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Pope Benedict decision might further irritate Jews

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 11, 2009

Archbishop Antonio Franco, Vatican nuncio to Israel and the Palestinian territories (CNS photo)

In moves that may further aggravate Jewish/Catholic tensions, a Vatican envoy has announced that Pope Benedict XVI will not enter Israel?s main Holocaust museum during his May 8-15 trip to the Holy Land, though he will stop at a memorial connected to the site, and the pope has also sent a letter to the world?s Catholic bishops defending his controversial decision to lift the excommunication of four traditionalist prelates, including one who has denied the Holocaust.

Archbishop Antonio Franco, the pope?s ambassador in the Holy Land, presented details of Benedict?s itinerary during a news conference Tuesday in Jerusalem. Franco said the pope will not visit the museum section of Yad Vashem, Israel?s most important Holocaust memorial, though he will lay a wreath at the site?s Hall of Remembrance.

Vatican spokespersons pointed out that this was the same protocol followed by Pope John Paul II during his historic visit to Israel in March 2000. Other foreign dignitaries, however, typically go into the museum during state visits to Israel.

Benedict?s decision not to enter the museum itself is widely understood to be linked to an on-going dispute between Yad Vashem and the Vatican over the museum?s presentation of Pope Pius XII, the wartime pontiff accused by critics of ?silence? during the Holocaust. Debate over Pius XII has long been a sticking point in Jewish/Catholic relations.

A caption below a large photo of Pius XII at Yad Vashem currently reads: ?Even when reports about the murder of Jews reached the Vatican, the pope did not protest, either verbally or in writing. In December 1942, he abstained from signing the Allied declaration condemning the extermination of the Jews. When Jews were deported from Rome to Auschwitz, the pope did not intervene. The pope maintained his neutral position throughout the war, with the exception of appeals to the rulers of Hungary and Slovakia toward its end. His silence and the absence of guidelines obliged churchmen throughout Europe to decide on their own how to react.?

Church officials, including Benedict himself, have repeatedly objected to that caption, arguing that Pius lodged public protests where possible against Nazi atrocities, and also acted behind the scenes to save lives.

?He often acted secretly and in silence because, given the actual situation of that complex historical moment, he saw that this was the only way to avoid the worst and save as many Jews as possible,? Benedict said last September during a Mass marking the 50th anniversary of Pius? death in 1958.

In response to those protests, Yad Vashem convened a behind-closed-doors summit of experts on Pius XII in early March to discuss the caption. A statement issued by museum officials, however, appeared to suggest that no changes are on tap: ?The presentation of the subject in the Holocaust History Museum at Yad Vashem is based on the best research regarding this topic,? it said.

While in Jerusalem, Franco said, Benedict XVI will also become the first pope to visit the Dome of the Rock, one of the holiest sites in Islam. Muslims believe it marks the spot where Muhammad ascended to Heaven in the company of the angel Gabriel.

Meanwhile, Benedict XVI has sent a letter to Catholic bishops around the world defending his decision to lift the excommunications of four traditionalist bishops who form part of the Society of St. Pius X. One of those prelates, Bishop Richard Williamson, has a long record of casting doubt on the historical reality of the Holocaust.

The pope?s letter was reported March 11 by veteran Italian journalist Andrea Tornielli.

The Williamson affair, Benedict acknowledged in the letter, ?has aroused, both inside and outside the Catholic church, a debate of a kind of vehemence that hasn?t been seen for a long time.?

Benedict called it an ?unforeseen misfortune? that Williamson?s views on the Holocaust have obscured the real motives for lifting the excommunications, which, he suggested, had nothing to do with Jewish/Catholic relations or the Holocaust, but rather with healing the only formal schism within the Catholic church in the last 100 years.

?A discrete gesture of mercy towards four bishops, ordained validly but not legitimately, suddenly seemed like something totally different: like a denial of reconciliation between Christians and Jews, and therefore like a rejection of what the [Second Vatican] Council had taught in this regard for the path of the church,? the pope wrote.

Benedict said that reaction has been personally frustrating for him, since reconciliation between Christians and Jews has been ?an aim of my personal theological work from the very beginning.? He also said that in the future the Vatican will have to pay more attention to the Internet as a source of information, since Williamson?s views on the Holocaust were easily available on-line.

The pope made clear that although the bishops are no longer excommunicated, they still have no authority to exercise any ministry in the church, and their Society of St. Pius X is not recognized. For that to happen, the pope suggested, the traditionalists must accept the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), including respect for Judaism: ?The magisterial authority of the church can?t be frozen in 1962. That must be completely clear to the society,? he wrote.

While conceding that the motives for revoking the excommunication were not ?explained in sufficiently clear fashion? at the time the decision was made, Benedict nevertheless defended the aim of reconciliation.

?Can we remain completely indifferent to a community with 491 priests, 215 seminarians, 117 brothers, 164 sisters and thousands of faithful?? the pope wrote. ?Do we truly have to allow them to drift farther and farther from the church??

Benedict seemed to bristle at suggestions that such outreach is unjustified: ?Sometimes one has the impression that our society needs at least one group for which it has absolutely no tolerance, a group which it can hate with a clean conscience,? he wrote. ?Then when someone dares to come close to that group ? in this case, the pope ? he too loses his right to tolerance, and he too can be treated with hate without any fear or reservation.?

The pope also chided Catholics who criticized his move: ?I?ve been saddened by the fact that even some Catholics, who ought to know how things stand, instead have struck at me with a kind of aggressive hostility,? the pope wrote. ?For precisely this reason, I want to thank all the more those Jews who have helped to remove misunderstanding, and to reestablish an atmosphere of friendship and trust.?

On March 17, Benedict XVI will begin a week-long trip to Africa, visiting the West African nations of Cameroon and Angola. He will then return to Rome for the celebrations of Holy Week and Easter, in addition to marking his 82nd birthday on April 16, before setting out again in May to visit Israel, the Palestinian Territories and Jordan.

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