



How the Vatican is encouraging dialogue between Russia and the West

Gerard O'Connell
September 01, 2017

It is no secret: The relationship between the Russian Federation and the Holy See has been improving. This development comes when Russia's ties to the European Union and the United States—and the Holy See's own relationship with the United States due to positions taken by the Trump administration on issues like climate change and immigration—are strained. Western powers have imposed sanctions attempting to isolate Moscow and trying to get the government to change its course in Ukraine and elsewhere.

The Holy See is aware of the concerns of the international community; however, especially during what Pope Francis has called "[this piecemeal third world war that we are living through](#)," it believes dialogue should be promoted over confrontation .

President Vladimir Putin has visited the Vatican five times and has already had two private conversations with Pope Francis, in 2013 and 2015. He is expected to meet him again next January, when he comes for the opening of a Russian art exhibition in the Vatican. Moreover, Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, has met his Vatican counterparts on several occasions and engaged in what sources say were "substantial, constructive discussions."

Pope Francis has played a huge role in this with his approach to the Orthodox Church and his willingness to meet with Patriarch Kirill of Moscow.
Tweet this

This developing friendship has been matched by an ever-improving relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church, with its 150 million members, and the Holy See. Pope Francis has played a huge role in this with his approach to the Orthodox Church and his willingness to meet with Patriarch Kirill of Moscow. Relations between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Holy See have been encouraged by President Putin, who has embraced the Orthodox faith not only at a personal level but also as part of his effort to consolidate his power at home. Last year, Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis met in Havana in February; a month later, the pope appointed one of the Holy See's top diplomats, Archbishop Celestino Migliore, as nuncio to Russia.

The Vatican's secretary of state, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, visited Russia from Aug. 20 to 24, upon an invitation from Russian state and church authorities. (This was the first visit by a secretary of state since 1999, and the most significant since Cardinal Agostino Casaroli's 1990 visit following the collapse of the Soviet Union.) Cardinal Parolin had what he defined as "important and constructive encounters" with President Putin, Foreign Minister Lavrov, Patriarch Kirill and

Metropolitan Hilarion, president of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations and the number-two official in that patriarchate.

Cardinal Parolin met with President Putin at the latter's summer residence in Sochi. While most of their conversations have remained confidential, both sides have revealed some of the major topics discussed, including the conflicts in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, and the situation of Christians and other minorities there and the need to protect them. The day after, he met with Mr. Lavrov and discussed, among other issues, combating terrorism and extremism, promoting dialogue, and protecting the interests of ethnic, religious and political groups in any final settlement in those countries in conflict. They also spoke about the international efforts to bring peace to Syria, including the Astana process, and the U.N.-sponsored Geneva talks.

The cardinal and his hosts agreed on the need to resume the Palestinian-Israeli talks and to work for a final settlement in accordance with the U.N. decisions. President Putin met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the same day he received the cardinal. Cardinal Parolin also asked his Russian counterparts to facilitate a political settlement to the dramatic crisis in Venezuela. Mr. Lavrov said Russia supports the Holy See's efforts to promote negotiations for a peaceful solution in Venezuela, but strongly opposes any outside attempt to arm the opposition or use military force.

Catholics in Russia are a tiny minority: 773,000 faithful, scattered over four dioceses that John Paul II established.

Tweet this

When discussing the sensitive political situation in Ukraine, one he knows well having visited the country last year, Cardinal Parolin insisted—it seems also in relation to the annexation of Crimea—on the need to fully respect international law. The Holy See is concerned by the lack of movement in the implementation of the Minsk Agreement, and the cardinal urged his Russian hosts to take “concrete steps” that could help advance the peace process—for example, by the liberation of prisoners. He presented this as a humanitarian gesture that could give new impetus to the process. It remains to be seen whether they act on it, but during the visit, Mr. Lavrov publicly acknowledged that the Russians “[appreciate](#)” the Vatican's support of the Minsk Agreement.

Speaking to Vatican Radio on his return home, [Cardinal Parolin stated](#), “Russia, for its geographical position, its history, its culture, and its past, present, and future, has an important role to play in the international community and in the world.” He added that the nation's leaders “must truly strive to put the higher interests of peace above all other interests.” The cardinal's words appeared to contain another message, too, albeit unspoken, for Western powers: Do not isolate Russia.

The Catholic Community in Russia

Catholics in Russia are a tiny minority: 773,000 faithful, scattered over four dioceses that John Paul II established. This move greatly upset the Russian Orthodox Church, which accused Rome of proselytizing. The climate has now changed between the Orthodox Church and the Holy See,

but for Catholics in Russia, life is still not easy. The cardinal met their bishops and celebrated Latin Mass in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Moscow on Aug. 21, which was filled to capacity. Later, he said he was touched “by the faith and devotion” of the people there and by their “attachment to the pope.” He said he would help them by raising their concerns with the highest authorities in the land.

He said he spoke with President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov about “several situations of some difficulty” for the Russian Catholic community. These included the difficulty in obtaining visas for foreign clergy to work in Russia and the failure of the authorities to restore the churches that were confiscated during the Communist era.

There is already one result from the visit: Both sides agreed to the mutual acceptance of diplomatic passports for their respective officials without them having to go through the normal visa process.

When the cardinal and foreign minister met the press after their meeting, Mr. Lavrov emphasized that Russia’s relationship with the Holy See is not new. It dates back to the 15th century and, he recalled, since the late 18th century, the Holy See has sent regular missions to Russia. In 1817, Russia opened its first permanent mission to the Holy See. From the Russian point of view, the two sides have a long history together and understand each other.

While Cardinal Parolin’s conversations with Russia’s president and foreign minister were undoubtedly of great importance, his meetings with Patriarch Kirill and Metropolitan Hilarion were no less so. Each encounter lasted around two hours and reflected the new climate in relations between the Orthodox Church and the Holy See after last year’s Havana meeting.

The cardinal brought Patriarch Kirill “a fraternal message” and a gift from Pope Francis. Patriarch Kirill stated that “a new stage in the development of our relations has begun, marked by important facts. The common positions allow us to design plans and endow them with real content.” He raised the possibility of joint Russian Orthodox-Catholic humanitarian projects to help people suffering from the conflicts in the Middle East.

The cardinal told Vatican media that, besides the Havana meeting, another event contributed to current relations: the bringing of the relics of St. Nicholas of Myra to Russia from Bari by Cardinal Kurt Koch, the president of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity. He said the Orthodox leaders told him they were overjoyed and “touched by the faith and religiosity of the people” as some 2.5 million people venerated the relics in Moscow and St. Petersburg during the two months they were on display. He said many Russians who belong to the Orthodox tradition but do not practice moved closer to the church on this occasion.

The Vatican diplomat revealed that during his two-hour meeting with Metropolitan Hilarion at the Danilovsky Monastery the discussion, in many ways, mirrored the ones he had with President Putin and Mr. Lavrov, including peace in Syria, the plight of Christians in the Middle East and the political situation in Venezuela. The cardinal and Metropolitan Hilarion also discussed Ukraine, focusing on ecumenical harmony and peace in that land. Sources within the Orthodox

Church said Metropolitan Hilarion raised cases of “political statements and aggressive actions” by members of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church that are loyal to Rome.

An issue that was not raised was the possibility of a second meeting between the pope and the patriarch, or a visit by Pope Francis to Moscow. But, as Parolin told Italian media, “in this new climate there is the will on the part of all to continue on the journey and to make other signs and gestures that can consolidate this journey.”

Cardinal Parolin’s visit has been positive for all sides. It has enhanced trust between both the Holy See and the Russian government, and between the Holy See and the Russian Orthodox Church. This augurs well for the future on both fronts. It could encourage new political initiatives in relation to some of the conflicts discussed, open the way to more joint humanitarian and cultural initiatives with the Orthodox, and bring benefits to the Catholic community in that land. All in all, the visit proves, yet again, that the culture of encounter and dialogue advocated by Pope Francis is the way to build constructive and peaceful relations in today’s world.