

[Close](#)
[All Editions front page story](#)

EXIT INTERVIEW

Bush: Faith shaped service, will shape future

JACQUELYN HORKAN of the Florida Catholic staff

TALLAHASSEE — Jan. 3 marked Jeb Bush's first day in eight years as a private citizen. So what's next for the former chief executive whom some have called Florida's greatest pro-life governor?

"I'm trying to sort out what the next phase of my life is going to be like," Bush said. "I'm hoping I won't live in the tyranny of the moment by saying I'll do this and do this and do this, but instead will take the time to sort out it all out and reflect, read."

It's an approach he took 12 years ago when Bush lost his first bid for the governor's mansion to incumbent Lawton Chiles. Bush, born an Episcopalian, had been attending Epiphany Catholic Church in Miami for years with his wife, Columba, and their three children. Following the disappointment of the 1994 gubernatorial race, Bush enrolled in Epiphany's Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults program and at the Easter Vigil Mass in 1995, he entered into full communion with the Catholic Church.



CNS PHOTO FROM L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO

Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, who led the U.S. delegation to Pope

"I think the process of going through RCIA was a great time for me to take some time to pause and reflect and my faith probably strengthened because of that," he said.

Bush said that his conversion did not dramatically affect his thinking on public policy and political leadership, in part because his faith is an indelible part of who he is.

"You can't synthesize it down to the notion that I'll put my faith in an escrow account and keep it separate from me as governor," said Bush. "You hear people say, 'I don't want to impose my faith.' Well it's not an imposition of faith. It's who you are."

As a Catholic politician, Bush compiled a sterling record in programs and initiatives designed to protect unborn children. His leadership helped gain passage of a law that requires abortion clinics to advise parents that their underage daughters are seeking abortions. He also put his support behind a measure to regulate health and safety standards at abortion clinics, which previously were allowed to operate with little or no state oversight.

In 2004, Bush attempted to have the court name a guardian for the unborn child of a developmentally disabled woman, and in the following year shepherded through passage the funding for a pro-life counseling program for abortion-minded women.

"He was a pro-life governor the likes of which I don't think we'll see in Florida again," said D. Michael McCarron, executive director of the Florida Catholic Conference, the public policy agency of the Florida bishops.

Bush himself considers his greatest accomplishment as a Catholic governor to be his administration's backing of a dramatic increase in social-service spending. As a newly inaugurated governor in 1998, he said his first trip outside Tallahassee was to a Miami courtroom where he convinced Judge Wilkie Ferguson to hold off on his plan to take over Florida's program for the developmentally disabled. Bush lived up to his promise, and spending on programs for Floridians with developmental disabilities grew by 165.7 percent during his eight years in office.

'It's troubling to me, it's hard to do, it's the hardest part of my job, to sign a death warrant and then to participate in the death penalty. But I have a duty to do it.'

According to the governor's office, state spending on programs for abused and neglected children increased by 148.5 percent during Bush's eight years in office. The Bush administration also boosted funding for adoptions of foster children, particularly those with special needs who often languish in the system the longest.

— Jeb Bush

"To me it's an important part of our faith that there be some recognition that there is equality under God," said Bush. "Whether you are healthy and wealthy or poor and destitute or have a significant setback in life, all of us have a role to play to show respect for all of us, particularly the most vulnerable. Not all of that can be done

through government and we're all called into action, but this government has responded and that's been important to me."

For many Catholic observers, however, Bush's pro-life record is marred by his support of the death penalty. Under his watch, 21 death-row inmates were executed, including the so-called "botched" executions of Allen Lee Davis in 1999, and Angel Diaz, just three weeks before Bush left the governor's mansion. The latter execution, during which Diaz seemed to grimace and twitch with pain, led to a moratorium on executions while members of a specially formed panel investigate ways to make state-sanctioned killing more humane.

"It's troubling to me, it's hard to do, it's the hardest part of my job, to sign a death warrant and then to participate in the death penalty," said Bush. "But I have a duty to do it."

Bush compares his duties under the death-penalty law to those under laws that make abortion the law of the land.

"I'm pro-life and I've probably attempted to do more to reduce abortions, but it's the law of the land and there needs to be respect for the rule of law," he said. "The same applies if you flip it around on the death penalty. But I can also justify it spiritually because there is a distinct difference between an innocent life and someone who has committed the most atrocious of crimes."

Bush's support of the death penalty reveals one of the primary challenges confronted by Catholics in public life. Although the leaders in his church condemn capital punishment, Bush's conscience and his sense of duty led him actively to pursue its administration.

Father Stephen O'Hala, a professor of moral theology at St. Vincent de Paul Seminary in Boynton Beach, said Catholics are allowed to disagree with church teaching if so directed by their consciences, but they must do so with an informed conscience.

"Conscience is that secret interior sanctuary," said Father O'Hala. "It's where a person encounters God's presence and direction in the most intimate way. When you speak of an individual's conscience, you have to be respectful of what's in that person's heart and mind."

Father O'Hala warns that the individual must take responsibility for informing his or her own conscience, guarding against self-deception and rationalization.

"It's a lot easier to get it wrong than to get it right when it comes to making moral decisions," he said.

For the former governor, the days of high-profile moral decision-making are at a, perhaps temporary, end. For now, Jeb and Columba Bush will be weighed against what one family friend said is their strongest asset.

"Forget the governorship and the politics," said Sister Christine Kelly, SSJ, director of Tallahassee's St. John

Neumann Center. "They are what love and marriage are about."

Back to Top

Copyright © 1996-2007 Florida Catholic Newspaper - All Rights Reserved
50 E. Robinson St. — Suite G, Orlando, FL 32801
Phone: 407-373-0075 • Fax: 407-373-0087 • Toll-Free: 1-888-275-9953