

Bishops clarify ‘ambiguities’ in 2002 Catholic-Jewish document

WASHINGTON – The “ambiguities” in a 7-year-old document from Catholic and Jewish dialogue partners are continuing to cause confusion, two committees of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said in a June 18 note.

The USCCB committees on Doctrine and on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs said the Catholic section of a 2002 document, “Reflections on Covenant and Mission,” written by participants in an ongoing dialogue between the National Council of Synagogues and the USCCB interreligious affairs committee, “contains some statements that are insufficiently precise and potentially misleading.”

“‘Reflections on Covenant and Mission’ should not be taken as an authoritative presentation of the teaching of the Catholic Church,” the committees said in a note issued in San Antonio during the bishops’ June 17-19 spring meeting.

Of special concern are the document’s “description of the church’s mission and, in particular, what evangelization means with regard to the Jewish people,” the committees said.

By stating that the Jewish people’s “witness to the kingdom ... must not be curtailed by seeking the conversion of the Jewish people to Christianity,” the document “could lead some to conclude mistakenly that Jews have an obligation not to become Christian and that the church has a corresponding obligation not to baptize Jews,” they added.

The 2002 document also calls interreligious dialogue a form of evangelization that is “a mutually enriching sharing of gifts devoid of any intention whatsoever to invite the dialogue partner to baptism.”

“Though Christian participation in interreligious dialogue would not normally include an explicit invitation to baptism and entrance into the church, the Christian dialogue partner is always giving witness to the following of Christ, to which all are implicitly invited,” the committees’ note said.

In a news release, the chairmen of the two committees discussed why the note was issued.

“Our most important concern here is a pastoral one,” said Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory of Atlanta, who heads the doctrine committee.

“The 2002 document, ‘Covenant and Mission,’ raised many questions among Catholics in the United States about how the church relates to the Jewish community,” he added. “Today’s statement helps to answer these questions clearly.”

Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., chairman of the ecumenical and interreligious affairs committee, said the USCCB “reaffirms what the Holy See has stated repeatedly: that while the Catholic Church does not proselytize the Jewish people, neither does she fail to witness to them her faith in Christ, nor to welcome them to share in that same faith whenever appropriate.”

But a June 22 statement by the New York-based Anti-Defamation League said the bishops’ note reflects “an objectionable understanding of Catholic-Jewish relations” and “appears to give a green light for the missionizing of Jews.”

“This document, if taken at face value, reintroduces the notion that Catholics can use interfaith dialogue as a means to invite Jews to Christian baptism,” said Abraham H. Foxman, ADL national director. “If so, then it is unacceptable, for such a statement would foster mistrust between Jews and Catholics and undermine years of work building a positive relationship based on mutual trust and respect of our differences in faith.”

In the news release, Archbishop Gregory commended the ongoing work of Catholic-Jewish dialogue.

“By continuing our study together, we hope to deepen our understanding of Jesus and our relationship with each other in God’s redemption of the world,” he said.

The full text of the committees’ note is available online at:
www.usccb.org/bishops/covenant09.pdf.