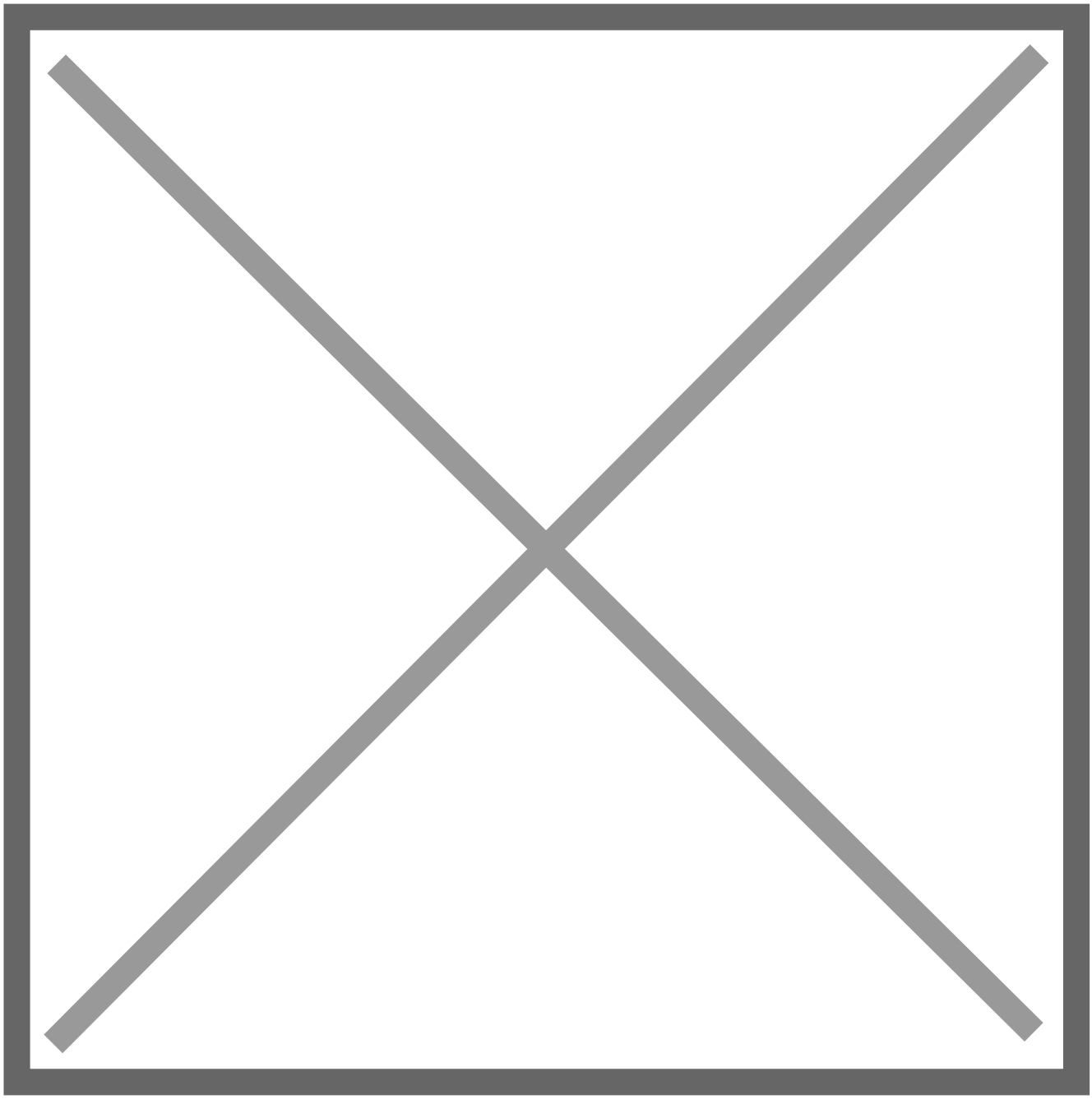
Vatican
Vatican News



Pope Leo XIV accompanies Britain's King Charles III to the San Damaso Courtyard of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican at the end of their visit Oct. 23, 2025. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)

by Cindy Wooden, Catholic News Service

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Pope Leo XIV welcomed Britain's King Charles III and Queen Camilla to the Vatican for a unique visit combining ceremonial flourishes and a historic moment of prayer in the Sistine Chapel.

According to Buckingham Palace, it was the first time since the Reformation in the early 16th century that the pope and a British monarch prayed together at an ecumenical service at the Vatican.

From the moment the royal couple arrived Oct. 23 in the San Damaso Courtyard of the Apostolic Palace, the high formality of the official visit was clear as a larger-than-usual contingent of Swiss Guards welcomed the king and queen, and the Vatican police band played the Vatican anthem and "God Save the King," which is the British national anthem.

After a private meeting, Leo and Charles exchanged gifts: a mosaic of Christ for the king and an icon of St. Edward the Confessor for the pope. They also gave each other framed, autographed photos of themselves.

But the two also exchanged top honors.

The king conferred on the pope the "Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath," which traditionally is given to heads of state, and the pope conferred on the king the "Knight Grand Cross with Collar of the Vatican Order of Pope Pius IX." Leo made Queen Camilla a dame of the same order.

Their majesties originally had planned to make the visit in April in conjunction with a formal state visit to Italy. While the Italian portion of their trip went ahead as scheduled, they only went to the Vatican briefly to greet Pope Francis, who died a few weeks later.

After the private meeting and exchange of gifts, Leo and Anglican Archbishop Stephen Cottrell of York, the ranking prelate of the Church of England, led midday prayer in the Sistine Chapel with a focus on "care for creation."

Leo and Cottrell sat in front of the altar under Michelangelo's Last Judgment during the prayer service, while the king and queen sat slightly to one side.

Cantors from the Sistine Chapel choir were joined by adults from the choir of St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle and children from the choir of the Chapel Royal of St. James' Palace in London.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols of Westminster, president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, and Archbishop Leo Cushley of St. Andrews and Edinburgh, representing the Catholic bishops of Scotland, and the Rev. Rosie Frew, moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, joined the king and queen for the prayer service.

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Briefing reporters about the visit, Archbishop Flavio Pace, secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, said the moments of prayer and the exchange of honors were clear signs of the progress made in Catholic-Anglican relations since the 1960s.

Leo and Charles left the Sistine Chapel together and went into the adjoining Sala Regia to meet business leaders and activists committed to fighting climate change and promoting sustainability.

The pope personally accompanied the king back to the San Damaso Courtyard where his "Bentley State Limousine," an armored car used for formal visits, was waiting for him and the queen.

As is customary, the Vatican press office provided no information about the pope and king's private discussion.

However, in a meeting with Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, and Archbishop Paul Gallagher, foreign minister, the press office said, "matters of common interest were discussed, such as environmental protection and the fight

against poverty."

"Particular attention was given to the shared commitment to promoting peace and security in the face of global challenges," the statement said. And "recalling the history of the church in the United Kingdom, there was a shared reflection on the need to continue promoting ecumenical dialogue."

After leaving the Vatican, Charles and Camilla went to Rome's Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls and walked through the Holy Door, prayed at the tomb of St. Paul and attended another prayer service.

With the approval of Leo, Charles was recognized as a "royal confrater" of the basilica, a decision made by U.S. Cardinal James Harvey, archpriest of the basilica, and Benedictine Abbot Donato Ogliari, head of the monastery of St. Paul Outside the Walls.

In return, Buckingham Palace said, "with the approval of the king, the dean and canons of the College of St. George Windsor have offered that Pope Leo XIV become 'Papal Confrater' of St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle and the pope has accepted."

"These mutual gifts of 'confraternity' are recognitions of spiritual fellowship and are deeply symbolic of the journey the Church of England — of which His Majesty is Supreme Governor — and the Roman Catholic Church have traveled over the past 500 years," the palace said in a statement.