

# Israeli ambassador backpedals on wartime pope comments

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(RNS) After strong criticism from the Jewish community, Israel's ambassador to the Vatican backpedaled from his praise of the controversial wartime Pope Pius XII for his "actions to save the Jews" during the Holocaust.

"Given the fact that this context is still under the subject of ongoing and future research, passing my personal historical judgment on it was premature," Ambassador Mordechai Lewy said in a statement on Sunday (June 26).

Lewy had said many Catholic institutions in Rome hid Jews from the occupying Germans during the mass arrests on Oct. 16, 1943, which led to the deportation of more than 1,000 people to Auschwitz.

"It would be a mistake to say that the Catholic Church, the Vatican and the pope himself opposed actions to save the Jews," Lewy said on Thursday. "To the contrary, the opposite is true: they helped wherever they could."

Lewy's remarks, which were seen as a conciliatory gesture on one of the most sensitive points of Jewish-Catholic relations, quickly drew fire from a large U.S. group of Holocaust survivors.

Lewy "disgracefully conflated the praiseworthy actions of elements in the Catholic Church to rescue Jews with the glaring failure of Pope Pius to do so," said Elan Steinberg, vice president of the American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors and Their Descendants.

In December 2009, Pope Benedict XVI declared Pius "venerable" and thus eligible for beatification, the rank just below sainthood. Pius

"saved more Jews than anyone else," Benedict said in a book released last year.

Jewish leaders and a group of Catholic scholars have called for still-sealed wartime records in the Vatican Archives to be made accessible before the Vatican makes any decision on Pius's beatification or possible sainthood.