

Vatican Scrambles to Steady Pope's Visit to Holy Land

Benedict stresses 'common threads' while visiting Jerusalem's holiest sites

✖ While Pope Benedict XVI visited Jerusalem's holiest sites on Tuesday, touring areas sacred to Muslims, Jews and Christians while stressing the common threads of the three faiths, Vatican officials were scrambling to smooth over Israeli criticism of his performance at Yad Vashem on Monday.

Former Chief Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, Yad Vashem director Avner Shalev, and Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin were all present at the Hall of Remembrance for the pope's visit last evening and each expressed disappointment afterwards that his remarks there did not contain any expression of personal remorse as a German and former Hitler Youth.

In response, Vatican officials touring with Benedict appear to have over-reached in his defense by initially telling *Reuters* Tuesday morning that as a youth, Joseph Ratzinger "never, never, never" belonged to the Hitler Youth. When various media then pointed out that Ratzinger himself had admitted his membership, his spokesman, Rev. Federico Lombardi, clarified that he indeed had been involuntarily conscripted into the infamous youth league, like other German teens, "but he opposed Nazi ideology and got out as soon as he could."

Meantime, the pontiff honored an Jewish practice yesterday by placing a written prayer in a cleft in the Western Wall. According to text released by the Vatican, the written prayer said: "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, hear the cry of the

afflicted, the fearful, the bereft; send your peace upon this Holy Land, upon the Middle East, upon the entire human family; stir the hearts of all who call upon Your name, to walk humbly in the path of justice and compassion. 'The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him' (Lam 3:25)!"

Earlier Tuesday morning, the pope visited the Temple Mount where he removed his red shoes to enter the Dome of the Rock mosque. After speaking with the Grand Mufti, the Palestinians' senior Muslim cleric, Pope Benedict declared that the world's three great monotheistic all believed in one God and recognized Abraham as a common forefather.

The pontiff also met with Israel's leading rabbis on Tuesday and delivered the message that he is committed to reconciliation between Christians and Jews. Sephardi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar told the pope that because he represents a "large nation of believers that knows what the Bible is", he was bound to pass on the message that "the Jewish people deserve a renaissance, and a little respect – to live in this land."

Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Yona Metzger congratulated the pontiff on his trip to "the eternal capital of the Jewish people" and spoke of the necessity of dialogue between the faiths. "If a historical meeting such as this, where the head of the largest religion in the world meets in Jerusalem with the head of the Jewish religion, had taken place many years ago," the rabbi asked, "how much blood would have been spared and senseless hatred prevented?"

Metzger praised Benedict for preventing the return to the Catholic Church of the Holocaust denier Bishop Richard Williamson and later reported that the pope had agreed to

cease all missionary and conversion activities among the Jews, a message he called "immensely important."

Later, the pope told local Arab Christian leaders gathered in the traditional Upper Room on Mount Zion that their suffering today is like that of Christ on the Cross. He also celebrated Mass at the Garden of Gethsemane, the traditional site where the Bible says Jesus prayed to God for guidance the night before his crucifixion.