

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 17, 2009 at 9:07am

Pope to visit Rome synagogue this fall

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NCR Today

In a telegram marking the beginning of the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah, Pope Benedict XVI told the Chief Rabbi of Rome that he plans to visit the storied Rome synagogue sometime this fall.

A Vatican spokesperson said that no date has yet been set, but that the second half of October seems probable.

It will mark the second time a pope has been to the synagogue, after John Paul II's historic 1986 visit, widely regarded as a significant turning point in Jewish/Catholic relations.

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invoke copious blessings upon all the Jews, as well as constant encouragement for your deep commitment to promoting justice, concord and peace,? Benedict?s telegram read.

?I renew my cordial friendship, in anticipation of being able, after your holidays, to joyfully visit your community and the synagogue, animated by a lively desire to manifest my personal closeness and that of the entire Catholic church.?

Rome's Chief Rabbi, Riccardo Di Segni, called the message "significant and important," and said that work is underway to organize the pope's visit.

Since his election to the papacy five years ago, Benedict XVI has repeatedly reached out to Jews, including a visit to the historic synagogue in Cologne, Germany, during his first foreign trip in 2005, and to the Park East Synagogue in New York during his mid-April 2008 trip to the United States.

Yet his pontificate also has been marked by occasional crises in Catholic/Jewish relations, including a furor earlier this year after Benedict XVI lifted the excommunications of four traditionalist Catholic bishops, including one who is a Holocaust denier.

Ironically, the Vatican confirmed earlier this week that formal talks with the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X will be held in the second half of October, roughly the same time that Benedict XVI may be making his visit to the synagogue.

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