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A NOTE ON AMBIGUITIES CONTAINED IN *REFLECTIONS ON COVENANT AND MISSION*

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United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*

INTRODUCTION

1. On August 12, 2002, Jewish and Catholic scholars made public a document they had composed entitled *Reflections on Covenant and Mission*, consisting of two parts, one presenting the "reflections" of the Catholic and another presenting those of the Jewish participants.¹ The original initiative for the document came from the ongoing consultation between the National Council of Synagogues and the Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The Catholic part of the document was written by scholars who made up an advisory group to the Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. When the document was originally published on the USCCB website, it was mislabeled as a statement of the "Bishops' Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs Committee and the National Council of Synagogues." On August 16, 2002, Cardinal William H. Keeler, the USCCB Moderator for Catholic-Jewish Relations, explained that *Reflections on Covenant and Mission* "does not represent a formal position taken by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops or the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs." Instead, Cardinal Keeler stated, the document "represents the state of thought among the participants of a dialogue that has been going on for a number of years between the U.S. Catholic Church and the Jewish community in this country." He added that the document was published in order "to encourage serious reflection on these matters by Jews and Catholics in the U.S."

2. Since *Reflections on Covenant and Mission* is not an official statement of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, it was not subject to the same review process that official documents undergo. In the years since its publication, however, some theologians, including Catholics, have treated the document as authoritative. This has proven problematic because the section representing Catholic thought contains some statements that are insufficiently precise and potentially misleading. *Reflections on Covenant and Mission* should not be taken as an authoritative presentation of the teaching of the Catholic Church. In order to avoid any confusion, the USCCB Committee on Doctrine and the Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs have decided to point out some of these ambiguities and to offer corresponding clarifications.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHRISTIANITY TO JUDAISM

3. The principal ambiguities in question involve the description of the Church's mission and, in particular, what evangelization means with regard to the Jewish people. *Reflections on Covenant and Mission* rightly acknowledges that the mission of the Church is evangelization, carrying the Good News of Jesus Christ to the whole world, and that this task "cannot be separated from [the Church's] faith in Jesus Christ."² At the same time, the document is very careful to acknowledge the special status of the Jews as the people to whom God revealed himself and from whom came the Messiah, Jesus Christ: "Christianity has an utterly unique relationship with Judaism because 'our two religious communities are connected and closely related at the very level of their respective religious identities.'"³

4. Catholic evangelization relative to the Jews will correspondingly take an "utterly unique" form—precisely because God has already established a particular relationship with the Jewish people, going back to the call of Abraham. The Second Vatican Council declared:

The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles.⁴

5. The document correctly acknowledges that "Judaism is a religion that springs from divine revelation"⁵ and that "it is only about Israel's covenant that the Church can speak with the certainty of the biblical witness."⁶ Nevertheless, it is incomplete and potentially misleading in this context to refer to the enduring quality of the covenant without adding that for Catholics Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God fulfills both in history and at the end of time the special relationship that God established with Israel. The Second Vatican Council explained:

The principal purpose to which the plan of the old covenant was directed was to prepare for the coming of Christ, the redeemer of all and of the messianic kingdom, to announce this coming by prophecy, and to indicate its meaning through various types.⁷

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.

6. *Reflections on Covenant and Mission* provides a clear acknowledgment of the relationship established by God with Israel prior to Jesus Christ. This acknowledgment needs to be accompanied, however, by a clear affirmation of the Church's belief that Jesus Christ in himself fulfills God's revelation begun with Abraham and that proclaiming this good news to all the world is at the heart of her mission. *Reflections on Covenant and Mission*, however, lacks such an affirmation and thus presents a diminished notion of evangelization.

THE CHURCH'S MISSION OF EVANGELIZATION AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE

7. *Reflections on Covenant and Mission* maintains that a definition of evangelization as the "invitation to a commitment of faith in Jesus Christ and to entry through baptism into the community of believers which is the Church" is a "very narrow construal" of her mission.⁸ In its effort to present a broader and fuller conception of evangelization, however, the document develops a vision of it in which the core elements of proclamation and invitation to life in Christ seem virtually to disappear. For example, *Reflections on Covenant and Mission* proposes interreligious dialogue as a form of evangelization that is "a mutually enriching sharing of gifts devoid of any intention whatsoever to invite the dialogue partner to baptism."⁹ 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.

8. *Reflections on Covenant and Mission* correctly asserts that the Church "must always evangelize and will always witness to its faith in the presence of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ to Jews and to all other people."¹⁰ It also rightly affirms that the Church respects religious freedom as well as freedom of conscience and that, while the Church does not have a policy that singles out the Jews as a people for conversion, she will always welcome "sincere individual converts from any tradition or people, including the Jewish people."¹¹ This focus on the individual, however, fails to account for St. Paul's complete teaching about the inclusion of the Jewish people as whole in Christ's salvation. In Romans 11:25-26, he explained that when "the full number of the Gentiles comes in . . . all Israel will be saved." He did not specify when that would take place or how it would come about.¹² This is a mystery that awaits its fulfillment. Nevertheless, St. Paul told us to look forward to the inclusion of the whole people of Israel, which will be a great blessing for the world (Rom 11:12).

9. *Reflections on Covenant and Mission*, however, renders even the possibility of individual conversion doubtful by a further statement that implies it is generally not good for Jews to convert, nor for Catholics to do anything that might lead Jews to conversion because it threatens to eliminate "the distinctive Jewish witness": "Their [the Jewish people's] witness to the kingdom, which did not originate with the Church's experience of Christ crucified and raised, must not be curtailed by seeking the conversion of the Jewish people to Christianity."¹³ Some caution should be introduced here, since this line of reasoning could lead some to conclude mistakenly that Jews have an obligation not to become Christian and that the Church has a corresponding obligation not to baptize Jews.

CONCLUSION

10. With St. Paul, we acknowledge that God does not regret, repent of, or change his mind about the "gifts and the call" that he has given to the Jewish people (Rom 11:29). At the same time, we also believe that the fulfillment of the covenants, indeed, of all God's promises to Israel, is found only in Jesus Christ. By God's grace, the right to hear this Good News belongs to every generation. Fulfilling the mandate given her by the Lord, the Church, respecting human freedom, proclaims the truths of the Gospel in love.

¹ *Reflections on Covenant and Mission*, *Origins* 32:13 (September 5, 2002): pp. 218-24.

² *Ibid.*, p. 220.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Second Vatican Council, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*) (www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html), no. 4.

⁵ *Reflections on Covenant and Mission*, p. 220.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁷ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) (http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html), no. 15.

⁸ *Reflections on Covenant and Mission*, p. 220.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² See Walter Cardinal Kasper, "La preghiera del Venerdì Santo," *L'Osservatore Romano*, 10 April 2008, p. 1.

¹³ *Reflections on Covenant and Mission*, p. 221.