

George W Bush meets Pope amid claims he might convert to Catholicism

George W Bush and Pope Benedict XVI have held an intimate meeting in Rome as rumours mounted in Italy that the president may follow in Tony Blair's footsteps and convert to Catholicism.

By Malcolm Moore in Rome

Published: 1:29PM BST 13 Jun 2008

The two men spoke for half an hour in the 12th century Tower of St John, a private area in the Vatican gardens which is used by the pope for private reflection.



President Bush and the Pope spoke for half an hour in the 12th century Tower of St John, usually reserved for the Pope's private reflection. Photo: AFP/GETTY

Related Articles

[George W Bush visit to cause Heathrow misery](#) (/news/uknews/2119557/George-W-Bush-visit-to-cause-Heathrow-misery.html)

[Great walks around London: Westminster and Whitehall](#) (/travel/activityandadventure/walkingholidays/5485917/Great-walks-around-London-Westminster-and-Whitehall.html)

[Prebendary Willie Booth](#) (/news/obituaries/religion-obituaries/5498039/Prebendary-Willie-Booth.html)

[As Janelas Verdes, Lisbon: Where to stay](#) (/travel/hotels/europehotels/hotelsinportugal/hotelsinlisbon/5368719/As-Janelas-Verdes-Lisbon-hotel-review.html)

[Baroness Thatcher to meet Pope Benedict XVI at Vatican](#) (/news/newstoppers/politics/margaret-thatcher/5367212/Baroness-Thatcher-to-meet-Pope-Benedict-XVI-at-Vatican.html)

['Punished' ambassador to Vatican to step down](#) (/news/newstoppers/mandrake/5339273/Punished-ambassador-to-Vatican-to-step-down.html)

The usual protocol for heads-of-state is a meeting in the pope's library in the Apostolic Palace, but a spokesman for the Vatican said Benedict wanted to reward Mr Bush for the "warmth" of his reception at the White House earlier this year.

The two men have grown increasingly close in the past two years, and Mr Bush was overheard whispering: "What an honour, what an honour, what an honour!" as he ascended the steps to the tower.

After a stroll through the Vatican gardens, the men listened to a recital by the choir of the Sistine Chapel. However, Mr Bush did not, as expected, kneel in prayer before the Grotto of the Madonna of Lourdes. It was thought that he may have prayed with the pope in private. Mr Bush prayed with Benedict in the Oval Office during the Papal visit to the US in April.

Several Italian newspapers cited Vatican sources suggesting that Mr Bush may be prepared to convert. One source told *Il Foglio*, an authoritative newspaper, that "Anything is possible, especially for a born-again Christian such as Bush."

He added that while the Holy See deplored the war in Iraq, "on ethical matters he has always had a line that is practically identical to that of the Vatican." Mr Bush has spoken out against gay marriage, abortion and stem cell research. He proposed amending the US constitution to "fully protect marriage" as the "union of man and woman as husband and wife".

He has repeatedly made clear his admiration for Benedict and has even claimed to have read some of the pope's theological books.

A source close to the Vatican said that Mr Bush was the most "Catholic-minded" president since John F Kennedy, who famously played down his Catholicism. Mr Bush belongs to a Methodist church in Texas and prays at an Episcopal church in Washington.

However, George William Rutler, a New York-based priest who is close to the president, was quoted by the *Washington Post* earlier this year saying that Mr Bush "is not unaware of how evangelism, by comparison with Catholicism, may seem more limited both theologically and historically".

Mr Bush has filled the White House with Catholic speech-writers and consultants and is also thought to have asked a Catholic priest to bless the West Wing.

Before he became president, Karl Rove, his former political adviser, invited Catholic intellectuals to Texas to lecture the candidate on the church's teachings. Mr Bush appointed the Catholic judges Samuel Alito and John Roberts to the Supreme Court.

However, it is thought unlikely that Mr Bush would convert until after he has left office. Jeb Bush, the president's brother, has already converted to Catholicism.

Catholics have noted that during the contested election in 2000, Jeb Bush travelled to Mexico and prayed to the icon of Our Lady of Guadalupe. His victory was announced by the Supreme Court on December 12, the feast day of the Lady of Guadalupe.

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2009