

Document confirms Pope Pius XII's efforts to save Jews, expert says

VATICAN CITY - A document found in a Rome convent confirms that Pope Pius XII quietly ordered church institutions to open their doors to Jews fleeing Nazi arrest and deportation, a church expert said.

"The Holy Father wants to save his children, including the Jews, and orders that hospitality be shown to these persecuted people in the convents," said a note found in the historical journal of the Augustinian Community of Santi Quattro Coronati.

The note, written by one of the nuns and dated November 1943, had an appendix with the names of 24 people, including Jews, who were hidden by the sisters of the cloistered convent, located near the Colosseum.

Nazi soldiers began rounding up thousands of Jews in Rome and shipping them to death camps in October 1943. One of the accusations against Pope Pius XII, repeated in a number of books in recent years, was that he did little or nothing to stop the deportations.

Jesuit Father Peter Gumpel, the "relator" or investigating judge of the sainthood cause of Pope Pius, found the document and spoke about it with Vatican Radio March 4. He said it was an important written confirmation of the many oral reports of Pope Pius' concern for the Jews and his unpublicized efforts to help them.

"The saving efforts of Pius XII, which have also been verified by many Jewish sources, were carried out through personal messengers - priests - who were sent to various Catholic institutions and houses here in Rome," Father Gumpel said.

The message delivered by these emissaries, Father Gumpel said, was "always the same: 'Open your doors to everyone persecuted by the Nazis,' which naturally applied in the first place to Jews."

Historians have documented the fact that many Jews found refuge in Rome's convents, monasteries and seminaries, and even in the papal villa outside Rome at

Castel Gandolfo.

Father Gumpel said Pope Pius and his aides were careful not to issue written orders because it would only provoke repercussions if they fell into the hands of Nazi occupation forces in Rome. The discovery of the note written by the Augustinian nuns is important, he said.

“It is an additional confirmation that could be useful in regard to those who persistently want to denigrate Pius XII and thus attack the Catholic Church,” he said.

Father Gumpel said he hoped the note could also help advance Pope Pius’ beatification, a major step toward sainthood. The declaration of “heroic virtues” needed for his beatification was approved unanimously by the Congregation for Saints’ Causes in 2007, but Pope Benedict XVI later ordered further study of the cause and its implications for Catholic-Jewish dialogue.

“We are still awaiting the signing of the decree by His Holiness,” Father Gumpel said.

While the matter remains under examination, the Vatican has asked both supporters and opponents of the sainthood cause to stop pressuring Pope Benedict about the issue.

“That is the subject of study and reflection on (the pope’s) part, and in this situation it is not appropriate to exercise pressure on him in one direction or the other,” Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, said in October.