

Will the Pope Meet Russia's New Patriarch?

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Like a new Pope stepping out of the conclave or the latest U.S. Supreme Court appointment, the election of the Russian Orthodox Patriarch comes with a fundamental question for anyone who's just nabbed a lifetime post atop his career ladder: Will he be in the future how he's been in the past?

Cyril, 62, the Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, was elected overwhelmingly on Tuesday as the new head of the Russian Orthodox Church. He arrives at the top job in Moscow with a very long and public resume. He served for nearly two decades as head of the Church's office of external affairs, a kind of roaming secretary of state, the Russian church's ambassador on the world's religious chessboard. ([See pictures of the Pope in France.](#))

Cyril, who'd been serving as interim head of the Church since the Dec. 5 death of [Patriarch Alexy II](#), was particularly adept at keeping warm relations with both Kremlin insiders and religious counterparts outside of Russia. His many contacts with the West, including a meeting in 2007 with Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican, helped earn Cyril a reputation as a pragmatic reformer who favored moving his Church closer to Catholicism after a millennium-long schism.

Relations had long been chilly between [the one-billion strong Roman Catholic Church and the largest Orthodox Church](#) (which claims 110 million adherents though perhaps less than 5% are regular churchgoers). There was little hope for major reconciliation during the 26-year reign of Pope John Paul II, a Polish native who was seen by Russian religious leaders as a threat for poaching faithful in its sphere of influence.

Tensions had been easing under Benedict, who has made rapprochement with the Orthodox a priority of his papacy, but a hoped-for meeting never materialized between the new Pope and Alexy, who died after serving for 18 years as the first Patriarch in the post-Soviet era. ([See pictures of Pope Benedict's visit to America.](#))

One of the opening questions of the new reign in Moscow is whether attempts to pull off that unprecedented Pope-meets-Patriarch summit gets put on the fast track. Benedict sent his best wishes Wednesday, notably long and gushing in his stated desire to move the two Churches closer. "May the Almighty bless your efforts to maintain Communion among the Orthodox Churches and to seek that fullness of Communion which is the goal of Catholic-Orthodox collaboration and dialogue," the Pope wrote. "I assure Your Holiness of my spiritual closeness and of the Catholic Church's commitment to cooperate with the Russian Orthodox Church for an ever clearer witness to the truth of the Christian message."

Other Catholic leaders hailed the choice of Cyril, who received 508 of the 700 votes cast at Tuesday's balloting among a commission of lay and clergy leaders in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral. He defeated a conservative rival, Metropolitan Kliment. "This was the best result we could have hoped for," said one Rome-based Catholic priest involved in ecumenical dialogue. "He's always been a moderate, and open minded, and now that he's reached the top, he's free to pursue closer ties with [the Vatican]." ([See 10 things to do in Rome](#))

On his Dec. 2007 trip to Rome, Cyril offered a notably conciliatory, though still vague, view of the long-separated sister churches. "Catholics and Orthodox feel that they belong to the same family, since they share the same Christian values," he was quoted as saying by Vatican Radio. "In order to overcome the divisions the most important thing is that the East and the West leave aside considering the other as foreigners."

Still, some insiders in Moscow say the Western view of Cyril as a closet liberal is naive, noting that he is as conservative as most other Metropolitans, and a longtime operator within the Church's tight bureaucratic machinery. He is believed to have maintained close relations with Vladimir Putin since he took over as Russian President in 2000. Both Putin, who is now Prime Minister, and current President Dmitry Medvedev, called the new Patriarch soon after the votes were tallied on Tuesday. It is widely believed that no Patriarch can emerge from the tightly controlled process of candidates' selection and voting, unless vetted by the Kremlin.

The "real" Cyril will begin to emerge after he is installed Sunday in a lavish ceremony in Moscow. Benedict, who also was a prominent figure before his 2005 election, has both confounded and confirmed the reputation as a hardliner with which he arrived at the top job. Like the Roman pontiff, one thing that Cyril will surely find is that his new post will provide surprises for which all his previous experience could simply not have prepared him. And when he responds, the world will take notice.

