

# Pope meets Orthodox archbishop, calls for prayers for unity

VATICAN CITY – Perseverance and prayer are needed as Catholics and Orthodox work toward full unity, Pope Benedict XVI said, welcoming Orthodox Archbishop Chrysostomos II of Cyprus to the Vatican.

The head of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus spent five hours with Pope Benedict June 16; his visit included a private meeting, a ceremony to sign a joint declaration of ecumenical commitment, a midday prayer service in the Vatican's Redemptoris Mater Chapel and a two-hour lunch.

While both the pope and the archbishop underlined the importance of the theological dialogue involving the Catholic Church and all the Orthodox churches, Archbishop Chrysostomos also insisted that it was essential to improve relations between the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church.

"I think I could be useful," the archbishop told reporters. He said he would visit Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow in early July and urge him to move toward a meeting with Pope Benedict.

For years Pope John Paul II had hoped for a meeting with the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, and Pope Benedict also has hoped to meet him, but Patriarch Alexy repeatedly has said such a meeting could not take place unless Catholics stopped proselytizing the Orthodox in Russia.

The Vatican repeatedly has said the Catholic Church rejects proselytism and has asked the Russian Orthodox to identify situations where Catholics are acting inappropriately so corrective action may be taken.

Speaking to reporters about the archbishop's visit, Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, said, "I think it is a mistake to focus" on the unrealized meeting of the pope and patriarch, because "the relationship between two churches is something much greater than such an encounter."

While the cardinal said he hoped Pope Benedict and Patriarch Alexy could meet within the next year, he said that “at the moment there is nothing being planned.”

Archbishop Chrysostomos said he spoke to Pope Benedict about the need to improve relations with the Russian Orthodox.

“The Holy Father did not give me a specific message to give Patriarch Alexy, but I am ready to offer my services” as a mediator, he told reporters.

“The will of God is peace, love and fraternity among people,” the archbishop said. “We must become one as the Holy Trinity is one.”

In his formal speech to the archbishop, Pope Benedict said that with God’s help “we must never tire of seeking together paths toward unity, overcoming those difficulties that in the course of history have created divisions and mutual mistrust.”

“May the Lord allow us soon to approach the same altar, to share all together the one table of the eucharistic bread and wine,” the pope said.

In his speech, Archbishop Chrysostomos addressed Pope Benedict as the bishop of the historic see of St. Peter and as the one who “possesses the primacy of honor” among all other bishops.

The archbishop said that the divisions between Catholics and Orthodox accumulated over the course of centuries and will take years to overcome, but faithfulness to God and an obligation to evangelize together mean everyone must work for unity with “patience and sacrifices.”

Archbishop Chrysostomos also asked Pope Benedict for his prayers and his “paternal cry for the defense of the rights” of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus, particularly in protecting Orthodox churches, cemeteries and monuments in Turkish-occupied northern Cyprus.

He said he is sure the pope understands the pain of the Cypriot people because, as a German, Pope Benedict comes from a country that had been “traumatized by division for decades.”

In northern Cyprus, the archbishop said, “human rights are trampled, monuments are destroyed (and) works of our spiritual patrimony have become the object of international commerce.”

In their joint declaration, Pope Benedict and Archbishop Chrysostomos called for the worldwide defense of human rights, particularly the right to religious freedom.

In addition, they said, “to profane, destroy and sack places of worship of any religion represents an act against the humanity and civility of peoples.”