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Rick Santorum appears to be a Catholic and an evangelical

David Gibson Religion News Service | Jan. 11, 2012

Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum addresses supporters at a rally in Somerset, Pa., in June. (CNS photo/Jason Cohn, Reuters)

Just days after Rick Santorum surged to a virtual tie for first in the Iowa caucuses, conservative activists at an invitation-only summit along the South Carolina coast were buzzing about the former Pennsylvania senator's sudden and promising breakthrough.

Deal Hudson, who directed Catholic outreach for George W. Bush's White House before starting the conservative group Catholic Advocate, was among the movers and shakers at the annual Awakening gathering on Kiawah Island. He was especially pleased to hear such praise for a fellow Catholic -- until Hudson realized something odd.

"There were a number of knowledgeable people who were very enthusiastic about Rick but didn't know he was Catholic," Hudson said with a quiet laugh. "I was really surprised."

To be fair, those conservative kingmakers may not be the only ones who don't know what church Santorum attends, much less care. But that, some say, is exactly the point.

Polls in Iowa showed that rank-and-file evangelicals threw most of their support to Santorum, a devout Catholic, rather than either of Santorum's evangelical rivals, Rep. Michele Bachmann or Texas Gov. Rick Perry.

And in South Carolina, where the Jan. 21 primary is shaping up to be a make-or-break date for social conservatives who want to slow Mitt Romney's momentum, evangelicals make up about 60 percent of likely voters. Surveys already show Santorum already spiking to a strong second place behind Romney.

Santorum "is exactly what we need to bring the country back -- and I think he can beat Obama," Lynn Waldrop, a Greenville, S.C., homemaker and born-again Christian, told Reuters.

In addition, many of the dozens of evangelical leaders set to meet in Texas this weekend in a last-ditch effort to settle on a social conservative candidate are reportedly tilting strongly toward Santorum.

Whether any of this will slow or derail Romney's path to the nomination is uncertain. But it does raise the broader question of why a Pennsylvania-born grandson of Italian immigrants who attends Mass in Latin is emerging as the favorite of conservative Protestants.

The answers help explain not only the political dynamics of the current race, but point to a generational shift from the 1960 campaign, when John F. Kennedy had to reassure evangelicals like Billy Graham that he wasn't too Catholic to be president.

"Now here we are, 50 years later, and evangelicals are not only willing to vote for Roman Catholic candidates but frankly they are flocking to Roman Catholic candidates" like Santorum and Newt Gingrich, said Ralph Reed, head of the Faith and Freedom Coalition and a top evangelical political activist.

"This is a big moment in American religious and political history."

Both Reed and Hudson note that Santorum's appeal to conservative Protestants isn't really -- or even mainly -- a case of mistaken religious identity. Plenty of evangelicals know Santorum is a practicing Catholic; it's just that it doesn't matter the way it once did.

What's really important is that Santorum espouses their values, because in a multifront culture war, an "ecumenism of the trenches" prevails over Reformation-era disputes about doctrine. So when Santorum makes full-throated opposition to gay marriage and abortion his signature issues, he is effectively singing from the evangelical hymnal.

"Rick Santorum may technically not call himself an evangelical but he is definitely one when it comes to social issues, so don't get too caught up in the title of 'Roman Catholic,'" David Brody, chief political correspondent for Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network, wrote after the Iowa vote.

"Santorum is an evangelical at heart."

He may also be more of an evangelical in policy. Indeed, if Santorum's opposition to gay marriage and abortion are in sync with the Catholic bishops, those positions resonate far more with conservative Protestants than they do with the average Catholic.

Moreover, Santorum openly splits with the hierarchy -- espousing positions traditionally associated with evangelicals -- in his opposition to immigration reform and universal health care, and his support for aggressive military action abroad and steep spending cuts at home.

Santorum's religious rhetoric is just as important in cultivating his evangelical appeal, and that is something new for Catholic politicians.

He has "an evangelical style," Hudson notes, which can be seen in his references to home-schooling his children, his support for teaching creationism in public schools, and his regular testimony about his personal relationship with Jesus. (Santorum adds that the U.S. needs to have "a Jesus candidate.")

Santorum is also a youthful 53, and a squeaky-clean family man. He has a large family, and relates affecting stories about a son that died at birth and about his youngest daughter, who suffers from a terminal illness.

That kind of confessional, public piety has generally been foreign to Catholics, and remains so for many of the

older generation. During the 2004 campaign, Democratic nominee John Kerry struggled to make "God talk" while George W. Bush spoke comfortably about his faith.

Yet Santorum is not an outlier. Rather, he represents a new kind of religious hybrid, the result of a kind of cross-pollination between evangelicals and Catholics that has taken place in recent decades.

That interaction began in earnest in the 1980s as conservative evangelicals and conservative Catholics began collaborating in the battle against abortion. The visibility and popularity of the late Pope John Paul II gave it a boost.

"It's the influence of the John Paul II revival in the Catholic Church which encouraged a 'less urbane' rhetoric about personal faith," Hudson said.

That Catholic influence went the other way as well. A host of prominent conservative Christians -- including Hudson, who used to be a Southern Baptist -- have converted to Catholicism in recent years. Gingrich is one, and Santorum himself helped former GOP senator and current Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback become a Catholic. Jeb Bush is also a convert, and that has all contributed to a sense of cultural familiarity among conservative believers.

Evangelicals who did not actually become Catholic nonetheless began borrowing some Catholic concepts -- about social justice and natural law, for example -- from Catholicism, and deployed terms like John Paul's "culture of life."

In fact, Bush used Catholic terms so frequently that Santorum called him "the first Catholic president of the United States" -- a quip that underscores the evangelical-Catholic bond while tweaking Kennedy-style Catholics who Santorum and others criticize for privatizing their faith.

Reed, who cut his political teeth in the 1990s as head of the Christian Coalition, notes that no candidate will win evangelical hearts and minds (or votes) just by using the right words -- just ask Michele Bachmann. A candidate must be seen as faithful but also electable, and Santorum -- or others who follow him -- may be able to make that double-barreled argument.

Ironically, the downside for Santorum and the new generation of "hybrid" Catholics is that in winning votes from the religious right, they may also be losing the support of fellow Catholics who don't recognize themselves or their faith in the stump speeches of these staunch conservatives.

The poll numbers so far reflect Santorum's difficulty in winning Catholic backing: in New Hampshire on Tuesday, Santorum's evangelical support (23 percent) was nearly three times his support among Catholics (8 percent). While there may be a way for him to secure the Republican nomination without his fellow Catholics, winning the general election without them could be near impossible.

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