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Medvedev, Pope Want Stronger Ties

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Pope Benedict and Medvedev exchanging gifts Thursday at the Vatican. **Vladimir Rodionov**

VATICAN CITY — Pope Benedict XVI and President Dmitry Medvedev met at the Vatican on Thursday, stressing the need for better ties and the promotion of shared Christian values, the Holy See said.

"I should learn Russian," the German-born Benedict said following the half-hour private talk, although there was no indication that Benedict would go to Russia. Long-running tensions in Russia between Orthodox faithful and Catholics prevented Benedict's predecessor John Paul II from achieving his dream of a Russian pilgrimage.

The Holy See's statement sidestepped any mention of the tensions between the Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches in Russia, including over property issues and Orthodox claims that the Catholics are trying to poach converts from Orthodox ranks. Instead the Vatican stressed the "positive contribution inter-religious dialogue can make to society."

Greeting Medvedev, Benedict welcomed him to "a very important meeting" Thursday.

The Vatican said both sides "expressed their pleasure at the good state of bilateral relations and highlighted their desire to strengthen them." It noted the cooperation between them "in the promotion of specifically human and Christian values, and in the cultural and social field."

The Vatican denies accusations that it aggressively proselytizes in Russia.

After Medvedev's previous talks with Benedict in late 2009, the Vatican and Russia upgraded their diplomatic relations to full-fledged ties.

After nearly a half-century of hostility between the Vatican and the Kremlin during the Cold War, a major breakthrough came when former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev met with the Polish-born John Paul in 1989, just after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

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