

# Orthodox, Catholic Faiths Inch Closer

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Reuters

The Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church are making progress toward healing their 1,000-year-old rift, a senior Russian official said ahead of President Dmitry Medvedev's first visit to the Vatican.

But Medvedev will not invite Pope Benedict to make a historic visit to Russia when the two meet on Thursday because he believes that church heads should take the initiative, said the official, who refused to be identified.

"It is not appropriate for a secular leader to raise the issue in the absence of a hierarch," the official said. "They [church leaders] should decide the issue themselves.

"However, a movement toward normalization is clearly seen, and things are moving in the right direction," he added.

Visits by Russian leaders to the Holy See in the past have failed to help heal the rift between the churches. But new hopes emerged when Patriarch Kirill took power after the death of his theologically more conservative predecessor, Alexy II, last December.

Patriarch Alexy, who spearheaded the revival of his church after decades of Communist persecution, treated rival religions and churches with suspicion.

The Russian Orthodox Church has accused the Vatican of poaching for converts in its territory, including in Ukraine. The Catholic Church says it is only ministering to an existing flock of about half a million Russian Catholics.

The medieval Christian church split into Eastern and Western branches in the Great Schism of 1054 amid disputes over papal authority and the insertion of a clause into the Nicene Creed. The divide has never been healed.

Patriarch Kirill, who headed the church's foreign relations department for many years before taking his present job, has shown less hostility toward Catholics than did Alexy.

German-born Pope Benedict, a theological conservative, is viewed by Orthodox hierarchs as a more welcomed partner than his predecessor, John Paul II.

<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/orthodox-catholic-faiths-inch-closer/390813.html>