

August 18, 2009

Dear Esteemed Colleagues:

The recent USCCB statement "*A Note on Ambiguities Contained in Covenant and Mission*" has caused serious concern in the Jewish community.

A major source of concern is the document's assertion that the remark in the earlier "Reflections on Covenant and Mission" that interreligious dialogue is "devoid of any intention whatsoever to invite the dialogue partner to baptism" needs to be qualified. According to the new document, "though Christian participation in interreligious dialogue would not normally include an explicit invitation to baptism and entrance into the Church, the Christian dialogue partner is always giving witness to the following of Christ to which all are implicitly invited." Since "*Reflections*" focused specifically on Jews, the latest statement informs us that Catholics engaging in dialogue with Jews must have the intention of extending an implicit invitation to embrace Christianity and that one can even imagine a situation in such a dialogue where this invitation would be made explicit.

A declaration of this sort is antithetical to the very essence of Jewish-Christian dialogue as we have understood it in the post-Vatican II era. We pose no objection to the position that Christians must bear witness to the truth of their faith and expound on it forthrightly, candidly and passionately. However, once Jewish-Christian dialogue has been formally characterized as an invitation, whether explicit or implicit, to apostatize, then Jewish participation becomes untenable.

The second source of concern has to do with the continuing validity of the Mosaic covenant. Section 10 of the new USCCB "*Note*" states that "the fulfillment of the covenants, indeed, of all of God's promises to Israel, is found only in Jesus Christ." This appears to posit that the Mosaic covenant is obsolete and Judaism no longer has a reason to exist.

There is a range of views within the Jewish community about the appropriate Jewish reaction to a Christian denial of the validity of this covenant. But we all recognize that affirming its validity is more likely to result in more positive attitudes toward Jews, and we were consequently encouraged by a series of what appeared to be authoritative statements by Church officials over the years that endorsed this affirmation. One example is the following affirmation made by Cardinal Walter Kasper at the most important venue for Catholic-Jewish dialogue where he spoke in his capacity as the Vatican's chief official for relations with the Jews (published in *America*, Sept. 17, 2001): "One of these questions is how to relate the covenant with the Jewish people, which according to St. Paul is unbroken and not revoked but still in vigor, with what we Christians call the New Covenant. As you know, the old theory of substitution is gone since the Second Vatican Council. For us Christians today the covenant with the Jewish people is a living heritage, a living reality."

The new statement has therefore engendered both uncertainty and considerable disappointment with respect to the position maintained by the Church and its spokespersons regarding this matter.

The “*Note*” has not only raised questions about the Church’s perception of the Mosaic Covenant; it espouses a view of the objective of Jewish-Christian dialogue that threatens the mutuality and efficaciousness of the entire project. We are deeply concerned.

Sincerely,
American Jewish Committee
Anti-Defamation League
National Council of Synagogues
Orthodox Union
Rabbinical Council of America