

Vatican letter directs bishops to keep parish records from Mormons

WASHINGTON - In an effort to block posthumous rebaptisms by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Catholic dioceses throughout the world have been directed by the Vatican not to give information in parish registers to the Mormons' Genealogical Society of Utah.

An April 5 letter from the Vatican Congregation for Clergy, obtained by Catholic News Service in late April, asks episcopal conferences to direct all bishops to keep the Latter-day Saints from microfilming and digitizing information contained in those registers.

The order came in light of "grave reservations" expressed in a Jan. 29 letter from the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the clergy congregation's letter said.

Father James Massa, executive director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, said the step was taken to prevent the Latter-day Saints from using records - such as baptismal documentation - to posthumously baptize by proxy the ancestors of church members.

Posthumous baptisms by proxy have been a common practice for the Latter-day Saints - commonly known as Mormons - for more than a century, allowing the church's faithful to have their ancestors baptized into their faith so they may be united in the afterlife, said Mike Otterson, a spokesman in the church's Salt Lake City headquarters.

In a telephone interview with CNS May 1, Mr. Otterson said he wanted a chance to review the contents of the letter before commenting on how it will affect the Mormons' relationship with the Catholic Church.

"This dicastery is bringing this matter to the attention of the various conferences of bishops," the letter reads. "The congregation requests that the conference notifies each diocesan bishop in order to ensure that such a detrimental practice is not

permitted in his territory, due to the confidentiality of the faithful and so as not to cooperate with the erroneous practices of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”

The letter is dated 10 days before Pope Benedict XVI’s April 15-20 U.S. visit, during which he presided over an ecumenical prayer service attended by two Mormon leaders. It marked the first time Mormons had participated in a papal prayer service.

Father Massa said he could see how the policy stated in the letter could strain relations between the Catholic Church and the Latter-day Saints.

“It certainly has that potential,” he said. “But I would also say that the purpose of interreligious dialogue is not to only identify agreements, but also to understand our differences. As Catholics, we have to make very clear to them their practice of so-called rebaptism is unacceptable from the standpoint of Catholic truth.”

The Catholic Church will eventually open a dialogue with the Mormons about the rebaptism issue, Father Massa said, “but we are at the beginning of the beginning of a new relationship with the LDS. The first step in any dialogue is to establish trust and to seek friendship.”

The two faiths share intrinsic viewpoints on key issues the United States is facing, particularly the pro-life position on abortion and an opposition to same-sex marriage.

However, theological differences have cropped up between Mormons and Catholics in the past.

In 2001 the Vatican’s doctrinal congregation issued a ruling that baptism conferred by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints cannot be considered a valid Christian baptism, thus requiring converts from that religion to Catholicism to receive a Catholic baptism.

“We don’t have an issue with the fact that the Catholic Church doesn’t recognize our baptisms, because we don’t recognize theirs,” Mr. Otterson said. “It’s a difference of belief.”

When issuing its 2001 ruling, the Vatican said that even though the Mormon

baptismal rite refers to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the church's beliefs about the identity of the three persons are so different from Catholic and mainline Christian belief that the rite cannot be regarded as a Christian baptism.

Latter-day Saints regard Jesus and the Holy Spirit as children of the Father and the Heavenly Mother. They believe that baptism was instituted by the Father, not Christ, and that it goes back to Adam and Eve.

Monsignor J. Terrence Fitzgerald – vicar general of the Diocese of Salt Lake City – said he didn't understand why the Latter-day Saints church was singled out in this latest Vatican policy regarding parish records.

"We have a policy not to give out baptismal records to anyone unless they are entitled to have them," Monsignor Fitzgerald said of his diocese. "That isn't just for the Church of the Latter-day Saints. That is for all groups."

Though he said the Salt Lake City Diocese has enjoyed a long-standing dialogue with the Latter-day Saints, Monsignor Fitzgerald said the diocese does not support giving the Mormons names for the sake of rebaptism.

Mormons have been criticized by several other faiths – perhaps most passionately by the Jews – for the church's practice of posthumous baptism.

Members of the Latter-day Saints believe baptizing their ancestors by proxy gives the dead an opportunity to embrace the faith in the afterlife. The actual baptism-by-proxy ceremony occurs in a Mormon temple, and is intended to wash sins away for the commencement of church membership.

Jewish leaders have called the practice arrogant and said it is disrespectful to the dead, especially Holocaust victims.

"Baptism by proxy is a fundamentally important doctrine of the Latter-day Saints," Mr. Otterson said. "We have cooperative relationships with churches, governments – both state and national – going back to the last century. Our practice of negotiating for records and making them available for genealogical research is very well known."

Father Massa said he is not aware of aggressive attempts to obtain baptismal records at Catholic parishes in any of the U.S. dioceses.

He also said the Catholic Church will continue to reach out to the Mormons and carry on the efforts of understanding that have already begun, especially in Salt Lake City.

“Profound theological differences are not an excuse for avoiding dialogue, but a reason for pursuing dialogue,” Father Massa said.