

Tony Blair joins Catholic Church: Baptized an Anglican

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After months of speculation, former British prime minister Tony Blair converted to Roman Catholicism in a low-key ceremony at an archbishop's chapel in London just before Christmas.

During his ten years as prime minister, Blair steadfastly sidestepped attempts to pin him down on questions about his faith. But his resignation from power last summer appeared to open the way to the formal step into the Catholic Church.

On December 21, he rode with his Catholic wife, Cherie, to the chapel of Archbishop's House in London, where he was received into the Catholic Church by Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor.

"I am very glad to welcome Tony Blair into the Catholic Church," the cardinal said in a statement. "For a long time he has been a regular worshiper at mass with his family, and in recent months he has been following a program of formation to prepare for his reception into full communion."

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, spiritual head of the worldwide Anglican Communion, said his own farewell to the former prime minister.

"Tony Blair has my prayers and good wishes as he takes this step in his Christian pilgrimage," Williams said in a statement. "A great Catholic writer of the last century said that the only reason for moving from one Christian family to another was to deepen one's relationship with God. I pray that this will be the result of Tony Blair's decision in his personal life."

Blair was baptized as an Anglican but has shown keen interest in Catholicism in recent years. Blair, now a Middle East peace envoy, met Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican in June, the month he stepped down as prime minister.

He made no move toward joining the Catholic Church during his years in power, possibly because of political sensitivities in a nation that has never had a Catholic

prime minister. His position was made even more awkward because under his administration, the government pursued policies that Catholics officially opposed, including allowing civil partnerships and adoptions for gay couples, allowing legal abortions and participating in the war in Iraq. -*Religion News Service*