

Tony Blair to be speaker at annual Al Smith dinner

NEW YORK – Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair is scheduled to be the guest speaker at the 62nd Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner Oct. 18 at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City.

Catholic New York, the archdiocesan newspaper, reported recently that Blair had accepted Cardinal Edward M. Egan's invitation to speak.

The annual \$1,000-a-ticket dinner is named for former New York Gov. Alfred E. Smith, who in 1928 became the first Catholic nominated by a major party as a presidential candidate. New York Cardinal Francis Spellman began the dinner in 1945 to inaugurate a hospital wing in honor of Smith and to raise money for health care programs in the New York Archdiocese.

With major public figures as speakers, it has become a nationally known event drawing many leaders from politics and other fields. Past speakers have included Presidents Ronald W. Reagan and John F. Kennedy; U.S. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz.; former Secretary of State Colin Powell; comedian Bob Hope; and retired Gen. Tommy R. Franks.

Presidential candidates of the major parties have traditionally been invited to speak in the years of presidential elections.

Blair was prime minister of Great Britain from May 1997 until he stepped down June 27 of this year. The United Nations then named him special envoy to the Middle East. Among his duties are mobilizing international aid and development for the Palestinians.

Blair is Anglican. His wife, Cherie, and their four children are Catholic, and he often attends Mass with them.

In a May interview with Catholic New Service, a British priest who has known Blair since 1983 and who baptized Blair's children said the former prime minister never

discussed the possibility of joining the Catholic Church.

“He used to come every Sunday to Mass,” said Father John Caden, 83. “He didn’t receive holy Communion but would read the lesson and do all sorts of things.”

The possibility of his future conversion would be a “matter for him and his conscience,” the priest added.