

Vatican moves John Paul II and Pius XII closer to sainthood

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 21, 2009



Popes John Paul II and Pius XII

Two instances of something may not constitute a trend, but they can at least suggest a strategy. Last week, an apparent Vatican strategy on turning popes into saints came into view: When you're going to move a controversial pope along the path to sainthood, bundle him with a more popular pontiff — the PR calculation apparently being that acclaim for the latter may drown out negative reaction to the former.

Call it a "two-for-one" strategy, one that appears especially probable when the controversy concerns Jewish/Catholic relations.

The Vatican announced Dec. 19 that Pope Benedict XVI has approved decrees of heroic virtue for two of his 20th century predecessors: Pope John Paul II and Pope Pius XII.

A decree of heroic virtue is a finding that someone lived a saintly life. It allows the candidate to be referred to as "venerable," and means 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). He was known for gestures of outreach to Jews, including removal of a reference to the "perfidious Jews" from the church's Good Friday liturgy.

The similarity with Saturday's announcement is striking.

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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, 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.

The 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." Elan Steinberg, vice president of the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and their Descendants, called the decision "profoundly insensitive and thoughtless."

Steinberg pointed out that the announcement on Pius XII came less than a year after Benedict's decision to lift the excommunications of four traditionalist bishops, including one who's a Holocaust denier, set off a crisis in Catholic/Jewish relations.

Reports from Italy indicate that a planned visit by Benedict XVI to the Great Synagogue in Rome, the first such occasion after John Paul's historic visit in 1986, may be at risk. A spokesperson for Rome's Jewish community said the event is "under review" in the wake of the announcement about Pius XII. Italian Jewish leaders also released a statement saying they will never forget the deportation of more than 1,000 Roman Jews in October 1943, aboard a train, they said, "that left Rome's Tiburtina train station for Auschwitz in the silence of Pius XII."

By way of contrast, John Paul II is credited with revolutionizing ties between Catholic and Jews. In addition to the 1986 synagogue visit, John Paul is also the pope who visited the Western Wall in Jerusalem in 2000, leaving behind a note apologizing for centuries of Christian anti-Semitism.

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.

To say that John Paul II is a more popular figure is also not to suggest that there's no controversy around his cause. Critics, for example, point to the fact that the sexual abuse crisis exploded on his watch as grounds for caution. Others object to the speed at which John Paul's cause is moving; in a recent interview with *30 Giorni*, Belgian Cardinal Godfried Danneels objected to the fast-track treatment for the late pope, saying that "holiness does not need to go through preferential channels."

Indeed, some observers object to the whole business of sainthood for popes. The argument goes that either they all should be canonized – which, arguably, cheapens the value of the act – or the Vatican has to pick and choose, which runs the risk of seeming political. In any event, the point of declaring someone a saint is, in part, to lift that person up as a role model, something that election to the papacy has presumably already accomplished.

It's not clear 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 uncertain Pius' cause will move that swiftly. In part, the Vatican may look to reaction to Saturday's announcement to gauge the likely fallout from moving forward quickly.

For now, however, the two pontiffs are linked, as was the case for Pius IX and John XXIII almost a decade ago. A key difference is that Pius IX's history with Judaism was a sore point in Italy and among experts, while debates over Pius XII have more global resonance.

One indication of how well the "two-for-one" strategy is working should come on January 17. Assuming that Benedict's visit to the Rome synagogue goes ahead, it will be revealing to watch how he's received – and whether gratitude for John Paul II, or resentment over Pius XII, has the upper hand.

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