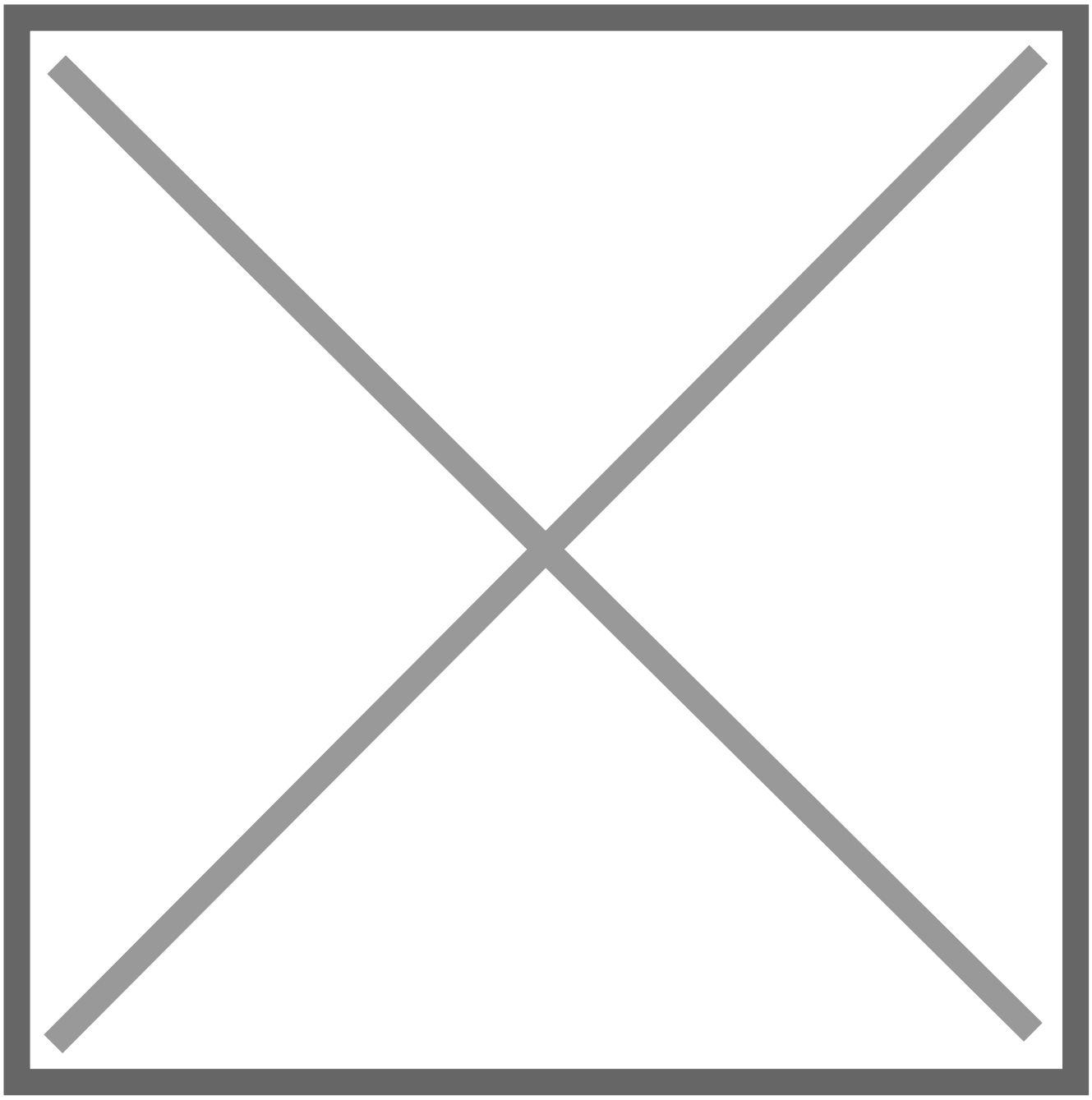
Vatican



Pope Francis presents gifts to Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of Moscow after the leaders signed a joint declaration during a meeting at Jose Marti International Airport in Havana Feb. 12, 2016. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

Cindy Wooden

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While the Vatican confirmed Pope Francis' hope to travel to Kazakhstan this year, it did not confirm a news story that Francis could meet Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of Moscow in Jerusalem in June.

Francis and Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev spoke by video conference April 11, "and the pope confirmed his intention to visit the country," said Matteo Bruni, director of the Vatican press office.

After the meeting, Tokayev's office issued a statement saying Francis confirmed he would visit the country to participate in the World Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions Sept. 14-15 in Nur-Sultan, the nation's capital. The Vatican has sent a delegation to each world congress since the program began in 2003.

And, a week after Bruni said the Vatican was studying the idea of a papal trip to Lebanon in June, the British news agency Reuters reported the trip could be June 12-13. Citing unnamed sources, Reuters said the pope could then fly to Amman, Jordan, early June 14 and travel by helicopter to Jerusalem for a meeting with Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of Moscow.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, had said April 7 that Francis wanted to meet with Kirill, but the churches were looking for a "neutral place" to do so.

At the same time, Kirill's support for Russian President Vladimir Putin and his war on Ukraine could make a meeting inadvisable.

In early March, soon after the invasion, Parolin had told the Italian news agency ANSA, "Kirill's words do not favor and do not promote an understanding, on the contrary, they risk igniting tempers even more and going toward an escalation and not resolving the crisis peacefully."

During his flight from Malta to Rome April 2, Francis was asked about meeting the patriarch. He told reporters, "For some time, there have been considerations regarding a meeting with Patriarch Kirill; that's what's being worked on, with the possibility of holding the meeting in the Middle East."

Francis and Kirill spoke by video conference March 16.

The Moscow patriarchate's statement about the discussion was brief and vague, saying the two had "a detailed discussion of the situation on Ukrainian soil," paying particular attention to the humanitarian situation and expressing hope for negotiations.

The Vatican, however, issued an unusually long statement, quoting the pope as telling the patriarch, "We are shepherds of the same holy people who believe in God, in the Holy Trinity, in the holy mother of God: that is why we must unite in the effort to help peace, to help those who suffer, to seek ways of peace, to stop the gunfire."

"There was a time when we spoke, even in our churches, of a holy war or a just war. Today we cannot speak like that. The Christian conscience of the importance of peace has developed," the pope told the patriarch, according to the Vatican statement.

Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of external relations for the Russian Orthodox Church, said in a statement April 11 that all the details, including the location of the meeting between the pope and patriarch, still are being discussed.

"In the present complex political situation," he said, "a very thorough consideration should be given not only to issues concerning the substantial part of the meeting of the pope and the patriarch, but also issues concerning security, transportation and logistics."

Francis and Kirill were the first pope and Moscow patriarch to meet personally. In February 2016, in a brief stopover on his way to Mexico, Francis landed in Havana where he and Kirill met for about two hours. The meeting followed decades of discussions and negotiations between Vatican officials and officials of the Moscow

Patriarch.

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