

RUSSIAN ORTHODOX WELCOME ICON, PATRIARCH RIPS ROME

July 22, 2005

BY STEVE GUTTERMAN

MOSCOW -- The leader of the Russian Orthodox Church celebrated the return of a religious icon from the Vatican, but reiterated criticism of the Roman Catholic Church Thursday.

With thousands of faithful massed in Kazan, Patriarch Alexy II led a colorful ceremony and turned over to the city's church authorities the Mother of God of Kazan icon, which was returned to Russia last summer in a goodwill gesture by the Vatican.

Pope John Paul II had hoped to carry the icon to Russia and accomplish his dream of traveling to the mostly Orthodox Christian country, but Alexy said a papal visit could not be based on returning the icon, which is a copy of the original 16th century work.

Alexy reiterated Thursday that no pope can visit Russia until ties improve, and again accused Roman Catholics of proselytizing in traditionally Orthodox Christian lands, Russian news agencies reported.

"I have not ruled out and do not rule out a visit by the pope to Russia, but under certain conditions," the ITAR-Tass news agency quoted Alexy as saying at a news conference. "Today we are witnessing broad proselytizing by the Roman Catholic Church on the territory of Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan."

The icon is said to have healed the sick and helped Russian armies repulse invaders, and thousands gathered to see the copy that Alexy held high. It will be kept in a monastery in the Volga River city of Kazan.

"It's just a joy to see it, a great joy," Tatyana Kuvshinova told Russia's Channel One television with tears in her eyes.

John Paul's successor, Pope Benedict XVI, has made improving relations among Christians and healing the 1,000-year-old rift with the Orthodox a priority.

The Russian Orthodox Church is the largest in the Orthodox world.

AP