

# Barack Obama's conversion to Catholicism

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## A choice influenced by Kennedy's death (Italian version)

There had been talk of his obvious sensitivity regards to Catholicism for some time now. Now his "catholic sensibility" appears to have become fervent adhesion to the Church of Rome, which, as soon as "politically" possible should be sealed by baptism. Hence Barack Obama would be the second Catholic President in the History of the United States after John Fitzgerald Kennedy. His conversion, however, would not take place during his current mandate, but in the course of a second one, or more probably when he becomes a former President; just like Tony Blair, who converted to Catholicism only after leaving 10 Downing Street.

Rumours concerning what some have even called his "secret conversion", as if it already taken place, increased after the long and moving funeral for his friend Teddy Kennedy held at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Basilica in Boston, last August 29th. The American President was clearly moved and captivated by the service. His funeral oration for the deceased senator emphasised – with participation that was not only emotive – work for the underprivileged, marked by the church's social doctrine, that had characterised Kennedy's political career. Obama's words and the tone he spoke in implied genuine syntony with those same principles as well as a commitment to continue his legacy. Although brief, his meeting with Cardinal Sean Patrick O'Malley was not a formality. Challenging the anathema of his traditionalist colleagues, the Cardinal attended the funeral of a politician considered, to say the least, "out of line", due to his position in favour of freedom of choice regarding abortion and civil unions between people of the same gender. He attended also out of courtesy to the President, an aggravating circumstance according to conservative Catholics, but also an opportunity, as O'Malley himself explained, to tell Obama, above all, that "the bishops of the Catholic Church are anxious to support a plan for universal health care" and also to remind the President that they will "not support a plan that will include a provision for abortion or could open the way to abortions in the future." And the President? "He was gracious in the short time we spoke, he listened intently to what I was saying." In short, beyond all official positions, there is a President who listens as far as subjects dear to the Catholic hierarchies are concerned. The President is ready to do everything possible to contain the abortion phenomena, as he told Benedict XVI during an audience in the Vatican last July 10th.

Furthermore, as soon as he had been elected, Pope Benedict was one of the first heads of state President Obama had called. After the phone call the President made it known that it had been "a cordial exchange." One must also bear in mind that his audience in Rome had been greatly desired by the American President, while the Holy See had been rather reluctant in conceding one due to hostile pressure applied by many American conservative bishops.

It is said in Bostonian circles that over the last months his relationship with Kennedy had become increasingly intense. The same sources also say that their friendship was not only "political" but above all human and intellectual, also addressing the subject of religion.

As known, Barack Obama was the bearer of a personal letter from the Massachusetts Senator to the Pope when he was welcomed in the Pope's private study. The President had wished to hand the Pope this letter personally with profound feelings of participation and personally requested the Pope's blessing for his friend, who was about to experience the last days of his life. Presidential spokesman Denis McDonough emphasised the importance of this event, reminding everyone that Teddy's brother, John, "famously overcame such concerns to become the nation's first Catholic president."

Those exchanges with the last of the Kennedy brothers increased his interest for the Catholic universe, regards to which however Obama had for some time been far from distant or extraneous. On the contrary, this attention has accompanied him even before he entered the world of politics. His activity as a community organizer in Chicago was linked to the Catholic Church's Campaign for Human Development, which financed his NGO. Its headquarters were the cellar of a Catholic Church. According to various Catholic analysts, that experience formed the manner in which Obama addresses political and social activities.

The President has the same dialogic vision of faith and doctrine, the same as that of Catholic doctrine. "My career – said President Obama in a conversation with the Catholic press – was intertwined with the belief in social justice that is so strong in the Church." Words that were followed by a sincere homage to the Cardinal of Chicago Joseph Bernardin, an icon for American Catholics. "He thinks and speaks like a Catholic", said Michelle Dillon, sociologist at New Hampshire University.

Rumours of his closeness to the Pope's church have been fuelled by the continuing absence in Obama's family life, of a place of worship, a home church.

After the break with the controversial Reverend Jeremiah A. Wright, their pastor during their years in Chicago, the First Family has been fought over by all the churches in the capital. It is said that the President's emissaries have visited a number of Episcopal and Baptist churches that might have been considered suitable for Barack, Michelle and their two daughters' Sunday prayers, excluding those that are too crowded or too 'fashionable', or attempting to find the impossible solution and not offend any church, especially the African-American ones. The search was unsuccessful. At the end of July there was talk of a church at Camp David, a significantly "non denominational" one and hence open to the faithful of all religions. A no-man's-land, the Evergreen Chapel, led by a US Navy Chaplain, the Baptist Minister, Lieutenant Carey Cash. However, a White House press release denied that that was the presidential home church.

Obama could remain at length in this religious limbo. Historian of American presidencies remind one that various recent presidents were not devoted to the extent of worship on Sundays. Clinton was and so was Bush; but Reagan and Bush Senior far less so. Of course, the absence of a religious reference, of a minister, would be assessed with increasing suspicion by believing Americans, without considering the old and

heavy “baggage” of Islamic religion to which Barack’s father belonged and that, according to conservative propaganda, is his true faith. On the other hand, his conversion would be a sensational event, albeit less so than imagined. There have recently been many famous cases within the American political sphere. The most recent event concerned Newt Gingrich, former president of the Chamber of Representatives who converted to Catholicism last March 29th at the National Sanctuary of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, led by Monsignor Walter Rossi. Gingrich was an important personality, one of the best brains in the Republican Right during the Nineties. He fell into disgrace but is now once again riding high. He is the most credited republican challenger to Obama for 2012, having already collected 8.1 million dollars for the presidential campaign, outdistancing enormously all his rivals. Those converted to the Church of Rome include recently deceased commentator Robert Novak, Kansas senator Sam Brownback, who has for some time had excellent personal relations with Obama, and TV host Larry Kudlock. There was talk of George W. Bush too, but his brother Jeb, now a Catholic, denied this when attending a meeting held by Comunione e Liberazione in Rimini.

*Translated by Francesca Simmons*

**Italian version**

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[http://www.europaquotidiano.it/dettaglio/113000/barack\\_obamas\\_conversion\\_to\\_catholicism](http://www.europaquotidiano.it/dettaglio/113000/barack_obamas_conversion_to_catholicism)