

## **Rabbi hits out at Pope's veneration of Pius XII**

JACQUELINE MALEY RELIGION, SMH, 24 Dec 2009

POPE PIUS XII was a moral coward and his advancement towards sainthood demeans the memory of Holocaust victims and the Christians who helped them, according to Rabbi Jeremy Lawrence, the chief minister of Sydney's Great Synagogue.

Pius XII, the Pope who presided over a Nazi-era Vatican, was put on the track to canonisation by a Vatican decree declaring him venerable last weekend.

But the Vatican decision - made by the same committee which recognised the second miracle of the Australian nun Mary MacKillop - has been slammed by Jewish groups.

Pius XII, Pope from 1939 to his death in 1958, has been criticised for not speaking out against the Holocaust generally and the Nazi round-up of Jews in Rome in 1943 in particular.

"How can one venerate a man who showed such cowardice, who was so close a bystander that he seemed to give his passive permission to the Nazis as the Jews were prised from his doorstep in Rome?" Rabbi Lawrence said. The decision demeaned all the "truly holy" people who had previously been beatified and canonised.

"He insults the memory of the innocents who were martyred [in the Holocaust] and the saintly and courageous souls who risked and gave their lives to save others," said the rabbi, who is adviser to the Executive Council of Australian Jewry and the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies.

The World Jewish Congress said the beatification of Pius XII was "inopportune and premature" and Rabbi Marvin Hier of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, a Jewish human rights group in Washington, expressed amazement at the decision.

The Sydney historian Paul O'Shea, who published a book last year about Pius, questioned why the Vatican was in "such a rush" to set Pius on the road to sainthood.

"By the summer of 1942 at the latest, [Pius] had as clear a picture of what was happening to the Jews in Europe as Churchill or Roosevelt had," he said. "He knew that Jews who were transferred 'to the east', as the Nazis said, were never heard from again."

The question was what did Pius do to help, Mr O'Shea said, and until Vatican archives from the World War II period were opened, historians would not know the answer.

Pius's supporters, who include Cardinal George Pell, Archbishop of Sydney, say he worked behind the scenes to save Italian Jews. They point to the fact that Pius gave money to Jewish internment camps in Italy, and argue that he must have known about the approximately 5000 Jews who were hidden on church property after 1943.

In his 1942 Christmas address, Pius lamented the plight of people who "only because of their race or nationality, have been condemned to death".

However, Vatican documents show the Pope knew in advance that the Nazis were planning to round up Jews in Rome and did not speak out, even as German trucks carrying the victims passed St Peter's Square.

"What could he do? It's a very vexed question," Mr O'Shea said.

William Szekely, the president of the NSW Council of Christians and Jews, said the issue would not affect Jewish-Christian relations in Australia, but he still planned to raise it at the next council meeting in February.

"There is a moral ambiguity about Pius's actions," he said