

Pope defends Pius against Jewish critics

By VICTOR L. SIMPSON

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ROME -- In a synagogue visit haunted by history, Pope Benedict XVI and Jewish leaders sparred Sunday over the record of the World War II-era pope during the Holocaust and agreed on the need to strengthen Catholic-Jewish relations.

Both sides said the visit to the seat of the oldest Jewish community in the diaspora was an occasion to overcome what Benedict called "every misconception and prejudice."

Signs of the Jewish community's tragic history were abundant, as the German-born Benedict stopped at a plaque marking where Roman Jews were rounded up by the Nazis in 1943 and at another marking the slaying of a 2-year-old boy in an attack by Palestinian terrorists on the synagogue in 1982. A handful of death-camp survivors wore striped scarves to symbolize the camp uniform.

Benedict defended his predecessor Pius XII against critics, telling the audience that the Vatican worked quietly to save Jews from the Nazis during World War II.

Many Jews object to Benedict moving Pius toward sainthood, contending the wartime pope didn't do enough to protect Jews from the Holocaust. The Vatican has maintained that Pius used behind-the-scenes diplomacy in a bid to save Jewish lives. While he didn't mention Pius by name, Benedict told Jewish leaders in the synagogue that the Vatican "itself provided assistance, often in a hidden and discreet way."

Benedict said Catholics acted courageously to save Jews even as their extermination "tragically reached as far as Rome."

He spoke shortly after Jewish Community President Riccardo Pacifici, whose grandparents were killed at Auschwitz while his father was saved by Italian nuns in a Florence convent, criticized Pius. Pacifici said Italian Catholics worked to save Jews but the "silence" of Pius "still hurts as a failed action."

Chief Rabbi Riccardo Di Segni later told the packed synagogue that "human silence ... doesn't escape judgment."

Several prominent Jews had said they would boycott, but Benedict received warm applause throughout the 90-minute visit. In an emotional moment, Pacifici greeted the Holocaust survivors, and the entire audience, including Benedict, rose to honor them.

The temple sits in the Old Jewish Ghetto, the Rome neighborhood near the Tiber where for hundreds of years Jews were confined under the orders of a 16th century pope.

Relations between Jews and the Vatican have at times been tense over the Vatican's sainthood efforts for Pius, who was pontiff from 1939 to 1958. Those tensions flared again after Benedict last month issued a decree hailing the "heroic virtues" of Pius, an important step before beatification, which is the last formal stage before possible sainthood.

In an open letter to the pope, Rome's Holocaust survivors also made a reference to Pius, saying that "the silence of those who could have done something has marked our lives."

The Rev. Remigio Oprandi, a priest who watched the pope's arrival outside the synagogue, rejected Jewish criticism of the wartime pontiff. "We Romans saved so many Jews during the war, all under orders of the pope," he said. "It goes against history to judge him negatively."

Some Jews also have been angered by Benedict's reaching out to Catholic traditionalists, including his revival of a prayer for the conversion of Jews.

Another sore point is Benedict's decision to revoke the excommunication of a renegade bishop who denied that millions of Jews died in the Holocaust. The Vatican has said it wasn't aware of the bishop's views when the excommunication was lifted.

Benedict recalled a 1986 visit to the synagogue by Pope John Paul II, who was widely credited with dramatically improving relations with Jews. The late pontiff, who lived under Nazi occupation in his Polish homeland, where Jews were largely annihilated, affectionately referred to Jews as "our elder brothers" in faith during that groundbreaking visit.

Despite their differences, Benedict said that "when we succeed in uniting our hearts and our hands in response to the Lord's call, his light comes closer and shines on all the people of the world."

Di Segni, the chief rabbi, said the pope's speech helped to "calm the waters." Pacifici told reporters that Benedict's indirect mention of Pius was "very measured" and showed that "he understands our worries."

Israeli Vice Prime Minister Silvan Shalom said he asked the pope to speed up the opening of the Vatican's archives on Pius' pontificate, an oft-repeated request from Jews and many scholars.

The Vatican has said those archives won't be catalogued and ready for consultation before 2014.

Italy's Jews are a tiny minority: about 30,000 in a predominantly Roman Catholic country of some 60 million. The neighborhood is the sentimental heart of Rome's 12,000-strong Jewish community, although many of them live elsewhere in the capital.

Under the leadership of John Paul and Benedict, the Vatican has been seeking common ground on such conservative agendas as traditional families while forging stronger relations with other religions, including Judaism and Islam.

Benedict has visited synagogues in Cologne, Germany, and in New York during papal pilgrimages since he became pontiff in 2005.

Associated Press writers Ariel David, Frances D'Emilio and Vanessa Gera contributed to this report.