

# Pope Quiz: Is Every Pontiff a Saint?

By DAVID GIBSON

Published: January 16, 2010

When [Pope Benedict XVI](#) approved a decree last month that nudged nearer to sainthood his controversial wartime predecessor, Pius XII, he sparked another round of the sort of Jewish-Catholic disputations that have marked his papacy, and even cast doubt on whether his trip to Rome's main synagogue, set for Sunday, would go on.

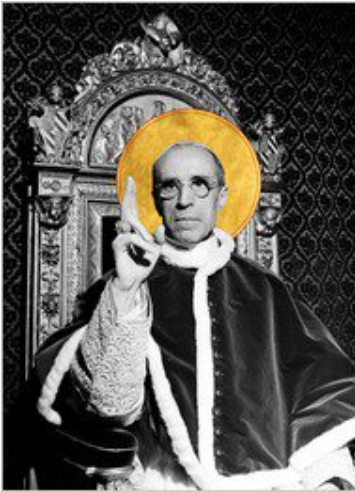


Photo Illustration by The New York Times; Photograph by Associated Press

**NEXT UP FOR CANONIZATION** Pius XII's place in his earthly life is a matter of debate.

The [Vatican](#) paired the announcement of Pius XII's "heroic virtue" — the step before beatification, which would be followed by canonization, or sainthood — with a similar declaration about [Pope John Paul II](#), who was considered a great friend to the Jews. No matter. Jewish leaders were furious, though Rome's Jews decided to go ahead with the papal visit.

Pope Benedict's decision of course renewed the longstanding debate over Pius's World War II legacy (was he "silent" or even complicit in the Nazi extermination of the Jews?), but there is another question here that goes beyond Pius:

Should any pope be made a saint?

The church counts less than a third of all 264 dead popes as saints, and most were canonized by popular acclaim in the first centuries of Christianity, often because they were martyrs. Only five were canonized in the entire second millennium, and when Pius X, who died in 1914, was made a saint in 1954 — by Pius XII — he was the first pope so honored in nearly 400 years.

Now nearly every recent pope is on the canonization track. John Paul II beatified Pius IX, the 19th-century pope who is a polarizing figure because of his belief in the power of the papacy and his views on Judaism. But like Benedict, John Paul did a little ticket-balancing. He simultaneously beatified the popular John XXIII, who convened the liberalizing Second Vatican Council in 1962. The canonization process for Paul VI, who followed John XXIII, is underway, and there is a campaign to beatify John Paul I, who reigned a mere 33 days before his death in 1978.

This trend, by some accounts, is creating several problems. One is that it can dilute the meaning of sainthood; all who die and go to heaven are saints, but those officially recognized as such by the church are exalted as worthy of veneration and imitation. Is every pope such an exemplar? Moreover, by canonizing predecessors a reigning pope elevates the throne he himself occupies and practically ensures that his successor one day will declare him a saint as well — as if sanctity were an award for becoming pope.

This overlooks the reality that the cardinals in a conclave are electing a leader to govern the church. As the German theologian Karl Rahner put it, if a pope turns out to be a wonderful Christian, that's "a happy coincidence," just as when the president of the chess club is also a great player. It is not necessarily relevant, however, to the health of the chess club — or the church.

In fact, conclaves have often looked for a pope who could govern firmly and defend the church in a dangerous world because that's what a pope usually had to do. But in modern times, as popes became, first, "prisoners of the Vatican" after the unification of Italy in 1870, and then globetrotting media stars a century later, they also became the universal face of Catholicism. "Before that, most Catholics would be hard

pressed to name the pope and almost none would know what he looked like,” said Christopher Bellitto, a church historian at Kean University in Union, N.J. “After 1870, with cheap printing and his prisoner-of-the-Vatican status, the pope’s face became recognizable and a rallying point for those who wanted to see the world as standing against the church.”

This “papalization” of the church means that every pope must now be seen as a holy man, indeed the holiest man in the church, even if there are pressing issues of governance that would require more savvy than piety. Although John Paul II is a lock for sainthood, serious questions about his administration of the church are emerging as the clergy sexual abuse scandals reveal how he neglected the mundane but critical tasks of being pope.

The Rev. Richard McBrien, a theology professor at Notre Dame and author of “Lives of the Popes,” suggested that canonizations may be a defense against criticism of popes, and he said the church would do better to canonize more saintly lay people — parents and grandparents and regular holy folk “with whom the overwhelming majority of Catholics can identify.”

“The only one of the recent batch of papal candidates for canonization who is at all credible is John XXIII,” Father McBrien wrote in an e-mail message. “But I would gladly trade John XXIII’s candidacy for the suspension of procedures on behalf of the other recent popes.”

Yet to avoid canonizing John Paul II or any pope at this point could come off as an insult, or a knock on the papacy. That forces promoters of papal canonizations, and defenders of Pius XII in particular, to create a false division between official actions and personal piety. As a papal spokesman said in defending Benedict’s decision on Pius, “the evaluation essentially concerns the witness of Christian life that the person showed ... and not the historical impact of all his operative decisions.”

But as Mr. Bellitto said, “based on this formula, plenty of nice people who did awful things would qualify for sainthood — and they’d hardly be models for the rest of us.”

Such a restricted view of sainthood also easily dismisses the realities of a pope’s job — and the debatable record of Pius XII. Hans Küng, the dissident Swiss theologian, recalls an episode during his days as a student in Rome in the 1950s when the private secretary of Pius XII, Father Robert Lieber, visited the seminary. Father Küng and the other young men pestered Father Lieber about whether the aristocratic Pius was a saint: “No, no!” the priest insisted. “Pius XII is not a saint. He is a great man of the church.”

It’s a verdict that makes Pius XII neither villain nor plaster icon, but neither does it answer the question of what a modern pope should be — a leader of the church or a model of sanctity?

David Gibson, author of a biography of Benedict XVI, writes on religion at [PoliticsDaily.com](http://PoliticsDaily.com).

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/17/weekinreview/17gibsonx.html>