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Sarah Mullally, left, on March 25, 2026, and Pope Leo XIV on April 13, 2026 (RNS/AP)

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Archbishop of Canterbury Sarah Mullally will travel to Rome this weekend to meet Pope Leo XIV — a visit she calls a pilgrimage, akin to the one she took to prepare for her installation at Canterbury.

Her four-day visit, which will include an audience with the pope at the Vatican April 27, will follow in the footsteps of countless other pilgrims when she visits the tombs of St. Peter and St. Paul. It will also follow past archbishops of Canterbury who have traveled to see the pope since 1966, encounters that reinvented ecumenical relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England, as well as the wider Anglican Communion.

But what will be remarkable about this visit is the optics: the sight of Mullally, the first female archbishop of Canterbury, standing shoulder to shoulder and kneeling in prayer with the leader of the Roman Catholic Church, which still maintains a male-only priesthood.

All the signs are that there will be undoubted warmth between the two church leaders. Three Catholic cardinals — Timothy Radcliffe and Vincent Nichols from England and Wales, and Cardinal Kurt Koch, head of the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity — and five Catholic archbishops attended Mullally's installation service at Canterbury. Pope Leo also sent a message of greeting to her.

Mullally herself has said that she is looking forward to working with Leo.

"As I prepare to make this pilgrimage, I know that I follow in the footsteps of those who have come before me, and I give thanks for the deepening dialogue and fellowship between Anglicans and Catholics over the last 60 years," she said in a statement released April 24. "It is a joy and privilege to meet and pray with His Holiness Pope Leo XIV, and I look forward to our time of conversation and prayer."

But the visit also has significant implications for both the archbishop and pope and their standing in the world. Mullally and her advisers have chosen her trip to Rome

as her first visit abroad since she was installed last month, rather than a location in the Anglican Communion.

The visit this weekend also means that before Mullally ventures to Africa in July — a continent where some Anglican bishops do not accept her as the church's primate because she is a woman — images will appear of her alongside the man who is arguably the world's foremost spiritual leader. So while Pope Leo, who himself just returned from an 11-day visit to Africa, may not accept women as priests in his own church, he is affording Mullally the courtesy of a meeting, which in effect shows some level of endorsement of her.

Meanwhile, Leo has found an ally in Mullally in his recent back and forth with U.S President Donald Trump over the war in Iran. After Trump criticized the first U.S.-born pope, calling him "WEAK on Crime, and terrible for Foreign Policy," Mullally spoke in solidarity with Leo, saying she backed his calls for peace.

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But Catholics and Anglicans may also be waiting to see if the visit creates an environment where the two churches might move closer together toward ecumenical progress.

When former Archbishop Michael Ramsey, in 1966, was the first archbishop of Canterbury to officially visit Rome since the Reformation, some thought full unity might be achieved. But that hasn't happened. One obstacle has been disagreements about women's clerical status, recognized in several joint declarations by the two churches in the past 60 years — which is part of why Mullally's visit to Rome is extraordinary.

Another is the issue of shared Communion, a continuing argument over whether Christ is fully present in the Eucharist after consecration, as Catholic teaching states. Finding accommodation on Communion would be a remarkable step forward, and one welcomed by many families where parents belong to the two churches.

While Mullally's visit will include meetings with leading Anglicans in Rome and Anglican Church communities, there will also be a focus on talks with the Catholic Church to improve relations and understanding. The statement from the archbishop of Canterbury said this will happen through prayer, personal encounters and formal

theological dialogue. There is also an aim "to affirm a shared witness, and encourage ongoing collaboration at both global and local levels," according to the statement.

That shared witness and collaboration was seen at the global level when the late Pope Francis and immediate past Archbishop Justin Welby visited South Sudan together in 2023 to urge peace in the war-torn country. No similar joint visits have yet been announced for Mullally and Leo. However, Mullally said in her statement, "Our world needs the peace, justice and hope that Jesus Christ brings, and I give thanks that our churches can walk together as we share that good news with the world."