

Document reminds Catholics of duty, right to share Gospel

VATICAN CITY - When Catholics fulfill their right and duty to share their faith with others, they are not engaging in proselytism or showing contempt for the beliefs of others, said a new document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Sharing the Christian faith with the hope that another may accept it is a command given by Christ to his followers and is a natural result of wanting others to share something special, said the "Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization."

Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the doctrinal congregation, presented the document at a Dec. 14 Vatican press conference.

In addition to reminding Catholics of their obligation to share the Gospel with others, the document harshly criticized Catholics who believe that every religion offers salvation, and it defended Catholics in some Orthodox countries from charges of "proselytism" when they welcome into the Catholic Church people who freely ask to join.

"For a long time, the reason for evangelization has not been clear to many among the Catholic faithful," the document said.

"It is even stated that the claim to have received the gift of the fullness of God's revelation masks an attitude of intolerance and (is) a danger to peace," it said.

In reality, the document said, when Christians share their faith with another they are responding to the right and the need the other has to hear the truth and to accept or reject it.

Cardinal Levada said the document, which already was being prepared when Pope Benedict XVI was still prefect of the congregation, was the result of a growing "confusion about whether Catholics should give testimony about their faith in Christ," particularly to people who already belong to another religion.

Respect for another, he said, absolutely forbids any use of “coercion or tactics unworthy of the Gospel,” but it also means sharing one’s blessings, the greatest of which is the good news of salvation in Christ.

Indian Cardinal Ivan Dias, prefect of the Congregation for Evangelization and a member of the doctrinal congregation, also participated in the document’s presentation and spoke about the need to balance respect for other religions with the desire to lead others to faith in Christ.

When talking with members of other religious traditions, “Christians must try to discover the action of the Holy Spirit, that is, the ‘seeds of truth,’ as the Second Vatican Council called them,” that are present in those religions, he said. At the same time, one must try “to lead them, without any superiority complex, to a full understanding of the truth in Jesus Christ.”

“Even if the various non-Christian religions possess seeds of truth planted in them by the Holy Spirit and the people who follow them may be saved, that does not mean that the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ is irrelevant. It is our task to help the seeds of truth grow so that they find their fullness in Christ,” Cardinal Dias said.

Nigerian Cardinal Francis Arinze, prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments and also a member of the doctrinal congregation, told reporters, “The sharing of our Catholic faith with others who do not yet know Christ should be regarded as a work of love, provided that it is done with full respect for their human dignity and freedom.

“Indeed, if a Christian did not try to spread the Gospel by sharing the excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ with others, we could suspect that Christian either of lack of total conviction of the faith or of selfishness and laziness in not wanting to share the full and abundant means of salvation with his fellow human beings,” Cardinal Arinze said.