

Nuncio attends Holocaust ceremony

JERUSALEM - In a reversal of an earlier decision, the papal nuncio to Israel attended a Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial ceremony after receiving a personal letter from the memorial's chairman.

Archbishop Antonio Franco said he decided to attend the ceremony April 15, the eve of Holocaust Remembrance Day, after receiving assurances from Chairman Avner Shalev regarding the memorial's willingness to review any new documentation regarding Pope Pius XII's actions during the Holocaust.

Archbishop Franco said his earlier announcement that he would not attend the ceremony was meant to be a "strong signal" of the need to "reconsider the way Pius XII is presented at Yad Vashem."

He said the depiction of the World War II-era pope in a photo caption at the museum was offensive to his sensibilities and those of Catholics worldwide.

Archbishop Franco said his intention had not been to dissociate himself from the commemoration or to "make a polemic statement" but to "reach an aim of consideration" of how the pope is presented.

"I have no further reason not to go," the nuncio said before the ceremony.

The photograph of Pope Pius and its caption have been on display in the renovated memorial since it reopened in March 2005. The caption states that Pope Pius refused to sign a 1942 Allied condemnation of the massacre of the Jews.

Shalev said in his April 15 letter to the nuncio that "the evaluation of the role of Pope Pius XII during the Holocaust poses a challenge to those who wish to seriously confront it. It is a complex issue, and we will continue to make sure that we are firmly rooted in the most updated historical truth.

"We would be pleased to examine any new documentation that may come to light on this issue," he said.

Yad Vashem said Archbishop Franco's decision to attend the ceremony "and identify

with the memory of the victims is the right thing to do. Yad Vashem believes that it was inappropriate to link an issue of historical research with commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust.”

Last year the former ambassador to Israel, Italian Archbishop Pietro Sambi, approached the memorial directors and requested that the caption be changed.

The ceremony traditionally is attended by all foreign ambassadors or their representatives.

The memorial said in an April 12 statement that the caption “reflected accurately the current research and understanding of what happened during the Holocaust.”

If new information – perhaps from the release of Vatican Archives information to Yad Vashem researchers – provides a different picture, Yad Vashem certainly would reflect that in the caption, the statement said. It also expressed regret at the nuncio’s decision.

Yad Vashem also depicts many stories of Catholic clergy and laypeople who rescued Jews during the Holocaust and honors gentile rescuers with an “Avenue of the Righteous” of trees planted in honor of individuals who risked their lives to save Jews.