

# Don't mention the Pope's Hitler Youth past, says the Vatican

The Vatican blundered into a fresh public relations fiasco on Tuesday after seeking to rewrite the biography of Pope Benedict XVI by denying that he was ever a member of the Hitler Youth.

By Nick Squires in Rome and Tim Butcher in Jerusalem

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Pope Benedict XVI places his note to God in the Western Wall at Judaism's holiest site in Jerusalem's Old City, Israel. Photo: GETTY

The muddle overshadowed the second day of the Pope's visit to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, when he visited sacred sites around Jerusalem and sought to bridge the historic divide between Catholicism and Judaism.

Even though the 82-year-old German pontiff has admitted in numerous interviews that he was drafted unwillingly into the Nazi youth movement towards the end of the war, his spokesman came up with another version.

"The Pope was never in the Hitler Youth, never, never, never," Father Federico Lombardi, chief spokesman for the Pope, told a press conference in Jerusalem.

Father Lombardi tried to draw a distinction between pro-Nazi Germans who volunteered for the Hitler Youth and young men, like the pontiff, who were forced to join the anti-aircraft unit but who, he claimed, were not necessarily in the Hitler Youth.

But Father Lombardi's comments contradicted statements the Pope himself has made.

In the 1996 book "Salt of the Earth", the Pope told Peter Seewald, a German journalist: "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."

Late yesterday Father Lombardi withdrew his earlier comments, saying that Benedict had, indeed, been forced to join the Hitler Youth.

Father Lombardi made his comments in the wake of a critical response in Israel to the Pope's choice of language over the Holocaust during the first day of his trip to Israel.

In clarifying his suggestion that the Pope had not been a member of the Hitler Youth, Father Lombardi said he had intended to dispute suggestions in the Israeli media that the Pope had been an enthusiastic Nazi as a boy.

"This fact of the Hitler Youth had no role in his life and in his personality," Father Lombardi said.

The puzzling claim about the Pope's membership of the Hitler Youth is the Vatican's third stumble this year.

In January he caused outrage when he lifted the excommunication of a renegade British Catholic bishop, Richard Williamson, who denied the extent of the Holocaust.

Two months later he was criticised by governments, NGOs and health experts when he said during his first papal visit to Africa that condoms can "aggravate" the Aids crisis.

The Pope began the day with a visit to two of the holiest Muslim and Jewish sites in Jerusalem, where he delivered messages of peace.

In keeping with tradition, he slipped a folded piece of paper bearing a prayer between the ancient stones of the Western Wall, revered by Jews as one of their most sacred shrines.

According to the Vatican, the prayer referred to "Jerusalem, City of Peace, spiritual home to Jews, Christians and Muslims alike" and asked God to end war.

He was then became the first pontiff to enter the Dome of the Rock mosque, where the Prophet Mohammed is believed to have ascended into heaven.

After meeting Israel's two chief rabbis, Shlomo Amar and Yona Metzger, the Pope sought to send a signal of rapprochement when he said that the Catholic church was "irrevocably committed" to reconciliation with Jews, tacitly admitting that a gap continues to exist between the two sides.

The first mass of his visit to Israel was held amid tight security in the Kidron Valley, yards from the Garden of Gethsemane where, it is believed, Jesus was betrayed.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/vaticancityandholysee/5314338/Dont-mention-the-Popes-Hitler-Youth-past-says-the-Vatican.html>