

Ambiguities in USCCB Committee's Critique of "Reflections" Document

By Robert Sungenis, Ph.D.

Committees of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), in a document jointly issued on June 18 by the Committee on Doctrine and Pastoral Practice and the Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, has stepped in and attempted to correct some of the theological errors that have been created in the wake of the Catholic-Jewish dialogue. Although it took the USCCB seven years to officially recognize the problems in *Reflections*, as the saying goes, it is better late than never. In 2002, except for a brief criticism by Rosalind Moss published by *Catholic Answers*, our apostolate was one of the few that had written a detailed and comprehensive critique of *Reflections*, titled *Conversion of the Jews Not Necessary?*¹ In it we not only critiqued *Reflections* for its theological errors, we also showed some of the controversial history of the Catholic-Jewish dialogue, beginning with Jules Isaac's books in the 1940s that appear to be the impetus for why the Catholic prelatry had traveled down this dubious path in the first place. Essentially, the past 40 years of Catholic-Jewish dialogue has resulted in little more than a constant temptation for Catholic prelates to water down or even contradict Catholic doctrine in the hopes of placating the Jews; the errors in the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* and the *Reflections on Covenant and Missions* being two of only a number of outstanding examples of this phenomena. Hopefully, the prelatry has finally recognized the dangers of going down this path, since, after having to make two major retractions in high profile ecclesiastical documents, its learning curve has been rather painful in the last year. Last summer (August 2008) the bishops voted 231 to 14 to excise an erroneous sentence from page 131 of the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, a sentence which stated that the Mosaic covenant was still valid for the Jewish people. Our apostolate, *Catholic Apologetics International*,

¹ an edited edition is available online at:

http://catholicintl.com/articles/Conversion_of_the_Jews_Not_Necessary_edited.pdf

spearheaded the movement to alert the bishops and the Vatican to the problem. Now, almost a year later, the USCCB committees, under the leadership of Bishop William Lori of Connecticut, has publically admitted that some of its high-ranking clerics made erroneous statements in the document titled *Reflections on Covenant and Missions*, issued under the aegis of William Cardinal Keeler and various Jewish rabbis in 2002.

As to be expected, the Jews are scoffing at the new face of Catholicism. On its website, of June 22, 2009, the Anti-Defamation League stated that the correctives issued by the USCCB committees "appear to give a green light for the missionizing of Jews" and "appears to reverse earlier statements on Catholic-Jewish relations by indicating that interfaith dialogue can be used by Catholics as an opportunity to seek Jewish partners to convert." Abraham H. Foxman, national director of the ADL said:

This document, if taken at face value, reintroduces the notion that Catholics can use interfaith dialogue as a means to invite Jews to Christian baptism....If so, then it is unacceptable, for such a statement would foster mistrust between Jews and Catholics and undermine years of work building a positive relationship based on mutual trust and respect of our differences in faith.

The ADL then demanded that the USCCB reaffirm the sentence from the original document that states that interfaith dialogue with Jews is devoid of any intention whatsoever to invite the dialogue partner to baptism.

Problems with the USCCB Committee Critique:

Still, even though the USCCB committees and Bishop Lori are to be congratulated for their criticism of *Reflections*, a careful reading shows an inordinate amount of problems in the committee's own views of the *Reflections* document. We had noticed similar issues when the USCCB corrected page 131 of the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*.² Perhaps part of the problem for the weakness is that the critique of *Reflections* is the product of two committees that did not consult with or obtain approval of the bishops of the USCCB. A very reliable source revealed to me that the committee's critique was not read or discussed in the June 2009 plenary session of the bishops. Since committee's are not doctrinally authoritative, the critique of *Reflections* seems to be more of an attempt to correct some internal conflicts with the

² See my published article: "More Confusion on page 131 of the USCCB Catechism" at www.catholicintl.com/articles/USCCB%20revises%20catechism.pdf

membership of the USCCB than being an official statement of the doctrinal position of the bishops of the USCCB.

In any case, as I go through the USCCB committee's critique, I will point out its theological and doctrinal problems in the remainder of my commentary.

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A NOTE ON AMBIGUITIES CONTAINED IN REFLECTIONS ON COVENANT AND MISSION

Committee on Doctrine and Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

R. Sungenis: Besides the fact that the paper was issued as a "USCCB" document even though the USCCB bishops did not discuss or vote on the paper, the first problem is with the title chosen by the committee, since it categorizes the heterodox assertions in *Reflections* merely as "ambiguities." They were anything but ambiguities. We can tell by the context and the clarity of the statements that they were deliberate and calculated, designed to redirect the course of Catholic doctrine and evangelism toward one particular group of people – the Jews. When statements such as the following are made in *Reflections*:

...a deepening Catholic appreciation of the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people, together with the divinely-given mission to Jews to witness to God's faithful love, lead to the conclusion that campaigns that target Jews for conversion to Christianity are no longer theologically acceptable in the Catholic Church...

...there is no doubt that it is done with the express purpose of changing Catholic doctrine, something William Keeler and many other cardinals and bishops have been trying to do in the Catholic-Jewish dialogue for many decades since Vatican II. The *Reflections* document tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to convince us that the Catholic Church, for the last two thousand years, was on the wrong course in its relations with the Jews and that we were suddenly and dramatically being given new marching orders from on high.

As I have pointed out many times in the past seven years, a convergence of a number of theological errors are readily apparent in the above quoted statement from *Reflections*:

1. *Reflections* bases its conclusions on the erroneous premise that there remains an "eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people," the very assertion that was rejected by the US bishops and excised from the 2006 *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* by their executive order on August 2008. Conversely, the words "a deepening Catholic appreciation" show that *Reflections* regards its position as a new revelation in Catholic thinking. This in itself should cause alarm.
2. *Reflections* bases its conclusions on the erroneous premise that God has given the Jews, as Jews, a divine mission to "witness to God's faithful love." The fact is, the Jews have no such divine mission. Their commission to preach the gospel was confined to the Old Testament, before the oracles of God were taken away from them because of their apostasy. It is the Catholic Church that now has the keys of the kingdom and has sole custody of the Gospel (*cf.*, Rm 3:1-2; Hb 4:2-6; 7:18; 8:1-13).
3. the above two errors lead *Reflections* to the dubious conclusion that the Jews, opposed to what the Catholic Church has taught and practiced for the prior 2000 years as it formed its missionary programs, are now to be considered exempt from such efforts. *Reflections* held that the salvation of Jews would not necessarily come from the Christian gospel but from the "eternal covenant" the Jews supposedly maintained with God independent of Christianity. So powerful was this "eternal covenant" that the Jews, so said *Reflections*, should now begin their own evangelism program "to witness of God's love." Obviously, it would be distinct from the love of God in John 3:16 ("God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...") because the Jews to which the *Reflections* document referred were not those who converted to Christianity but were committed rabbis and Jewish theologians who made it their business to deny both the deity of Christ and his message to the world. In essence, the phrase "God's love" is ecumenical-speak for the same kind of global religious utopia for which religious liberals from both faiths have been searching for the last 40 years, but have never found, and never will find, because it doesn't exist.

As it stands, the new evangelism that Cardinal Keeler, *et al.*, had proposed was not understood by *Reflections* as a mere ecumenical movement but as a "theological" stipulation. *Reflections* made this clear when it said that evangelizing Jews was "no longer theologically acceptable in the Catholic Church." The word "theological" exposes the real goals and motives

of *Reflections*, for by using this word it is asserting that Christian faith and evangelism, *by divine mandate*, must now relinquish its sole reign and make room for Jewish faith and evangelism. This is precisely why *Reflections* insisted on having two covenants, one for Christians and one for Jews, since faith and evangelism must have a solid theological foundation upon which they can build, and no less than a divine covenant for each faith would satisfy such a requirement. In other words, the Catholic Church's two thousand year old teaching on Supersessionism (*i.e.*, that the New Covenant in Jesus Christ replaced the Old Covenant with Moses) had to be overturned in order for *Reflections* to be effective. This has been the 40-year quest of the Catholic-Jewish dialogue – the removal of Supersessionism from Catholic doctrine.

To their dismay, the Jews have found that removing Supersessionism is not as easy as they thought it would be. If anything, the Catholic Church, just in the past year, has finally drawn its line in the sand. Regardless of the distortions that Jewish commentators have put on Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate* for the past 40 years, Catholic prelates seemed to have come to the point of understanding just what all the schtick was about. It was about persuading the Catholic Church, under pretense of friendly relations, to change its Gospel so that the Jewish religion could be resurrected as an equal religion to Christianity. The answer to that question has been a resounding no, thanks to Pope Benedict XVI's recent reiteration in the 1962 missal of the necessity of converting the Jews to Christianity; as well as the recent corrections issued by the USCCB and its committees regarding both the *US Catholic Catechism for Adults* and *Reflections on Covenant and Mission*. The only problem is that the USCCB committee failed to call the dubious propositions in *Reflections* what they really are. They are not "ambiguities," nor are they merely "insufficiently precise" nor "potentially misleading" (two phrases the USCCB committee uses in paragraph #2). They are theological errors of the highest order that, in a canonical court of law, would easily be classed as heretical.

The USCCB committee article begins as follows:

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. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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

R. Sungenis: Paragraph #4 of the USCCB committee document states:

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.

As regards “ambiguities,” the USCCB committee issued one of its own with the reiteration of the phrase “utterly unique,” which, presumably, is quoted from *Reflections*. What does “utterly unique” mean and why is it even used in the context of evangelizing the Jews? The problem, of course, stems from the USCCB committee’s reason for using the phrase. It claims that “God has already established a particular relationship with the Jewish people, going back to the call of Abraham.” Granted, God had once established a “particular relationship” with the Jewish people, but history and Scripture confirm the fact that the relationship vastly changed. Because of their sins, the Jewish nation was punished and cut off from God’s graces, and it is now only to individual Jews who are willing to submit themselves to the graces under the New Covenant who will have any more “particular relationship” with God.

So what can the USCCB committee have in mind when it speaks of an ongoing “particular relationship” for the Jews, and how does this relationship result in producing an “utterly unique form” of evangelization toward them? The answer comes from the committee’s quote from Vatican II’s *Nostra Aetate*, as follows:

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.

Let’s take these two sentences one at a time. As to the first, yes, it is certainly true that we cannot forget that we received the Old Testament from the Jews, and that they once had a Covenant with God. But what does our recognition of these facts have to do with how we evangelize the Jews today, except that because the Jews are familiar with the Old Testament we can begin our discussion there when speaking to them about Christ? St. Peter and St. Paul did the

same. They drew on their vast knowledge of the Old Testament when evangelizing the Jews, but never did they modify the Gospel or make it “utterly unique” for the Jews. If anything, they boldly revealed to the Jews their ongoing hypocrisy and moral depravity, pleading with them to turn from their sins or face God’s judgment.³

So, although it is true that we, as Vatican II tells us, are not to forget the Jewish patrimony, Vatican II does not draw any exaggerated conclusions, at least nothing on the order of making the Catholic gospel “utterly unique” for the Jew. Appealing to truth in the Old Testament in attempts to convert the Jew is not an “utterly unique form” of evangelization. It is the same technique used by the greatest Jewish evangelist the world has ever known – St. Paul of Tarsus.

Now, let’s deal with the second of *Nostra Aetate*’s statements that the USCCB committee finds so profound:

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.

Let’s assume for the moment that there is no controversy as to the identity of the “root” of the well-cultivated olive tree in Romans 11 (for some believe the root refers to someone other than the Jews, as I will show momentarily). If the Jews are the root, then what can *Nostra Aetate* mean by its metaphor that “the Church draws sustenance from the root”? The answer is rather easy, since *Nostra Aetate* suggests it in the previous sentence. The sustenance is the Old Testament. What Catholic has not depended heavily upon the Old Testament for Christian truth, hidden, yes, but easily brought out by comparing it with the New Testament? And do we honor the Jew for having given us the Old Testament? Certainly we do. But we also need to remember that only a small percentage of Jews were involved in the dissemination of Holy Writ, and an equally small percentage actually lived by it. So it’s not the Jews, at large, to whom we owe a debt of gratitude, but to the faithful Jews, the Abrahams, the Moseses, the Davids, the John the Baptists. Why? Because these are the Jewish believers that the New Testament praises, for it is they who looked forward to the day of Christ, while other Jews killed the prophets and even Christ himself (*cf.*, Mat 23:37-38; John 8:58; Heb 11:26; Psalm 69:9; Mal 3:1). Unfortunately,

³ Cf., Acts 2-7. Unfortunately, it didn’t make much difference. The Jews only found another excuse why they wanted to reject Jesus – because he and Paul supposedly rejected the Old Testament. At least, that is what the Jew, David Klinghoffer, tells us in his 2005 book “Why the Jews Rejected Jesus.” (See my review of Klinghoffer’s book at:http://www.catholicintl.com/bookreviews/A_Review_of_David_Klinghoffer.pdf)

most Jews today have the same mentality as those who sent Christ to the cross – they applaud the death of Christ because they believe he was a fraud. Hence, the idea that we are to honor the Jews just because they are Jews (as the USCCB committee seems to be suggesting by its out of context quote from *Nostra Aetate*) is not what Scripture or the Church or Vatican II has taught us.

Of course, the USCCB committee's argument is predicated on the fact that the "root" of the "well-cultivated olive tree" represents the Jews. *Nostrae Aetate*, however, did not identify the Jews or anyone else as the representation of the "root." That identification of the root is left for further exegesis of Romans 11:16-24. Here St. Paul uses the analogy of a "root" and its "branches." He does not say that the Jews are the root; rather, verses 17-21 stipulate that the Jews are the "branches" that have been "broken off." The Gentiles are also branches, but they were "grafted into" the root after the Jews were cut off. The identities are unmistakable. Neither the Jews nor Gentiles are the root.

So what is the root (since neither St. Paul nor Vatican II tell us)? One possibility is that Abraham is the root. Another is that God himself is the root. But one thing we know for sure is that the root is not the Jews at large, for St. Paul says they are branches, not the root. Abraham could serve as the root because he is the father of both the Jews and the Gentiles. Since the promises were given to Abraham when he was a Gentile, thus he is the father of all the nations of the earth (*cf.* Gen 12-15; Rom 4:1-11; Gal 3:6-8). But he is also the father of the Jews since, when he was circumcised he became a Jew and the progenitor of the Jewish nation (Gen 17-22). Paul himself says he is a "descendant of Abraham" in Romans 11:1-2. The point of this analysis is that we, as Christians, are not to give homage to the Jewish people, for they are not the root. They are branches that were cut off, and if anything they deserve to be pitied. We give honor to Abraham, our father in the faith, but not because he was a Jew, *per se*, but because he believed in God and looked forward to the day of Christ (*cf.* Rom. 2:28-29; 4:12-26; Gal 3:6-29).

So when *Nostra Aetate* says "she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles," it means that we, as Paul says, "walk in the footsteps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised [as a Gentile]" (Rom 4:12-13). Unfortunately, it seems the USCCB committee drew a conclusion from *Nostra Aetate* (*i.e.*, that the Jews are the "root" of Paul's analogy) without knowing

precisely what it really meant in light of Scripture and Tradition, and thereby created a false impression, even though, ironically, it was trying to correct the *Reflections* document.

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.

R. Sungenis: An equally problematic statement occurs in paragraph 5 of the USCCB committee paper. First, it says that "the [*Reflections*] document correctly acknowledges that 'Judaism' is a religion that springs from divine revelation..." The problem is with the word "Judaism," simply because it is commonly used today to represent the religion of the modern Jew, a religion invented after Christ that has made itself a continual antagonist to the Christian faith. That, to be sure, is not a religion that "springs from divine revelation," at least not without the proper chronological qualifications, of which the committee paper is absent. In fact, the word "Judaism" was hardly ever employed to represent the Jewish people or religion of the Old Testament. The only place it appears is in the Septuagint, in 2 Maccabees (2:21; 8:1; 14:38), a very late time in Jewish history, and in a context of oppression from the Romans. Conversely, the New Testament regards "Judaism" as an obsolete and thoroughly anti-Christian religion. The only two places that the word "Judaism" appears is Galatians 1:13-14,⁴ an instance in which St. Paul speaks about his "former life in Judaism that was without Christ," a time in which he persecuted the Church and

⁴ From the Greek Ἰουδαϊσμῶ, transliterated, "Judaismo"

was a zealot for his anti-Christian Jewish traditions.⁵ Hence, even in the New Testament the word “Judaism” took on a flavor that was anything but “divine.” It became a religion of the anti-divine, because it rejected the Logos, who was God in the flesh. Since the USCCB failed to make these distinctions, it misrepresented what “Judaism” really stands for today. Unfortunately, there is no indication, either in *Reflections* or the committee’s critique of *Reflections*, that either the Jews or “Judaism” have been judged as a rebellious and apostate entity that is against the Christian gospel and has been punished by divine mandate.

Second, the USCCB committee paper refers to *Reflections*’ citation of the Jewish Old Covenant as: “it is only about Israel’s covenant that the Church can speak with the certainty of the biblical witness.” It then posits the following correction:

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.

Sadly, the committee’s attempted correction of *Reflections* is just as bad, if not worse, than the statement in *Reflections* itself. It is symptomatic of the theological duplicity that is prevalent today among Catholic prelates who are either caught up in the political correctness of the Catholic-Jewish dialogue or who are adversely affected by it in one form or another. It is entirely inappropriate to address the problem caused by *Reflections* by suggesting that *Reflections* would have been correct if it had pushed for the “enduring quality of the covenant” if it had only added that “for Catholics Jesus Christ...fulfills...the relationship that God established with Israel.” Let’s call this precisely what it appears to be – an attempt to both allow the Jews to keep the Old Covenant and allow the Catholic Church to interpret the Old Covenant in terms of Jesus Christ.

⁵ “13 For you heard of my former way of life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it, 14 and progressed in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my race, since I was even more a zealot for my ancestral traditions.” (Gal 1:13-14 NAB). Interestingly enough, there are many places the New American Bible (NAB) injects the word “Judaism” into the text, but it is not in the original Hebrew or Greek. The first appears in Esther 8:17. The Hebrew and the Septuagint simply have “Jews,” but the NAB translates it as “Judaism.” Similarly, the NAB translates Acts 2:11 as “converts to Judaism” but the Greek text says: Ἰουδαῖοί τε καὶ προσήλυτοι (“both Jews and proselytes”) with no indication that they were converts to Judaism. The NAB does the same with Acts 6:5, referring to Nicholas as a “convert to Judaism” when the text actually says προσήλυτον Ἀντιοχέα (“a proselyte of Antioch”). Even more problematic is the NAB’s translation of Acts 13:43 into “many Jews and worshipers who were converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas” when the text actually says: ἠκολούθησαν πολλοὶ τῶν Ἰουδαίων καὶ τῶν σεβομένων προσηλύτων τῷ Παύλῳ καὶ τῷ Βαρναβᾷ (“many of the Jews and religious proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas”).

In this way, the Jews and Catholics can have their cake and eat it, too. The Jews get to keep the Old Covenant because it has an "enduring quality" for them, and the Catholics get to interpret the Old Covenant in a Christian framework, and everyone is happy. We can be reasonably sure of this conclusion because the committee paper does not condemn the attempt of *Reflections* to preserve the Old Covenant for the Jews; rather, it only says that it was "incomplete and potentially misleading" for *Reflections* to say that the Old Covenant was still "enduring" without stipulating that "for Catholics" it is fulfilled in Christ. Consequently, the committee leaves entirely uncorrected *Reflections'* assertion that the Jews can interpret the Old Covenant as their own salvific pathway to God, for it is permitted to do so just as long as Catholics are allowed to add in Jesus Christ and interpret the Old Covenant in a Catholic framework.

Hence, we need to be clear. Although the USCCB committee paper gives the impression of thoroughly correcting *Reflections*, its corrections are quite anemic. Nowhere does the committee paper clarify that:

1. the Old Covenant is superseded by the New Covenant;
2. the Old Covenant is no longer valid for the Jews;
3. the Jews cannot rely on the Old Covenant to bring them to God,
4. barring the few exceptions of invincible ignorance that only God can judge, the Jew must accept the New Covenant and Jesus Christ as God.

Again, to even suggest that it is just "for Catholics" that the Old Covenant is to be understood as fulfilled by the New Covenant is just as bad as *Reflections* saying that it is theologically passé for Jews to be targeted with Christian evangelism. These are glaring omissions for a paper that purports to make definitive corrections to the *Reflections* document.

Unfortunately, the attempt by the USCCB committee to sanction its above view by a quote from Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* ("The principal purpose to which the plan of the old covenant was directed was to prepare for the coming of Christ...") is itself "incomplete and potentially misleading," for without alerting the reader to the fact that *Dei Verbum* gave no suggestion that the Jews could interpret the Old Covenant in their own way (*i.e.*, as not as fulfilled in Christ), the USCCB leaves the impression that Vatican II sanctioned a dual interpretation of the Old

Covenant, one for Jews and one for Catholics. What the committee should have done to mitigate this "potentially misleading" problem was to say:

Nevertheless, it is ~~incomplete and potentially misleading in this context~~ wrong to refer to the ~~enduring quality of the~~ covenant without adding that for Catholics *and for Jews*, 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 USCCB committee continues with paragraph 6:

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.

R. Sungenis: Not surprisingly, once the die has been cast, these problems persist in paragraph 6. Although the committee paper rightly chastises *Reflections* for not accompanying its recognition of God's relationship with Israel with "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," the committee does not emphasize that it is precisely to the Jew that this Gospel message needs to be told. Because of the distinction between Jews and Catholics that the committee created in paragraph 5 by saying that "for Catholics" (which implies, "not for Jews") the Old Covenant is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, this leaves the interpretation of paragraph 6 ambiguous. It suggests that the "utterly unique form" of evangelism to the Jews that is being promoted by both *Reflections* and the USCCB committee is such that the Jews can hold on to the "eternal quality" of their Old Covenant as long as they allow Catholics to interpret the Old Covenant as fulfilled in the New. The committee's attempt to mitigate the problem in *Reflections* by saying "that proclaiming this good news to all the world is at the heart of her mission" is simply not sufficient enough in light of all the "ambiguous" and "potentially misleading" information saturated in *Reflections*. The committee had the perfect

opportunity to make it clear, once and for all, that the Old Covenant is superseded by the New Covenant, and because of that immutable fact the Church must be continually "proclaiming this good news to all the world, [including to the Jews], [which] is at the heart of her mission." Again, this stipulation was required in paragraph 6 because of the theological blunder the committee created in paragraph 5 with the phrase "for Catholics."

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.

R. Sungenis: Here the USCCB committee paper rightly criticizes the blatant attempt of *Reflections* to redefine Christian evangelization. *Reflections* had the sheer audacity to say that when evangelization is understood as an "invitation to a commitment of faith in Jesus Christ and to entry through baptism into the community of believers which is the Church," this is not to be the focus of Christ's work and the mission of the Church. The committee recognizes *Reflections'* reformulation as resulting in a Gospel "in which the core elements of proclamation and invitation to life in Christ seem virtually to disappear." Taken in perspective, however, the committee's criticism of *Reflections* is severely muted at this point. In retrospect, Martin Luther's gospel wasn't as bad as the *Reflections'* version. At least Luther tried to preach "the core" of the Gospel, even if he believed it only came by faith, not indulgences. What *Reflections* did was introduce a heresy in the Christian faith the likes of which we have never seen in two thousand years. The simple fact is, when, as the committee itself admitted, the "core" of the Gospel is eliminated, then there is no Gospel. It is only Satan coming as an angel of light, transforming himself into an

apostle of Christ, as St. Paul so boldly warns us in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15. That *Reflections'* deliberate attempt to destroy the core of the Gospel is seen by the USCCB committee as only "ambiguities" or "potentially misleading" statements shows why *Reflections* was allowed to persist in this heterodoxy for the last seven years without so much as a finger being raised in protest. If the committee cannot see *Reflections* as a deliberate attempt to destroy the Gospel, then we can see why there was simply no pressing need to address these mere "ambiguities" quickly and thoroughly.

Yet even when the committee attempts to correct *Reflections* on this matter, it does so, ironically, in a very ambiguous and potentially misleading manner itself. After it recognizes that *Reflections* incorrectly insisted that evangelization must be "devoid of any intention whatsoever to invite the dialogue partner to baptism," the best the committee can do to correct this blatant attack on the command of Jesus Christ to preach the Gospel to all nations and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Mat. 28:19-20) is say that "the Christian dialogue partner is always giving witness to the following of Christ, to which all are implicitly invited." In other words, by focusing on "the Christian dialogue partner," the committee tries to deal with the problem by making a distinction between "dialoguing" and "evangelization," suggesting that for the former we don't need to verbalize either our commitment to Christ or an invitation to baptism, since these elements will somehow manifest themselves "implicitly" to the dialogue partner. How the very "core of the Gospel" is supposed to seep "implicitly" into the mind of the dialogue partner without our verbalizing it to him, the committee does not explain.

Unfortunately, what the USCCB committee apparently forgot from its opening sentence of paragraph 7 was that *Reflections* wasn't merely talking about "dialoguing" when it suggested that we should withhold the invitation to baptism from the dialogue partner; rather, *Reflections* was speaking directly about the very "definition of evangelization"! In other words, *Reflections* was trying to promote a *new* evangelization in which baptism and the naming of Jesus Christ as the savior behind the baptism was either eliminated from the evangelization or pushed so far back on the agenda that it became of no real necessity.

The USCCB committee paper continues:

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).

R. Sungenis: Here the committee quotes a paragraph from *Reflections* that sounds somewhat orthodox: “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’” but then adds a subsequent quote from *Reflections* that it regards as unorthodox: “sincere individual converts from any tradition or people, including the Jewish people.” The committee decides to target *Reflections’* emphasis on “individual converts” because, according to the USCCB’s interpretation of Romans 11:25-26, St. Paul taught “the inclusion of the Jewish people as a whole in Christ’s salvation,” an eventuality that the committee sees as “a mystery that awaits fulfillment.” In reality, the committee’s complaint about “individual converts” is, theologically speaking, much ado about nothing. The committee’s private interpretation of Romans 11:25-26 is neither a dogmatic teaching of the Catholic Church nor one that is required of any Catholic to hold.⁶ Hence, using its unproven interpretation as a basis to deny either *Reflections* or any other interpretation its opinion on the matter is an overstepping of its ecclesiastical bounds.

⁶ The closest the Catholic Church comes to making an official interpretation of Romans 11:25-26 is paragraph 674 of the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, but, unlike the USCCB’s interpretation, the Catechism does not specify that the conversion of Jews is an event that is either confined to the future or applicable to the “whole” Jewish people. The Catechism merely strings together quotes from Romans chapter 11 without offering a definitive exegesis as to how and when they all fit together. This is only proper, for there are many scholars who understand the clause “and so all Israel shall be saved” as referring to all the Jews from Abraham to the end of time who are the elect of Israel and who will be saved, whereas the rest of Israel remains unsaved. The USCCB seems to think that Romans 11:25-26 can only apply to some entity of Jews in the future who, it insists, represent “all” or the “whole” of Israel. But not only is this an exegetically weak interpretation of Paul’s words, in practicality it excludes four millennia of Jews as a “whole” who lived prior to this future event from participating in the salvific blessing of God.

In actuality, the USCCB committee strained the gnat and swallowed the camel at this juncture. While focusing on the phrase "individual converts, the committee missed one of the most egregious errors in the *Reflections* document. The sentence just prior in *Reflections* says the following: "Thus, while the Catholic Church regards the saving act of Christ as central to the process of human salvation for all, it also acknowledges that Jews already dwell in a saving covenant with God." Instead of exposing this heresy, the committee ignores it and decides to quibble about whether Romans 11 refers to "individual" converts or a "whole" people. In fact, there is a whole cadre of errors that *Reflections* spilled out in the surrounding three paragraphs. I will underline the more egregious:

Thus, while the Catholic Church regards the saving act of Christ as central to the process of human salvation for all, it also acknowledges that Jews already dwell in a saving covenant with God. The Catholic 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. In so doing, the Catholic Church respects fully the principles of religious freedom and freedom of conscience, so that sincere individual converts from any tradition or people, including the Jewish people, will be welcomed and accepted.

However, it now recognizes that Jews are also called by God to prepare the world for God's kingdom. Their 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. The distinctive Jewish witness must be sustained if Catholics and Jews are truly to be, as Pope John Paul II has envisioned, "a blessing to one another." This is in accord with the divine promise expressed in the New Testament that Jews are called to "serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness before God all [their] days" (Luke 1:74-75).

With the Jewish people, the Catholic Church, in the words of *Nostra Aetate*, "awaits the day, known to God alone, when all peoples will call on God with one voice and serve him shoulder to shoulder (Soph 3:9; see Is 66:23; Ps 65:4; Rom 11:11-32)."

These statements reveal to us, in no uncertain terms, that *Reflections* had no intentions of either preaching the Gospel to the Jews or seeking their conversion, regardless whether the focus was on the "individual" or the "whole" Jewish people. If a Jew happens to convert to Christianity, *Reflections* says he "will be welcomed and accepted," but *Reflections* is making it quite clear that it isn't going to put any effort into seeking the conversion of the Jew because it is obvious to its authors that the Jew "already dwells in a saving covenant with God." In other

words, a Jew who comes into the Catholic Church is just window dressing, or perhaps the result of psychological pressure fundamentalist Catholics put on him by insisting that he must convert to the Catholic Church in order to be saved. As it stands, *Reflections* did a nice job of covering all the bases: (a) if the Jew comes to the Church, that is good; (b) if the Jew stays away from the Church and practices Judaism, that is good, too. In either case the Jew is saved, simply because he is a Jew. Even more pretentious is that *Reflections* tried to support this heterodoxy by calling John Paul II and Scripture to its aid.

The USCCB committee continues:

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.

R. Sungenis: The most that the USCCB committee can muster in criticism of the outlandish statements in *Reflections* is to state the following in paragraph 9:

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.

In other words, the committee refuses to go on record saying that *Reflections*' conclusions are definitively wrong, thus allowing them to stand in their original formulation with only a “caution” that they could be misunderstood. One can only guess why the committee is so reluctant to condemn *Reflections*' anti-Catholic teachings for what they are. The committee simply refuses to condemn, clearly and succinctly, the very things we read in the underlined words above, namely:

1. the Jews have their own salvific covenant with God,
2. the Jews and Judaism are to be understood as an equally viable gospel witness to the kingdom on par with Christianity,
3. the prerogative of the Jews to salvation and witness should not be interrupted by Catholics seeking to convert them to Christianity.

Instead, the committee makes the outrageous conclusion that the *Reflections'* phrasing can be acceptable since only "some" people could mistake its words for being heterodox. More specifically, by putting its critique of the *Reflections'* statement in a negative grammatical form (*i.e.*, "Jews have an obligation not to become Christian and that the Church has a corresponding obligation not to baptize Jews") the committee sidetracks us from the real issue. The issue is not that *Reflections* says Jews have an "obligation not to become Christian" but that it insists Jews don't need to become Christian in order to be saved. There is a vast difference between the two. If it were an obligation for the Jews not to become Christian, it would imply that the Jew would somehow lose the privilege of his Jewish salvation if he were to become Christian, as if he had forsaken a guarantee God gave him just for being Jewish. The *Reflections* document is bad, but at least it did not go that far. *Reflections* doesn't mind if Jews become Christians because, as we said above, *Reflections* believes that the Jew is saved whether he remains a Jew or becomes Christian. It is a win-win situation, at least according to the *Reflections* document. Unfortunately, the fact that the committee did not point out this important difference makes its whole analysis of *Reflections* suspect of incompetency.

The concluding statement of the USCCB committee paper is equally troublesome. It says:

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).

The inspired words of Romans 11:29 are true enough, but unless the committee is willing to spell out the precise nature of the "gifts and call" and to whom they apply, then it does a disservice to the reader, the very reader the committee had earlier "cautioned" could take things the wrong way unless they are clearly stated. Needless to say, scriptural proof-texting of the type that the committee has displayed in his use of Romans 11:29 has been a major problem throughout the Catholic-Jewish dialogue for the past 40 years. First, Romans 11:29 does not say that the "gifts and call" belong exclusively to "the Jewish people." Rather, St. Paul merely makes

Jews' 2000-year old rejection of Christ is transferred from the Jews to God himself. It wasn't the Jews' obstinacy toward Christ that resulted in their lack of conversion, but the fact that God couldn't move the Jews to salvation until the appropriate future time – a time just before the return of Christ when the world is about to end. This dubious rationale was stated in 2002 (the same year *Reflections* was published) by Eugene Fisher, former director of the USCCB:

If you put off the moment that Jews will come to recognize Jesus as the Messiah until the end of time, then we don't need to work or pray for the conversion of Jews to Christianity. God already has the salvation of Jews figured out, and they accepted it on Sinai, so they are OK. Jews are already with the Father. We do not have a mission to the Jews, but only a mission with the Jews to the world. The Catholic Church will never again sanction an organization devoted to the conversion of the Jews. That is over, on doctrinal, biblical and pastoral grounds. Finito.⁸

The USCCB committee concludes with the following:

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.

R. Sungenis: The problem with these kinds of general statements about the "fulfillment of covenants" and "found only in Jesus Christ" is that though they sound good on the surface, they are useless in light of the inordinate amount of theological aberrations in the *Reflections* document. As we stated earlier, in no place in its entire critique did the USCCB committee affirm that the Old Covenant is superseded by the New and that the Jews can no longer depend on the Old Covenant to give them any favor with God, much less salvation. Instead, the committee implied that the Jews can still depend on the Old Covenant as long as we Catholics somehow tie it into Jesus Christ. This is heterodoxy. Unless the USCCB makes a clear statement about the revocation of the Old Covenant, and that salvation for the Jew will be procured the

⁸ *The Jewish Week*, January 25, 2002, previously at www.thejewishweek.com.

same way it is for everyone else in the world, that is, through the New Covenant in Jesus Christ, its critique of *Reflections* will simply be a case of the medicine being worse than the disease.

My hope and prayer is that the USCCB and its committees will recognize its responsibility to tell its Catholic parishioners the plain and simple truth.

Footnotes of the USCCB committee paper:

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.

NB: A copy of this critique has been sent to Bishop William Lori and Fr. James Massa of the USCCB committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.

About the author:



Robert A. Sungenis, Ph.D. is the founder of Catholic Apologetics International Publishing, Inc., a non-profit 501-c3 corporation. He holds advanced degrees in Theology and Religious Studies from George Washington University, Westminster Theological Seminary, and Calamus International University. He is the author of many books and articles on religion, politics, science and culture, including: *The CASB, Vol. 5, The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (CAI Publishing, Inc., 2009); *The CASB, Vol. 4, The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-11* (CAI Publishing, Inc., 2009); *The CASB, Vol. 3, The Epistles of Romans and James* (CAI Publishing, Inc., 2008); *The Catholic Apologetics Study Bible, Vol. 2, The Apocalypse of St. John* (Queenship Publishing, 2007); *The Catholic Apologetics Study Bible, Vol. 1, The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Queenship Publishing, 2003); *Not By Bread Alone: The Biblical and Historical Evidence for the Eucharistic Sacrifice* (Queenship Publishing, 2000); *How Can I Get to Heaven: The Bible's Teaching on Salvation Made Easy to Understand* (Queenship Publishing, 1998); *Not By Faith Alone: The Biblical Evidence for the Catholic Doctrine of Justification* (Queenship Publishing, 1997); *Not By Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of Sola Scriptura* (Queenship Publishing, 1997); *Shockwave 2000* (New Leaf Press, 1994). He has appeared on radio and television, including programs on CNN, the BBC and EWTN.