

Vatican 'surprised' by criticism of pope

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The Vatican was "surprised" at negative reaction in Israel to words spoken by Pope Benedict XVI at Yad Vashem on Monday, Holy See spokesman Rev. Federico Lombardi said Tuesday.

Pope Benedict XVI lays a...

Pope Benedict XVI lays a wreath during a ceremony in Yad Vashem's Hall of Remembrance on Monday.

"We are a little surprised at the negative reaction to the pope's speech," said Lombardi in an interview with The Jerusalem Post. "At Yad Vashem the pope's speech was a meditation on a very specific theme: shema, or name. The pope spoke of memory, of remembering the names of those persons and the crimes committed against them so that it will never happen again," he said.

Lombardi added that in the past, Benedict had "emphasized other aspects of the Holocaust." He was referring to speeches the pontiff had made during a 2005 visit to a synagogue in Cologne, Germany, and during a trip to Auschwitz the following year in which he singled out Nazi German culpability.

In response to a question by the Post, Lombardi said the pope was not disappointed with Israelis.

"He is a very patient and sympathetic person," Lombardi said. "But he does believe that he has not been well understood. Israelis have not understood the speech."

Several prominent Israeli figures criticized the speech, including the chairman of the Yad Vashem Directorate, Avner Shalev, the chairman of its Council, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, and Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin.

The focus of the criticism was on Benedict's failure to apologize for what Israelis see as the Church's relative inaction on behalf of Jews during the Holocaust, and his omission of the word "Nazi" or "murder."

The Church's position on the Holocaust became even more problematic in January, after the pontiff lifted the excommunication of Bishop Richard Williamson, a Holocaust denier. The move drew fire from numerous Jewish leaders.

Another controversial issue has been the proposed beatification of Pope Pius XII. Pius served during World War II and has been the focus of much of the criticism about the Church's wartime inaction. Benedict's willingness to continue the beatification process, which could lead to sainthood for Pius, was come in for severe criticism in Jewish circles.

Finally, the pope's German origins, his membership in the Hitler Youth - which was mandatory for all German boys at the time - and his service in the German army after being drafted by the Nazi regime, have all been widely publicized in the local media.

As a result, expectations were high among Israelis that the pontiff would go to great lengths to distance himself from that past.

However, Lombardi said the pope had already made clear his position on the importance of remembering the Holocaust, fighting Holocaust denial and emphasizing Germany's guilt.

"He need not repeat himself all the time," said Lombardi. "At Yad Vashem, the pope had a different message to convey, one of remembering."

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