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Jewish groups question dialogue with Catholics

Jerry Filteau | Aug. 28, 2009

In a letter to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, leading U.S. Jewish organizations have voiced "serious concern" about the future of Catholic-Jewish dialogue.

The Jewish organizations said that a June statement on the nature of Catholic-Jewish dialogue, issued jointly by two bishops' conference committees, "is antithetical to the very essence of Jewish-Christian dialogue as we have understood it in the post-Vatican II era."

They said the bishops' statement seems to assert that "the Mosaic covenant is obsolete" and that even in interreligious dialogue Catholic partners must at least implicitly intend to invite Jews to abandon their faith and become Christian.

If that is the Catholic framework for dialogue with Jews, "Jewish participation becomes untenable," they said.

The letter, dated Aug. 18 and released Aug. 20, was signed by the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, the National Council of Synagogues, the Orthodox Union and the Rabbinical Council of America.

The Orthodox Union and the Rabbinical Council of America, respectively the national synagogal and rabbinical organizations of Orthodox Judaism, cosponsor an ongoing Catholic-Jewish dialogue, with the bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs as the official Catholic partner.

The bishops' conference committee is also the official Catholic partner in dialogue with the National Council of Synagogues, which represents the national rabbinical and synagogal organizations of Conservative and Reform Judaism.

The Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee have long been important voices for the Jewish community and strong advocates of improved Catholic-Jewish relations.

Fr. James Massa, executive director of the bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, told NCR Aug. 25 that the ecumenical-interreligious committee chairman, Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory of Atlanta, and the doctrinal committee chairman, Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., have taken the Jewish letter very seriously and were still engaged in wide consultations on how to respond.

"They're really taking their time with this, they're praying over it," he said. "They are very concerned to maintain and deepen relations with the Jewish community, which is one of the great fruits of the Second Vatican Council."

"These are stumbling blocks in the relationship that we think we can get past," he added. "There's a deep desire to maintain relations of friendship and a dialogue of mutual understanding between the church and the Jewish community on the part of the bishops."

The Catholic statement that prompted the letter was a four-page note released during the U.S. bishops' national meeting in San Antonio last June, jointly authored by the bishops' Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and their Committee on Doctrine (NCR, July 10).

Titled "A Note on Ambiguities Contained in 'Reflections on Covenant and Mission,'" it criticized the 2002 "Reflections" document that emerged from dialogue between the bishops' conference and the National Council of Synagogue. It said the 2002 statement inadequately expressed, from the Catholic side, the unique role of Jesus as the fulfillment of God's covenant through Moses with the people of Israel.

"The long story of God's intervention in the history of Israel comes to its unsurpassable culmination in Jesus Christ, who is God become man. ... The fulfillment of the covenants, indeed, of all of God's promises to Israel, is found only in Jesus Christ," the committees' statement said.

The June statement also criticized the Catholic participants' comments in "Reflections on Covenant and Mission" for what it called an inadequate expression of the church's mission of evangelization. The bishops' committees said Catholics must always be involved in witnessing the Gospel and inviting others to share their belief, even in the context of interreligious dialogue.

"Though Christian participation in interreligious dialogue would not normally include an explicit invitation to baptism and entrance into the church," it said, "the Christian dialogue partner is always giving witness to the following of Christ, to which all are implicitly invited."

The Aug. 18 letter from the Jewish organizations said the June statement by the two bishops' committees "tells 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." That comment referred to the language in the committees' note saying that "normally" such dialogue does not include an explicit invitation to conversion ? with the implication that at least in some circumstances the invitation might be explicit.

"Once Jewish-Christian dialogue has been formally characterized as an invitation, whether explicit or implicit, to apostatize, then Jewish participation becomes untenable," the Jewish organizations wrote.

Their letter also decried the note's comment that "the fulfillment of the covenants, indeed, of all 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," the letter said.

In the June note the two bishops' committees affirmed the continuing validity of God's covenant through Moses with the people of Israel, but without using the strong language of various Vatican or papal statements since Vatican II ? such as those by Pope John Paul II that present-day Jews are "the people of God of the old covenant, never revoked by God" and are "partners in a covenant of eternal love which was never revoked."

John Paul also said that in the centuries since the biblical age Judaism has reflected a "continuous spiritual fecundity, in the rabbinical period, in the Middle Ages and in modern times" ? a statement quoted by the Catholic scholars in 2002 but also left unmentioned in the June 2009 note.

When the June statement by the bishops' committees came out, several Catholic scholars involved in Catholic-Jewish dialogue warned that it could open a can of worms long considered closed by Catholic and Jewish dialogue participants ? namely the long-standing Jewish distrust of theological dialogue with Christians, based

on historically substantiated fears that Christians might employ such dialogues as a means to convert Jews to Christianity.

The letter from the Jewish organizations found the affirmations of the continuing validity of the Mosaic covenant in the bishops' statement insufficient to merit their conclusion that the statement fundamentally declares the Mosaic covenant "obsolete."

Possible consequences of a rupture in U.S. Catholic-Jewish relations are far-reaching. During the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s and in the decades since, those relations in the United States have been a leading force in the advancement of dialogue and constructive relationships between the two faith communities worldwide.

On the plus side, participants on both sides of the U.S. Catholic-Jewish dialogues have a long history of resolving differences, or at least achieving a new way of dealing constructively with those differences, after each side has stated its case forthrightly and objectively.

To mention just a few cases:

- The highly successful meeting of U.S. Jewish leaders with Pope John Paul II in Miami in September 1987, almost derailed three months earlier by the pope's meeting with Austrian President Kurt Waldheim, whose connections with a World War II Nazi military unit responsible for Jewish killings had only recently been revealed.
- U.S. Catholic and Jewish leadership in resolving world crises over a Catholic nuns' convent in Oswiecim, Poland (Auschwitz in German), at the edges of one of the main concentration camps where Nazis had cremated hundreds of thousands of Jews during World War II.
- The U.S. Catholic-Jewish effort in which Cardinal Jozef Glemp of Warsaw and Gniezno, Poland, in a 1991 U.S. visit, apologized for anti-Semitic remarks he had made earlier; U.S. Catholic and Jewish leaders were among those who inaugurated major educational efforts in Poland to reverse traditional anti-Semitic attitudes among Polish Catholics.

This is not to mention the key role that U.S. Catholic bishops and experts at the Second Vatican Council, in close collaboration with American Jewish leaders like Joseph Lichten and Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, played in producing Nostra Aetate, the Vatican II document on interreligious relations that repudiated anti-Semitism and declared the church's close ties with Judaism.

The Catholic-Jewish history in this country holds out hope that the June statement by the bishops' committees and the August response by most of the country's major Jewish organizations may ultimately lead to another step in strengthening those relations, even though the immediate context of substantive disagreement suggests division rather than healing.

[Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.]

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