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Pope Francis meets with Romanian Orthodox Patriarch Daniel at the patriarchal palace in Bucharest, Romania, May 31.(CNS/Vatican Media)



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Bucharest, Romania — May 31, 2019

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Pope Francis expressed hope May 31 that the Catholic and Romanian Orthodox churches will work more closely together in the future, asking in an address to the leaders of the 16-million-strong Orthodox community that God would help the churches experience "unprecedented ways of sharing and of mission."

Speaking to Orthodox Patriarch Daniel on the first of a three-day visit to Romania, the pontiff likewise addressed the patriarch and his confreres as kin, calling them "not strangers, but brothers and friends."

Catholics and Orthodox, said the pope, are meant to work together, especially in matters of charity and service to others.

"The Lord … calls us to charity, to mutual service, to 'give God' before we 'speak of God,' to a goodness that is not passive, but prepared to get up and set out, a service that is active and collaborative," said Francis.

"Our own journey has begun anew with the certainty that we are brothers and sisters walking side by side," he added.

Francis is visiting Romania, which is located north of Bulgaria and south of Ukraine on Europe's southeastern border, through June 2. He is only the second pope to visit the country, following John Paul II in 1999, and only the second to personally address a Romanian Orthodox patriarch.

Ecumenical relations with the Romanian Orthodox, who make up about 86 percent of the country's population, were the central focus of the first day of the pope's visit. After addressing the country's political leaders upon landing mid-morning May 31, Francis met Daniel at the patriarchal headquarters.

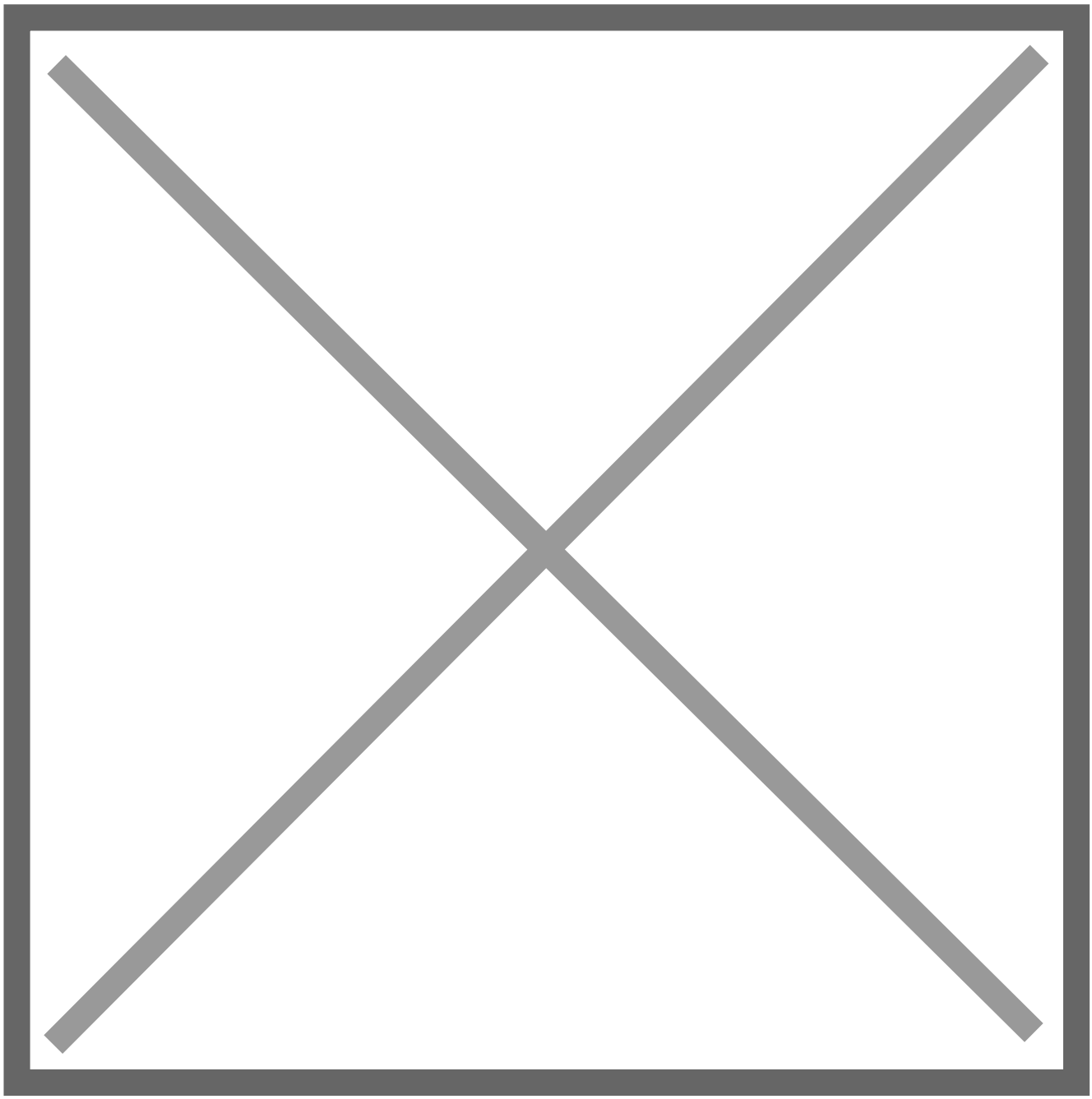
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The two later traveled together to Bucharest's new Orthodox cathedral, which is still under construction but set to become the world's largest Orthodox church. They then took part in a prayer service in which they both recited the Our Father prayer separately; Francis in Latin, followed by Daniel in Romanian.

In a short speech before his own recitation of the prayer, the pope asked that God would help the two churches broaden their horizons and be impelled to "preach the good news of the Gospel beyond the confines of the communities to which we belong."

Francis also called on Catholics and Orthodox to be "cultivators of communion." He said they should be "tireless in sowing seeds of unity … without suspicion or reserve, without pressuring or demanding uniformity, in the fraternal joy of a reconciled diversity."

Regional experts characterized the joint papal-patriarchal prayer service as significant for Romania, where relations between Orthodox and Catholics have sometimes been strained.



Pope Francis and Romanian Orthodox Patriarch Daniel pray the Our Father at the new Romanian Orthodox cathedral in Bucharest, Romania, May 31. (CNS/Paul Haring)

The local Catholic community, which the Vatican estimates at about 1.4 million people, is split between a primarily immigrant Latin rite population and the Romanian Greek Catholic Church.

During the communist era, Romania's leaders favored the Orthodox church, which was considered more in line with Russia. They deposed the Greek Catholic bishops, imprisoned many of the leaders, and forced the conversions of hundreds of thousands of faithful.

Gail Kligman, a sociologist who has done extensive field work in Romania, said the moment represented a "really important step forward" after years of tensions. Kligman, an associate vice provost for UCLA's International Institute, said she had even personally experienced moments of violence between Greek Catholics and Orthodox in the 1980s.

"When it runs that deeply at the local level, I think the very fact, the symbolism of them doing this together, if separately, is a very strong statement," said the academic. "That's a positive development."



Romanian Orthodox Patriarch Daniel presents Pope Francis with an icon of St. Andrew the apostle at the new Romanian Orthodox cathedral in Bucharest, Romania, May 31. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Francis and Daniel each recited the prayer among a crowd of thousands inside the cathedral. They stood before the church's gold- and mosaic-laden iconostasis, the gate that Orthodox churches use to separate the sanctuary from the nave.

Before saying the prayer, Daniel presented Francis with a gift of a large mosaic image of St. Andrew, who, according to tradition, founded the church in Romania.

Upon landing in Bucharest May 31, Francis headed first to Romania's presidential palace, where he addressed President Klaus Iohannis, Prime Minister Viorica Dancila, and the country's other political leaders.

The pope praised developments in the country since the fall of communism 30 years ago, but also urged the political leaders to set aside personal ambitions in service of the common good.

"It is necessary to move forward together with conviction in following the highest calling to which every state must aspire: that of responsibility for the common good of its people," said Francis.

The pontiff said that such movement will require "a noble willingness to sacrifice something of one's own vision or best interest for the sake of a greater project."

The pope's schedule June 1 will be more focused on Romania's small Catholic community. He will leave Bucharest in the morning for a visit to a Marian shrine in Sumuleu Ciuc, about 175 miles north of the capital.

Later in the day, the pontiff will head another 175 miles to the northeast to visit the town of Iasi, where much of Romania's Latin rite Catholic community is based, before returning to Bucharest in the evening.

On June 2, the pope leaves Bucharest for Blaj, about 200 miles to the north. While there he will concelebrate an Eastern rite Divine Liturgy for the beatification of seven 20th-century Romanian Catholic bishops who were each persecuted by the country's communist-era authorities and died in prison after refusing to renounce their faith.

Bishop John Michael Botean, who leads the Romanian Greek Catholic Church's only diocese abroad, said the trip will be "very, very important" for his community.

Botean, who leads the Eparchy of St. George's in Canton, Ohio, which serves Romanian Catholics across the U.S. and Canada, pointed to the pope's decision to celebrate the beatification ceremony personally.

"The big deal for me and our church is the beatification of our martyred bishops, that he's doing it himself, he's doing it in our home turf, and in a place of immense historical importance," he said.

The Romania trip is the pope's 30th abroad since his election in March 2013, and his fifth during 2019. Other trips on the pontiff's schedule this year include the African countries of Madagascar, Mozambique and Mauritius in September, and Japan in November.

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