

## WORLD &amp; NATION

## Pope furthers dialogue with Orthodox, Muslims

By John Thavis  
Catholic News Service

PLOVDIV, Bulgaria — Despite his increasing frailty, Pope John Paul II accomplished some key objectives on his ecumenical and interreligious journey to Azerbaijan and Bulgaria.

During the May 22-26 trip, he nudged dialogue with Muslims and Orthodox Christians a few steps further, traveling as a respectful pilgrim to countries where tiny Catholic communities are not seen as a threat.

He has now visited 15 former Soviet republics or satellites since the fall of European communism; on this trip he proclaimed three new martyrs of 20th-century totalitarianism and brought spiritual solace to populations still recovering from the communist experience.

And with his eye on Moscow and a meeting with Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexei II, the pope clearly identified himself as a friend of the East — quoting its saints, praising its spiritual traditions and reviewing some of the more glorious pages of its history.

Is Moscow any closer for the aging pontiff?

"Moscow is something that should be done and must be done and will be done — we hope in a not very long time," Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls told reporters on the final day of the papal trip.

But he added that he was expressing a desire, not a certainty.

The biggest obstacles to an eventual trip to Russia appear to be the pope's own fading health and Patriarch Alexei's staunch opposition, which increased recently after the pope created four new Catholic dioceses in the country.

In Bulgaria, where 80 percent of the people count themselves as Orthodox Christians, the pope once again showed that Orthodox opposition to his traveling ministry is not monolithic — especially among Orthodox churches that are tied to Moscow but do not operate under its authority.

The official Orthodox reaction to the pope's presence was mixed. Bulgarian Patriarch Maxim showed up unexpectedly at an opening ceremony, leaving Vatican officials beaming.

But the next day, when the pope arrived at his residence, the patriarch avoided the traditional "fraternal embrace" and simply shook the pope's hand.

The 87-year-old patriarch's gesture — or lack of it — was criticized by younger Orthodox leaders, who said their church's leadership was too conservative and too tied to the past.

"We need a Second Vatican Council," said Antoni Hubanchev, director of the Orthodox theological faculty at the University of Sofia, who brought two busloads of Orthodox laity to see the pope at the ancient Monastery of St. John of Rila.

Others said many Orthodox faithful recognized that the pope's message embraced wider spiritual themes that are more attuned to the modern world. In today's increasingly globalized society, they said, past territorial or historical squabbles between churches seem less and less relevant.

The pope brought concrete signs of good will, leaving with the Orthodox a relic of St. Darius, a Roman soldier who was martyred in what is now Bulgaria, and des-

ignating a church in Rome for worship by the Bulgarian Orthodox community there.

The pope always has believed that not everything has to be perfect for dialogue to occur, and that ecumenism is a work in progress. He registered one small advance in Plovdiv May 26, when he beatified three Assumptionist priests shot to death by the communist regime in 1952.

The pope used the Mass to pay tribute to the joint suffering of Orthodox and Catholics under the harsh repression of the communist regime. Welcoming him from the altar was the local Orthodox bishop, who had fewer qualms than his patriarch about attending a Catholic liturgy.

The pope also had a political message in Bulgaria, where he called on Europe to nurture its "Christian roots" as it consolidates its economic unity.

Bulgaria is trying to get into the European Union, and the pope seemed to hope that this Eastern nation would bring a more religious perspective to the continent's political forum.

In Azerbaijan, a Shiite Muslim nation in the volatile Caucasus region, the pope preached religious tolerance and called for an end to fundamentalism and violence in



Reuters/CNS

Pope John Paul II watches as a Bulgarian soldier lays a wreath at a monument to Sts. Cyril and Methodius on their feast day, May 24, in Sofia, Bulgaria.

the name of God.

It was an audacious message, considering there are only 120 Catholics in the whole country and that Islamic extremism has taken root elsewhere in the region. But the pope knew that Azerbaijani Muslims are generally respectful of Christians, and he shrewdly supported his call with quotes from one of their favorite traditional poets.

For the 82-year-old pontiff, the visit marked a watershed in his physical decline. No pope has ever put his fading health and mobility on display for such a global audience.

His struggles with the symptoms of his neurological disease — including shaking arms, slurred speech and a lack of mobility — evoked sympathy and respect among his hosts, but also some concern.

After praising the pope's courage and determination in persisting with his foreign travel, Orthodox Archbishop Simeon said, "I think the people around him, they must tell him he has to stop."

It's advice the pope already may be thinking about. While his July trip to Toronto is definitely on, the Vatican hinted that planned stops in Mexico and Guatemala might be canceled.

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