

Two forces for peace: President Putin and Pope Francis meet in the Vatican



The President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin met with Pope Francis in the Vatican, the meeting between the two leaders who are instrumental in bringing about a peaceful resolution to the situation in Syria and who prevented a western military intervention in that country further advanced work on issues related to bringing about a peaceful resolution to conflicts in the Middle East and in particular resolving the plight of Syrian's Christian population who are largely supporters of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad.

The upcoming meetings are expected to assist in the further development and strengthening of ties between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Holy See but may also lead to a normalizing of relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church, which have seen a series of historic rifts, most notably with regard to Russian Orthodox Churches seized by Greek Catholics and Catholic Churches seized by the Soviets and given to the Russian Orthodox Church by Josef Stalin. Due to the conflict the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church has never met with the Pope.

The President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, who is on an official visit to the Vatican, held a private meeting with Pope Francis in which many issues were discussed. "It was quite a cordial and constructive meeting," Vatican spokesman Father Federico Lombardi told reporters after the encounter. President Putin had arrived around 45 minutes late because of transport problems.

President Putin brought a greeting to the pope from Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, but reportedly did not talk about matters between the Orthodox and Catholic churches, Lombardi said and so far there has been no open discussion of a possible visit to Russia by Pope Francis.

President Putin presented the Vladimir Icon of the Mother of God to Pope Francis who appeared very moved and impressed by the gift and the Pope in turn presented Putin with a majolica depicting the Vatican Gardens. After presenting the icon to the Pope, President Putin crossed himself and kissed it as did Pope Francis. The Vladimir Icon of the Mother of God is one of the most important for Orthodox faithful.

After the meeting 10 members of the Russian delegation, including Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov,

Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Presidential aide Dmitry Peskov, had a chance to meet the Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church and photographs were taken.

Statement of the Holy See Press Office:

In the afternoon of Monday 25 November 2013, the President of the Russian Federation, His Excellency Mr. Vladimir Putin, was received in audience by the Holy Father Francis. Mr. Putin subsequently went on to meet with the Secretary of State, Archbishop Pietro Parolin, who was accompanied by the Secretary for Relations with States, Archbishop Dominique Mamberti.

During the cordial discussions, satisfaction was expressed for the good existing bilateral relations, and the Parties focused on various questions of common interest, especially in relation to the life of the Catholic community in Russia, revealing the fundamental contribution of Christianity in society. In this context, mention was made of the critical situation faced by Christians in some regions of the world, as well as the defense of and promotion of values regarding the dignity of the person, and the protection of human life and the family.

Furthermore, special attention was paid to the pursuit of peace in the Middle East and the grave situation in Syria, with reference to which President Putin expressed thanks for the letter addressed to him by the Holy Father on the occasion of the G20 meeting in St. Petersburg. Emphasis was placed on the urgency of the need to bring an end to the violence and to ensure necessary humanitarian assistance for the population, as well as to promote concrete initiatives for a peaceful solution to the conflict, favoring negotiation and involving the various ethnic and religious groups, recognizing their essential role in society.

According to the Kremlin President Putin and Pope Francis discussed 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. The situation in Syria was touched upon in this regard.

Other issues which were covered in the short meeting included the prospect of expanding bilateral cooperation in the humanitarian and social spheres, including through science cooperation and the arts.

President Putin also met with Vatican Secretary of State Pietro Parolin after his audience with the Pope however details are still coming in as to the content of that meeting. However it is clear that the meeting was preparatory for the further expanded full format discussions that will take place tomorrow.

The visit follows up on constructive contacts between the Pontiff and the Russian head of state, the most important being before the Group of 20 Summit in early September when the Pontiff implored President Putin to make an all out effort to bring about a peaceful resolution to the Syrian crisis. Pope Francis also pled with other world leaders gathered in St. Petersburg at the time in a written address and the Vatican issued several statements that they were categorically against an invasion of Syria.

President Putin personally thanked Pope Francis for the G20 letter which read: "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," 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."

The letter from the Pope to the G20 leaders and the fact that Pope Francis mobilized hundreds of thousands if not millions of Catholics around the world who participated in a fast and prayer for peace along with all of the efforts of President Putin and the Russian Government were both key in preventing an invasion by Obama on Syria after a provocative reported chemical attack in Damascus which saw Obama ready to attack with neither UN Security Council Support nor US Congressional approval.

The meeting at the Holy See is not President Putin's first meeting with a Catholic Pope, President Putin has previously visited the Vatican three times and met with both John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The meetings have taken place against the backdrop of the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the Russian Federation and the Holy See in 1990. Since then Russian presidents have maintained active interaction despite theological and historical disagreements between the Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches.

The first Russian President to meet the head of the Catholic Church was President Gorbachev in 1989, in 1998 President Yeltsin met Pope John Paul II and President Dmitry Medvedev met with Pope Benedict XVI twice during his time in the Kremlin.

In 2011, the Russia Government 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.

The Vatican said on Monday that ecumenical relations between the Catholic and Orthodox churches "weren't really" discussed during the 35-minute discussion between Putin and Francis in the Pope's private library, though Putin brought greetings from Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill.

The fact that such an important icon as the Vladimir Icon of the Mother of God was presented to the Pope is a very important sign from the Russian Orthodox Church of its desire to normalize relations and surely painstaking planning went into the selection and presentation of the icon.

In preparation for the visit by President Putin to the Vatican the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Kirill, met with Milan Archbishop of the Catholic Church Angelo Scola in Moscow last week, a sign of the warming of ties between the churches.

"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.

President Putin and Pope Francis are both men who above all else have a penchant for understatement and even though their lifestyles may be quite different both of them have shown they will do their utmost to work for peace, this includes in the world and between the faiths.

Tomorrow should see more important work being done to bring about better relations and improve

relations and with the focus on the people this will not be limited to inter-state cooperation but will benefit all people and Christians worldwide, in particular those living in zones of strife. Whether large moves will be made to mend the rift between Catholicism and Orthodoxy is to be seen, but one thing is certain, the door is open.

Any views and opinions expressed above are my own. I can be reached at robles@ruvr.ru.

John Robles

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