

# Pope urges Russia's Catholic bishops to work with Orthodox

VATICAN CITY – Catholics in Russia must work together with the country's much larger Orthodox community to defend human life and the family and promote strong moral values, Pope Benedict XVI said.

The pope met the four Catholic bishops of Russia Jan. 29, the last day of their "ad limina" visits to the Vatican to report on the status of their dioceses and just two days after the Russian Orthodox Church elected a new patriarch.

In a situation where Catholic-Orthodox differences involving theology, church structure and practice make formal dialogue a challenge, the pope said, the bishops must engage in dialogue on a personal level.

"Such contacts contribute to greater mutual understanding, thanks to which it is possible to work together in areas of common interest," he said.

"It is important that Christians unite to face the great cultural and ethical challenges of the present moment concerning the dignity of the human person and his inalienable rights, the defense of life at every stage, the safeguarding of the family and other urgent economic and social questions," the pope said.

In a country like Russia, so deeply marked by more than 1,000 years of Orthodox tradition and culture, "it is essential to take into account the necessity of a renewed commitment to dialogue with our Orthodox brothers and sisters," Pope Benedict said.

While again offering his best wishes to Patriarch-elect Kirill of Moscow, the pope also prayed that God would "confirm us all in the commitment to walk together on the path of reconciliation and fraternal love."

Pope Benedict told the Catholic bishops he understood the challenges of ministering in Russia and he praised their efforts to "relaunch liturgical-sacramental participation, catechesis, priestly formation and the preparation of a mature and

responsible laity” after decades of communist repression of church activities.

In addition to the lingering effects of communist atheism, he said, Russia also is experiencing a crisis in family life, a sharply declining birthrate and other problems common to Western industrialized nations.

“These problems also worry government authorities, with whom it is therefore advisable to collaborate for the good of all,” he said.

Pope Benedict told the bishops not to let themselves be discouraged when results do not seem to match the amount of effort they put into pastoral programs.

“Nourish in yourselves and in your collaborators an authentic spirit of faith,” trusting that Jesus will make their efforts bear fruit in time, he said.