

Anger grows at Nazi-era pontiff

GINA DOGGETT, SMH, 21 Dec 2009



John Paul II, left, and Pius XII

VATICAN CITY: Pope Benedict moved the controversial wartime pontiff Pius XII closer to sainthood by declaring him "venerable" in a surprise announcement, provoking the ire of Jewish leaders.

The pontiff simultaneously bestowed the same title on his predecessor John Paul II. The statement by the German-born Pope "took everyone by surprise", the Vatican expert Bruno Bartoloni said.

The head of Germany's Central Jewish Council, Stephan Kramer, said Benedict was "rewriting history".

"This is a clear hijacking of historical facts concerning the Nazi era," he said. "Benedict XVI rewrites history without having allowed a serious scientific discussion. That's what makes me furious."

Cardinal George Pell said: "I'm a great supporter of Pius XII. He was dealt an appallingly difficult set of cards ... he did an enormous amount for the Jews."

Italian Jewish leaders said they were still awaiting access to the Vatican's archives so they could make an accurate historical assessment of Pius, who is accused of not having done enough to save Europe's Jews from the Nazis.

"We do not forget the deportations of Jews from Italy and in particular the train that deported 1021 people on October 16, 1943, which left Rome's Tiburtina station for Auschwitz to the silence of Pius XII," said a statement. Another veteran Vatican-watcher, John Allen, said announcing the decree on Pius simultaneously with the other two reflected "a kind of strategy of taking the sting out of it". The title of "venerable" is a necessary step on the way to beatification and eventual sainthood.

Pius has been a source of tension with Jewish groups due to the view among many historians that he remained passive while Nazi Germany killed millions of Jews.

Benedict, who was himself at the centre of controversy over his past membership of the Hitler Youth, has publicly defended Pius.

The Vatican has argued that Pius, who was Pope from 1939 to 1958, saved many Jews who were hidden in religious institutions in Rome and abroad, and that his silence was born out of a wish to avoid worsening their lot.

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