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Catechism Edit 'Troubling,' Jewish Leaders Say

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Deletion of Passage on Moses in Catholic Handbook Questioned

By Daniel Burke
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In catechisms, as in prisons, there are no insignificant sentences.

Every word of these handbooks is meant to clearly express the fundamentals of the faith. The Catholic Church, especially, places great emphasis on its catechism to help pass doctrine from one generation to the next.

So when 200 U.S. bishops voted this summer to delete a reference to the covenant between God and Moses in the "United States Catholic Catechism for Adults," some Jewish leaders were perplexed.

Pending Vatican approval, this sentence will be deleted from the text: "Thus the covenant that God made with the Jewish people through Moses remains eternally valid for them."

Bishops said too many Catholics seemed to misunderstand the covenant sentence, believing it meant Jews do not need Jesus to be saved.

"There was a concern that we were trying to say too much in too few words," said Washington Archbishop Donald Wuerl, who chairs the board that oversaw the new catechism. "When you get into an area of theological complexity, brevity doesn't always serve you well."

The [U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops](#) (USCCB), which published the catechism in 2006 with the Vatican's approval, says it is the first change to the new catechism, which took six years and three drafts to complete.

Jewish leaders, some of whom view the change in light of a recent flap over the Latin Mass and lingering resentments over "The Passion of the Christ," are perplexed by the excision.

In addition, a controversial Catholic apologist -- whose writings have been denounced by his bishop and whom the Southern Poverty Law Center has labeled a "rabid" anti-Semite -- is taking credit for the change.

The USCCB says the statement about the Moses covenant was not wrong, just ambiguous and misunderstood. The conference decided to replace it with a section from the older "Catechism of the Catholic Church" that quotes St. Paul's

letter to the Romans:

"To the Jewish people, whom God first chose to hear his word, 'belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ."

That passage puzzles Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League. "Why take a very simple sentence and replace it with a very complicated paragraph?" he asked. "When did the Catholic Church decide that our covenant was finished?"

Alan Berger, a professor of Holocaust studies at [Florida Atlantic University](#), called the change the latest "in a long line of mixed symbols. It's very troubling."

Deleting the sentence allows U.S. bishops to dodge the controversy, said Monsignor Daniel Kutys, executive director of evangelization and catechesis at the USCCB's committee on the catechism.

"Part of the decision was to skirt the issue rather than explain it," Kutys said.

The USCCB and individual bishops began receiving letters about the catechism in 2006, after a Pennsylvania man, Robert Sungenis, targeted the reference to Moses on the Web site of his Bellarmine Theological Forum, according to Kutys.

Sungenis, 53, of State Line, Pa., said he wrote to the Vatican and met with officials from the bishops' conference. "I tried all the proper channels and I think it worked," Sungenis said.

If the sentence were not deleted from the catechism, Sungenis said, it would "shake the faith" of lay Catholics by implying that people can be saved without believing in Jesus.

The amateur apologist -- Sungenis has a doctorate in religious studies from a British school without U.S. accreditation -- also asserts that "an anti-Christian, Jewish influence has infiltrated the Catholic Church at the very highest levels."

Sungenis's writings on Jews have been sharply criticized by fellow Catholics, who accuse him of anti-Semitism. His local bishop, Kevin Rhoades of Harrisburg, has demanded that Sungenis stop writing about Jews and made him stop using the word "Catholic" in his organization's name.

"I had hoped that he would cease from speaking or writing about Judaism and the Jewish people in a hostile, uncharitable, and un-Christian manner," Rhoades wrote to a former colleague of Sungenis's in February.

Sungenis might have been the first to raise the issue, but he shouldn't be given credit for revising the catechism, said the USCCB's Kutys. "It was changed, but

not because of what he said," Kutys said. "People were misunderstanding it, and through that blog spreading that misunderstanding to other people."

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