



Britain's King Charles III waves as he arrives for a visit to University College Hospital Macmillan Cancer Centre in London, Tuesday, April 30, 2024. (AP/Kin Cheung, File)

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King Charles III is scheduled to have an audience with Pope Francis during a state visit next month to the Vatican, suggesting the Holy See is optimistic the pontiff will be back at work by then, barring any setbacks in his recovery from double

pneumonia.

The tentative audience was among details of the British monarch's visit to the Vatican and Italy released on Tuesday by Buckingham Palace. State visits are always planned in close consultation with the Vatican's secretariat of state.

The palace separately confirmed that Charles wrote privately to the pope when he was taken ill. Francis, 88, has [been hospitalized since Feb. 14](#). With gradual improvements, the Vatican said Monday it had suspended morning updates and is issuing less frequent medical bulletins. The next one is not expected before Wednesday.

The visit to the Vatican is symbolic of efforts to build closer ties between the Catholic Church and the Church of England, which split from Rome in the 16th century during the reign of King Henry VIII. Charles, who is head of the Church of England, made building bridges between people of all faiths a priority since he ascended the throne 2 1/2 years ago.

Charles' three-day trip begins April 7 and it will also include events in Italy and its capital, Rome, which surrounds Vatican City.

In Rome, Charles will highlight the close links between Britain and Italy, two NATO allies, at a time when European nations are working to bolster support for Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression. The visit will include a joint flypast over Rome by the Italian Air Force aerobatic team, Frecce Tricolori, or Tricolor Arrows, and their Royal Air Force counterparts, the Red Arrows.

The king and queen will attend a reception in Ravenna, in the Emilia-Romagna region of northern Italy, to mark the 80th anniversary of the region's liberation from the Nazis by Allied forces on April 10, 1945. The royals will also celebrate the cuisine of the Emilia-Romagna region and meet with local farmers devastated by floods that recently hit the area.

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"The visit to Italy will underscore the depth and breadth of the bilateral relationship," the palace said in a statement.

One of the central events of Charles' trip to the Vatican will be a historic first in which the king, in his capacity as supreme governor of the Church of England, will visit the Papal Basilica of St. Paul's Outside the Walls, where reconciliation and ecumenical relations between Christian faiths are celebrated. Choirs from the King's Chapel Royal, St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle and the Sistine Chapel will perform.

English kings had a particular link to the basilica before the split from Rome during the Protestant Reformation. The church was built over a white marble sarcophagus that for some 2,000 years has been believed to be the tomb of St. Paul.

The visit is taking place during the Papal Jubilee, a year of forgiveness and reconciliation that is celebrated by the Catholic Church every 25 years.

"The Visit to the Holy See will be an historic visit in the year of the Papal Jubilee, and will mark a significant step forward in relations between the Catholic Church and Church of England," the palace said.