

Israeli ambassador to Vatican praises Pius XII, then backs off

VATICAN CITY – Israel's ambassador to the Vatican caused a controversy when he made unusually positive comments about Pope Pius XII's role in efforts to save Jews during World War II. Days later, he modified his position to say that his comments were personal and historically premature.

The envoy, Mordechai Lewy, said originally that it was erroneous to believe that the Catholic Church and Pope Pius had opposed actions to help the Jews and that indeed, "the opposite is true."

Lewy's comment broke from the belief shared by many Jews that Pope Pius did not do enough to stop the Oct. 16, 1943, Nazi sweep of Rome's Jewish ghetto and subsequent deportation of Roman Jews. Critics say Pope Pius maintained a general attitude of silence and inaction during the Holocaust and did not take a courageous position against Adolf Hitler.

Lewy made his comments at a ceremony June 23 in honor of an Italian priest, Father Gaetano Piccinini, who helped Jews during the Nazi occupation of Rome. He said that the help and hiding places provided by a network of Catholic institutions at the time likely "happened under the supervision of the highest Vatican officials, who were informed about what was going on."

He said: "It would be a mistake to say that the Catholic Church, the Vatican and the pope himself opposed actions to save the Jews. To the contrary the opposite is true. They helped wherever they could."

On June 26, Lewy issued a statement saying: "Praising the good deeds of Don Piccinini was embedded in a larger historical context. Given the fact that this context is still under the subject of ongoing and future research, passing my personal historical judgment on it was premature."

Pope Pius' role during the war has long been a thorn in Vatican-Israeli relations. Pope Benedict XVI's efforts to move him along the sainthood path has dismayed

Israel and many Jews, who say that beatification should be delayed at least until Vatican archives of the period have been opened and thoroughly studied.

The Vatican has long maintained that Pope Pius refrained from openly clashing with Hitler and his plan of extermination of Jews because of a deeply held belief that any comment would bring about reprisals and more deaths. Pope Pius supporters say that he worked quietly behind the scenes, enabling the Catholic network of priests, religious and others who opened their doors to hide Jewish families.