

Meeting Between Patriarch, Pope Seen as 'More Realistic'

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A meeting between Pope Benedict and the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, which could help heal a 1,000-year rift, looks increasingly possible, a senior Russian official said Tuesday.

Relations between the Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches have warmed in recent years, making an elusive meeting between the pope and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill more likely, the official said on condition of anonymity.

"It seems to me that the prospect of such a meeting is more realistic than it was a few years ago," the official said, speaking on the eve of a two-day visit by President Dmitry Medvedev to Italy, where he will meet Pope Benedict.

"The atmosphere is more conducive to this," he said.

The late Pope John Paul II's dream of visiting Russia was thwarted by persistent disputes with the Russian Orthodox Church.

The churches have bickered, sometimes bitterly, over issues ranging from proselytizing to church property in Ukraine and have often seemed to find little to agree on other than the perceived dangers of secularism.

Russian Orthodox leaders have repeatedly said the disputes are a barrier to a meeting between pope and patriarch.

The Russian official did not speak in detail of disputes but said "the Vatican has taken many very good steps" including handing over historic real estate and hallowed remains to the Russian Orthodox Church.

"We have noticed that the dialogue between the two churches has intensified and become more regular, and it seems to me ... that various reproaches are voiced less often," the official said.

Kirill became patriarch of the Russian church two years ago after the death of Alexy II. Benedict became pope after the 2005 death of John Paul, whose Polish heritage and Communist-era role complicated his relations with Russia.

Medvedev is to meet Benedict on Thursday during a visit that will also include talks with Italy's leaders.

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