

# Relations Warms Between Russian Orthodox Church and Vatican

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By SOPHIA KISHKOVSKY

MOSCOW — Festivities in Rome this weekend for the dedication of an Orthodox church on the grounds of the Russian Embassy near the Vatican attest to a surprising but marked warming of relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Vatican in recent months, according to church officials and analysts.

If trends hold true, they add, a meeting of the pope and the patriarch of the Orthodox Church in Russia may be close. Whether even that could begin to overcome the centuries-old hatred surrounding the two churches' conflicting authority over Christians is another question.

To mark the dedication Sunday of the Church of St. Catherine the Great Martyr, Orthodox clergy will conduct a prayer service Saturday at the Church of San Clemente, and the choir of the Danilov Monastery, the seat of the Moscow Patriarchate, will sing in a Roman basilica.

Pope John Paul II long dreamed of visiting Russia and mending relations with its Orthodox church, the world's largest. But the pope's Polish origins apparently heightened the suspicions of Russian church leaders about his intent, and he was neither invited to Russia nor able to overcome tensions about the Uniate Church, which follows the Eastern rite but is loyal to Rome, and Catholic priests proselytizing here.

After John Paul's death, and the election in January of Patriarch Kirill as the new head of the Russian Orthodox Church, relations have warmed.

In March, Pope Benedict XVI, a German, sent a message to a ceremony in Bari, Italy, where the Italian government handed back to Russia a church and pilgrimage center built in the czarist era.

"How could we not recognize that this beautiful church awakens in us the nostalgia for full unity and maintains alive in us the commitment to work for union among all the disciples of Christ," Benedict wrote.

Reflecting Russia's geopolitical dance with Europe, the Moscow Patriarchate has found common ground with Benedict, and since Patriarch Kirill was enthroned, he has appointed church officials who portray the pope as a like-minded man of the church, not politics.

"This pope, in contrast to the previous one, doesn't strive to always be politically correct," said Archbishop Hilarion of Volokolamsk, an Oxford-educated theologian who was until recently the Russian Orthodox Bishop of Vienna and Austria and the Russian Church's representative to European institutions. "He believes he must speak of the teachings of the Catholic church. The task of such a church figure, especially of such rank, is to clearly state the teaching of the church, even if it doesn't correspond to contemporary standards of political correctness."

Archbishop Hilarion was selected in March to lead the patriarchate's Department of External Church Relations, which Patriarch Kirill headed for two decades. Both Archbishop Hilarion and the Reverend Vsevolod Chaplin, another rising church official in his early forties who heads a newly created department on church and society relations, strongly backed Benedict's controversial comments in March that condoms are not the solution to the spread of AIDS. Their voices were among the few supporting Benedict's stand.

From Rome come indications that Patriarch Kirill's election represents a new chance for Russian Orthodoxy.

His predecessor, Patriarch Aleksy II, "had to work to refound the church, to set up structures, organize the clergy" after Soviet power crumbled, said Monsignor Bruno Forte, archbishop of Chieti-Vasto and a member of the Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. "Kirill has been handed a reborn church, so he has the strength to forge a new path."

As Metropolitan of Smolensk in 2006, Patriarch Kirill wrote the foreword to the first Russian-language edition of Pope Benedict's book "Introduction to Christianity," written when he was still the theologian Joseph Ratzinger.

He wrote: "The traditionalism of Benedict XVI offers a profound view, a wise insight into the essence of things. It is my deep conviction that this must be the approach of all Christians desiring to remain loyal to the never-aging Tradition of the Ancient Church in the face of the latest in a series of onslaughts of totalitarian relativism, which we are observing today."

Ironically, while conservative values unite the new patriarch and Benedict, Patriarch Kirill has been under attack by Russian Orthodox fundamentalists, in part for an outgoing style and presence that more readily recall John Paul II.

Tensions between Moscow and some of the world's Orthodox churches are a stumbling block to relations with the Roman Catholic Church.

Moscow and Constantinople have been wrestling for centuries over jurisdictional issues, and with renewed vigor since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

On the issue of primacy, the Moscow Patriarchate chafes especially when the Patriarch of Constantinople is described as the leader of the world's Orthodox Christians, and when that patriarch is compared with the pope.

The Russian Church, said Archbishop Hilarion, would like to promote the role of Orthodoxy in the European Union. "Now several Orthodox states are part of the European Union," he said, alluding to Bulgaria, Romania and Greece.

All this has experts saying that a meeting of pope and patriarch is now much more likely, if hard to predict. "Patriarch Kirill is unpredictable," said Aleksei Yudin, a member of the editorial board of the Russian Catholic Encyclopedia. "He might have some powerful move. If a goal appears, he won't be slow."

Elisabetta Povoledo contributed reporting from Rome

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