News
Vatican



Pope Francis, left, reaches to embrace Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill in Havana, Cuba Feb. 12, 2016. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia, Pool)

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**ROME — ** Pope Francis has sent a protocol greeting to the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, assuring him of prayers on his patron's feast day and stressing the value of human life and wisdom, as the Vatican insists on maintaining cordial relations amid the war in Ukraine.

The website of the Moscow Patriarchate published the brief greetings Francis sent Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill to mark Tuesday's feast day for St. Cyril, a saint important to both Catholics and Orthodox Christians, especially in Slavic nations.

"These days I pray to our Heavenly Father that the Holy Spirit will renew and strengthen us in the gospel ministry, especially in our efforts to protect the value and dignity of every human life," Francis wrote.

He also called for God's "gift of wisdom."

The moderate tone was evidence of the Vatican's attempt to maintain relations with Kirill, a policy that has come under increasing criticism from the head of the Polish bishops' conference. Archbishop Stanislaw Gadecki returned from a visit to Ukraine this week and called for the Vatican to change its "naïve and utopian" policy, saying it won't work in the long run.

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In an interview with the Polish Catholic news agency KAI, Gadecki said it was a "noble" goal to strike a dialogue with Moscow. "But that is not accompanied by sufficiently serious thought on the Vatican's part," he was quoted as saying.

Kirill has justified the invasion on spiritual and ideological grounds, calling it a "metaphysical" battle with the West. He has blessed soldiers going into battle and invoked the idea that Russians and Ukrainians are one people.

Francis' three-sentence note to the Orthodox leader made no mention of Russia's invasion of Ukraine or even a generic appeal for peace. That said, it was a protocol greeting marking a religious observance; Francis has, in his public remarks,

frequently denounced the war and loss of life.

Gadecki, of the Polish bishops' conference, acknowledged the tradition of Vatican diplomacy is to not call out aggressors and to seek at all costs to maintain an open channel of dialogue in hopes of nudging a peaceful resolution.

In the case of Ukraine, the Vatican has also been keen to not antagonize the Russian Orthodox Church, after it worked for decades to improve relations that culminated in an historic meeting between Francis and Kirill in Havana in 2016.

"But today, in the situation of war ... it is most important that the Holy See supported Ukraine on all levels and was not directed by utopian thoughts," Gadecki was quoted as saying.

Francis mentioned the war at the end of his weekly general audience Wednesday. Speaking to Polish pilgrims, he called for prayers for peace in Ukraine and for God "to teach us to show solidarity for those who are affected by the tragedy of war" and to find reconciliation among nations.