

U.S. bishops clarify statement on Catholic-Jewish dialogue

WASHINGTON - Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and four other bishops, including Cardinal William H. Keeler, retired archbishop of Baltimore and the USCCB's liaison to the Jewish community, issued a "Statement of Principles for Catholic-Jewish Dialogue" Oct. 5.

The cardinal and bishops also said in a letter to Jewish leaders released the same day that a June 18 document titled "A Note on Ambiguities Contained in 'Reflections on Covenant and Mission' " would be amended by removing two sentences that might lead to misunderstanding about the purpose of interreligious dialogue.

The June note addressed issues related to evangelization and the Jewish covenant that were discussed in an article written in 2002 by a group of Catholic scholars who were consultants to the USCCB and the National Council of Synagogues. Intended "as a clarification of church teaching primarily for Catholics," the note "led to misunderstanding and feelings of hurt among members of the Jewish community," the bishops said in their Oct. 5 statement.

"Because we are dialogue partners, this hurt is ours as well," they said.

In addition to announcing the revision, the bishops also issued a "Statement With Six Principles for Catholic-Jewish Dialogue" that draws on church teaching and Catholic understanding of the dialogue process.

Among the principles is the acknowledgment that "Jewish covenantal life endures till the present day as a vital witness to God's saving will for his people Israel and for all of humanity." The bishops also affirmed the responsibility of Catholics to bear witness to Christ as "the unique savior of humankind." At the same time, they noted that "lived context shapes the form of that witness."

The Oct. 5 statement of principles was sent in response to an Aug. 18 letter from Rabbi Gary Greenebaum, the American Jewish Committee; Rabbi Eric Greenberg, the Anti-Defamation League; Rabbi Gilbert Rosenthal, the National Council of

Synagogues; professor Lawrence Schiffman, Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, Orthodox Union; and Rabbi David Berger, the Rabbinical Council of America.

The Jewish leaders wrote to express their concern that Paragraph 7 of “A Note on Ambiguities Contained in ‘Reflections on Covenant and Mission’ ” had formally characterized Catholic-Jewish dialogue as an invitation, either explicit or implicit, to Jews to abandon their faith in order to embrace Christianity.

The bishops in their statement of principles said that Catholic-Jewish dialogue “has never been and never will be used by the Catholic Church as a means of proselytism,” nor is it “a disguised invitation to baptism.”

The bishops also said they sought to reaffirm Catholic commitment to a dialogue in which Jewish self-identity is respected and “deeper bonds of friendship and mutual understanding between the members of our two communities” is promoted.

“In sitting at the table, we expect to encounter Jews who are faithful to the Mosaic covenant, just as we insist that only Catholics committed to the teachings of the church encounter them in our dialogues,” it said.

In addition to Cardinal George and Cardinal Keeler, the bishops who signed the statement and letter were: Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory of Atlanta, chairman of the Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs; Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., chairman of the Committee on Doctrine; and Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., co-chair of the USCCB-Orthodox Union/Rabbinical Council of America Consultation.

The full statement can be found online at www.usccb.org/seia/StatementofPrinciples.pdf; the bishops' letter can be found online at www.usccb.org/seia/ResponsetoRabbis.pdf.