

Bush: Faith can give president 'extra strength'

By Julie Asher
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Strong religious faith can give the president "an extra shot of strength when you need it," President George Bush said Oct. 23 in a 12-minute telephone interview with Catholic News Service.

Bush also repeated his opposition to abortion, saying the differences between the Republicans and the Democrats on the issue are "like night and day."

In the wide-ranging interview, Bush spoke about religion's role in his life. He also answered questions on his administration's policy of returning Haitian boat people to Haiti without first hearing their asylum pleas, and discussed abortion, capital punishment, family leave, school choice and health care.

And he touched on prayer in public schools and in other public places.

"I don't believe you can be president without having faith. I really strongly feel that," Bush said.

On school prayer, he said, "I think when we go to the extreme to say that you can't open a high school football game on a Friday night in my own state of Texas with a prayer, we're going too far."

The president said he favors voluntary prayer in public schools, adding, "They open the Senate with prayer and heavens knows they need it. They open the House with prayer and heavens knows they need it."

"My opponent (Gov. Bill) Clinton opposes school prayer," he said.

Bush added that he thinks "there's nothing wrong with displaying nativity scenes at Christmas in the White House "or any place else."

Asked how he would respond to criticism from Catholic migration officials of

his Haitian policies, he said: "We've got a good policy ... The United States must control its immigration policy. Our program calls for screening the people that want to come to see that political dissidents are allowed in, that ... people claiming economic deprivation, regrettably, are not."

He added that U.S. Embassy officials have not seen evidence of the military deterring Haitians who apply for asylum. Last June the U.S. Catholic Conference joined in a friend-of-the-court brief objecting to the policy, saying that refugees would be fearful of military persecution if forced to apply for asylum at home.

On abortion, the president disagreed with some analysts' view that he and Vice President Dan Quayle were leaning toward a more moderate position.

"Gov. (Bill) Clinton and (Sen. Al) Gore are both pro-abortion, he said. "They both support that pro-abortion bill in the Senate and I strongly oppose it. So does the vice president. I don't see any change in anyone's position ... I certainly don't see the Democrats moving towards a position that in my view is more reasonable."

About capital punishment, he said he differs with the bishops' opposition to the death penalty, adding that he's for it "in certain instances because I think if somebody murders a police officer that that person ought to pay with his life."

He also said Catholic officials should endorse his plan for health-care reform.

No more debate is needed on dealing with the country's crisis in health care, the president said. "The debate's been going on for two years now."

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