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VATICAN CITY — The Sistine Chapel Choir, whose boys and men sing for the pope at all his Masses, is about to get some illustrious company.

The Westminster Abbey Choir, the world-renowned chorus that last year performed at the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton, will join the Sistine singers at a special papal Mass on Friday in St. Peter's Basilica, a historic event seen as a perfect symbol of Christian harmony after centuries of discord.

It's the first time in its 500-plus year history that the pope's personal choir will sing as a single chorus with another choir, let alone one from the breakaway Anglican church.

And this isn't any ordinary chorus: The Westminster Abbey Choir represents some of the finest of the Anglican church's liturgical music traditions.
As a result, the symbolism of the choirs from the two churches uniting into one is enormous, particularly given Pope Benedict XVI’s stated aim of trying to unite all Christians.

The Mass marks the feast of St. Peter and St. Paul and is the day in which newly appointed Catholic archbishops receive a woolen stole, known as the pallium, as a sign of their communion with the pope.

“It’s the big Mass for underlining our links to the Holy Father, and to ask at that occasion for a non-Catholic choir to take part is deeply significant,” said Monsignor Mark Langham, the Vatican official responsible for relations with Anglicans.

Anglicans split from Rome in 1534 after English King Henry VIII was refused a marriage annulment. A half-millennium later, the two churches remain divided on a host of issues, especially female bishops and openly gay priests.

The differences prompted the Vatican in 2009 to make it easier for Anglicans uneasy with the liberal bent of their church to convert, throwing another wrench in ecumenical dialogue.

Organizers of the historic performance have tried to downplay the differences or at least acknowledge that while deep theological problems remain, culturally the two churches can come together.

“In diversity you can find points of unity,” said Monsignor Massimo Palombella, the choirmaster of the Sistine Chapel Choir. “And I dare say, it’s not just that you can find it, you must find points of unity. To do this, we use culture.”

That said, the uniting isn’t going to be easy. The two choirs are vastly different in style and come to liturgical music from very different backgrounds. And to many ears, Westminster is simply better.

“It is a splendid choir,” said the Rev. Jerome Weber, a Roman Catholic priest who reviews sacred music for Fanfare, the respected classical music magazine. Known for its precision, attention to detail and tonality, the Westminster choir is recorded twice a year by Hyperion, the British classical music label.

The Sistine choir, on the other hand, is simply of a lesser quality: warm as the Roman vocal tradition requires, but often loud with a “harsh, bombastic tone,” he said.

Colin Mawby, the English composer, recently wrote a glowing review of the Sistine choir’s May concert at the Roman Catholic Westminster Cathedral, saying the pope’s singers had unfairly suffered from a bad reputation when in fact they were “a superb and expressive group.”