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Meeting with Pezzi

Thaw in Moscow?

Following the change here in the Catholic leadership in Moscow, relations between the Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches are growing warmer, officials say

- by Dr. Robert Moynihan

MOSCOW, Russia, October 30, 2007 -- Moscow has changed dramatically in the past few years, above all in two ways: in its lights, and in its cell phones.

The city was always beautiful and monumental, with its splendid onion-domed churches and monasteries and its dramatic Stalin-era high-rise office buildings, but in the 1990s there were fewer lights. Now the main streets are lit by myriad lights until dawn.

And cell phone are everywhere. No one seems to be without one.

And so the communications revolution which is transforming our world, is also transforming Russia.

Even I am caught up in it, as people write emails in response to my newsflashes, and people I meet tell me they have read the newsflashes, sometimes only hours after I have filed them.

This evening, I met for dinner with Father Igor Vyzhanov, the Russian Orthodox priest in charge of dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church for the Patriarchate of Moscow.

"I read your newsflash about Archbishop Kondrusiewicz and Sister Lucy," he said to me. "I do think the departure of Archbishop Kondrusiewicz from Moscow marks an era in the relationship of our two Churches. We were able to collaborate with him on a number of matters, but we feel that we will be able to build on that experience in the years ahead, working with the new Archbishop, Paolo Pezzi."

Father Igor, with whom I collaborated in recent years on a successful project to translate into Russian the works of the American Orthodox historian Dr. Jaroslav Pelikan, said he had one observation: "You suggest that there may be a problem with Archbishop Pezzi's status in Russia. I am sure that will not be a problem. Our Church enjoys a good relationship with our government, and if necessary, we would be in touch with appropriate authorities to resolve any problems in a positive way."

Earlier in the day, I met with Archbishop Pezzi in his curia office next to the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in the central area of Moscow. I asked him how he sees the transition from Kondrusiewicz to himself.

"I am committed to building on the basis he has laid," he said.

He said that he saw in the Pelikan book an excellent basis to build upon. (The book will appear as the first volume in a 100-book series called "Library of the Spirit" which the Belgian lay Catholic Jean-Francois Thiry, a member of the Italian-based movement Communion and Liberation who has lived in Moscow since 1991, is publishing in conjunction with the Russian Orthodox.)

Pezzi said he has reflected profoundly on the message of Fatima.

"It is a message which I take very seriously," he said. "But I think the critical thing for us is not to impose any of our own conceptions on what God intends. All our undertakings, here in Russia, are within his providence."

Just before his elevation to the rank of Bishop and assuming duties of the head of the Catholic Archdiocese in Moscow, Monsignor Paolo Pezzi gave an interview to *Interfax-Religion* editor-in-chief Valentina Dudkina, a Russian Orthodox journalist. Here is that interview in its entirety, precisely as it was posted earlier today:

How do you feel about your appointment as the head of the Catholic Archdiocese in Moscow?

ARCHBISHOP PAOLO PEZZI: I am called by the Holy Father to take part in the Apostolic Succession, which is the sacramental dialogue of Jesus with "his people". I took this appointment with awe. St. Augustine said that a bishop is the one who looks closely at Jesus. Therefore, I believe that the message of bishop's service is to give a proper response to Christ's call "Follow Me". The oath taken by the doctors "First, do no harm" also comes to mind. A bishop should remember this advice in his service. I am comforted by the fact that the God Who called me to this uneasy service will never leave me without His support and help. Embarking on this new task, I feel a strong desire that everything I do in word or deed be in the Name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him (Ref.: Col 3:17); and my whole life be the evidence of passion for the sake of the Glory of Christ in history.

I hope that I will not lack prayers and active support from those faithful to the Archdiocese -- priests, monastic clergy, and laity. With the Help of God, together we will be able to overcome any difficulties.

What changes do you plan to make as the head of the Archdiocese of the Holy Virgin?

PEZZI: First, I should say that I view my new service in Russia as a continuation and improvement of the work started before me. It should be the continuation, not the beginning. Life itself implies a sustained development and renewal. All the more so, if we remember the most difficult situation when Russia began to revive its church life almost two decades ago.

In simple words, we focus on nurturing faith, a mature faith, which turns into a living testimony in all spheres of every-day life (family, work, science, politics and other). It is notable, that the Catholic and Orthodox Churches have cooperated in their efforts to address the issues of nurturing and Christian values both on European and even global levels.

I could briefly name some of our basic objectives: taking most care of priests and monks who work in the archdiocese along with further improvement of existing pastoral care; and further improvement of the process of ordination -- both in preparing to ordination to the priesthood and during the first years of service of young priests. I am happy to evidence a substantial progress in improving inter-confessional relations, but this joint work needs to be continued in every possible way. Moreover, 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 in Russia mainly by the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate and is deeply rooted in the Russian society. We also need to give a close attention to the pressing problems of the modern Russian society. We should work to further improve and update the media from conception standpoint.

What do you think of the widely discussed initiatives of the Russian Orthodox Church to teach the Basics of the Orthodox Culture at schools and restore military priesthood?

PEZZI: I strongly believe in the fundamental importance of the Christian education for the benefit of the whole society. Faith in God Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life is the critical principle of the recovery of society not only for every individual Christian, but also for each country and humankind as a whole (whether or not it is admitted); so it is very important that young people at school age and in a difficult period of their military service learn about their Christian heritage which in Russia took shape of the Orthodoxy. Therefore, I cannot but favour teaching of this subject in schools or reinstatement of military clergy, although I can see the challenges related to the issues so widely discussed in this country, as you correctly put it in asking me your question. To my mind, the main thing here is to speak "in favour" and not "against", and most favourably present the Christian religion and the Orthodoxy

itself in its beauty and riches to reach hearts and minds of young people. We also need to promote the freedom of our young counterparts to accept our proposal. My teacher Luigi Giussani, an Italian Catholic priest, wrote a book with a seemingly funny but very meaningful name "The Risk of Education". We will never live in a free and responsible society, unless we bring up free and responsible people.

How far do you think Catholics may expand their missionary practice in the countries which belong to the canonical territory in the Russian Orthodox tradition?

PEZZI: I personally got interested in Russia because of my love of the Russian culture in its full variety (music, icon painting, and religion philosophy) following the steps of Father Giussani. I remember, for example, that when I was at the very start of my religious way my friends gave me a replica of Andrey Rublyov's icon *The Savior of Zvenigorod* which I have always had with me. The word "mission" -- in its evangelical interpretation -- means a grateful acceptance of the God's Love and an attempt to pass this personal experience, as in the historic life of Christ who was sent (in Latin *missum*) -- this is the etymology of the word! -- by his Father by virtue of their mutual love. The Priestly Fraternity of the Missionaries of St. Charles Borromeo to which I belong was founded in 1985 in response to the appeal of Pope John Paul II who said "Go round the whole world, bring everywhere truth, beauty, and peace which we meet in Jesus the Savior." Seeking to answer this appeal, members of our fraternity live in small communities as the twelve disciples lived together with Christ. They see the Christian message (that is, again, "mission" in the evangelic sense of the word) as enthusiasm in the Glory of Christ. Indeed, 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, as there will be no place left for conflicts!

It cannot be denied that regardless of overall cultural differences between the Catholic and the Orthodox worlds, the Catholic Church and Local Orthodox Churches make joint efforts to address the basic challenges of modern life. Appeals for joint Catholic-Orthodox efforts to protect Christian values sound increasingly often and urgent.

You were born in Russi, Italy. Isn't it providential that you are now appointed the bishop of the largest Catholic diocese in Russia?

PEZZI: Of course, this may seem accidental, but I take it as an omen that my native small town located not far away from ancient Ravenna is named Russi which may be translated as *Russians*.

Also earlier today, I attended a press conference at the Interfax offices with the head of the Moscow Patriarchate Department for External Church Relations, Metropolitan Kirill.

Meeting with about 40 journalists to discuss a 4-day cultural conference the Church is holding on the relationship between Russian Orthodoxy and Russian Society, Kirill said relations between the Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches are improving.

"It is clear that from a period which could be described as biting frost we have advanced to a warm spell," he said.

He said there is a growing understanding in the two Churches that they are allies on many issues troubling humanity and this understanding serves as a foundation for "a certain system of solidarity" in their relations at international organizations and a dialogue with the secular world.

In his opinion, the recent transfer of the Kondrusiewicz to Minsk is hardly the result "of any covert Church diplomacy but an internal affair of the Catholic Church."

