



British seminarians carry a Union Jack flag as they approach St. Peter's Square.
(Courtesy of Ryan Hawkes)



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When Cardinal Vincent Nichols blesses King Charles III during his coronation ceremony on May 6, he will become the first Catholic bishop to formally participate in the coronation of a monarch since the Reformation.

Some 1,000 miles away from Westminster Abbey, here in a city that once denounced Protestants as heretics, British seminarians studying for the priesthood in Rome will also join in prayer — and celebration — for their new king.

At the [Venerable English College](#) — the oldest British institution outside the United Kingdom, which began as a hospice in 1362 and became a seminary in 1579 — the coronation festivities will be a two-day affair.

On May 5, morning Mass will be celebrated for the intentions of King Charles, who visited the college in 2019 after attending the canonization Mass of St. [John Henry Newman](#), the first non-martyr English saint in more than 600 years.



Shown is a handmade decoration for the Venerable English College's coronation celebrations. (Courtesy of Ryan Hawkes)

The evening's events will begin with solemn vespers, which will conclude with the national anthem, "God Save the King," followed by a coronation gala attended by some 200 friends of the English College. A six-piece jazz band will play in the garden, and guests will enjoy a buffet dinner and open bar. And as fitting for a coronation, formal dress is required.

On May 6, coronation day, the atmosphere will be a bit more relaxed: Following a morning Mass, seminarians and priests living at the college will gather to watch a livestream of the coronation and then will celebrate at a garden barbeque.

"There's certainly a buzz in the community," said 22-year-old Ryan Hawkes from the Diocese of Portsmouth, who noted it's the largest event the community has hosted in decades.

The streets surrounding the English College — located on the via di Monserrato, just a stone's throw from Rome's Campo di Fiori, always pulse with activity from tourists and locals alike. Inside the college this week, the energy matches or even exceeds the neighborhood's usual pace.

Final touches are being sewn on banners, choirs are rehearsing round-the-clock and the college's archivist is putting together a temporary exhibition on the college's relationship with the crown and past coronations.



Britain's Queen Elizabeth II is seen arriving at the State Opening of Parliament with Prince Charles in London Oct. 14, 2019. The queen died Sept. 8, 2022, at the age of 96. Her successor, Charles III, will be crowned king on May 6. (CNS photo/Toby Melville, pool via Reuters)

Seminarian Luke Theobald, 31, of the Birmingham Diocese, said that plans for the weekend extravaganza began after last year's annual Advent choral performance, a solemn event, followed by a less-than-serious talent show for both the college and the British community living in Rome.

Theobald, who described the college as a "mini-embassy in Rome for the English-speaking world," and two other seminarians began to consider what they could do next.

When the seminarians began to consult the college's extensive archives, they soon realized that there is a long history of coronation celebrations. The last one, of course, was well before they arrived or had even been born, for Queen Elizabeth II in 1953.

The college's rector, Fr. Stephen Wang, gave the student-organized initiative his blessing and, following Easter, preparations got seriously underway with the college's schola regularly meeting to rehearse hymns, as well as new music written for the occasion. Another seminarian, who serves as the college's tailor, began to prepare the decorations.

"I always feel that being away from one's home country makes one a great deal more patriotic," Hawkes said.

But there's more than sentiment that's motivating the celebration.

In a recent interview with the British weekly The Tablet, Cardinal Nichols [described](#) his participation in the coronation as a "remarkable moment" for ecumenical relations, one where the Vatican's secretary of state, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, will attend, representing the Holy See.



College Tailor James Finnegan of the Archdiocese of Liverpool prepares for the Venerable English College's coronation celebrations in Rome. (Courtesy of Ryan Hawkes)

Ben Sinclair, 26, of the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, concurred.

He ticked off a series of ecumenical events in recent years, including the [joint peace pilgrimage](#) to South Sudan in February that included Pope Francis, the archbishop of Canterbury and the moderator of the Church of Scotland, and the ecumenical vespers during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity that takes places at the Papal Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls here in Rome.



The top of the processional cross that will be used at the coronation of King Charles III in May is seen on the altar of an Anglican parish in Llandudo, Wales, April 19, 2023. Relics of Christ's cross, a gift from Pope Francis, are under glass in the center of the processional cross. (CNS/Dave Custance, courtesy of the Church in Wales)

"It's very encouraging to see the creative ties that there are between the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England and other Christian churches, which are fruits of the work that's been done since the last coronation 70 years ago, and especially in the papacy of Pope Francis," he said.

Hawkes agreed, noting that the ecumenical and historic significance of cardinals being present at a coronation for the first time since that of Queen Mary "certainly represents something of a diplomatic reconciliation between the Catholic Church and the Church of England, even if not a dogmatic one."

When King Charles walks down the aisle of Westminster Abbey, he will follow a processional cross containing a relic of Christ's cross that Pope Francis [gave](#) to the king as an ecumenical gesture.

Theobald said that he's been "positively surprised" at how overtly Christian the new king has been since assuming the throne.

"He's really trying to hold on to traditional values, which I think he would believe — many would believe — are universally held on to, such as family, community and caring for nature," Theobald said. "And he's really trying to, as best as he can, keep one foot in tradition, and one foot in the reality of modern Britain, which is a very diverse place."

Theobald said that when he was younger, he was an anti-monarchist, believing it to be an institution past its time and without democratic accountability.



Members of the Venerable English College's schola rehearse. The group will perform music written for the coronation during events celebrating King Charles III's ascension to the throne. (Courtesy of Ryan Hawkes)

As he's gotten older, he has come to reassess that view, especially in light of Queen Elizabeth's death in September.

"This woman stood for our values, traditions with a sense of integrity, and didn't feel the need to be in the spotlight," he said. "Those are the attributes that we all aspire

our politicians to be, but because of modern media they can't be."

"The monarchy allows someone to be outside of the minutiae, the day-to-day politics," he added.

While he believes King Charles will be a "monarch for everyone," he believes he will maintain his core Christian identity.

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Hawkes recalled that it was Queen Elizabeth who once described the constitutional role of the Church of England — whose supreme governor is the monarch — as being like an umbrella where other faiths may take shelter.

"As Catholics, we aren't threatened by the Church of England in the slightest," said Hawkes. "On the contrary, constitutionally, it's a guarantor of religious liberty, something we're very grateful for as a minority group who still bear the collective memory of persecution in our own land."

And that, according to the seminarians at the Venerable English College, is worth raising a glass to celebrate this coronation weekend and beyond.

"If we want to see what all of this means as a Catholic," Hawkes continued, "we can look to Thomas More who famously described himself as 'the king's faithful servant, even if God's first.' "