

Pastor takes Bush's attendance in stride: In the President's Pew

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Episcopal Rector Luis Leon, a priest who looks out at George and Laura Bush in the pews occasionally, says he treats President Bush just like any other parishioner at the historic St. John's Church, which is just a short walk from the White House.

"I'm not an adviser in any fashion," he said in a recent interview. "My relationship is that of the local pastor of the church that he attends." But Leon admitted that the Episcopal congregation has the distinction of having been convenient to presidents since the days of James Madison.

"If you're looking at the iconography of Washington, this fits somewhere in that iconography," he said. "A lot of people know about the little yellow church across the street from the White House."

Its currently most famous worshiper and the first lady attend once or twice a month when they're in town, the rector reports. They sit in Pew 54—nine rows from the front—marked with a brass plate that reads "The President's Pew" and furnished with kneelers embroidered with the names of past presidents.

"I don't ever change a sermon because he's coming to church, and I don't change a sermon because he's not coming to church," Leon said one Sunday as he sat in the parish house, a second historic landmark located next to the steepled church with a dome bordered in stained glass.

On January 20, Leon gave a short homily during a private Inauguration Day prayer service at the church. Since December the 55-year-old native of Cuba has known that he was designated by the White House to give the invocation at the inauguration.

Leon considers Bush to be a member of his church, given his regular attendance. The president, who once was a Presbyterian Sunday school teacher, remains a member of Highland Park United Methodist Church in Dallas. He was baptized in an

Episcopal church in New Haven, Connecticut, according to *The Faith of George W. Bush*, by Stephen Mansfield.

Jan Nunley, deputy director of Episcopal News Service, said church law says members whose baptisms have been recorded in any Episcopal church and who have received Holy Communion at least three times in the previous year are considered to be communicants.

As a parishioner, Bush stands in line for communion and “shakes hands with everybody at the exchange of the peace, just like everybody else,” Leon said. - *Religion News Service*