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Russian Catholics Greet New Pope With Open Arms

By Jonathan Earle

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Pope Francis waving as he walks out of a basilica in Rome on Thursday. **Alessandro Bianchi**

Russia's small Catholic community greeted the election of Pope Francis with elation and hopes that the new pontiff will continue to improve ties with the country's Russian Orthodox majority despite a rocky history and lingering disagreements.

Congratulations to the new pope, formerly the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, 76-year-old Jorge Mario Bergoglio, poured in from ordinary Catholics as well as senior political and religious leaders in Russia, which has an estimated 700,000 Catholics, or about 0.5 percent of the population.

President Vladimir Putin said he hopes ties between the Vatican and Russia will continue to develop "on the basis of the Christian values that unite us," according to a statement posted on the Kremlin's website.

The election of the first non-European pope in centuries was a sign that the church is global and open to all, said Father Igor Kovelevsky, chairman of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of the Russian Federation, which oversees the Roman Catholic Church in Russia, Interfax reported.

Described as warm, humble and conservative, Bergoglio appeared to fit the bill for Russian Catholics, many of whom harbor fond memories of the gregarious and worldly Pope John Paul II, who helped re-establish the Catholic presence in Russia beginning in the waning days of the Soviet Union.

The new pope should unite religious believers of all faiths, including members of the Russian Orthodox Church, said Yegor Bredikhin, 18, a student and recent convert, standing in the falling snow outside Moscow's main cathedral Wednesday morning.

He should also be conservative, said Yekaterina, 26, a graduate student and member of the Greek Catholic Church. "It would be very strange and contradict the teachings of the church if the Catholic pope were for same-sex marriages," she said on the day of the vote.

Catholics have a long and variegated history in Russia going back to at least the 12th century. Over the years, and even to this day, they have had to fend off suspicion and occasional hostility from nativists who see them as an unwelcome Western import.

Inter-church relations have improved in the last decade under outgoing Pope Benedict XVI, and Catholics interviewed by The Moscow Times say they feel at home in Russia. But unresolved issues remain between the two churches, the most troublesome being a property dispute in Ukraine.

That conflict has been the latest sticking point preventing a meeting of the heads of both churches, something that has never happened in their history.

Patriarch Kirill said the Russian Orthodox Church shared Francis's concern for the poor and suffering, and that this creates new opportunities for cooperation between the two churches, Interfax reported.

Experts said Russian Catholics had reason to be optimistic and pessimistic about the arrival of Pope Francis but warned that Russia would probably not be high on the new pontiff's to-do list.

The Vatican's prestige and influence has suffered in recent years with mounting revelations of child sex abuse by priests and allegations of corruption at the Vatican Bank, and there has been widespread speculation that Benedict XVI's historic resignation was linked to the church's woes.

Given these challenges, and the shift of Catholicism's heartland from Europe to South America and Africa, Russia's tiny fraction of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics, will be far from Pope Francis's thoughts, wrote Kommersant FM editor-in-chief Konstantin von Eggert.

And unlike his predecessor, a long-time Vatican insider who met with Orthodox Patriarch Kirill while Kirill was still a metropolitan, Francis does not have established ties to the Orthodox Church, said Roman Lunkin, a religion expert at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Furthermore, it's going to be difficult to explain to Francis, an Argentinean Jesuit who's said to have a passion for social work and a concern for the poor, how things are done in Russia, Lunkin said.

"Why is it important to tip-toe around the Moscow Patriarchate's sphere of influence? Why are Catholics constantly accused of proselytizing? Why is it important to be quiet when the Orthodox Church and the government object to new Catholic churches?" he said.

A Rocky Past

The Catholic Church in Russia, which includes Roman Catholics and Eastern Catholic churches that are also subordinate to the pope, currently consists of four dioceses in Russia — the archdiocese is in Moscow — and a total of 396 parishes nationwide.

The three other dioceses are based in Saratov, Novosibirsk and Irkutsk.

Catholicism has a long and turbulent history in Russia, punctuated by expulsions of Catholic missionaries and frustrated attempts to reunite the largest Western and Eastern branches of Christianity, which split in the Great Schism of 1054.

Roman Catholic chapels first appeared in the ancient cities of Novgorod, Ladoga and Smolensk between the 12th and 15th centuries, and Jesuit missionaries arrived in 1684, only to be expelled five years later and see their leader sent to a monastery.

The government became more tolerant to Catholics in the late 18th century under Emperor Catherine the Great, who established rules for a Catholic parish in the imperial capital, St. Petersburg. The Jesuits returned shortly thereafter, but were again expelled less than two decades later.

The relationship hit rock bottom under the Bolsheviks, who in 1918 declared all church property to belong to the Soviet state, a move that was followed by arrests of Catholic clergy.

In 1990, diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and the Holy See were established and the full re-establishment of the Catholic Church in Russia took off.

A Dominant Rival

Orthodox believers make up 74 percent of the Russian population, according to a December poll by the independent Levada Center, and critics have accused the Kremlin of cozying up to the Russian Orthodox Church to wage an information campaign against dissenters and critics.

While all religious groups face legal and property issues, "some confessions find it easier to resolve these issues than others," said Father Kirill, a spokesman for the Mother of God Catholic Archdiocese in Moscow.

Senior Orthodox clergymen have been spotted with expensive cars and pricy jewelry in recent years, enjoying scandalous luxuries that are anathema to Francis, who reportedly rides the subway to work, cooks his own food, and flew to Rome with a single suitcase and sans entourage.

"Metropolit Hilarion and other senior clergy are used to diplomatic discussions between top officials, but for this pope, concrete missions, concrete social and evangelical projects are more important," Lunkin said, referring to the Orthodox Church's head of external relations.

There is some hope that differing styles could be trumped by values and religious sensibilities.

Francis is said to be well-versed in Eastern Orthodox liturgical tradition, and an Orthodox bishop in South America told Itar-Tass that he was "pro-Russian," saying that Bergoglio was friendly with local Orthodox clergy in Argentina and sometimes attended Orthodox services.

Because of the Catholic Church's relatively small size and novelty in Russia — the archdiocese in Moscow was established in 2002, alarming some Orthodox leaders — it has managed to remain isolated from some of the Roman Catholic Church's problems, at least publicly.

There have not been any scandals involving alleged pedophilia by Catholic clergymen in Russia. The strongest whiff of sexual impropriety came in 2008, when a Russian man killed a Jesuit priest whom prosecutors said had been making sexual advances.

But its relative insignificance in the Catholic world also partly explains Russian Catholics' exclusion from the Vatican's hierarchy.

There aren't any Russian cardinals, and consequently, none of the 115 cardinals who chose Cardinal Bergoglio to be the 266th pontiff serves in Russia. Only one, Archibishop of Vilnius Audrys Juozas Backis, serves in the former Soviet Union.

"It's too dangerous" to appoint a Russian cardinal, which would surely harm relations with the Orthodox Church, said Ivar Maksutov, a senior lecturer at the Center for the Study of Religion at the Russian State University for the Humanities.

According to officials in both churches, relations warmed under Benedict XVI, who assumed the pontificate in 2005 and stepped down last month citing frailty, the first pope to retire in almost 600 years.

Moscow and the Holy See established full diplomatic relations in 2009, and perennial Orthodox complaints about Catholics' "poaching" their flock petered out.

The primary remaining irritant involves a dispute in Ukraine between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Greek Catholics, who the Orthodox Church says wrongfully seized its property in the 1980s and 1990s.

Soviet dictator Josef Stalin ordered the seizure of Eastern Catholic Churches and gave the property to the Russian Orthodox Church. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Eastern Catholics took back more than 500 of them, mostly in Western Ukraine.

The dispute was exacerbated by the presence of Greek Catholic missionaries in traditionally Orthodox parts of the country, said Deacon Alexei Dikarev, a spokesman for the Russian Orthodox Church.

No Easy Fix

Relations between the two churches will likely remain a source of tension for years to come, said Father Kirill, the spokesman for the Moscow Archdiocese.

"It's a dialogue of love," he said, adding that it was natural for the two churches, while close in terms of tradition and practice, to continually calibrate their relationship.

He denied that the Catholic Church ever aggressively proselytized in Russia. "If by proselytism we mean scaring people or using unsavory methods — payments, etc. — then this has never been the case," he said.

Maksutov, the religion expert, said relations between the two churches were currently "guarded."

"They're neither good nor bad. And because the Roman Catholic Church is less interested in the former Soviet Union than in Africa and Latin America, there's no special dialogue," he said.

The cardinals may have missed a chance to improve interfaith relations by failing to elect as pope Hungarian bishop Peter Erdo, who forged close ties with the Orthodox Church and was seen by Vatican insiders as a leading candidate before Wednesday's vote.

Officially, the churches' eventual goal is to unite after almost 1,000 years of separation. "We're on the path, but we have a long way to go," Dikarev said.

One often-cited step on that path is a meeting of the heads of the two churches, which has never happened despite rumors in recent years that a summit was in the wings.

Metropolitan Hilarion on Thursday repeated the Russian Orthodox Church's longstanding line on such a meeting: It's possible, but not until the churches resolve "conflicts that arose abroad in the 1980s and 1990s," he said, referring to the Ukrainian property dispute.

Father Kirill downplayed the significance of a summit of the two leaders. "It's not a magical solution to our problems," he said, adding that spiritual unity was the main goal in bilateral ties.

Love From Russia

Bergoglio's first appearance as Pope Francis on the Vatican balcony at about 11:15 p.m. Moscow time on Wednesday earned gushing reviews from Russian-speaking Catholics on the Vkontakte social network, the largest in Russia.

"They say the strongest and most mysterious feeling is falling in love, but I would beg to differ; I'm having 'that feeling' right now," wrote user Lilia Khugeyan, from Western Ukraine, where about 10 percent of the population is Catholic.

Others were more sober in their assessment. "Come on girls, emotions are good, but I'm more interested in whether he will rise to the challenges of the times," replied another Western Ukrainian user, Dima Mis. "I don't know much about him, and his Wikipedia entry is skimpy,"

he wrote.

Bergoglio was an unknown for many Catholics in Russia, including for Father Daniel Ceratto, a fellow priest and Argentinian. "Unfortunately, I don't know much about him. I've been here for 12 years," said Father Ceratto, director of the Church's Regional Family Center in St. Petersburg.

Although the church does not keep accurate statistics, Father Kirill speculated that the number of Catholics in Russia was probably shrinking due to emigration of Catholics with strong foreign roots. He denied that the trend was due to a "loss of faith" or signaled the church's unsustainability.

Catholics interviewed by The Moscow Times said that while they're comfortable in Russia, many don't always feel accepted.

Bredikhin, the student, said he felt "fantastic" as a Catholic, but was concerned about how a coreligionist conscript would fare against endemic bullying in the Russian army.

"They wouldn't understand a Catholic there; he'd be an outcast," Bredikhin said. "Individuals understand that there's freedom of religion, but the masses don't."

Anna Belova, 28, who works in the cathedral's catechismal library, said her social circles didn't include any Orthodox Christians but that she occasionally encounters resistance from particularly conservative Orthodox believers.

"Once I invited an Orthodox priest to attend to my grandmother. When he found out that I'm Catholic, he gave me a long lecture and tried to convert me," she said.

Igor Gurkin, 39, a taxi driver and daily churchgoer, said he hadn't ever observed antagonism toward Catholics, but that could also be because, as Yekaterina, the graduate student, said, "It's not written on my forehead that I'm a Catholic."

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