

A 'two-for-one' strategy in declaring popes as saints

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Two instances of something may not constitute a trend, but they can at least suggest a strategy. This morning an apparent Vatican strategy on turning popes into saints came into view: When you're going to move a pope along the path whose cause is sure to cause friction in Catholic/Jewish relations, bundle it with a popular pope also seen as a friend to the Jews.

Call it a 'two-for-one' strategy with regard to pope-saints.

This morning, the Vatican announced that Pope Benedict XVI has approved decrees of heroic virtue for several figures, including two of his 20th century predecessors: Pope John Paul II, and Pope Pius XII.

A decree of heroic virtue is an official finding that someone lived a saintly life. It allows the candidate to be referred to as 'venerable,' and means that the only hurdle left for beatification is a documented miracle, with one more miracle necessary for canonization, the formal act of declaring someone a saint.

The obvious parallel is to September 2000, when Popes Pius IX and John XXIII were beatified in the same ceremony. Among other things, Pius IX was known for corralling the Jews of Rome back into their ghetto and for the famous case of a Jewish child forcibly removed from his family and raised in the Vatican. John XXIII, on the other hand, was the popular 'Good Pope John' of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Among other gestures of outreach to the Jewish community, John XXIII had removed a reference to the 'perfidious Jews' from the church's Good Friday liturgy.

The similarity with today's announcement is striking.

Pius XII, of course, was the pontiff during the Second World War, whose alleged 'silence' on the Holocaust has long been the subject of fierce historical debate. Whether one regards Pius as a hero or a villain, the progress of his cause will produce new tensions in Jewish/Catholic relations — even if the result has seemed a foregone conclusion for some time, since Benedict XVI has repeatedly insisted that Pius XII did everything possible under the dramatic circumstances of the war to save Jews and other victims of the Nazi regime.

Those tensions were not long in surfacing. Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League told the Associated Press, "We are saddened and disappointed that the pontiff would feel compelled to fast-track Pope Pius at a point where the issue of the record — the history and the coming to a judgment — is still wide open."

Hence the logic of moving Pius XII along at the same time as John Paul II, since John Paul is credited with revolutionizing ties between Catholic and Jews. John Paul II is the pope who visited the Great Synagogue in Rome in 1986, the first time any modern pontiff had entered a Jewish place of worship; he's the pope who visited the Western Wall in Jerusalem in 2000, leaving behind a note apologizing for centuries of Christian anti-Semitism; and in a thousand other ways large and small, he signaled a new sensitivity to the Jewish world.

Among other things, the timing suggests that bundling John Paul II and Pius XII wasn't entirely an accident. The Congregation for the Causes of Saints approved a decree of heroic virtue for Pius XII in May 2007, more than two years ago. News reports at the time indicated that Benedict XVI had decided to slow things down, not out of doubt about Pius XII's worthiness, but concern for the wider implications of declaring him a saint.

To be sure, John Paul II's outreach to the Jews is hardly the only aspect of his resume that merits consideration, and the same thing was true with John XXIII. Arguably, even if neither pope had ever done anything with regard to Judaism, they both still would have been compelling candidates for sainthood.

Yet putting each man into the same sainthood "class," so to speak, with a fellow pontiff whose public image on Judaism is more mixed is, at least in part, a way of trying to soften the sting. Substantively, it sends a signal that the Catholic church is not honoring those pontiffs in order to promote hostility to Jews; in terms of PR, it tries to ensure that whatever negative publicity may surround the controversial popes will be balanced (and, perhaps, outweighed) by positive reaction to the popular ones.

It remains to be seen whether John Paul II and Pius XII, having been declared venerable together, will also be beatified together. Sources say the beatification of John Paul II could come as early as October 2010, while it's not clear that Pius' cause will move quite that swiftly.

Yet the two pontiffs are, for the moment, linked, as was the case for Pius IX and John XXIII almost a decade ago. How well that strategy may play out is anyone's guess, especially since Pius IX's history with Judaism was a sore point only in Italy and among experts, while the debates over Pius XII have a more global resonance.

It is a strategy nonetheless, and for an institution sometimes accused of being tone-deaf with regard to communications, perhaps that alone is worthy of note.

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