

Putin to Meet Pope Francis as Church Relations Warm

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Pope Francis

President Vladimir Putin will meet with Pope Francis at the Vatican on Monday as part of his state visit to Italy, an encounter that could help fuel further warming in relations between the Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches.

Since the election of Pope Francis to head the Vatican in March, there have been signs that the two churches are eager to ease the tensions that have dominated their relations in recent decades and that date back all the way to the Great Schism of 1054.

Ahead of Putin's visit, Russian Orthodox Church head Patriarch Kirill met with an influential Catholic archbishop in Moscow last week, attesting to the more amiable nature of inter-church ties.

"We live in an epoch when many of our historic differences should stop playing the critical

role they have played in relations between our churches," Kirill said at the meeting with Milan Archbishop Angelo Scola, RIA Novosti reported.

At first glance, Putin and Francis may not seem to have the most compatible personalities, especially when it comes to lifestyle. While Putin enjoys the use of more than a half-dozen presidential residences, Francis refuses to indulge in papal privileges, and Putin's purported watch collection would likely not have fit in the single suitcase Francis took with him to Rome when he became pope.

But Putin says he is a man of faith, and he makes an overt effort to show his close ties to the Russian Orthodox Church.

"I cannot speak about Vladimir Putin's faith on a personal level," said Natalya Pecherskaya, rector of the St. Petersburg School of Religion and Philosophy. "But as a scholar, I can say that Putin's policies have brought religion to the forefront and have triggered positive change in inter-church relations."

Putin regularly makes public appearances at Russian Orthodox services on major holidays, and he has said he has read the Bible and even keeps a copy on his plane. Putin formed a friendship with late Patriarch Alexy II and is close to the current head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, who is a strong political ally.

Last week, Putin paid a visit to Kirill on his 67th birthday at Christ the Savior Cathedral, presenting him with a lacquer box adorned with a picture of the Assumption Cathedral of the Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius, along with a bouquet of white roses.

But on Putin's visit to the Vatican, heavenly matters will not dominate the agenda.

"Putin will be meeting Pope Francis as the president of Russia, and then only secondly as a Russian Orthodox [person]," said Father Kirill Gorbunov, a spokesman for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of the Mother of God in Moscow.

The Kremlin announced that Putin and Pope Francis will discuss the state of international institutions and their ability to respond to crises, as well as the protection of Christian minorities in the Maghreb and the Middle East.

Other topics of discussion will include the prospect of expanding bilateral cooperation in the humanitarian and social spheres, including through science and art.

Despite theological and historical disagreements between the Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches, Russian presidents have actively interacted with the Holy See since the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the two states in 1990.

Putin has visited the Vatican three times, meeting with both John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and former President Dmitry Medvedev visited twice with Pope Benedict XVI during his time in the Kremlin.

In 2011, Russia and the Vatican signed a cooperation agreement in the field of child health care, and last month the countries agreed to strengthen ties between their respective academic institutions and museums.

As a head of state, Pope Francis — much like Putin — is also concerned with world politics, even though he spends much of his time appealing to a higher power.

Prior to the Group of 20 summit in early September, Pope Francis implored Putin to seek a peaceful resolution to the Syrian crisis along with other world leaders.

"To the leaders present, to each and every one, I make a heartfelt appeal for them to help find ways to overcome the conflicting positions and to lay aside the futile pursuit of a military solution [in Syria]," Pope Francis wrote in his letter to Putin. "Rather, let there be a renewed commitment to seek, with courage and determination, a peaceful solution through dialogue and negotiation of the parties, unanimously supported by the international community."

Days later, Russia and the U.S. agreed on a draft UN Security Council resolution to rid Syria of its chemical weapons, ending weeks of diplomatic stalemate and talk of a military strike. Putin, who was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for his role in helping strike the deal, became an unlikely paragon of pacifism — at least in the eyes of his supporters.

Catholicism remains a marginal religion in Russia. There are approximately 700,000 Catholics throughout the country, accounting for about 0.5 percent of the population.

Despite a closeness between the churches "that had yet to be witnessed," according to Father Gorbunov, there remain seemingly intractable disagreements.

A dispute between the Russian Orthodox Church and Greek Catholics, whom the Orthodox Church says wrongfully seized its property in the 1980s and 1990s, remains a major irritant in inter-church relations.

Soviet leader Josef Stalin ordered the seizure of Eastern Catholic churches and granted the property to the Russian Orthodox Church. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Catholics took back more than 500 churches, mostly in western Ukraine.

The Patriarch and the Pope have never met because of the dispute.

"Relationships improve when we have common tasks, common goals," said Pecherskaya, of the St. Petersburg School of Religion and Philosophy. "Putin's visit to the Vatican, although it is political in nature, is nonetheless crucial for building the common goals that will improve relations between the Catholic and the Russian Orthodox churches."

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