

Pope Benedict prays sainthood cause of Pope Pius XII proceeds smoothly

VATICAN CITY - Pope Benedict XVI prayed that the sainthood cause of Pope Pius XII, whose pontificate spanned the “tumultuous years” during and after World War II, would proceed smoothly.

At a memorial Mass in St. Peter’s Basilica Oct. 9, Pope Benedict said “courage and patience” and a constant striving for holiness marked the pontificate and life of Pope Pius, who died Oct. 9, 1958.

“While we pray the cause of beatification of the servant of God, Pius XII, may happily continue, it is wonderful to remember that holiness was his ideal – an ideal he never forgot to propose to everyone,” Pope Benedict said in his homily.

Critics have said they believe Pope Pius did not speak out clearly enough in defense of the Jews during World War II or was indifferent toward the victims of Nazism.

Pope Benedict put Pope Pius’ case on hold last year after members of the Congregation for Saints’ Causes unanimously voted to recommend the pope formally declare him venerable, a step toward canonization.

Instead Pope Benedict set up a commission to study new archival material about his predecessor’s papacy and to examine how his possible beatification would impact Catholic-Jewish and Vatican-Israeli relations.

The Oct. 9 Mass was attended by thousands of the faithful and hundreds of cardinals and bishops from around the world who interrupted their discussions during the Oct. 5-26 world Synod of Bishops on the Bible to participate in the memorial Mass.

Pope Pius’ pontificate began in 1939 just as “the threatening clouds of a new world conflict were gathering over Europe and the rest of the world,” Pope Benedict said. The 20th-century pontiff was already aware of the impending danger hidden in the

“monstrous socialist-Nazi ideology with its pernicious anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic roots” when he served 1917-1929 as apostolic nuncio in Germany, the pope said.

The breakout of World War II and the occupation of Rome only brought Pope Pius’ concern and love for humanity into greater light as he orchestrated major efforts to “defend the persecuted without any distinction according to religion, ethnicity, nationality and political affiliation,” said Pope Benedict.

Pope Pius “often acted secretly and silently” because he knew that was the only way “he could avoid the worst and save the greatest possible number of Jews,” said Pope Benedict.

Despite having to veil his public criticisms of Nazi atrocities, Pope Pius still made an emotional condemnation with “clear reference to the deportation and extermination perpetrated against the Jews” in his 1942 Christmas radio message to the world, the pope said.

Pope Pius “consoled refugees and the persecuted” and dried the tears of pain of innumerable war victims, he added.

He said Pope Pius drew strength during these troubled, insecure times from the word of God and Christ who is “the only certainty that never wanes.”

That Pope Pius took great pains to save and care for countless people during and after the war was confirmed by the “numerous and unanimous testimonies of gratitude extended toward him at the end of the war” and after his death, the pope said.

Those who paid tribute to Pope Pius’ actions included Golda Meir, then foreign minister of Israel, the pope recalled; he quoted her condolences as saying: “When fearful martyrdom came to our people, the voice of the pope was raised for its victims. ... We mourn a great servant of peace.”

Pope Benedict noted the “not always peaceful” debate surrounding Pope Pius’ legacy has overshadowed the important and landmark contributions this pope made to the church and society.

His 1943 encyclical on sacred Scripture, "Divino Afflante Spiritu," represented a "prophetic intuition" that gave the green light to serious scientific research on biblical texts, said the pope. He said Pope Pius also laid the groundwork for the liturgical movement with his 1947 encyclical on liturgy, "Mediator Dei."