News



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A Catholic priest involved in the sainthood cause of a Polish cardinal has rejected claims the cardinal fostered anti-Semitism and refused help for endangered Jews.

"These charges are manipulative and untrue. There's no way he can be accused of anti-Semitism," said Fr. Boguslaw Koziol, vice postulator for the cause of Cardinal August Hlond, who headed the Polish church from 1926 until his death in 1948.

"His letters have been cut and published only in fragmentary form to portray him negatively when speaking about Jews. The latest accusations come from the same sources and are thus based on distortions," Koziol said.

The priest's comments came after claims by Rabbi David Rosen, international director of interreligious affairs for the New York-based American Jewish Committee, that Hlond advocated a boycott of Jewish-owned shops and businesses in a 1936

pastoral letter, and later declined requests for help from threatened Jewish communities.

In an interview with Catholic News Service, the priest said accusations of anti-Semitism first appeared in German newspapers after the opening of the sainthood cause for Hlond in 1992.

However, he added that the claims had been disproved by "historically objective and unemotional research," and said there were "overwhelming arguments" for his beatification.

"It's possible his process could now face delays if the Vatican seeks further clarifications," said Koziol, who heads the beatification office of the Polish church's Society of Christ Fathers in Poznan.

"But all documents connected with Cardinal Hlond, including his misquoted pastoral letter, have been carefully checked, and no Jewish organizations have made any complaints previously," he said.

The pope signed a decree May 21 recognizing the "heroic virtues" of Hlond at the recommendation of the Vatican's Congregation for Saints' Causes and is widely expected to approve his beatification. A miracle attributed to the cardinal's intercession would be needed before he could be beatified.

The cardinal had urged Polish Catholics to shun Jewish shops and publications, Rosen said, and to avoid "the harmful moral influence of Jews" and their "anti-Christian culture."

"While realizing the Holy See has its own criteria for the cause of canonization, such a step will be perceived within the Jewish community and beyond as an expression of approval (or at least absence of condemnation) of his extremely negative approach," the rabbi said.

"While he did temper his remarks with an admission that 'not all Jews are this way,' and forbade assaults on Jews or attacks on their property, he nevertheless condemned Judaism and Jewry for rejecting Jesus," he added.

Ordained in 1905 after joining the Salesian order, Hlond worked for a decade in Austria, before being named first bishop of Katowice, Poland, in 1925 and archbishop of Gniezno, Poland's primatial see, a year later.

Following twin Nazi and Soviet occupations of Poland in September 1939, the cardinal left for Rome, from where he publicized Polish suffering, but was arrested by the German Gestapo in 1944 while residing in France.

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Freed by U.S. forces, he returned home in July 1945 and was instrumental in reorganizing the Catholic Church in Poland's western "recovered territories."

A beatification process for the cardinal, who was buried in Warsaw's St. John's Archcathedral after dying in suspicious circumstances, was opened in 1992 by the Salesian order in Rome.

In a Twitter message after the pope's May 21 decree, the Polish primate, Archbishop Wojciech Polak of Gniezno, said he hoped Hlond would now be "beatified and canonized as soon as possible."

However, in his letter, Rosen said the cardinal had rejected post-war requests by Jewish leaders for the church's help against anti-Semitism in the run-up to a July 1946 pogrom at Kielce, in which 42 Jewish Holocaust survivors were savagely murdered and 40 injured by a Polish mob.

He added that Hlond had failed to condemn the massacre at a press conference a week later, and had instead "pointed out that the Jews were all communists or supporters of communism, and that the pogrom was their own fault."

The charge was rejected by Koziol, who told CNS Hlond could not have made such public comments in Poland's communist-controlled media.

The vice postulator said the cardinal had issued a statement to American journalists about the Kielce massacre, correcting U.S. misreporting of his position -- with a request it be published unchanged -- but added that the statement, like his 1936 letter, had been quoted selectively.

"I don't know the intention of the Jewish committee, and why it's chosen to intervene now in this way," he said. "But we've already provided all necessary explanations, and it would be important to hear voices of support from Poland's bishops."