

# Orthodox Leader Urges Vatican to Resolve Dispute

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ROME — A senior leader of the Russian Orthodox Church has called on the Vatican to do more to resolve outstanding disputes so that a meeting between the pope and Patriarch Kirill could take place.

Since the Soviet breakup in the early 1990s, the Russian Orthodox Church has accused Catholics of using their new freedoms to poach souls from the Orthodox religion, a charge the Vatican denies.

The biggest contention, though, concerns the fate of many church properties that Soviet leader Josef Stalin ordered confiscated from Eastern Rite Catholics, who worship in an Orthodox rite but owe their allegiance to Rome.

Stalin gave the property to the Russian Orthodox Church but after the fall of communism, the Eastern Rite Catholics took back more than 500 churches, mostly in western Ukraine.

"Not very much was done or is being done in order to solve this problem," said Metropolitan

Hilarion, head of the external relations department of the 165 million-member Russian Orthodox Church and one of the closest aides to Patriarch Kirill.

"As soon as we have this understanding, we will be ready to begin preparations for such a meeting," he said Monday.

Hilarion said the dispute remained the major problem in Catholic-Orthodox relations and the main obstacle to a meeting between Pope Benedict and Kirill, whose churches split in the Great Schism of 1054.

The late Pope John Paul had wanted to meet the previous Russian patriarch, Alexy II, possibly in Russia, to bring forward his dream of advancing the cause of Christian unity. But the Russian Orthodox Church blocked his initiative.

Benedict, who heads a church of some 1.2 billion members, is seen as much more palatable to the Russians than his Polish predecessor, whose fight against communism in his homeland was seen by some in the Orthodox Church as a crusade against Russia.

Hilarion said Benedict in many ways showed "more sensitivity to the Orthodox tradition than his predecessor.

"This is why we regard positively the development of our relations, but still we believe that some further work should be done to improve the situation before the meeting between the pope and patriarch could take place," Hilarion said.

"We believe that such a meeting is quite possible, but before we discuss the time, the venue and the protocol, we would like to come to agreement on basic issues, and we would like to receive some signs of readiness to work for the solutions of the existing problem," he said.

Hilarion practically excluded that the meeting could take place either in Moscow or the Vatican.

"A neutral territory would certainly be easier for the first meeting, [but] we are not prepared to discuss either time or venue before we discuss the content. For us the content is what matters — not the venue or the time," he said.

Geneva or Vienna has been proposed as a possible meeting point.

There has also been some speculation that Benedict and Kirill could meet in Serbia in 2013 as part of the 1,700th anniversary of the Edict of Milan, which allowed religious toleration in the Roman empire.

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