

Students Meet Pope Leo XIV

Jesuit News recounts the visit of Jesuit pupils to Rome and their meeting with Pope Leo.



Pope Leo XIV signs a tennis ball for a Wimbledon student

It may not be the first time former pupils of the Jesuit Wimbledon College in London have shaken hands with a pope, but it is almost certainly the first time they've done so while still at school.

In June of this year, a group of pupils travelled to Rome as part of the Jubilee Year celebrations. They were accompanied by the headteacher, Adrian Laing, and the chaplain, James Potter, joining a wider delegation of Catholic schools involved in community organising through Citizens UK.

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with the Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV, in St Peter's Square.

The students from Wimbledon College shook Pope Leo's hand, exchanged a few words with him and presented him with a pair of Wimbledon College cufflinks. He also signed a tennis ball brought by the pupils, which will be displayed at the school. Other members of the delegation handed Pope Leo a copy of the *Called to Action* toolkit, which includes testimonies of the work done by Citizens' schools.

Thomas, a student from Wimbledon College, reflected on the experience:

‘Pope Leo had a kind smile for everyone. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would take part in anything like this. It has really strengthened my faith and desire to share that loving kindness with others.’

The journey began close to home. The group had been invited to meet the pope thanks to a letter delivered by Cardinal Vincent Nichols on their behalf, following a conference of Catholic schools working with Citizens UK.

Wimbledon College has been a founding member of Merton Citizens, a local alliance of community groups that, for the past eight years, has campaigned around mental health, the living wage, housing and welcoming refugees. Community organising has become a key way the school lives out its Jesuit mission of a faith that does justice, helping students to ‘walk with the excluded’ and ‘journey with youth’ in tangible ways.

In January 2025, the school received a response from Pope Francis, saying he would be ‘pleased to greet your delegation on a date to be arranged’. But soon after, he fell seriously ill and sadly died before a date could be confirmed.

Although they were told informally that the new pope, Leo XIV, would likely honour the invitation, no written confirmation followed. After a nervous wait – and a lesson in perseverance – the guards were finally able to confirm that they were on the guest list, and they were let through onto the main platform in front of St Peter’s Basilica. Moments later, they heard Pope Leo announcing to the tens of thousands gathered in the square: ‘Special greetings to the members of Citizens UK

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Catholic movement.’

Adrian Laing, headteacher of Wimbledon college, shared his reflections: ‘He showed a genuine interest in our pupils, as he spoke with them. The items he signed will have a special place at the College. Being able to visit many of the sites closely connected to St Ignatius of Loyola, including praying in his chapel, made the visit an even more memorable occasion.’

James Potter, chaplain of Wimbledon College, summed up his feelings on the trip: ‘It was an incredible experience. I am hugely passionate about the work that is going on day in, day out in Citizens UK alliances across the country. It has been a privilege to be part of this group of inspiring young people and adults. I hope these partnerships between Catholic schools and Citizens UK continue to strengthen and grow, because I think there is so much potential for us to contribute to the betterment of our local communities.’

The delegation included young organisers and staff from St Anthony’s Primary School, St Bonaventure’s (both East London), St Thomas More Catholic High School (North Tyne-side), Cardinal Newman College (Brighton), Greyfriars Catholic School (Oxford), and Wimbledon College (Merton).