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A Meeting Between The Pope And The Patriarch of Moscow Seems Closer Today

Italian Scholar Living in Russia Speaks On Eastern Orthodox- Roman Catholic Relations

ROME, SEPT.19, 2012 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- It is “an eventuality that was never excluded in the past and which seems closer today.” The much awaited meeting between Benedict XVI and Orthodox Patriarch Kirill might not be far away, on condition that some open questions are resolved, said the hieromonk Giovanni Guaita in an interview with Aid to the Church in Need (ACN). The Italian scholar has lived in Russia for almost 30 years as a collaborator of the secretary for Inter-Christian Relations of the Department for Foreign Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate.

The hieromonk – a title attributed by the Eastern Churches to monks who have received priestly ordination – received the Papal Foundation at the Muscovite monastery of Saint Daniel, a spiritual and administrative center of the Orthodox Church, where the Department headed by the Metropolitan, Hilarion, has its headquarters.

“The hope is that the meeting will mark a moment of effective change in relations between the two Churches, and not limited to a handshake in front of photographers,” he said. First, he explained, some knots must be untied, not so much in Russia as in other countries, for example, Ukraine. The desire of a possible face to face meeting between the heads of the two Churches, however, was discussed in 2005 by the newly elected pope, Benedict XVI and the then “simple” Metropolitan Kirill.

Relations between Moscow and the Holy See were also discussed last July on the occasion of Prime Minister Mario Monti’s visit to Russia when, due to scheduling conflicts, the Italian Premier broke with protocol, meeting the Orthodox patriarch even before his meeting with [Russian President Dmitry] Medvedev. The hieromonk was present at the conversation in which there was obviously talk of the present economic crisis, a subject felt profoundly by the patriarchate. “Today Russia is facing social problems she never knew in the past, such as the enormous economic disparity between various strata of the population. And the Orthodox Church is increasingly active in this area,” he explained to ACN-Italy.

Another relatively recent phenomenon is that of immigration. Those which in the Soviet period were simply internal movements have now become migratory flows with the consequent problems of reception and integration. “In Moscow the community of immigrants, both official as well as

clandestine, is very large and comes, to a great extent, from the former Soviet Republics with a Muslim majority. Because of this, inter-religious dialogue is necessary,” Guaita said.

The Russian Orthodox patriarch is also strongly committed to providing support to persecuted Christians worldwide and to opposing a “certain 'Christianophobia' present in Western Europe and where the faithful do not suffer persecution directly, but where the desire exists to relegate the Church to the margins of social life and to reduce the religious event to a private question,” he said.

Concluding his interview, the Orthodox Religious scholar thanked ACN, saying that they are “one of the very first Catholic organizations to establish very cordial relations with the Moscow patriarchate.” Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the air was tense between the two Churches, both in Russia as well as in the countries of the former USSR. However, the Papal Foundation continued to support “an amazing quantity” of projects in favor of the Orthodox Church, be it in Moscow or in other regions of the Federation.

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