

Bible is source of Christian unity, bond with Jews

VATICAN CITY – The Bible is a source of Christian unity and is evidence of Christianity's special bond with the Jewish people, said the outline for the next world Synod of Bishops.

The theme of the synod, scheduled Oct. 5-26, 2008, will be: "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church."

While focusing specifically on the Bible, the synod's outline emphasized Christian belief that Jesus Christ is the fullest expression of the word of God and that the entire Bible can be understood only in reference to Jesus.

The "lineamenta," or outline, of the synod's theme was released at an April 27 Vatican press conference. The document contains dozens of questions about what Catholics know and understand about the Bible and its relationship to the teaching of the church.

Bishops' conferences and other groups were asked to respond to the questions by November. The responses will form the basis of the synod's working document.

Expressing particular concern over Catholic ignorance of the Old Testament, the outline said Christians and Jews recognize the Hebrew Scriptures as the inspired word of God.

Christians cannot claim to know and love the Bible if they do not know and love the Old Testament, it said.

"The faith of the church considers the Old Testament a part of the one Christian Bible and acknowledges its permanent value and the bond between the two testaments," it said.

Christianity and Judaism are "grounded in the same covenant, because God, who is always faithful to his promises, has not revoked the first covenant" with the Jewish

people, it said.

The outline specifically asked bishops to report on any incidents in which the Scriptures are misused “to ferment attitudes of anti-Semitism,” a problem usually associated with readings about the passion of Jesus and the role of the Jewish leaders of his time.

Croatian Archbishop Nikola Eterovic, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, told reporters, “We would be happy if everyone said this is no longer a problem, but it is a question that must be asked.”

“Our relationship with the Jewish people is very special, and we hope every shadow of anti-Semitism has disappeared,” he said.

The archbishop said his office had not begun drawing up a list of the guests who will be invited to the synod, but he did not rule out the possibility of inviting a Jewish representative along with the delegates from other Christian churches. Such guests participate but do not vote at the synods.

The outline also mentioned the Bible as a potential source for promoting dialogue with other religions, particularly through explaining each other’s sacred texts.

Archbishop Eterovic said he expected the responses specifically would mention Islam, which the outline does not do.

Also during the press conference, Archbishop Eterovic explained the new norms of the Synod of Bishops, approved by Pope Benedict XVI in September and published in late April.

The 1971 norms needed updating to reflect the codes of canon law for the Latin and Eastern churches and what had become normal synod practice, he said.

The most notable change, although already present in other Vatican documents, he said, is a line specifying the fact that the pope can decide to grant deliberative powers to a synod.

In addition, he said, the heads of the Eastern Catholic churches now can name a delegate to take their place at the synod, and Eastern churches with more than 25

bishops will be asked to elect additional delegates just like Latin-rite bishops' conferences do.

The outline praised a greater emphasis on the Scriptures in the liturgy, advances in biblical scholarship and Catholic familiarity with the Bible since the Second Vatican Council, but it said that more must be done.

"Many Christians remain without any contact with the Bible, and the danger is always present that it will not be used properly," the outline said.

Catholics need to understand that the Bible must be read in harmony with the church, its tradition and teachings.

"The magisterium," the church's teaching authority, it said, "renders irreplaceable service in guaranteeing an authentic interpretation of the word of God."

"The idea of 'sola Scriptura' (Scripture alone) cannot exist in and of itself, because the Scriptures are related to the church, namely, to the one who receives and understands both tradition and Scripture," it said.

While the Bible "casts light on every person's life and indicates the road to be followed," particularly through the Ten Commandments and the beatitudes, the outline said the Bible cannot be read literally.

Understanding God's word, it said, involves combining the literal meaning with the Bible's historical meaning, its interpretation in the church's tradition and its application to life in the modern world.