

Pope, Russian president vow to strengthen relationship

by [Luigi Sandri](#)

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Rome, February 17 (ENInews)--In their first meeting after the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Russia, Pope Benedict XVI and President Dmitry Medvedev expressed their desire to strengthen bilateral relations.

Describing the 35-minute encounter as "cordial," the Vatican said that "the broad-ranging collaboration between the Holy See and the Russian Federation was recognised, both in the promotion of specifically human and Christian values, and in the cultural and social field."

And it concluded: "Subsequently, emphasis was given to the positive contribution inter-religious dialogue can make to society. Finally, attention turned to the international situation, with particular reference to the Middle East."

Pope Benedict and Medvedev had previously held talks leading up to the establishment of diplomatic relations on December 3, 2009.

Medvedev did not meet with journalists. There had been speculation in the Russian media that Benedict might announce a visit to Russia, something his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, had desired.

When Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989 met John Paul II in Rome, he invited the pontiff to visit Moscow. But shortly thereafter, the breakup of the Soviet Union derailed the idea. During the 50-year Cold War, Moscow's official stand of atheism prompted a chilly relationship with the Vatican.

Recently, the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church have been at odds over accusations that Rome is aggressively seeking converts in Russia.

Diplomatic sources said an invitation to Benedict would have to come from both the Russian government and the Orthodox Patriarchate of Moscow.

However, Anatoly Krasikov, director of the Center for Religious and Social Studies of the Institute of Europe in Moscow and formerly a journalist on Vatican affairs for the Soviet Itar-Tass news agency, said Benedict and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill already know each other.

Before he was elected patriarch in January, 2009, Kirill served for years as the chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of External Church Relations and met Benedict many times, both as pope and before, when he was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Krasnikov noted. "They know each other very well. So, in this respect, what can another meeting give?" Krasikov said.

Relations between the Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches, bitterly divided in the 1990s by centuries-old tensions over the Ukrainian Greek Catholic, or Uniate, church in Ukraine, which follows the Byzantine rite but is loyal to Rome, have warmed considerably under Benedict and Kirill.

There was a heated exchange of letters late last year between Catholic and Orthodox officials when the Russian church welcomed a decision by legislators in Kaliningrad, formerly the German city of Königsberg, to hand over Catholic and Lutheran churches confiscated by the Soviets after World War II to the Moscow Patriarchate.

But an overall unified front has crystallized in repeated statements by Benedict and Kirill that the two churches stand in common spiritual witness to a secular world.

An official of the Moscow Patriarchate said on 14 February that diplomatic relations have helped advance contacts between the churches. "The establishment of full diplomatic relations between the Russian Federation and the Holy See has given a new impulse to the development of constructive relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Vatican," the Rev. Dmitri Sizonenko, an official of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of External Church Relations, told the Interfax news agency.

As Medvedev and the Russian delegation were welcomed by the pope outside his private library, Benedict described the meeting as "very important."

Medvedev gave Benedict two books of letters written from 1996 to 1999 by former Russian president Boris Yeltsin to various chiefs of state, including John Paul II and a volume of the Orthodox Encyclopaedia, written in Russian. Benedict gave Medvedev

a Vatican mosaic.

-- Sophia Kishkovsky contributed reporting from Moscow.