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UPDATED: Scholars ask pope to slow Pius XII's canonization

Dennis Sadowski Catholic News Service | Feb. 18, 2010

WASHINGTON -- Nineteen Catholic scholars of theology and history are asking Pope Benedict XVI to slow the process of the sainthood cause of Pope Pius XII.

Saying that much more research needs to be done on the papacy of the mid-20th century pope, the scholars said in a Feb. 16 letter to Pope Benedict that "history needs distance and perspective" before definitive conclusions can be reached on the role of Pope Pius during World War II and the Holocaust.

Leading the effort are Servite Father John Pawlikowski, professor of ethics at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, and Holy Cross Father Kevin Spicer, associate professor of history at Stonehill College in Easton, Mass.

"We're not on a bandwagon to stop his eventual canonization," Father Pawlikowski told Catholic News Service Feb. 18. "We're saying allow some time."

Father Pawlikowski said the scholars, known widely for their research and expertise on the Holocaust, wanted to express their concerns in a respectful manner to the pope.

First sent Feb. 16 via e-mail to the Vatican and then sent a day later via overnight mail, the letter asked Pope Benedict "to be patient with the cause of Pope Pius XII."

Pope Benedict advanced the cause of Pope Pius' sainthood in a Dec. 19 decree.

Copies of the letter also were sent to Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York, episcopal moderator for Catholic-Jewish relations for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews.

Both Father Spicer and Father Pawlikowski said the letter was meant to be private correspondence with the pope but it was released by an unknown party to a secular news agency Feb. 17.

Father Spicer told CNS Feb. 18 that the scholars also wanted to tell Pope Benedict that concerns about the canonization of Pope Pius are not limited to the Jewish community.

"The people who signed the letter, they are ... Catholic, they work in the Catholic Church in Holocaust studies or have written in that area before," Father Spicer said.

"We're all practicing Catholics. We're faithful to the Holy Father. We wanted to be sure of writing a letter that was respectful but at the same time addresses our concerns," he added.

In the letter, the scholars said "the movement to press forward at this time the process of beatification of Pius XII greatly troubles us."

Citing controversy that surrounds Pope Pius' actions during World War II and the Holocaust, the scholars said much research remains to be done before final conclusions can be drawn about his behavior.

"History needs distance and perspective to arrive at these conclusions," the letter said. "At this moment, scholars eagerly await the opening of the papers from Pius XII's pontificate that you, Holy Father, have so graciously arranged to be made available."

The scholars said existing research "leads us to the view that Pope Pius XII did not issue a clearly worded statement, unconditionally condemning the wholesale slaughter and murder of European Jews."

"At the same time, some evidence also compels us to see that Pius XII's diplomatic background encouraged him as head of a neutral state, the Vatican, to assist Jews by means that were not made public during the war. It is essential that further research be conducted to resolve both these questions," the letter said.

The scholars also shared their concern that by discussing the beatification of Pope Pius, Catholic-Jewish relations would be set back.

Acknowledging Pope Benedict's efforts to breach misunderstandings between Catholics and Jews, the scholars still cautioned that much work remains to build relations between the two religions.

"Mistrust and apprehension still exist," the scholars wrote. "For many Jews and Catholics, Pius XII takes on a role much larger than his historical papacy. In essence, Pius XII has become a symbol of centuries-old Christian anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.

"It is challenging to separate Pope Pius XII from this legacy. Proceeding with the cause of Pope Pius XII, without an exhaustive study of his actions during the Holocaust, might harm Jewish-Catholic relations in a way that cannot be overcome in the foreseeable future," the letter said.

In addition to Father Spicer and Father Pawlikowski, the list of signers includes Jesuit Father James Bernauer, philosophy professor, Boston College; Suzanne Brown-Fleming, independent scholar; John Connelly, associate history professor, University of California at Berkeley; Frank J. Coppa, history professor, St. John's University in New York; Donald J. Dietrich, theology professor, Boston College; Sister Audrey Doetzel, a member of the Congregation of Notre Dame de Sion and associate director of the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning, Boston College; Lauren N. Faulkner, assistant history professor, University of Notre Dame in Indiana; Eugene J. Fisher, retired associate director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligous Affairs in Washington; and Dominican Father Elias H. Fullenbach of the Institute for Church History, University of Bonn in Germany.

It also includes: Beth A. Griech-Polelle, associate history professor, Bowling Green State University in Ohio; Robert A. Krieg, theology professor, Notre Dame; Martin Menke, associate history professor, Rivier College in Nashua, N.H.; Paul O'Shea, senior religious education coordinator, St. Patrick's College, Strathfield, Australia; Michael E. O'Sullivan, assistant history professor, Marist College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y.; Michael Phayer, professor emeritus of history, Marquette University in Milwaukee; Mercy Sister Carol Rittner, professor of Holocaust and genocide studies, Richard Stockton College of New Jersey; and Jose Sanchez, professor emeritus of history, St. Louis University.

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Editor's Note: The full text of the scholars' letter to Pope Benedict can be read at cnsblog.wordpress.com/2010/02/18/catholic-scholars-ask-pope-benedict-to-slow-process-of-sainthood-cause-of-

pope-pius-xii/.

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