

Obama bares his Christian soul: White House Easter breakfast

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President Obama bared his soul before a cross section of Christian leaders at a White House Easter breakfast on April 6. He spoke publicly of his faith in redemption through Jesus in the most personal terms since becoming president.

Addressing his “brothers and sisters in Christ” among the nearly 90 pastors, bishops and community activists in attendance, Obama spoke of “our risen Savior” and the inspiration he takes from Christ’s resurrection.

“We are awed by the grace he showed even to those who would have killed him,” Obama said, pausing occasionally to glance at written notes. “We are thankful for the sacrifice he gave for the sins of humanity. And we glory in the promise of redemption in the resurrection.”

Among those seated with presidential aides and cabinet secretaries in the gilded East Room were Archbishop Pietro Sambi, the Vatican’s U.S. ambassador; Houston megachurch pastor Joel Osteen; and National Council of Churches president Peg Chamberlin. They were joined by former members of Obama’s faith advisory council and prominent black clergy, who met privately with the president before the breakfast.

Obama said the Easter breakfast, along with a recent Passover Seder and a Ramadan dinner last fall, was part of his pledge to make the White House “a place where all people would feel welcome.” Presidential aides also said it gave Obama the opportunity to thank Christian leaders for their community service.

But the breakfast also provided a platform for Obama to speak openly about his Christian faith, even as a small but stubborn minority of Americans believe he is Muslim.

Obama did not directly address those doubts on this occasion but said: “As Christians, we believe that redemption can be delivered—by faith in Jesus Christ.

And the possibility of redemption can make straight the crookedness of a character, make whole the incompleteness of a soul.”

The president also said that of all the Gospel stories, Jesus’ last words on the cross—“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit”—especially resonate with him during the Easter season. “These words were spoken by our Lord and Savior, but they can just as truly be spoken by every one of us here today,” Obama said.

The Tuesday breakfast came during a faith-filled week for the president, after the first family celebrated Easter Sunday at an African Methodist Episcopal church in one of this city’s poorest and most violent neighborhoods.

“For those who are wondering or have doubts about whether he is authentically Christian, I think today’s message puts all doubts to rest,” said Kirbyjon Caldwell, another Houston megachurch pastor who attended the breakfast.

Obama’s father was a Kenyan Muslim-turned-atheist, his mother an agnostic and his Indonesian stepfather an unorthodox Muslim. Caldwell, who is close to Obama and his predecessor, President George W. Bush, said he is galled by the number of Americans—one in ten, according to a 2009 poll—who refuse to believe Obama is Christian.

“Never in modern history has a president said: ‘I am a Christian,’ and others said, ‘No, you’re not,’” Caldwell said. “It’s stupid and an insult to him.”

Caldwell was also one of about 20 black clergy—from denominational heads to pastors who knew Obama when he was a community organizer in Chicago—who gathered with the president privately before the breakfast.

The group prayed and talked about needs in the black community—particularly summer jobs for youths amid a faltering job market. Obama said his budget includes \$3 million devoted to a program addressing the issue, Caldwell noted.

Obama’s meeting with black clergy came as some were grumbling that the president had brushed aside black leaders during his first year in the White House. – *Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*