

With Patriarch's death, Russian Orthodox and the ecumenical cause are at a crossroads

Moscow, Dec. 5, 2008 (CWNews.com) - The death of Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexei II (see today's CWN "News Brief" coverage) brings an end to a tumultuous era in the history of the Moscow patriarchate, and raises crucial questions about the future of Christian ecumenism.

The Russian prelate who died on December 5 had risen through the ranks of the Orthodox hierarchy in the 1960s and 1970s, at a time when the leadership of the Russian Church was closely watched by the Soviet KGB. Although Alexei denied ever having acted as a KGB agent or informer, he was viewed with favor by the Soviet government leadership-- certainly not seen as a threat to the all-encompassing power of the Communist Party.

Nevertheless, when he was elected Patriarch in 1990, at a time when that Soviet power was crumbling, Alexei seized his opportunity and used his power skillfully to bring about a genuine revival in the life of the Orthodox Church in Russia. That revival continues to this day, and the Orthodox Church-- always intimately linked with Russian patriotism-- has forged strong bonds of partnership with the new leaders of the Kremlin.

Decades of subservience under an officially atheistic regime have taken their toll on the Orthodox faith in Russia, and the old days when the Tsar functioned as the protector of the faith are no more than a distant memory. But Patriarch Alexei recognized that Vladimir Putin needed the support of the Moscow patriarchate almost as much as the patriarchate needed the support of the Putin regime. The close partnership between the Orthodox Church and the Russian government continues today, albeit in a new form. Alexei's successor will no doubt seek to strengthen those bonds.

But if the next Russian Patriarch hopes to capitalize on the new stirrings of Russian nationalism, he must recognize the conflict that often arises between nationalist sentiment and ecumenical friendship. Patriarch Alexei adamantly insisted that Russia belongs to the Orthodox Church, even if the vast majority of the Russian people belong to no church at all. That insistence has been a major roadblock to ecumenical progress.

Russia, Patriarch Alexei argued time and again, is the "canonical territory" of the Moscow patriarchate. In Russia and its neighbors-- notably Ukraine-- Catholics should defer to the Orthodox leadership, the Russian prelate said, and the Roman Church should not attempt to set up her own hierarchical structures. During Alexei's reign the Moscow patriarchate issued frequent condemnations of what it saw as Catholic "proselytizing" inside Russia. The Vatican replied that Catholic evangelists were not seeking to steal the faithful away from Orthodox parishes, but to bring the Gospel to those Russians--the vast majority-- with no active religious affiliation. Such explanations fell on deaf ears in Moscow. Again, in the eyes of the Moscow patriarchate *all* Russians were presumptively Orthodox, and any missionary effort was intrusive.

Because of these complaints from the Moscow patriarchate, the late Pope John Paul II ([bio - news](#)) was thwarted in one of his most cherished ambitions: to make an apostolic visit to Russia. Twice the Vatican began planning a "summit meeting" between the Pontiff and the Russian Patriarch, to introduce the possibility of such a trip; each time the Patriarch upset the plans, announcing that he would not meet with the Pope until the Catholic Church renounced "proselytism" and accepted Moscow's claim to an exclusive "canonical territory"-- concessions that the Vatican would not make.

The Patriarch's rebuffs to Pope John Paul II may also have been influenced by his determination to uphold the cause of Russian nationalism. A visit by a Polish Pontiff would have raised special concerns in Russia, in light of the age-old tensions between those two countries. With the election of Pope Benedict XVI ([bio - news](#)), the Moscow patriarchate adopted a more conciliatory attitude toward the Vatican-- although the Russian prelate still insisted that he could not meet the Pope until his complaints against the Vatican were addressed.

While maintaining a cordial but distant attitude toward the Vatican, the Moscow patriarchate under Alexei II was at times openly hostile toward the acknowledged leader of the Orthodox world, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople. Yet again, Russian pride appeared to be a major factor. As the leader of what is by far the largest of the Orthodox churches, Patriarch Alexei seemed reluctant to defer to the shepherd of a bedraggled little Christian community in Turkey, regardless of Constantinople's historical claims.

During the past few years, Moscow and Constantinople have been fiercely at odds over the Ecumenical Patriarch's decision to recognize the autonomy of the Estonian Orthodox Church. In the past the Estonian Church was subject to Moscow. (Alexei himself was a native of Estonia, and once the Orthodox bishop there; if the Estonian Church was an independent Orthodox body, his status as head of the *Russian* Church might be considered anomalous.) In this case the Moscow patriarchate argued that historical precedent should trump current geopolitical realities.

The tensions between Moscow and Constantinople have inhibited ecumenical ties between the Holy See and the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Although Bartholomew I has been an enthusiastic supporter of the cause for Christian unity, he has been hesitant to make concessions to Rome that could aggravate his problems with Moscow.

If a new Russian Orthodox Patriarch adopted a friendlier attitude toward Rome-- or even toward Constantinople, for that matter-- his leadership could produce enormous strides toward the goal of Christian unity. But in order to take those strides, the Russian leader would need to question his Church's strong identification with the forces of Russian nationalism. And simply by raising such questions, he might endanger the current ties between the Moscow patriarchate and the Russian political leadership. The new Patriarch, whoever he may be, will face challenges every bit as difficult as the ones that faced the late Alexei II.

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