

Pope hopes return of Russian Orthodox church in Italy helps ecumenism

POPE-RUSSIANS Mar-2-2009 (220 words) xxxi

By **Catholic News Service**

BARI, Italy (CNS) -- Pope Benedict XVI has expressed support for the return of a historic Southern Italian church to its former Russian Orthodox owners.

At a ceremony March 1, the little Church of St. Nicholas in Bari was formally handed over to the Russian Orthodox. Built by Czar Nicholas II, the church became the property of the Italian government after Russia's 1917 revolution.

As Italian President Giorgio Napolitano passed the church keys to Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, a papal representative said the pope hoped Bari, a seaport on the Adriatic, would continue to be a city of peaceful encounters between the Orthodox and Catholic faithful.

Since 1087, the tomb of St. Nicholas of Myra -- one of Russia's patron saints -- has been housed in the Catholic Basilica of St. Nicholas in Bari. Czar Nicholas had a Russian Orthodox church built near the basilica to provide services to Russians who traveled to Bari on pilgrimage.

Cardinal Salvatore De Giorgi, the retired archbishop of Palermo who was Pope Benedict's representative at the ceremony March 1, told the politicians and faithful present that the little Russian church "reawakens in us the yearning for full unity" between Catholics and Orthodox and encourages both to work more seriously to unite all who believe in Christ.

<http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0900956.htm>