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King Charles, left, and Pope Leo XIV. (Courtesy)

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When King Charles III lands in Rome on Wednesday (Oct. 22) for an official state visit with Pope Leo XIV, you can expect all the pomp that accompanies such an occasion. But the meeting will also include a historic moment of some circumstance on Thursday, when Charles publicly prays with Leo in an ecumenical service in the Sistine Chapel.

The historical significance stems from the king's role as Supreme Governor of the Church of England, the church founded by Henry VIII in the 16th century when he fell out with the Roman Catholic Church over his desire for his marriage to Catherine of Aragon to be annulled. Though Charles has visited the Vatican five times, and his mother, Queen Elizabeth II, had official visits with popes going back to Pope John XXIII, it will be the first time in 400 years that a British monarch has prayed with the head of the Catholic Church.

But the moment has further importance as a milestone in reconciliation between Roman Catholics and Anglicans, in which the British monarchy has played a key role. Elizabeth's engagement with the Vatican, which included meetings with Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI in the U.K., never went as far as Charles will this week. Cautious for fear of offending Protestants, she never publicly attended a Catholic Mass in Britain, though she was seen at the Roman Catholic funeral of King Baudouin of the Belgians in Brussels in 1993.

In 1982, when John Paul II visited the U.K., some Scottish Protestant leaders raised objections to Charles, then Prince of Wales, attending an ecumenical service at Canterbury Cathedral, where the pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury officiated together. Three years later, when Charles on a visit to Rome planned to attend a Mass celebrated by John Paul II in private, the queen told him not to do so.

But as king, Charles has been much more open in his relations with the Catholic Church, having indicated soon after his accession to the throne in 2022 that he wished to engage with people of all faiths, describing the U.K. as a "community of

communities."

The king's coronation in 2023 highlighted this growing ecclesiastical friendship. It was attended by the papal nuncio — effectively the pope's ambassador — while the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, participated in the ceremony, the first Catholic cleric to do so since the coronation of Mary I in 1553. At the head of the king's procession was a cross that had been sent as a gift by Pope Francis.

This year has seen a remarkable series of events that suggest growing constitutional, spiritual and family openness to the Roman Catholic Church.

In May, the Scottish Catholic lawyer, Baroness Elish Angiolini, was appointed the king's representative, or Lord High Commissioner, at the Church of Scotland's General Assembly, the first Catholic to be appointed to the role since the Reformation. While other Scottish public offices, like English and Welsh ones, had been opened to Catholics again with the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, the ban on Catholics as Lord High Commissioner stood, and Charles' appointment of Lady Angiolini required an act of Parliament to allow it to go ahead.

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In early September, Charles visited the home of the Victorian-era cleric John Henry Newman, who converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism, and also the church he founded, the Birmingham Oratory. The king paid tribute to Newman, whose canonization he had attended in Rome in 2019. (Newman will be made a Doctor of the Church a week after the king's state visit to Rome.)

Later that month, Charles led the royal family at the funeral of the Duchess of Kent, a royal who had become a Catholic in 1994. The funeral at Westminster Cathedral was the first royal requiem held in England's mother church of Catholicism since it opened in 1903.

The service in the Sistine Chapel this week will take as its theme the care of creation and church unity. It was first planned for April, but the state visit was canceled due to the ill health of Francis. Instead, Charles and Queen Camilla made a private visit to see Francis days before he died. The care of creation theme was picked because of the king's and Francis' long-standing interest in the environment, which the pope articulated in his 2015 encyclical, Laudato Si'. Pope Leo has already made known

that he considers climate change a priority of his own pontificate.

The papacy's and monarchs' shared interest in dialogue between religions is also reflected in the Sistine Chapel service. The Vatican has two departments, or dicasteries, that focus on dialogue, one for promoting Christian unity and the other for interreligious dialogue. The king has frequently engaged with different Christian denominations as well as Islam and Judaism, among other faiths. On Monday he visited a Manchester synagogue in North West England that was the subject of a recent terrorist attack.

The ecumenical service in the Sistine Chapel will be jointly led by Leo and the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, and will also feature the Children of the Choir of His Majesty's Chapel Royal and the Choir of St. George's Chapel in Windsor Castle — both Anglican choirs from royal households — accompanied by the Sistine Chapel Choir.

Later, Charles and Camilla will visit the Papal Basilica of St. Paul's Outside the Walls, where the pope and leading Anglican clergy officiate at an annual service of Christian unity. On Thursday, the king will be given the title of Royal Confrater of St. Paul, and a special chair has been made to be used by him and his successors when they visit the basilica.

A Church of England spokesman said the Confrater title was a tribute to the king's "work over many decades to find common ground between faiths and to bring people together," while the U.K. Foreign Office has described the Vatican as a "crucial and influential partner." The British government is known to focus on Rome's influence on issues such as climate change, education and peacemaking.

But holding the service in the basilica says much in itself about the two churches' renewed friendship: Together with its adjoining Benedictine abbey, the building has a long pre-Reformation tradition of being associated with the English crown, and the abbey's coat of arms includes the insignia of the Order of the Garter, the royal medieval order of chivalry.