

Proselytizers must not coerce, Catholic-Jewish dialogue group agrees

WASHINGTON — Proselytism must never involve coercion or manipulation, agreed Jewish and Catholic leaders at a fall dialogue session in New York.

“Any effort to lead a person to faith that tramples on human freedom betrays a lack of respect for human dignity,” said Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory of Atlanta, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.

The fall consultation between the USCCB and the National Council of Synagogues featured talks by Rabbi Alan Brill of Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J., and Father Arthur Kennedy of St. John’s Seminary in Brighton, Mass., on how Christians and Jews view dialogue and witness.

Witness is a less significant category in Jewish theology than it is in the Christian tradition, Rabbi Brill said, with Jews generally preferring the terms “education” and “continuity” to describe how faith is passed on within families and cultures.

For Catholics, however, witness is seen as integral to the faith, Father Kennedy said. “Commitment to witness means uniting one’s life with Jesus Christ, even sacrificing one’s life as a martyr,” he added.

But since the Second Vatican Council’s decrees on non-Christian religions and on religious freedom, Catholics have distinguished authentic witness from a kind of proselytism that Father Kennedy described as “forced, manipulative, coercive, intimidating and cajoling.”

The consultation also included discussion of a Statement of Principles for Catholic-Jewish Dialogue issued by the USCCB in October and of Middle East issues, particularly Israel’s policy on visas for religious workers.

The October statement, endorsed by five USCCB leaders, said dialogue “has never been and will never be used by the Catholic Church as a means of proselytism – nor is it intended as a disguised invitation to baptism.”

Monsignor Robert L. Stern, secretary-general of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, reported on the status of the 147,000 Christians who reside in Israel and the 30,000 to 40,000 who live in occupied territories.

“Their plight is very serious as they find themselves in a tenuous situation,” he said.

The Nov. 11 dialogue session was the final one at which Cardinal William H. Keeler, retired archbishop of Baltimore, would serve as co-chairman and USCCB moderator for Jewish affairs. Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York has been named to succeed him in both roles.

Rabbi Alvin Berkun, National Council of Synagogues president and Jewish dialogue co-chairman, praised Cardinal Keeler for his interfaith work, as did other participants in the consultation.

Archbishop Gregory thanked Cardinal Keeler on behalf of the U.S. bishops for his wise and generous service to reconciliation between the church and the Jewish community.