

Rome Eyes Russian Orthodox Church Vote

Tuesday, Jan. 06, 2009

By Jeff Israely / Rome

Kremlinologists and Vaticanisti are cut from the same cloth — fantastically adept at identifying the most important signs amid the smoke-and-mirrors maneuvering of their respective subjects. This month, both have their eye on the same thing: the plot turns inside the Russian Orthodox Church, which is weighing a successor to [longtime Patriarch Alexy II](#), who died last month at age 79.

The Russian Orthodox Church's Local Council, which includes both clerics and laymen chosen by parishes and is the church's highest decision-making body, will elect a new Patriarch in the next few weeks. Among the names being mentioned are Metropolitan Filaret, the scholarly patriarchal exarch of Belarus; Metropolitan Cyril, the well-known head of the external-relations department of the Moscow Patriarchate; and Metropolitan Kliment, the more liberal administrator of the Patriarchate.

Within Russia, where Orthodox Christmas is celebrated Wednesday, the stakes for succession are high. Alexy, who rose to power in 1990, led his church through the convulsive but ultimately fruitful transition to the post-Soviet era. Religious freedom blossomed. The church, which counts some 110 million faithful (though far fewer attend church regularly), grew in importance after decades of suppression under Communism.

Alexy was occasionally criticized for his closeness to Kremlin leaders. But by the time of his death on Dec. 5, he was seen as having ably steered the church through a momentous period of national and religious revival. His successor will have to navigate both Moscow's growing geopolitical ambitions and the first hints of Western-style secularism in Russian society at large.

The arrival of a new Patriarch is also creating plenty of anticipation among religious leaders outside of Russia. Attending Alexy's funeral last month was an impressive array of clerics from dozens of countries and religions, including the main branches of Christianity. Notably, several prominent Catholic Cardinals showed up. Rome has no sway over the Orthodox Church's choice, but it is deeply interested in the new Patriarch. The 1-billion-strong Catholic Church is eager to forge closer ties to the largest branch of Orthodox Christianity after a millennium of prickly (at best) relations following the Great Schism of 1054. Most recently, Alexy had accused Catholics of aggressive proselytizing throughout the former Soviet Union after the fall of Communism. It was said that [Pope John Paul II's](#) great regret was not being able to visit Moscow.

Despite centuries of disputes, Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity have much in common. They share a common adherence to ancient liturgy and traditionalist doctrine. Like Pope Benedict XVI, Alexy was a stern critic of what he saw as increasingly lax morals in contemporary culture, calling on Europe to defend its Christian roots from the onslaught of secularism. Observers of both churches have noted that Benedict's first trip outside of Rome as Pope was to the southeastern Italian city of Bari, which is considered sacred by the Orthodox Church because it holds the relics of the revered Saint Nicolas. Benedict had been hoping to meet his Russian counterpart before Alexy's death, in what would have been an unprecedented act of public reconciliation between the churches.

American Jesuit scholar Robert Taft, a Rome-based expert in Eastern Christian liturgy, cautions that Catholic-Orthodox relations should not be judged solely by "photo op" encounters between the Pope and Patriarch. "We are sister churches," said Taft. "There's never going to be a day when Orthodox become Catholics, or vice-versa. But we can move toward being in communion, with the Holy Trinity and with each other. That's what we're heading toward. It's a sharing of life."

Taft says that though both churches have "taken a step back from exclusivity," there is still Orthodox criticism that Catholics are too centralized, and Catholic criticism that the Orthodox aren't centralized enough.

For those hoping for a rapid warming of relations — and that photo op! — Cyril, 63, might be the best candidate to succeed Alexy. Heading the powerful external-affairs department of the Patriarchate, he has been a leading Orthodox figure abroad and has long championed improved interfaith dialogue. He played a backroom role in reuniting the Moscow-based church with followers of the Russian Orthodox Church outside of Russia, though he has been criticized for allegedly profiting from the church's stake in the alcohol and tobacco trade in the 1990s.

Cyril, who has been fulfilling the duties of Patriarch in the weeks since Alexy's death, is a well-known figure among ordinary Russians, with his own radio and television programs. Still, both Kremlinologists and Vaticanisti can agree that there are other factors that may be more important than popular appeal. For one thing, Cyril is on excellent terms with both Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev.

