

Gerry O'Connell - Pope Leo and King Charles make history with first-ever joint prayer service in Sistine Chapel



Pope Leo XIV meets with King Charles III in the St. Damasus Courtyard at the Vatican after a state visit and prays with him in the Sistine Chapel, Thursday, 23 October 2025.

King Charles III and Queen Camilla were received in a private audience by Pope Leo XIV in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace this morning, Oct. 23, during a state visit to the Holy See. Afterward, for the first time in history, a British monarch and a Pope prayed together in the Sistine Chapel in an event of great ecumenical significance.

The royal couple arrived at the Vatican in a motorcade that drove through St. Peter's Square and the Arch of the Bells and then to the San Damaso Courtyard of the Apostolic Palace. They were given a state welcome with a guard of honour provided by the Swiss Guard, as a band played the national anthems of the United Kingdom and Vatican City State. The regent of the papal household, Msgr. Leonardo Sapienza, then escorted them to the pope's library, where they were welcomed by Pope Leo..

Charles had met three other popes—John Paul II, Benedict and Francis—while he was Prince of Wales, and met Francis a second time after ascending to the throne; it was his and Queen Camilla's first encounter with Pope Leo.

At the end of the audience, King Charles presented to Pope Leo representatives of the Church of England who had accompanied him. He then gave the pontiff a large silver photograph and an icon

of St. Edward the Confessor, while the pope gifted him with a Vatican-made scaled version of the mosaic of “Christ Pantocrator” that is housed in the Norman Cathedral of Cefalù, Sicily. Further, in an extraordinary exchange of honours, King Charles conferred on Pope Leo the honour of Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath, which is the order traditionally given to heads of state. The pope, for his part, conferred on Charles the honour of Knight Grand Cross with Collar of the Vatican Order of Pope Pius IX, and on Queen Camilla the honour of Dame Grand Cross of the same order.

Following the private audience, King Charles had a meeting with Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican secretary of state, and Archbishop Paul Gallagher, the English-born secretary for relations with states and international organizations. The king had first met Cardinal Parolin when the cardinal attended the royal coronation ceremony in May 2023—the first papal representative to attend the coronation of a British monarch in 500 years.

The Vatican issued a statement after the royal couple had left the city-state that recalled their meeting with Pope Leo. Then, referring to “the cordial talks” at the Secretariat of State, it said that “appreciation was expressed” for “good existing bilateral relations.” It reported that they discussed “matters of common interest...such as environmental protection and the fight against poverty” and gave “particular attention... to the shared commitment to promoting peace and security in the face of global challenges.” They also reflected on “the history of the Church in the United Kingdom” and “the need to continue promoting ecumenical dialogue.”

While King Charles visited the Secretariat of State, Queen Camilla was given a guided tour of the Pauline Chapel by Dr. Barbara Jatta, the first female director of the Vatican Museums. The chapel, built between 1537 and 1540, is the official papal chapel and is also where the cardinals gather before entering a conclave in the Sistine Chapel.

A historic prayer in the Sistine Chapel

Soon after midday, history was made when the royal couple entered the Sistine Chapel together, followed by Pope Leo and Archbishop Stephen Cottrell, the Anglican archbishop of York, to recite and sing together the church’s midday prayer.

As king, Charles is the supreme governor of the Church of England, and at his request, the ecumenical prayer service centred on two themes: Christian unity and care for creation. The theme of unity was highlighted by the opening hymn, the text of which was written by St. Ambrose but translated into English by St. John Henry Newman. (In 2019, the then-Prince of Wales attended Pope Francis’ canonization of the Anglican priest and scholar who became Catholic.) The ceremony’s location highlighted the theme of care for creation; the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel was painted by Michelangelo with nine scenes from the Book of Genesis, the best known of which depicts God stretching out his hand to create Adam.

During the ceremony, the royal couple, the pope and the archbishop sat on chairs under Michelangelo’s Last Judgment, which the artist painted between 1536 and 1541, in the years after the separation of the churches of Rome and England in 1534.

The religious service was presided over by the first American-born pope while the Archbishop of York read the introductory prayer. Three choirs led the singing of hymns and psalms: the children of the Chapel Royal at St. James Palace, London, the choir of St. George’s Chapel at Windsor Castle and the Sistine Choir.

After praying in the Sistine Chapel, the king and pope went to the Sala Regia, a state hall between the Sistine and Pauline chapels, for a discussion on care for creation. There, they were joined by representatives from climate organizations and the business world committed to sustainable

development. Alessandra Smerilli, F.M.A., the secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, gave an introduction at the meeting. At the end of the meeting, the pope and the king exchanged orchids, a plant known for its resilience in difficult environments, as a sign of their mutual commitment to the care of creation.

St. Paul's and another milestone

After the prayer service, the royal couple bade farewell to the pope and left the Vatican. In the afternoon, they drove to the papal basilica of St. Paul's Outside the Walls, which is attached to a Benedictine abbey, for another ecumenical ceremony. The basilica and abbey have centuries-old links with the English monarchy, dating back to the Saxon kings who contributed to the upkeep of this ancient building over the tomb of St. Paul. By the late Middle Ages, the kings of England were regarded as the protectors of the basilica and abbey, as recalled by the insignia of the Order of the Garter that can be seen here today.

The Benedictine Abbot of St. Paul's, Donato Ogliari, O.S.B., and the archpriest of the basilica, Cardinal James Harvey, welcomed the king and queen on their arrival and accompanied them through the Holy Door—open only during the Jubilee Year—into the basilica and escorted them to the tomb of St. Paul under the main altar.

The Benedictine abbot presided over the ceremony that included welcoming King Charles as a “Royal Confrater”—that is, a royal member of the brotherhood of St. Paul's basilica and abbey. This is a unique honour given to King Charles with the approval of Pope Leo. The text conferring the title was read out and said the honour is bestowed “in recognition of the historic association” between the British monarchy and the basilica and abbey” and “in thanksgiving for the steps taken since the Second Vatican Council in the common ecumenical journey” by the churches of Rome and of England. Moreover, it is given “as a sign and pledge of mutual friendship and of our commitment to the fraternal task of the ecumenical movement, so that our churches, walking together, may move forward, seeking the unity for which Our Lord prayed.”

Meant as a gesture of hospitality and spiritual fellowship, the designation “Royal Confrater” reflects the ever-growing friendship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England; it's also a recognition of Charles's own efforts to bring people of faith together. A special chair was designed for him to accompany that honour; decorated with his royal coat of arms and the motto “*Ut Unum Sint*” (“That they may be one”)—words from Chapter 17 of St. John's Gospel that are also the title of a 1995 encyclical by Pope John Paul II on the topic of ecumenism and Christian unity. He sat on this chair during the singing of vespers. After the ceremony, it will remain in the basilica.

Today's evening prayer service concluded with the recital of the Our Father in English, and soon after, King Charles drove to the nearby Beda College, a Catholic seminary, named after the English saint, the Venerable Bede, for men who discern their call to the priesthood later in life. At a reception hosted at the college, he met trainee priests, ambassadors from the Commonwealth countries and British nationals working in the Vatican. *{The Beda was Fr Jock's seminary -and at present also hosts the Scots College seminarians}*

Queen Camilla, meanwhile, met Catholic sisters from the International Union of Religious Superiors General, a body set up in 1965 to promote greater collaboration between women's religious congregations. Accompanied by the group's new executive secretary, Roxanne Schares, S.S.N.D., she spoke with some of the sisters and learned about the work they do across the globe to support female empowerment through educational opportunities, better access to health care, sexual violence and human trafficking prevention and environmental protection.

After these last events of a truly historic state visit, the royal couple returned to London, conscious that they had laid another milestone on the road to Christian unity.



King Charles has become the first English monarch in 500 years to pray with the Pontiff of the Catholic Church when he attended a service led by Pope Leo and Anglican Archbishop Stephen Cottrell at the Vatican.



Pope Leo XIV accompanies Britain's King Charles III, followed by Queen Camilla, to the San Damaso Courtyard of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican at the end of their visit on 23 October.

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