

Christian Persecution Demands Historical Meeting Between Major Church Leaders

The patriarch of Russia's Orthodox Church will take part in a historic first meeting with the Roman Catholic pontiff on Feb. 12 because of the need for a joint response to the persecution of Christians in the Middle East, the Orthodox Church said.

Senior Orthodox cleric Metropolitan Hilarion said that long-standing differences between the two churches remain, most notably a row over the status of the Uniate Church, in Ukraine.

But he said these differences were being put aside so that Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis could come together over persecution of Christians.

This issue will be the central item on the agenda for their meeting, in Havana, Cuba, the cleric said.

"The situation shaping up today in the Middle East, in North and Central Africa, and in some other regions where extremists are carrying out a genuine genocide of the Christian population, demands urgent measures and an even closer cooperation between the Christian churches," Hilarion said.

"We need to put aside internal disagreements at this tragic time and join efforts to save Christians in the regions where they are subject to the most atrocious persecution."

The meeting could be a hugely significant step toward healing the 1,000-year-old rift between the Western and Eastern branches of Christianity, which split in the Great Schism of 1054.

Hilarion said the first-ever meeting between the heads of the

two Christian churches would not take place in Europe because Patriarch Kirill had objected to this idea from the very beginning.

“Because it is namely Europe with which this tragic history of divisions and conflicts among Christians is linked,” Hilarion said. {eoa}

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