

Interim Orthodox leader picked after Alexy's death: Metropolitan Kirill

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Metropolitan Kirill, considered a reformer in his approach to relations with the Russian government and the Roman Catholic Church, has been chosen as the interim leader of the Russian Orthodox Church following the death on December 5 of Patriarch Alexy II, who was 79.

Alexy II shepherded his church through the rubble of communism and helped the dominant church body of Russia revive to the point that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin became an open supporter this century.

Despite many overtures from Rome under Pope John Paul II, Alexy was unwilling to heal a longstanding breach with Catholics.

Kirill, 62, the Russian Orthodox leader of the provinces of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, was chosen by secret ballot by the Holy Synod, a ruling group of 12 senior clergy who met December 5 outside Moscow, Reuters reported. He leads the church's external relations department and has appeared often on television representing the church.

Elected patriarch in June 1990, Alexy presided during the fall of communism and the corresponding influx of foreign missionaries into Russia, which he harshly criticized. Under his leadership, the repressed Russian Orthodox Church reemerged as a vital national institution.

Long-neglected church buildings were restored to their former glory and hundreds of new houses of worship and educational institutions were built throughout the country and abroad.

The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour was rebuilt in the 1990s on the spot where the original cathedral stood before it was dynamited on Stalin's orders in 1931. The new cathedral, within view of the Kremlin, is regarded as a symbol of Russia's religious revival.

Moscow police estimate that nearly 100,000 people passed through the building to view Alexy's casket. *Komsomol skaya Pravda*, a former Communist newspaper, marked the patriarch's death with a banner headline about Russia's national mourning.

In 2007, he oversaw the end of an 80-year schism with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, which had split with Moscow during the Soviet era.

"When (Alexy) became patriarch, there were only 18 monasteries across the Soviet Union; now only in Russia and Ukraine, there are over 700," said Joseph Kryukov, who helps oversee Russian Orthodox parishes in the U.S.

During Alexy's 18-year tenure, new leaders emerged in almost every other Orthodox Christian denomination, starting with the 1991 enthronement of the spiritual head of world Orthodoxy, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, and most recently with the November election of Metropolitan Jonah to lead the Orthodox Church in America, an autonomous church that has Russian roots.

Alexy also lived to see the death of Pope John Paul II, a fierce opponent of communism who had longed to visit Russia in a bid to heal the split between East and West that erupted more than 950 years ago. Alexy, however, repeatedly denied those requests.

Over the past two decades, Alexy and other Russian leaders have frowned on Catholic proselytizing in what they consider their exclusive territory. Catholic officials have repeatedly denied any intention of converting Orthodox believers in Russia.

In a condolence statement December 5, the Vatican's top ecumenical official, Cardinal Walter Kasper, affirmed the late patriarch's "personal commitment to improving relations with the Catholic Church" while acknowledging "difficulties and tensions" in that relationship.

A telegram from Pope Benedict XVI further credited Alexy's efforts "for the rebirth of the church, after the severe ideological repression which led to the martyrdom of so many witnesses to the Christian faith."

Leaders of other faiths around the world also sent condolences, including Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams. "He was a leader of stature, with abundant experience, determination and courage, who guided his church with a steady hand through a profoundly challenging period of change in Russia's history," Williams

said. *-Religion News Service, Ecumenical News International*