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SHALL THE TWAIN EVER MEET?: On the Cancellation of the June 1997 Meeting of the Pope of Rome and the Patriarch of Moscow

by Ralph Della Cava

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SUMMARY

At the start of 1998, rumors - as well as denials - are once again flying of an imminent, historic meeting between the Pope of Rome and the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. To put that prospect into perspective, the present article explores the 10 June 1997 decision of the Holy Synod, the powerful interim governing body of the Russian Orthodox Church, to cancel the previously scheduled encounter of the two church leaders later that month. It also examines differing explanations offered for that decision and the background to some of the continuing misunderstandings between the two confessions.

Two Steps Backward?

June, 1997 may go down on record as the month and year when the Russian Orthodox Church, claimant of the loyalty of upwards of some 100 million nominal believers in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus alone, took two decisive steps - back into its past!

That past, marked by both an abiding suspicion of other world faiths and a territorially-based ecclesiastical monopoly buttressed by, and oft historically subordinate to, state power, would now seem - after seven tempering years of religious liberty - to be destined to repeat.

The first step in this apparent about-face was the Russian Church’s last-minute cancellation on the tenth of June 1997 of what would have been an historic encounter near Vienna- the first since the founding of Christianity among the Slavs a millennium ago - between a Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia and a Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church.¹ Moreover, Pope John Paul II, as Patriarch of the West, a title conferred on his predecessors by a once undivided Christianity, would have in effect met Patriarch Aleksiy II, his Russian

¹ The decision was made by the Holy Synod at its meeting on 10 June 1997; the official document was published in Department of External Church Relations, Moscow Patriarchate, Informatsionnii Bvulleten' (Moscow), 8:97 (17 June 1997), 1-3, and apparently announced the following day. News of it appeared in Bruno Bartoloni, "Patriarch Calls off Pope Summit,” The Moscow Tribune, 14 June 1997, 1.
Orthodox confere, on ecclesiastical common ground.  

The second step backwards was surely the initially tacit, but then enthusiastic acceptance by the Moscow Patriarchate (over which Aleksiy II presides) of a bill that it had in fact long sought and for better than three years helped fashion. Approved by a 337 to 5 vote of the Duma on the eighteenth of June 1997, and signed into law on the following twenty-sixth of September by Russia's President, Boris Yeltsin, the measure not only severely limits freedom of conscience and religion throughout the federation, but also invests Orthodoxy with privileges denied most other faiths.

Optimistic or Pessimistic Future?

At issue in the remarks which follow is not how both these steps will play themselves out in the coming days and months. Indeed, it is possible to imagine scenarios of quite opposite extremes.

The optimistic one posits that the two aging and ailing patriarchs will find it within their failing powers to reschedule the long-sought meeting sometime in the near future. Each has affirmed his will to do so. With respect to the new law, expectations remain high, if not entirely well-founded, that the Russian Federation's Supreme Court will strike it down as a flagrant violation of Article 28 of the 1993 Constitution guaranteeing religious liberty and in violation of many of the international treaties to which Russia is a party.

Historically speaking, the five apostolic patriarchates prior to the Great Schism of 1054 were: Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Rome and Constantinople. After that date, all but Rome and five others -- Russia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria and Georgia -- comprise the nine patriarchates which along with the four metropolitans or archdiocesan churches of Cyprus, Greece, Poland and Albania make up the autocephalous (self-governing) Orthodox churches in communion with each other under the "priority" of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.


The "New Law" as it was passed by the Duma and in the subsequent version signed by President Boris Yeltsin in September 1997 over the protests of several Western governments and confessions are available in an English translation from the Keston News Service, Oxford, England at the following e-mail address: Keston.institute@keston.org

Aleksiy II expressed his hope of rescheduling their meeting in a letter to the Pope, cited in "Meeting of Patriarch, Pope Cancelled over Differences," The Moscow Times, 14 June 1997, 3.; John Paul II reiterated his intention to meet in his Sunday homily at St. Peter's on 22 June 1997, as reported by the BBC on the night of 22 June 1997 and by Reuters in a dispatch from Vatican City and summarized in "Pope Appeals for Christians to Reconcile," The Moscow Times, 24 June 1997, 4. See the discussion later in the text.

This view is largely expressed by West European and American observers and by local Russian human rights groups which, despite shortages of manpower and finances, are intent on testing the new law in Russia's courts: see Pavel Mirzoev, "Natural Monopoly of the Patriarchate," Russkiy Telegraf, 14 January 1998 as re-transmitted by the San Francisco-based, on-line news service, Holy

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But, a pessimistic scenario is equally conceivable in light of the recent legislative victory. On the one side, outspoken moderate leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) may prove unable to beat back mounting offensives by ultra-nationalist clerics who denounce every act of ecumenism as a heresy and consider a meeting of the Patriarch with a "Polish" pope an outrage against Russian patriotism. On the other hand, some of these same moderates may also prove unwilling to stand up fully for the rights of other confessions.

In fact, in the recent past, church leaders in general have repeatedly and publicly labeled religious bodies such as Scientology and the Japan-based Aum Shinrikyo as destructive "sects" and "cults". At times, some have failed to make little or no distinction between those bodies on the one hand and Roman Catholics, Baptists and most main-line Protestant confessions on the other. Just as often they have condemned nearly all of these confessions outright for unfairly "proselytizing" on Russian soil, which the Patriarchate considers an exclusively "Orthodox domain."

Which of the scenarios or what mix of the two will describe reality will surely become clearer over the coming weeks and months. For now, however, what may be useful to explore are the dramatically changing circumstances that have lead to the present state of affairs.

In this text, only the issue of the Pope's and Patriarch's meeting can be dealt with.

Steps Toward the Failed Encounter

Indeed, their encounter stands a good chance chance of being salvaged. Both sides have eagerly sought to meet for over two years.

During the papal visit to Hungary in September 1996, and apparently at the initiative of several local Catholic prelates and their government, a meeting of the two religious leaders was scheduled at the celebrated Benedictine monastery in Pannonhalma, the founding of which - fittingly and symbolically - antedates the Great Schism of 1054. But, at the last minute the Patriarch is reported to have begged off as pressures from among ultra-nationalist clerics within the ROC were upped excessively.

Trinity, available at: news@holy-trinity.org

6 This has been expressed by Russian clerical ultra-nationalists and most recently spelled out by Serbian Orthodox who are intent on exiting from the WCC (see note 30, below); the clearly pejorative reference to the "Polish" pope was reported on good authority to have been made recently by a well-placed Orthodox clergyman.

7 This exclusivity is elaborated by Orthodox ecclesiastics as "canonical territory," a concept rejected by most other faiths, but recognized in the breach by some.

Concerning sects and cults, see the directory published by the Missionary Department of the Moscow Patriarchate: Missionerskiy Otdel Moskovskogo Patriarchata Russkoy Pravoslavnoy Tserkvi, Novve Religioznne Organizatsii Rossii Destruktivnogo i Okkyl'tnogo Charaktera - Spravochnik (Belgorod, 1997). The preface contains important references to the "inapplicability" of the current guarantees of religious liberty (presumably the 1990 Law on Freedom of Religion and Conscience) and of the "American" and "European models" of church-state relations and religious freedom (presumably the wide spread acceptance of religious toleration and separation of church and state).
Then in November 1996 - according to well-placed sources - it was the Russians who eagerly proposed that both sides try again. The occasion would be the Second European Ecumenical Assembly which was held in Graz, Austria between 23 and 29 June 1997 under the sponsorship of Europe's Christian churches. Initially, it was suggested that not only the patriarchs of Moscow and Rome convene, but also that of Armenia as well as the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople-Istanbul. The latter is generally regarded throughout the Orthodox world as the "first among equals" and has been historically accorded the power, attributed to no other authority, to shape the consensus that either grants or confirms autonomy and autocephaly (degrees of self-governance, from partial to full, respectively) to local and national churches.

Since early 1996, the Russians have been at odds with Constantinople over the latter's reconfirmation of the original autonomy of the Orthodox Church of Estonia. With the Soviet occupation of the Baltics in 1940, the Estonian Church had involuntarily fallen under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. With national independence in 1991, however, Estonian politicians of all persuasions, no less than churchmen of the Orthodox minority, contended for a return to pre-war ecclesiastical liberties.

Moscow vehemently opposed it, but later formally relented and a face-saving, middle-term solution was hastily agreed to. Russian relations with Constantinople, however, have remained embittered. Might not then the meeting of patriarchs in Graz - where, under the theme of "Reconciliation - Gift of God and Source of New Life," some ten thousand faithful from hundreds of confessions were expected to gather - have been envisioned by Moscow as a chance to mend their differences?

On 30 May, 1997, His All Holiness, Bartholomeos I, the Ecumenical Patriarch, had evidently concluded it had not. From Istanbul, he announced his decision to "postpone" - in effect, cancel - his expected participation in both the Assembly and his planned official state visit to Austria. He further charged that contrary to its expressed purpose, the Assembly was being turned into a "confrontation" between church leaders and that he did "not wish to participate in a tug of war pitting supremacies against one another." Sources close to the Patriarch alleged that the cancellation came in the wake of "attempts by the Vatican and the Moscow Patriarchate to exploit the congress," while subsequent press coverage indeed suggests that

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8 The official sponsors were the Conference of European Churches and the Council of European [Roman Catholic] Bishops' Conferences. The world press had given this event considerable attention: one starting point is John Thavis, "Vatican Working on Papal Meeting with Russian Orthodox Patriarch," Catholic News Service, 12 May 1997.

9 Based on a dispatch from Reuters, "Orthodox patriarchs may make historic meeting with Pope." 09 May 1997.

10 See "Vartholomeos cancels official visit to Austria," Athens News Agency Bulletin, (No 1200), 31 May 1997; he added, "The events in Graz aim at reconciliation between Christians and should not be used to promote personal interests."

11 Ibid.
at some point between November 1996 and late May 1997, Bartholomeos I and the Armenian church leader - originally proposed by the Russians as participants - had somehow been deliberately dealt out of any "pan-patriarchal" encounter. By early June, the venue also had shifted from Graz to Vienna, and still again to an ancient Cistercian monastery in Heiligenkreuz, some 20 kilometers (12 miles) southwest of Vienna. Only then - on or about 08 June - did officials of the Russian Orthodox Church go on record to confirm that the future encounter, were it to occur, would be strictly between the Pope and the Moscow Patriarch.

**Overtures by Pope and Patriarch**

Indeed, both sides have long put great store in a meeting of just the two. Since Vatican Council II (1962-1965) Rome has eagerly sought to promote the cause of Christian Unity, while it is an open secret around the Vatican that since his election to the See of Peter in 1978, the Holy Father has hoped not only one day to make the first pastoral visit of a Roman Pontiff to Russia, but also to preside over celebrations of the Third Christian Millennium at which the Moscow Patriarch's presence is considered indispensable.

Indeed, some circles in Rome believe the Holy Father has made unnecessary concessions. Driven by a "calling" to put an end to the "scandal" of Christian division, he has in effect pledged to the Russians - in a series of encyclicals and official documents - to respect Orthodoxy's ascendance on Russian soil, to prohibit his own clergy from proselytizing there, and - to the dismay of Ukraine's minority Greek Catholics, liturgically Byzantine, but in union with the Holy See - to find forms of "full communion" with the Orthodox that would fall short of the latter's formal submission to papal authority (whose claim to infallibility is in no way recognized by world Orthodoxy) as had been required in the past.

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13 See the Reuters dispatch out of Moscow, "Roman, Russian Churches Discuss Historic Meeting," 09 June 1997: "The Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church may meet Pope John Paul in Austria later this month in an unprecedented encounter between the two Christian leaders, a Russian church official said on Friday. " Talks are now being held between the Vatican and the Patriarchate in Moscow," said Timofei Zolotusky, an official in the Patriarchate's external relations department. "In all of history there has never been such a meeting," Zolotusky said. "Since talks are being held, it shows that both sides want it to happen."


These documents are discussed in passing in a series of articles by Ralph Della Cava: "The Roman Catholic Church in Russia, The Latin Rite: A Five Year Assessment -- Towards a 'Native' Russian Church?," Harriman Review, 9:4 (Winter), 46-57, also in a Russian translation in Stranitsy (Moscow), 2:2 (Spring 1997), 230-251; "Religious Resource Networks: Roman Catholic Philanthropy in Central and East Europe" in Transnational Religion and Fading States, edited by Susan Rudolph
Not a few Roman critics believe the papacy has gone too far. Yet, shortly after Heiligenkreuz was canceled, it might be said that the Holy Father went even farther. In his Sunday homily at St. Peter's on 22 June 1997, he declared that "reconciliation must involve everyone ... all the people of Europe ... from the Atlantic to the Urals, from East to West." Then, in an obvious allusion to rescheduling his meeting with Aleksiy II, he underscored the "urgency" to overcome "still open problems and sometimes unexpected upsets ..."¹⁵

For his part, Aleksiy II is no less intent in promoting the unity of the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic" Church (a definition of early church councils which, incidentally, is held in common by Orthodox and Catholics as well as many reformation Christians). He said as much in his 1994 Christmas address on Vatican Radio and has reiterated that view subsequently. Moreover, in the aftermath of his canceled meeting with the Pope, he wrote the Holy Father, insisting on "continuing the dialogue underway," and expressing the wish (according to the papal press secretary) "that this meeting will be able to take place."¹⁶ As recently as 15 January 1998, at the closing of the regular twice yearly "bi-lateral conversations" between the Holy See and the Patriarchate, he reportedly again "voiced his willingness to attend such a meeting and to continue the dialogue," although not until "obstacles" to the same were overcome.¹⁷

Benefits to Moscow

Indeed, for Russian Orthodoxy such a meeting has broad significance. In at least three respects, Moscow would have much to gain from it.

First of all, it would likely result not only in establishing direct access to Rome at the highest echelon, but would also do so by sidestepping Constantinople entirely. For, although the Ecumenical Patriarchate has been reduced in modern times in both numbers and resources, it has nonetheless successfully retained its historic ascendance over the highly divided Orthodox world and does so in part by serving as its principal "broker" and interlocutor between its faithful and Christians of other confessions.

In fact, Constantinople was not only among the first to champion Orthodox membership in the World...
Council of Churches, now under broad attack by Orthodox conservatives, but in 1967 under the late Patriarch, His All Holiness, Athenagoras I, it also opened up a dialogue with the popes of Rome that has continued to this day.

Until late, the papacy has always accorded a measure of preeminence to its relations with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. For that very reason, an exclusive meeting between John Paul II and Aleksiy II can probably be viewed as a nuanced shift in Rome’s priorities and its tacit acknowledgment of Moscow’s potentially greater role than Constantinople’s in the now multi-polar world of religious dialogue that has emerged in the post-Cold War era.

Incontrovertibly, Moscow’s boast of 60 million nominal Orthodox believers inside Russia and better than 40 million more in neighboring Ukraine and Belarus alone makes it the single largest Orthodox Church in the world. But outside Russia, that boast could be made empty. In those very same newly independent countries (once part of the former USSR), various nationalist forces, especially in Ukraine, openly deny - as did the Estonians - the Moscow Patriarchate’s continuing claim of canonical authority over these distant Orthodox faithful now residing in nations of their own.

The "Ukrainian Problem"

Indeed, the "Ukrainian" problem (one so multi-faceted and complex that it requires patient explanation here) - and the chance to gain from Rome advantages for a Russian Orthodoxy that is now under fire across Russia’s very borders - was surely a second reason for the Heiligenkreuz meeting.

What precisely might Moscow have hoped to gain? First of all, a more strenuous "taming" by Rome of the five million-strong Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC). Established 400 years ago as a Byzantine rite in union with the See of Peter, it was "phoenix-like" reborn in the late eighties after having been legally "abolished" by Soviet authorities in 1946 and its properties and faithful "absorbed" by the Moscow Patriarchate. The post-Soviet era "battles" to repossess churches, monasteries and entire bodies of parishioners have still not been fully resolved. Indeed, both sides periodically claim that some of their respective communities still suffer from "oppression and persecution" - perpetrated either by the faithful of the "other" confession or, as is not infrequently the case, powerful local political leaders partisan to one or another church (or their own re-election).

In the mid-nineties, the UGCC - historically centered in Western Ukraine (and whose members Russian Orthodox pejoratively call "Uniates") - seems to have embarked on a "policy of 'national recognition," by situating new churches in the traditionally Orthodox Central and Eastern regions. (UGCC’s critics condemn this course as an undeclared "policy of expansion;" whether it enjoys Rome’s tacit approval also appears a matter of considerable dispute).

Probably equally disconcerting to Moscow is the expressed intent of the UGCC to elevate its presiding Cardinal and Metropolitan in Lwiw to the rank of a Byzantine rite Patriarch (a rank historically never accorded...
him) and then to move the would-be new to Kyiv, Ukraine's capital and millennia birthplace of ancient Rus's Slavic Orthodox Christianity. No less distressing has been the cordial relations Greek Catholics have maintained with the three nationalist Orthodox "currents" (that call themselves churches and as such are juridically fully incorporated in Ukraine).

Not only do the latter dissent canonically - and patriotically, in their opinion - from the authority of the Moscow Patriarchate. But - in outright defiance of the Russian Orthodox Church of which they were once a part - two of these have also established their own "Patriarchate of Kiev and of all Rus-Ukraine." To add insult to injury, one of these self-proclaimed patriarchs, Filaret (Denisenko), was himself the former Metropolitan of Kiev of the Russian Orthodox Church, a member of its Holy Synod, and even a losing candidate in the patriarchal succession of 1990 (when the office was conferred upon Aleksiy II). Consequently, from the Moscow Patriarchate's perspective, Filaret's persistence in the "rump" office of "Patriarch of Kiev" amounted to condemnable perfidy and so justified not only the disciplinary actions meted out to him since 1994, but also in the face of his "disobedience" the order of excommunication decreed in February 1997 by the Russian Church's bienniel Bishops' Council.18

Thus, whatever discomfort the Greek Catholics may cause, it is this troika of Ukrainian Orthodox Churches - numbering from a fifth to a third of the country's approximately 40 million nominal Orthodox (and whose histories and current politics cannot be broached here) - which is in the opinion of many observers the real threat to the Moscow Patriarchate's future.19

How so?

Suffice it to recall here that from the time of the Soviet army occupation of Western Ukraine in 1946 (then a part of Poland) until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Orthodox and Greek Catholics together (the latter then were "crypto-Greek Catholics"), hailing mostly from Western Ukraine and amounting to between a fifth and a third of the country's population, had together provided better than a third of all the seminarians

18 With regard to the excommunication of Filaret, see the "Russian Orthodox Church: Act on [sic] Excommunication of the monk Filaret [Mikhail Antonovich] Denisenko," dated 23 February 1997 and available on line from the Moscow Patriarchate's website at: http://www.russian-orthodox­church.org.ru/sobor09e.htm#1

19 The components of this "troika" are: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kievan Patriarchate; the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church with its own Patriarch in Kiev; and a schismatic faction of the latter (these are discussed elsewhere in this footnote and in note 20 below).

On Ukrainian Orthodox church rivalries and varying statistics, see the scholarship of Frank Sysyn, Serguei Plochiy, and Bohdan Bociurkiw varingly published in the journal, Religion, State & Society; the newspaper, The Ukrainian Weekly; and in Michael Bourdeaux, The Politics of Religion in Russia and the New States of Eurasia (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1995).

For a recent account of current problems and interviews with Archbishop Mefodiy of Ternopolis and Podolsk of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (whose Patriarch is Dimitry and against whom a new schism has erupted, thus creating a "second" Ukrainian Autocephalous Church), see the articles in NG-Religii, 5 (May 1997), the very informative monthly supplement on religion, begun in January 1997, of the Moscow daily newspaper, Nezavisimaya Gazeta.
and clergy of the entire Russian Orthodox Church as well as a goodly portion - as much as a third - of its annual revenues. At the major theological academies of Zagorsk (outside Moscow and called today Sergey Posad) and St. Petersburg, it was a standing joke that the "Ukrainians" had taken over the Russian Church.

Of course, today, it is not the privation per se of these human and material resources from Moscow that is critical (indeed, the Russian Church has made miraculous progress in the last five years in creating a substantial and independent economic base for itself). But, rather it is their commitment since independence by these now self-sufficient confessions to apply their own substantial resources to the cause of unifying all three of the anti-Moscow currents of Ukrainian Orthodoxy into a single new "Patriarchate of Kyiv and All Rus-Ukraine" -- one enjoying eventual autocephaly and thus no longer dependent on Moscow.

Indeed, Moscow's fear of just such a direction led it late (in 1992), reluctantly, and as a largely tactical measure to grant a modicum of administrative "autonomy" to the current Russian Orthodox "Metropolitan of Kiev and all Ukraine" and his thirty-three prelates. Technically speaking, that step also holds out the promise of Kiev's one day gaining full autocephaly. But, because these churchmen still remain (by church law and choice) loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate - despite Ukraine's independence - and however much this position is canonically "correct," many Ukrainians are not assuaged. Moreover, that the said Metropolitan continues to sit officially on the Holy Synod, the important interim governing body of the Russian Church, as do his prelates at its biennial Bishops' Councils, makes their claim for being a genuinely "autonomous" Ukrainian Church all the more implausible to Ukrainian nationalists.

Three other factors seem to be working against Moscow's middle-run retention of influence over its Ukrainian Church. For one, popular support for the three Orthodox currents mentioned above and their

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20 The role of Ukraine within the Moscow Patriarchate just prior to the dissolution of the USSR (1989-1990) is sensitively described by the American Greek Orthodox Deacon, Anthony Ugolnik, "Burdened with History - Soviet Churches & The Search for Authenticity," Commonweal (21 December 1990), 751-756.

21 Canonically, a church may not declare itself either autonomous or autocephalous. Rather, it can appeal to its "mother church" for such independence and then -- wait. The Ecumenical Patriarchate may intervene to hasten and sanction the results of the process.

In the case of Filaret (Denisenko), the former Russian Orthodox Church's Metropolitan of Kiev, he had himself declared Patriarch of Kiev and all Rus-Ukraine -- after having lost out to Aleksiy II in the June 1990 election to fill the post of Patriarch of Moscow!

For the Ukrainian Orthodox still loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate and headed by Metropolitan Vladimir (Sabodan), Filaret is a fraud and usurper. Indeed, at the ROC's Bishops' Council convened in Moscow in February 1997 he was formally excommunicated for "anti-church activities," criminally ignoring an earlier church decree of banishment, performing 'consecrations without possessing the holy priesthood," for daring "to call himself 'patriarch of Kiev and Rus-Ukraine', while the ancient throne of Kiev is lawfully occupied by a canonical representative of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the rank of metropolitan" who is in communion with the Moscow Patriarchate; see "Russian Orthodox Church: Act on [sic] Excommunication of the monk Filaret [Mikhail Antonovich] Denisenko," dated 23 February 1997 and available on line from the Moscow Patriarchate's website at: http://www.russian-orthodox-church.org.ru/sobor09e.htm#1

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campaign for a fully independent Kievan-based Orthodoxy continues enthusiastic, even if the number of worshippers, parishes and dioceses appear to have remained stable over the last few years.

For another, outside Russia and the former Soviet Union some other "autocephalous" (fully self-governing) churches and prominent Orthodox clergy have expressed complete sympathy for Ukraine's cause and its implicit right to its own Patriarchate. In that context, Constantinople's ready defense of Estonia was widely construed as a step towards its eventual endorsement of Ukraine. (In that light, Moscow's temporary, but disproportionately aggressive break with the Ecumenical Patriarchate in early 1996 appears far more understandable). For still another, the prospect of a Kievan Patriarchate enjoys broad support from among Ukraine's politicians - across party lines and at every level of government. They have simply not yet reached a consensus on the tactics - either at home or in diplomatic circles - necessary to bring this about.

**Moscow on the World Stage?**

Of course, what specific action Moscow expects of Rome in regard to the Orthodox situation in Ukraine is hard to say. Surely, a major aim is to halt the further decline of Russian church influence there and in several bordering states (where in Soviet times it had enjoyed an effective monopoly). In the very least, a meeting of the Pope and Patriarch would finally allow Moscow - on its own merits - to have Rome's ear just as Constantinople has long had.

Moreover, such a meeting could bring a third and last boon to Moscow: the occasion to reveal itself on the world stage as a "major player" in the religious politics and strivings of our times. That stage has so far escaped it, while few of the world's personalities can command it with the same success as does Pope John

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22 A 1989 or 1990 article by the Rev. Basil Osborne, the Orthodox Auxiliary Bishop of Sourozh (Great Britai), published in the British Orthodox journal, Sourozh, argued early and strongly in favor of the Moscow Patriarchate's full endorsement of autocephaly for a Kievan Patriarchate; although I was informed of this article by a reliable source, I have not yet been able to verify it.


24 In public, the Moscow Patriarchate insists on an end to Catholic proselytism, to Rome's further extension of ecclesiastical structures inside Russia, and to its support of the Greek Catholics in Ukraine, demands that Rome could hardly meet.

As to what Rome may have expected in exchange is also difficult to say. But few would dismiss the hope for a pastoral visit by the Holy Father to the Catholics of Russia, an undertaking that can hardly be expected to be easily agreed to at this juncture. Even were President Boris Yeltsin to extend such an invitation, Rome would unlikely accept were the Moscow Patriarchate to oppose it.

Evidence of such a Vatican goal is only indirect: thus far, the Holy Father has put off several ecclesiastical requests for a papal visit to Ukraine, an option whose consequence would likely be to foreclose for a long time to come any papal visit to Russia.

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The truth of the matter is that Orthodoxy in general and Russian Orthodoxy specifically have remained just "beyond the pale" of the global media. As to Aleksiy II, none of his important trips abroad (neither to Germany nor the United States) has yet "put him on the map," not even his strenuous June 1997 pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In fact, press reports of his support of the Palestinians sounded more reminiscent of the Soviet Union's one-time anti-Israeli policy than of one of the visit's intended goals "back home," viz., to help garner support from among Russia's twenty-two million nominal Moslems, who make up the country's second largest faith.

Graz, or Vienna, or Heiligenkreuz - any one of them might just have been center stage.

**Why the Cancellation**

If so much was riding on the meeting, why did the Russians cancel it? Why did they do so literally after all the major joint pronouncements were said to have already been - in the opinion of observers close to the Vatican, but publicly denied by the Moscow Patriarchate - "signed, sealed and delivered?" And finally why did they do so on the night of the tenth of June - at a supposedly unscheduled meeting of the Holy Synod that had been organized on the spot only hours earlier during the reception celebrating the sixth anniversary of Aleksiy II's "enthronement" as Patriarch?

The Patriarchate's official press release put the blame on the Vatican, contending that its representatives had "at the last minute ... removed passages from a planned joint declaration which were of crucial importance for the Russian Orthodox Church." It then enumerated a litany of grievances which have been substantially

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25 Elsewhere, this Pope's relationship to media, media's decisive role in promoting religions' own objectives (despite the supposed bias against religious beliefs and the discourse of faith), and the supposedly "unlimited" world-wide power of media specifically rooted in the West to promote (inordinately, in the opinion of some) the historic faiths of the West have been widely discussed in several places. See, among others, Ralph Della Cava, "Vatican Policy, 1978-1991: An Updated Overview," *Social Research*, 59:1 (Spring 1992), pp. 169-199.

26 See "Orthodoxy Faces Media Bias in North America, US Expert Contends," *Orthodox Press Service*, 1:6 [New Series], 15 July 1997, an on-line news service, edited in Byalistok, Poland by the Orthodox Youth Movement and available via: syndesmos@telbank.pl


28 Andrei Zolotov, "Alexy Blames Pope for Cancellation," *The Moscow Times*, 17 June 1997, 3. A fuller account can be found in the interview with the Moscow Patriarchate's Chancellor, Archbishop Sergiy of Solnechnogorsk, published as "Dialog Neobchodim, No V strecha Neymestna," in the NG-Religii supplement No. 6 (June 1997) of the weekly *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 26 June 1997, 3. In it, the Chancellor makes the Pope directly responsible for "overturning "a series of previous conditions agreed upon by both sides concerning the preparation of the meeting." He went on to say that "the major problem ... touched on the draft of the final document from which -- at the very last minute -- Vatican representatives excised..."
the same over the past couple of years and had certainly not altered in any significant way within the previous week or two after both sides had apparently firmly committed themselves to the meeting.29

What, then, really lies behind the cancellation? Answers other than official ones have simply been unavailable from either side. But one piece of speculation that made the rounds of Moscow diplomatic and church circles can be summed up in one word: Ukraine!

But, not exactly for the reasons cited in the press conference. Rather, as the rumor had it, Ukraine's Orthodox ecclesiastics loyal to Moscow had actually lobbied hard against the meeting. In their minds, it would have only strengthened the hand of the "uniates" and their "friends" in the Orthodox "Kievan Patriarchate." Joining these Ukrainian "Moscovites" was probably the "anti-Polish," ultra-conservative faction of Russian prelates who have consistently labeled ecumenism a heresy and who played a key, but unsuccessful role at ROC's February 1997 biennial Bishops' Council to end ties to non-Orthodox Christians. Moreover, these lobbyists had mounted their campaign just two weeks or so after the Georgian Orthodox Church ended its membership in the World Council of Churches and while anti-ecumenical forces in the Serbian Orthodox Church were gathering strength to do the same.30

Those second-guessing this situation further speculated that neither Aleksiy II nor Kirill, the Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, a champion of ecumenism, since 1989 the experienced Director of the Patriarchate's Department of External Church Relations, and a key proponent of the meeting between Pope and Patriarch, had anticipated the extent and depth of the internal opposition. Had they done so, the argument continues, they would never have led Rome on. When they perceived the danger - indeed, at the eleventh hour - they convened the impromptu session of the Holy Synod on whose shoulders, rather than on their own, the decision to cancel has since rested. As a result, the Patriarch was free to address a personal letter to the Pope immediately thereafter reiterating his wish "that this meeting will be able to take place."

Perhaps Soon

Indeed, no one speaks of losers. Nor does anyone dare suggest that the Russian church may simply be too mired in its own past and so still "unprepared," psychologically and theologically, to catch up with the sense such issues as the Uniates and their position in Western Ukraine and all questions connected with the condemnation of proselytism." I have been unable to confirm the accounts of either side.

29 The two basic charges reported were: "Latin" Catholic proselytism in Russia; and, "uniate" (Greek Catholic) activities in Russia, Belarus and Western Ukraine; again, see the interview with the Moscow Patriarchate's Chancellor, Archbishop Sergiy of Solnechnogorsk, published as "Dialog Neobchodim, No Vstrecha Neymestna," in the NG-Religii supplement No. 6 (June 1997), cited in note 28.

30 See Andrei Zolotov, "Georgian Orthodox Church to leave WCC and CEC," Ecumenical News Service, 26 May 1997; and Fr. Sava [sic], "Possible Withdrawal of the Serbian [Orthodox] Church from WCC, 21 June 1997; both available on-line from: news@holy-trinity.org
of ecumenism prevailing today in West Europe. At least, not publicly.31

Rather, the statements from both sides, but especially from Catholic quarters, reinforce the Patriarch's hope "that this meeting will be able to take place." Perhaps, the common vision of pope and patriarch putting an end to the "scandal" of Christianity's divisions and giving welcome to the Third Christian Millennium together in full solidarity may yet bring about the still unprecedented encounter. Nor can its historical significance be lost on both protagonists whose wills may yet win out over advancing age and failing health.32

Time is short, but in the end it never fails to reveal on whose side it was on.

31 In private church circles, Orthodox and Catholic, both views have been heard expressed: for one, that the patriarchs of Rome, Moscow and Constantinople all "lost" a golden opportunity; for another, that a millennium of isolation and division is much harder for the Russian Orthodox Church to overcome because its great church reforms begun in 1917 -- long preceding those of the Second Vatican Council (1962 to 1965) -- were aborted by the Bolshevik Revolution and its ensuing development.

32 At 68, Patriarch Aleksiy II suffers from a heart condition which he has supposedly had monitored at American hospitals during his trips to the States; most recently, while in Austria, he collapsed during a three-hour religious service, according to "News in Brief," The Philadelphia Inquirer, "International Section," 23 June, 1997.

Pope John Paul II's health continues to decline, although according to a recent visitor, "his mind remains as alert as ever."