

# New Russian patriarch may help mend Vatican rift

---

Thursday, January 29, 2009

MOSCOW: The newly elected head of the Russian Orthodox Church is a forceful traditionalist who could nonetheless move cautiously to improve strained ties with the Vatican, Russian experts said on Wednesday. Metropolitan Kirill, who is to be enthroned as patriarch on Sunday after his election late Tuesday night, often travelled and met priests of western churches as the long-time head of the Church's foreign relations department.

Among the clerics he met was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, and experts say a historic meeting of the Russian patriarch with the pope could be in the cards.

"A meeting with Benedict XVI is possible like never before," Moscow-based religious expert Maxim Shevchenko told AFP. "They have known each other for several years and their views on the modern world are very close," added Shevchenko, who heads the Centre for Strategic Research into Contemporary Religion and Politics.

In Vatican City Wednesday, Pope Benedict XVI greeted the election of Kirill as the new patriarch of Moscow and all Russia.

"I invoke on him the light of the Holy Spirit for a generous commitment to the service of the Russian Orthodox Church, entrusting him to the special protection of the mother of God," Benedict said.

But when it comes to meeting with the pontiff, experts stressed that Kirill would need to move slowly in order to avoid upsetting the Orthodox Church's powerful conservative wing and that any such meeting would probably not happen in Russia. Traditionalists fear what they see as Kirill's liberal tendencies in part because of his experience as a Church diplomat, said Alexander Verkhovsky, a religion expert at the Sova human rights centre in Moscow. "At first he will need to show that he is not as liberal as he is described, that he will not modernise the Church and that he will maintain the status quo. But this will not last long," Verkhovsky said.

As an "energetic diplomat" Kirill would eventually agree to meet the pope, though probably not on Russian territory, Verkhovsky predicted.

[http://www.thenews.com.pk/daily\\_detail.asp?id=159641](http://www.thenews.com.pk/daily_detail.asp?id=159641)