

Bishops vote to revise U.S. catechism on Jewish covenant with God

WASHINGTON - The U.S. bishops have voted to ask the Vatican to approve a small change in the U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults to clarify church teaching on God's covenant with the Jewish people.

The proposed change - which would replace one sentence in the catechism - was discussed by the bishops in executive session at their June meeting in Orlando, Fla., but did not receive the needed two-thirds majority of all members of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops at that time.

After mail balloting, the final vote of 231-14, with one abstention, was announced Aug. 5 in a letter to bishops from Monsignor David Malloy, USCCB general secretary.

The change, which must be confirmed by the Vatican Congregation for Clergy, would remove from the catechism a sentence that reads: "Thus the covenant that God made with the Jewish people through Moses remains eternally valid for them."

Replacing it would be this sentence: "To the Jewish people, whom God first chose to hear his word, 'belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ'" (Rom 9:4-5; cf. CCC, No. 839).

"Talking points" distributed to the bishops along with Monsignor Malloy's letter said the proposed revision "is not a change in the church's teaching."

“Catholics understand that all previous covenants that God made with the Jewish people have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ through the new covenant established through his sacrificial death on the cross,” the talking points say.

“The prior version of the text,” they continue, “might be understood to imply that one of the former covenants imparts salvation without the mediation of Christ, whom Christians believe to be the universal savior of all people.”

Father James Massa, executive director of the USCCB Secretariat of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, told Catholic News Service Aug. 11 that he did not “anticipate any tensions in the relationship” between Catholics and Jews as long as the proposed change is properly understood as arising from a need to “remove ambiguity” in the catechism.

“The catechism is not the place where you work out difficult theological problems,” he said. “That’s what scholars are charged to do.”

Father Massa said the status of the Jewish covenant has been “a very fertile area for theological investigation” in recent years, although church teaching has been clear on two related points:

- The Jewish people “are in a real relationship with God based on a covenant that has never been revoked.”
- “All covenants with Israel find fulfillment in Christ, who is the savior of all.”

Father Massa added that the current wording in the catechism “was not flat-out wrong” but “was ambiguous and needed to be qualified.” But because the catechism is an educational tool and not a theological textbook, the bishops decided not to expand that section to provide a fuller consideration of the issue, he said.

He also stressed the Catholic teaching that it is “never permissible to impose our faith on others.”

Adopted by the U.S. bishops in November 2004 and later approved by the Vatican, the 664-page adult catechism is the first official catechism produced by the nation’s bishops since the creation of the Baltimore Catechism, first published in 1885 and revised in 1941.

In the first two weeks after its July 31, 2006, publication, it sold more than 25,000 copies, according to USCCB Publishing.

Therese Brown, associate director for marketing, sales and service at USCCB Publishing, said about 190,000 copies of the adult catechism had been sold to date. Another printing of 50,000 copies took place in May and those copies are expected to run out around the middle of next year, she said.