

FORMER RABBI OF ROME AT 95 GETS CONGRATS FROM POPE

Benedict XVI Recognizes Toaff's Role in Dialogue

By Jesús Colina

VATICAN CITY, MAY 4, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Benedict XVI sent a message of congratulations to the former chief rabbi of Rome, Elio Toaff, for his 95th birthday, which was Monday.

The Pope's personal secretary, Monsignor Georg Gaenswein, read the message at the inaugural ceremony of the Elio Toaff Foundation for Hebrew Culture

"I think," the Holy Father writes, "using the expressions of the Psalm, how the Lord restored your soul, leading you along the right path, even through the darkest valley, at the time of the persecution and extermination of the Jewish People. The Lord, in his mysterious plans, wished you to have a unique experience of his salvation, becoming a sign of hope for the rebirth of many of your brothers and sisters."

"I am particularly happy to recall," the Pope adds, "your commitment to promoting fraternal relations between Catholics and Jews, and the sincere friendship that bound you to my venerated predecessor Pope John Paul II."

Toaff was the chief rabbi of Ancona, Italy, during World War II. He nearly lost his life at the hands of the Nazis on various occasions.

At the end of the war, in 1946, he was named chief rabbi of Venice, and in 1951, given this same post in Rome. He remained the chief rabbi of Rome until 2001, when at age 86, he retired.

He has been a staunch supporter of dialogue with Christianity.

In 1958, on the occasion of Pope Pius XII's death, he affirmed: "More than on other occasions, we have had the great opportunity of experiencing the great compassion and the great generosity of this Pope during the years of the persecution and the terror, when it seemed that no hope remained for us."

What Toaff called his "life dream" was fulfilled when in 1986, Pope John Paul II visited the synagogue of Rome in answer to his invitation.

Toaff and the Polish Pope had a close friendship up to the Pontiff's death. In fact, the rabbi is one of the people that John Paul II mentioned in his spiritual testament.

Benedict XVI's note concluded like it began, with a reference to Psalm 23, wishing that in the rabbi's life, these words would be fulfilled: "Only goodness and love will pursue me all the days of my life; I will dwell in the house of the Lord for years to come." And he ends, "Shalom!"