

Vatican:Elevation of Pius is not 'hostile' to Jews: Beatification of WW2-era pope

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A decree moving the controversial wartime Pope Pius XII one step closer to sainthood is not a “hostile act toward the Jewish people,” said the Vatican’s top spokesman.

Federico Lombardi, a priest who directs the Holy See Press Office, said in a statement before Christmas that Pope Benedict XVI’s decree on December 19 that recognizes Pius’s “heroic virtues” and declares him “venerable” reflects an evaluation of the late pope’s personal holiness, “and not the historical impact” of his decisions.

Pius’s new status makes him eligible for beatification, the rank just below sainthood. The move has drawn complaints from many Jewish leaders.

Critics say Pius, who reigned from 1939 to 1958, failed to do or say all he could to stop the Nazi Holocaust. His defenders counter that he heroically condemned anti-Semitism throughout Hitler’s reign and both directly and indirectly saved thousands of Jews during the Holocaust.

The controversy over Pius’s legacy had overshadowed Benedict’s visit in May to Jerusalem’s Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial. The pope avoided visiting the adjacent museum because its exhibits included a photo caption critical of Pius.

Announcement of the decree caught most observers by surprise. The Vatican’s Congregation for the Causes of Saints voted unanimously to declare the late pope “venerable” in May 2007, but Benedict took the extraordinary step of appointing a commission to reconsider Pius’s record, with special attention to Jewish concerns.

Apparently the pope was satisfied by evidence presented at a Rome conference last September, which he said showed that Pius had “spared no effort in intervening” on

behalf of the Jews, though in many cases “secretly and silently, precisely because . . . only in this way was it possible to avoid the worst and save the greatest number of Jews.”

A number of historians and Jewish leaders have said that more study is necessary in order to evaluate Pius’s wartime record, and they have called for opening the Vatican archives from World War II, most of which are inaccessible to outsiders. The Vatican says it needs until at least 2014 to prepare those documents for consultation.

“We are sadly disappointed, and fail to understand why they would put the beatification on track as long as the issue of the archives is not resolved,” said Abraham Foxman, national director of the New York-based Anti-Defamation League.

Foxman noted that Jewish-Catholic relations had “just come out of a difficult period” following Benedict’s decision in January 2009 to lift the excommunication of ultra-traditionalist Bishop Richard Williamson, who turned out to be a public Holocaust denier. “The rift has just healed, so why reopen another wound at this time?” Foxman asked.

In Washington, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum echoed the call to open the archives: “Such research will be possible only when all Vatican archival material from 1933–1945 is completely open and available to scholars of all disciplines.”

While insisting on Pius’s “attention to and concern for the fate of the Jews,” the Vatican’s Lombardi said the December 19 decree implied “no intention in any way to limit discussion” of the late pope’s record.

Lombardi also noted that the cause of Pius’s beatification is “completely independent” of that of the late Pope John Paul II, whom Benedict also declared venerable. Before either man can be beatified, he must be credited with a miracle due to his intercession. A second miracle after beatification would be needed in order for canonization as a saint. –*Francis X. Rocca, Religion News Service*