

Vatican cardinal defends reformulation of Tridentine prayer

VATICAN CITY – A Vatican cardinal defended Pope Benedict XVI's reformulation of a prayer for the conversion of Jews and said he hopes it will not become an obstacle in Catholic-Jewish dialogue.

Cardinal Walter Kasper, who heads the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations With the Jews, said the Catholic Church cannot hide its belief that Jesus Christ is the savior of all peoples, including the Jews.

But that does not mean the church is launching a missionary effort among the Jewish people, he told Vatican Radio Feb. 7.

Cardinal Kasper was responding to Jewish criticism of the pope's new Good Friday prayer for Jews in the 1962 Roman Missal, known as the Tridentine rite, which can be used with greater freedom under new norms issued last year.

The pope removed language that spoke of the "blindness" of the Jews, which Cardinal Kasper said was "a little offensive."

"The Holy Father wanted to remove this point, but he also wanted to underline the specific difference that exists between us and Judaism," the cardinal said.

That difference is that for Christians Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God, he said.

"This difference cannot be hidden. The Holy Father wanted to say, yes, Jesus Christ is the savior of all men, even the Jews. He says this in his prayer," Cardinal Kasper said.

"But if this prayer, today, speaks of the conversion of the Jews, that doesn't mean we intend to carry out a mission," he said.

Rather, he said, the pope's revised prayer expresses an "eschatological hope" by citing St. Paul's expectation that when "the full number of the Gentiles" enters the

church, then all Israel will be saved.

In effect, Cardinal Kasper said, the pope has removed the “language of contempt” and replaced it with words that express honest differences.

True dialogue between faiths must always accept the identity of the other, he said.

“We respect the identity of the Jews; they should respect ours, which we cannot hide,” he said.

“I don’t see this as an obstacle, but rather as a challenge for true theological dialogue,” he said.

The newly formulated prayer, published only in Latin with no official translations, begins: “Let us pray for the Jews. May the Lord our God enlighten their hearts so that they may acknowledge Jesus Christ, the savior of all men.”

It continues: “Almighty and everlasting God, you who want all men to be saved and to reach the awareness of the truth, graciously grant that, as the full number of the Gentiles comes into your church, all Israel may be saved.”

The older version of the prayer, in addition to referring to the “blindness” of the Jews, appealed that they “be delivered from their darkness” and that God “may take the veil from their hearts.” A reference to “perfidious Jews” was dropped in 1959.

After the revised text was published Feb. 5, some Jewish leaders quickly expressed disappointment.

“While we appreciate that the text avoids any derogatory language toward Jews, it’s regretful that the prayer explicitly calls for Jews to accept Christianity,” Rabbi David Rosen, the American Jewish Committee’s international director of interreligious affairs, said in a statement.

“This differs greatly from the text in the current universal liturgy that prays for the salvation of the Jews in general terms,” Rabbi Rosen said.

Abraham H. Foxman, U.S. director of the Anti-Defamation League, said the pope had made only “cosmetic revisions” to the prayer. The text remains deeply troubling

because it calls on Jews to acknowledge Christ as savior, he said.

Vatican officials have emphasized that the newly formulated Good Friday prayer applies only to the 1962 missal and that its use would be exceptional, since the old rite is not as widely available during the three days leading up to Easter.

The 1970 Roman Missal, revised after the Second Vatican Council, is the one generally used by Catholic churches around the world. It also contains a Good Friday prayer for Jews, which reads: "Let us pray for the Jewish people, the first to hear the word of God, that they may continue to grow in the love of his name and in faithfulness to his covenant. Almighty and eternal God, long ago you gave your promise to Abraham and his posterity. Listen to your church as we pray that the people you first made your own may arrive at the fullness of redemption."