

Historic Meeting of Pope and Russian Orthodox Head 'Draws Nearer'

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Pope Francis arrives to lead the weekly audience in Saint Peter's Square at the Vatican June 24, 2015.

ROME — An historic meeting between Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church is "getting closer every day," a senior Orthodox prelate has said in an interview.

The unprecedented meeting would be a significant step towards healing the 1,000-year-old rift between the Western and Eastern branches of Christianity, which split in the Great Schism of 1054.

"Now such a meeting is getting closer every day but it must be well prepared," Metropolitan Hilarion, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church's foreign relations department, said in an interview on Sunday with Italy's *Corriere della Sera* newspaper.

He said the meeting between the head of the 1.2 billion-member Roman Catholic Church

and the head of Russian Orthodox Church — which counts some 165 million of the world's 250 million Orthodox Christians — would take place in a "neutral" country, not in Moscow or the Vatican. Austria or Hungary were possibilities, he said.

Hilarion, one of the most influential people in world Orthodoxy, said he could not say if the meeting could take place as early as this year, but there was currently "a good dynamic" between the two Churches.

Francis told reporters on the plane returning from a trip to Turkey last year that he had sent word to Kirill that he was willing to meet the Russian patriarch "wherever you want, you call me and I'll come."

The Russian Orthodox Church has accused Catholics of using their new freedoms of religion following the break-up of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s to try to convert people from the Orthodox, a charge the Vatican has denied.

One of the biggest bones of contention is the fate of many church properties that Soviet dictator Josef Stalin 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, Eastern Rite Catholics took back many church properties, mostly in western Ukraine.

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