

A summit on religion in Moscow

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 7, 2006 All Things Catholic

This week, a World Summit

of Religious Leaders took place in Moscow under the sponsorship of Patriarch Alexy II, head of the Russian Orthodox Church. The summit, designed as a lead-in to the July 15 meeting of G-8 nations in St. Petersburg, drew over 200 religious leaders from 49 countries, including Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist and other communities.

The aim was to arrive at a common set of values in light of pressing global concerns. In their final statement, participants called for an end to terrorism, an ethical underpinning for modern notions of democracy and human rights, and respect for human life from natural beginning to natural end.

The Vatican was represented by a high-level delegation that reads like an "all-star team" of Catholic ecumenical and inter-religious engagement: Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity; Cardinal Paul Poupard, President of the Pontifical Council for Culture as well as the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue; Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, former President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace; Cardinal Godfried Daneels of Brussels; Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, emeritus archbishop of Washington; Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin; and Bishop Vincent Paglia of Terni, Italy. Most are longtime stalwarts of the Community of Sant'Egidio's ecumenical and inter-faith efforts.

The delegation represents the largest number of cardinals ever to visit Russia at once, and was taken as a sign of an ecumenical "thaw" in relations between Russian Orthodoxy and the Catholic church.

Ironically, this "summit of religious leaders" was missing the two most iconic religious figures of our time: the Dalai Lama and the pope.

The Dalai Lama was not on the guest list for political reasons. Putin's government wants close ties with China, and the Chinese would have objected had Putin given the living symbol of Tibetan nationalism a platform.

As to the absence of Benedict XVI, Orthodox officials offered a positive gloss.

"The visit of the pope of Rome is a historical event, and it would be methodologically wrong to put it on a par with other historical events, including the summit," said Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad.

Another noticeable absence was Catholic Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of the Mother of God archdiocese in Moscow (so named so as not to offend Orthodox sensibilities, who insist there can be only one archbishop of Moscow, Alexy II). Orthodox frostiness to Kondrusiewicz is well-known, in part because of his insistence upon "reciprocity" in the Catholic/Orthodox relationship. Bishop Joseph Werth, of the diocese of Trasfiguration in Novosibirsk, took part as president of the Russian bishops' conference.

Local sources say the choice not to include Kondrusiewicz was made by the Vatican.

Frustrated with what they see as a pattern of placating the Orthodox, local Catholic critics charged that the summit was largely a public relations exercise by Alexy designed to put a "human face" on the Putin government, in exchange for preferential treatment for the Orthodox. Critics said it resembled international "meetings for peace" organized by the Soviets in the 1960s and 1970s. They observe that tough cases such as the Chechen war, or Russian policies on religious liberty, were not on the agenda.

Vatican sources argued that whatever its shortcomings, the summit represented an opportunity both to improve Catholic/Orthodox ties, as well as to bring the various religions closer to a compact witness against religiously motivated violence.

In an interview with the Italian Catholic daily *L'Avvenire*, Kasper downplayed the prospect of a papal trip to Russia.

"At the moment, the trip of the pope to Russia is certainly not the principal object of our conversations," he said. "We have many other things to discuss, many common initiatives we're considering, beginning with the defense of the Christian roots of Europe."

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On the subject of Catholic/Orthodox relations, there's an important Vatican personnel move to report. The officer in the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity responsible for Catholic/Orthodox dialogue, Polish Jesuit Fr. Józef Maj, was replaced in early May by a Slovenian Jesuit, Fr. Milan ?ust.

?ust is a deep admirer of Eastern traditions, and observers say his appointment may boost relations with the Russian Orthodox since, as a

Slovenian, he does not trigger the same historical resentments as a Pole.

Russian sources told *NCR* that the Orthodox leadership in Moscow backed ?ust's appointment.

?ust was born in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 1967. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on Pavel Florensky (1882-1937), a Russian Orthodox theologian, philosopher, mathematician and engineer, sometimes compared by his followers to Leonardo Da Vinci.

Prior to his Vatican appointment, ?ust taught at the Gregorian University. He has also served as superior of the Jesuit community at the Centro Aletti in Rome, where he guided visitors through the pope's "Redemptoris Mater" Chapel, the work of Jesuit Fr. Marko Rupnik, also of the center.

From Sept. 1 to Sept. 22, 2005, ?ust served as a visiting professor at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut.

*The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is **href="mailto:jallen@natcath.org">jallen@ncronline.org***

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