

Vatican, Russia upgrade ties to full diplomatic relations

VATICAN CITY - The Vatican and Russia announced they would upgrade diplomatic relations to the highest level.

During a meeting at the Vatican Dec. 3, Pope Benedict XVI and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev agreed to establish full diplomatic ties between their two countries. Since 1990 they have exchanged diplomatic representatives but without full relations.

The two leaders discussed “the challenges currently facing security and peace” and the international and political situation in the world, according to a written statement released by the Vatican after the meeting.

They also discussed “cultural and social questions of mutual interest, such as the value of the family and the contribution believers make to life in Russia,” the Vatican statement said.

The private discussions between the two leaders were “cordial,” it said.

In a customary exchange of gifts, the pope presented Medvedev a copy of his encyclical “Caritas in Veritate” (“Charity in Truth”) in Russian. The president gave the pope 22 volumes of an encyclopedia on the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Vatican and the Russian federation forged high-level official contacts in 1990, a year before Russia voted the communist government out of existence and the former Soviet Union collapsed. It was the first time the two countries exchanged official representatives since full diplomatic relations had been broken after the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The Vatican’s representative in Moscow has had the title of apostolic nuncio and Moscow’s representative to the Vatican has had the title of ambassador since 1990, but the diplomats’ functions have been that of representatives.

The atypical diplomatic status of the two representatives has not had a negative impact on their work as they enjoy normal working ties and diplomatic rights and privileges, said Pavel Dyukarev, charge d'affaires at the Russian Embassy to the Vatican.

Tense relations between the Russian Orthodox and Catholic churches had been partially responsible for the lack of establishing full diplomatic relations in the past, he said by phone to Catholic News Service Dec. 4. He said that while church and state are separate in Russia, "the church is not separate from society and at the time one had to take this into consideration."

"It's true that the (improved) relations between the two churches have facilitated" this political step forward, "but there is no direct link, just an atmosphere that has been marked by closer, friendlier relations," said the diplomat.