

Israelis not happy with synod statement, angry over bishop's remarks

VATICAN CITY - Several prominent Israelis expressed concern over a statement by the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, which said Jews cannot use the Bible to justify injustices.

But tensions increased when a U.S. bishop 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 Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, said Oct. 25 that the final message of the Synod of Bishops reflected the opinion of the synod itself, while the remarks by Melkite Bishop Cyrille S. Bustros of Newton, Mass., were to be considered his personal opinion.

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.

Bishop Bustros spoke at a news conference at the Vatican Oct. 23 to present the message agreed upon by the synod participants.

Father Lombardi told reporters the final message was "the only approved, written text" issued by the synod.

"There is a great richness and variety of contributions offered by the synod fathers that, however, should not be considered as the voice of the synod in its entirety," he said in the statement.

The overall assessment of the work of the synod fathers is "largely positive" in the

words of Pope Benedict XVI and in general opinion, Father Lombardi said.

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.

In his own elaboration of the passage, Bishop Bustros said, “For us Christians, you can no longer speak of a land promised to the Jewish people.” The coming of Christ, Bishop Bustros said, showed that Jews “are no longer the preferred people, the chosen people; all men and women of all countries have become the chosen people.”

What the bishops wanted to say, he said, is that the theme of the Promised Land can’t be used “to justify the return of Jews to Israel and the expatriation of Palestinians.”

In the Israeli statement issued Oct. 24, Ayalon said, “We express our disappointment that this important synod has become a forum for political attacks against Israel, in the best tradition of Arab propaganda.”

Ayalon called on the Vatican to distance itself from Bishop Bustros’ comments, which Ayalon said “are a libel against the Jewish people and the state of Israel and should not be construed as the Vatican’s official position.”

Ayalon also said that the synod had been “hijacked by an anti-Israeli majority.”

In a telephone interview with Catholic News Service Oct. 25, Mordechai Lewy, Israel’s ambassador to the Vatican, called Bishop Bustros’ comments “outrageous” and said, “the Vatican should take a clear distance from them because it will give every Jew a reason to be suspicious of rapprochement with the Catholic Church.”

He said that while he had “no problem” with the 44 resolutions approved by the synod, he disagreed with parts of the synod’s final message, including the passage that provoked Bishop Bustros’ remarks.

“The Israeli government does not use the Bible to determine our political borders,”

he said.

Rabbi David Rosen, international director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee and the only Jewish representative to address the synod, said it was “appalling that in their final statement ... the bishops did not have the courage to address challenges of intolerance and extremism in the Muslim countries in which they reside, and rather chose to make the Israeli-Palestinian conflict their first focus.”

Rabbi Rosen, who addressed the synod Oct. 13 in his capacity as Jerusalem-based adviser to the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, said Bishop Bustrós’ statement reflected “either shocking ignorance or insubordination in relation to the Catholic Church’s teaching on Jews and Judaism flowing from the Vatican II declaration ‘Nostra Aetate.’”

He urged the Vatican to issue a “clear repudiation” of the bishop’s remarks.

The 185 bishops and patriarchs with full voting rights at the synod represent the dwindling number of Catholics in mostly Muslim countries in the Middle East, although eight synod members came from Israel.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict was discussed at length by synod participants.

During a Mass to close the synod Oct. 24, Pope Benedict urged greater commitment to finding a lasting peace in the region.

In a front-page article in its Oct. 23 edition, L’Osservatore Romano, the Vatican newspaper, called the construction of new Jewish settlements in the West Bank “those houses that block peace.”

Contributing to this story was Judith Sudilovsky in Jerusalem.