

# Intermarriage found more common for Reform Jews, less so for Catholics

NEW YORK – Religiously mixed marriages are becoming more common among those who practice Reform Judaism but have shown a significant decline among American Catholics in the past 20 years, speakers said at a recent meeting of a Catholic-Jewish dialogue group.

Forty-six percent of married Reform Jews have spouses who identify themselves as having another faith, while 26 percent of Catholic marriages involve partners who are non-Catholic, participants in the semiannual consultation of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the National Council of Synagogues were told.

The consultation, chaired by Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York and Rabbi Alvin Berkun, president of the (Conservative) Rabbinical Assembly, took place Oct. 19 in New York.

“Whereas 30 years ago a Christian-Jewish couple might have approached a rabbi with embarrassment about their intentions to marry, today they’re asking about spirituality programs in which the both of them can feel comfortable,” said Rabbi Charles Kroloff, who chaired a task force on intermarriage for the Central Conference of Reform Rabbis.

The percentage of Jews in mixed marriages becomes progressively lower as one moves across the spectrum from Reform to Conservative to Orthodox Judaism. Only Reform rabbis can officiate at such weddings without incurring sanctions from their denomination, Rabbi Kroloff said.

“But even in the case of Reform rabbis, only between 40 (percent) and 50 percent are willing to conduct a ceremony under the ‘chuppah,’” the canopy used in the Jewish ceremony that symbolizes the home that the bride and groom build together, he added.

Sheila Garcia, associate director of the USCCB Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth, spoke about mixed marriages in light of weakening sacramental practice among American Catholics over the past three decades.

“The necessary pledge made by the Catholic in a mixed marriage to do all in his or her power to baptize and rear the children as Catholic obviously runs into conflict with the legitimate Jewish desire to pass on Jewish faith and identity,” Garcia said.

“But what Catholics and Jews today are both dealing with is an alarming trend of many in their 20s not to affiliate themselves or their kids with any organized religion,” she said.

The consultation also featured reports on the American Jewish Committee’s Catholic-Jewish Educational Enrichment Program, through which about 10,000 Catholic and Jewish high school students since 1993 have learned about the history, teachings and traditions of each other’s faith; the Oct. 10-24 Synod of Bishops for the Middle East at the Vatican; and the status of negotiations between the Vatican and Israel about the economic portion of the 1993 Fundamental Agreement.

Father James Massa, executive director of the USCCB Secretariat of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, said that although significant progress was made earlier in the year on issues such as taxation and the juridical status of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land, the Israeli side unexpectedly chose not to schedule the next meeting when the two sides met Sept. 21.

The New York consultation took place before the Oct. 24 closing message by participants in the Synod of Bishops and a U.S. bishop’s subsequent comments on the message prompted protests from the Israeli government.

Under the section dedicated to relations with Jews, the synod message warned against inappropriate use of the words of the Bible. It said that “recourse to theological and biblical positions which use the word of God to wrongly justify injustices is not acceptable.” It was generally interpreted to refer to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Melkite Bishop Cyrille S. Bustros of Newton, Mass., later told reporters at the synod

that Jews could no longer regard themselves as God's "chosen people" or Israel as "the Promised Land," because Jesus' message showed that God loved and chose all people to be his own.

The statement by Bishop Bustros provoked an immediate reaction from Israel. In a statement, Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon said the Vatican should distance itself from what the bishop said and that the remarks should not be allowed to jeopardize their relations.

The Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, said the final message reflected the opinion of the synod itself, while Bishop Bustros' remarks were to be considered his personal opinion.