

New Moscow archbishop to work with Orthodox

MOSCOW – Russia's new Catholic archbishop has pledged to improve cooperation with the Russian Orthodox Church, while rejecting proselytism and helping resolve the country's "pressing problems."

"It is notable that the Catholic and Orthodox churches have cooperated in efforts to address the issues of nurturing Christian values on European and global levels," said Italian-born Archbishop Paolo Pezzi of Moscow.

"This work is in full keeping with the will and intentions expressed by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI. First of all, I mean a friendly, valid and substantial dialogue with the Orthodox tradition, which is represented here mainly by the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate and is deeply rooted in the Russian society," said the archbishop.

"We also need to give close attention to the pressing problems of the modern Russian society," he added.

In an Oct. 28 interview with Russia's Interfax news agency, marking his installation as head of the Moscow-based Archdiocese of the Mother of God, Archbishop Pezzi said his work would mark "the continuation, not the beginning" of efforts to improve pastoral care for Catholics and make better use of priests and religious.

The archbishop said he supported current demands by the Orthodox Patriarchate in Moscow to reintroduce military chaplains and ensure Orthodox culture was taught at schools.

"Mission is a testimony of evangelical values. And proselytism starts at the point where the real mission ends. Therefore, if all of us, both Catholics and Orthodox, practice mission, we can develop good understanding and pursue unity – there will be no place left for conflicts," said the 47-year-old archbishop.

"Regardless of overall cultural differences between the Catholic and the Orthodox

worlds, the Catholic Church and local Orthodox churches are making joint efforts to address the basic challenges of modern life,” he noted. “Appeals for joint Catholic-Orthodox efforts to protect Christian values sound increasingly often and urgent.”

Archbishop Pezzi was consecrated Oct. 27 in Moscow’s Immaculate Conception Cathedral by the Vatican’s nuncio to Russia, Archbishop Antonio Mennini, and Bishop Joseph Werth of the Novosibirsk-based Transfiguration Diocese.

In a message at the Mass, Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow said he also hoped the new archbishop’s tenure would mark “good relations” and “an early resolution of problems” between Catholic and Orthodox churches.

Born in Italy, Archbishop Pezzi attended Pontifical Lateran University, where he studied about Catholics in Siberia. He has worked in Russia since 1993 as a member of the Fraternity of the Missionaries of St. Charles Borromeo, a priestly association within Communion and Liberation.

Archbishop Pezzi, who served as rector of Mary, Queen of the Apostles seminary in St. Petersburg, replaces Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, a Russian citizen who will return to his native Belarus as archbishop of Minsk-Mohilev.

Speaking at his Oct. 28 farewell Mass, Archbishop Kondrusiewicz said his “greatest happiness” had been “observing the renewal of Christian life on Russian territory” since his 1991 appointment, adding that he had been particularly supported by Pope John Paul II “in hard times when it seemed all was lost and there were no more prospects.”

The archbishop said he was grateful to foreign priests, nuns and laity who had helped rebuild the Catholic Church in Russia, as well as to the Orthodox church and other Christian denominations for helping develop dialogue.

He said he had “gained wings” from seeing “huge queues for the confessionals and masses of people sunk in prayer” at Catholic churches.

“The Catholic Church is very much needed here at the center of Russia,” said Archbishop Kondrusiewicz, according to Poland’s Catholic information agency, KAI. “Our church has become a permanent element of the Russian reality and is giving

hope to an atheistic society. Rebuilt from ruins, it is taking an active part in the country's social, cultural and academic life, giving a testimony of faith in a secularized world."

Catholics constitute less than 1 percent of Russia's 147 million inhabitants, according to government data.

The church had just 10 registered parishes and eight priests in the country at Archbishop Kondrusiewicz's 1991 appointment as the first resident archbishop of Moscow. Currently Russia has 126 diocesan and 142 religious order priests, as well as 309 nuns and 193 monastic brothers, although only one in 10 are Russian citizens.

However, the church is not recognized as "traditional" under Russia's 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, and only half its 426 parishes are legally registered.

Catholic-Orthodox ties became tense after the 1991 collapse of Soviet rule over Orthodox complaints of Catholic proselytism, although a joint working group was set up in February 2004 to help resolve interchurch disputes.