism.

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