

Catholics and Anglicans prepare ecumenical burial fit for a king

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CANTERBURY, England (RNS) Tens of thousands of people in Leicester—England’s most religiously diverse city—are getting ready to honor the memory of a long-despised English king with a ceremony that testifies to the already warm relationship between the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church.

The bones of King Richard III—who was slain in battle in 1485 and vilified in the writings of William Shakespeare, who described him as a “poisonous bunch-back’d toad”—will be interred at Leicester Cathedral on Thursday at a ceremony led by Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby and attended by leading Catholics, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, and Jews, as well as members of England’s royal family.

Richard was the last king of England to die in battle while attempting to defend his throne from Henry VII. The latter went on to establish the Tudor dynasty, whose most memorable monarch was Henry VIII.

After the battle, Richard’s remains were hastily buried by Franciscan monks. In 2012, archaeologists digging in a parking lot found his remains and had the DNA checked with a known survivor of the king’s family.

Now some speculate that Leicester could replace Canterbury as the hottest Christian pilgrimage spot in England.

At a special service on Sunday night, Cardinal Vincent Nichols, head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, said the reburial of the king would draw Anglicans and Catholics even closer together.

Nichols said offering a Requiem Mass for the repose of the soul of Richard III was “a profound and essential Christian duty” and that it is what the former king of England would have wanted.

Richard III, who died nearly 50 years before the English Reformation, was a devout Catholic.

The cardinal raised smiles among members of the large congregation when he said that we live in an age “when saints become villains and villains become saints.”

On Sunday, thousands of people followed a procession that took the remains from Leicester University to the site of the king’s final battle, Bosworth. The bones, in a coffin made by a living relative of the king, are now lying “in repose” at the cathedral.

The commemorations, full of the pomp and circumstance befitting of a royal farewell, have been criticized by some Richard devotees who say they’re sickened by the commercialization of the ceremony, with people selling Richard III T-shirts and offering medieval haircuts for 25 pounds (or \$37).

“The more I see of this undignified, money-grabbing pantomime surrounding King Richard III in Leicester, the more incensed I become,” wrote Louise Hollingsworth, a Richard fan, on a Facebook page.

Queen Elizabeth II is not expected to attend the service, but Buckingham Palace said she has written a tribute in the order of service.