

Democrats courting Catholics
Va. governor seen as standard-bearer
By Rick Klein, Globe Staff | January 31, 2006

WASHINGTON -- The Democratic Party's intensifying efforts to reach out to Catholic voters will hit a high-water mark tonight, when party leaders turn to Virginia's newly installed governor to deliver the response to President Bush's State of the Union address.

Governor Timothy M. Kaine, a devout Catholic who spoke openly about his faith during his election campaign last year, will speak about his work as a Jesuit missionary in Honduras, said Delacey Skinner, a Kaine spokeswoman. Kaine said that experience during his time as a Harvard Law School student inspired him to enter public service.

"Faith is a good guidepost for how you evaluate the world, but it also should be a good guidepost for how you act," Skinner said. "That's really what his faith teaches -- that the real focus should be doing the work of faith that helps others."

Kaine's address from the governor's mansion in Richmond, a departure from the usual practice of Democratic congressional leaders responding to the president's speech from Capitol Hill, is part of the party's strategy to bring a once-reliable constituency back to their side.

After Democratic Senator John F. Kerry of Massachusetts -- the party's first Catholic nominee since John F. Kennedy in 1960 -- lost the Catholic vote to Bush, a Methodist, in the last presidential election, national Democrats want to recast the party's image. They say their positions on key issues like the Iraq war, immigration, the environment, and poverty are in synch with church teachings.

"There's a huge amount of educating to do," said Patrick Whelan, director of the Boston-based national Catholic Democrats and president of Catholic Democrats of Massachusetts. "The Democrats really do stand for something, and there is a moral program in our party."

Until recently, most Catholic voters were loyal Democrats, dating back to President Franklin Roosevelt. Many defected to vote for Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, but Bill Clinton won them back in 1992 and 1996.

But Republicans aggressively courted the largely Catholic Hispanic vote, and stood against abortion and gay marriage, which the Vatican also opposes. The move paid dividends: Bush's 2004 reelection campaign won 52 percent of all Catholic voters, according to exit polls.

That election "was a bit of a wake-up call for Democrats, though the changes we saw had been developing for quite some time," said John C. Green, a political science professor at the University of Akron and a senior fellow at the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. "This is a group of folks they don't want to abandon in future elections."

Most analysts say the Democrats' deep commitment to abortion rights has eroded its support among Catholics, and the party is still grappling with the issue. That internal tension became public this week: Kerry and Senator Edward M. Kennedy, a fellow Catholic from Massachusetts, tried but failed to stop Supreme Court nominee Samuel A. Alito Jr. -- also a Catholic -- in a battle centered in part on abortion rights.

"When it's all said and done, what we have is a core group of liberal Democratic senators who Americans think are out of the mainstream," said Tony Perkins, president of the conservative Family Research Council.

Yet many Democrats acknowledge they must reach voters on so-called "values" issues, and winning back Catholics is a priority.

The Democratic National Committee is working with newly formed Catholic political groups in 10 states. On Capitol Hill, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, a Catholic, has formed a group to identify ways Democrats can speak about social issues and faith. And a group of Catholic Democratic lawmakers want more money for antipoverty and family planning programs, with a 10-year goal of reducing abortions by 95 percent. Representative Rosa DeLauro, a Connecticut Democrat and a Catholic, has invited theologians to meetings of Democratic House members to help the politicians speak more comfortably about religious values.

Kerry agreed that Democrats "owe the country a much better discussion of what we believe and why," and that discussion can illustrate their platform.

Quite simply, Kerry said, "My faith teaches me that we have a moral obligation to one another, to the forgotten, and to those who live in the shadows."

As a presidential candidate, though, Kerry stumbled on the subject of his religion -- Bush's strong suit. Democrats see hope in the way Kaine handled the issue during his gubernatorial run; he referred to his faith to defuse GOP attacks about his opposition to the death penalty and his respect for abortion laws.

"He went and did it and he won," said Green, of the University of Akron. "This is a lively debate right now, but it's quite plausible that candidates like Kaine will help the Democrats."

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