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The pope and Hitler Youth (Benedict's words)

by John L. Allen Jr.



Pope Benedict and Israel's President Shimon Peres plant an olive tree, an ancient symbol of peace and prosperity, in the garden of the presidential palace in Jerusalem May 11. (CNS/ Reuters)

Jerusalem

During a press briefing in Jerusalem today, the Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, chided reporters for repeating what he called a falsehood ? namely, the claim that the young Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, was once a member of the Hitler Youth.

"The pope was never in the Hitler Youth: never, never, never," Lombardi said.

Unfortunately for Lombardi, his assertion is contradicted by a fairly unimpeachable source: the future pope himself.

Before proceeding, a necessary caveat: The historical evidence is overwhelming that Joseph Ratzinger's family was ferociously anti-Nazi, and that the future pope was appalled by the arrogance and destructiveness of National Socialism. He was never a Nazi party member, entered an auxiliary unit of the

German army only when forced to do so, and deserted before war's end. He was an American prisoner of war in a camp near Ulm, Germany, before being released and returning to his seminary studies.

Nonetheless, it is a fact of his biography that Ratzinger was once, albeit briefly and involuntarily, enrolled as a member of the Hitler Youth. The relevant documentation comes from the 1997 book *Salt of the Earth*, based on an interview which then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger granted to German journalist Peter Seewald. Here is the exchange, which appears on page 52 of the English edition:

Seewald: "Were you in the Hitler Youth?"

Ratzinger: "At first we weren't, but when the compulsory Hitler Youth was introduced in 1941, my brother was obliged to join. I was still too young, but later, as a seminarian, I was registered in the HY. As soon as I was out of the seminary, I never went back. That was difficult, because the tuition reduction, which I really needed, was tied to proof of attendance at the HY. Thank goodness, there was a very understanding mathematics teacher. He himself was a Nazi but an honest man, who said to me, 'Just go once and get the document, so that we have it.' When he saw that I simply didn't want to, he said, 'I understand, I'll take care of it,' and so I was able to stay free of it."

To be fair, Lombardi's point was doubtless that the young Ratzinger never wanted to be part of the Hitler Youth and never participated in it. His concern is probably that short-hand media formula such as "former Hitler Youth member" can leave an inflammatory, and inaccurate, impression.

Asked later in the day for clarification, Lombardi said he could confirm that what then-Cardinal Ratzinger said in 1997 was correct, that he was registered in the Hitler Youth and was therefore technically a member.

"This was a formal thing, which was not a significant part of his life," Lombardi said. "He had no active participation and no identification with this movement."

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In truth, however, the fact that Ratzinger never wanted to be part of the Hitler Youth was already well known. By denying a technical point that the pontiff himself has already conceded, this afternoon's attempt at a clarification may risk reopening a chapter most people already considered closed.

John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His traveling with Pope Benedict XVI in Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories May 8-15. Read NCRonline.org daily for his dispatches from the Holy Land.

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