

Pope's icon return lifts hope of church détente: Representation of Mary and Child handed over in Moscow

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Russian Orthodox church leaders have welcomed Pope John Paul II's decision to return a precious icon to Russia, a representation of Mary and Child that was handed over in Moscow in late August by a Catholic delegation.

"We very much value the fact that the Vatican is returning this miraculous icon to our church," said Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexsy II. "If we want Christian values to remain alive and Europeans to be guided by the gospel in life, we must work together." The Orthodox leader was speaking amid preparations to receive the icon, *Our Lady of Kazan*, in the Kremlin's Dormition Cathedral.

Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, the head of Russia's Catholic minority, said he hoped the gesture would improve relations between the Orthodox and Roman churches, which have been strained in recent years.

The icon depicting the Madonna and Child is said to be an early 18th-century copy rather than the original, thought by some to date back to the 13th century but now lost. The original icon has been credited with working miracles on behalf of the Russian people, including the defeat of several invading forces.

The replica ended up on the international art market after disappearing during the Russian revolution. It was bought from a private New York collector in 1970 by a U.S. Catholic group and presented to the pope in 1993. It had hung above his desk.

Handing over the icon to a Moscow-bound delegation at a Vatican ceremony August 25, Pope John Paul said the image signaled "the deep unity between East and West which survives in time despite historic divisions and human errors." John Paul was

reported to have once hoped to take the icon to Russia in person, but the Russian Orthodox Church has so far blocked a papal visit, accusing the Vatican of expansionism in traditionally Orthodox Russia.

Still, Orthodox Metropolitan Jeremie of Switzerland, former president of the Conference of European Churches, told Vatican Radio recently that the pope's "great-hearted gesture" would be "welcomed with joy" by Orthodox Christians. - *Ecumenical News International*