

Mideast Catholic bishops urge Israel not to use the Bible 'to justify injustices'

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Bishops from the Middle East, summoned by the pope to the Vatican, ended their two-week meeting with a statement that called on Israel to end its "occupation" of Arab lands and to stop using the Bible to defend injustices.

The dwindling numbers of Christians living in the Middle East was to be the principal reason for the meeting called by Pope Benedict XVI, but the joint communiqué also warned Israel about "injustices" against Palestinians.

The synod's message said that "recourse to theological and biblical positions which use the word of God to wrongly justify injustices is not acceptable," in an apparent reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But tensions arose with the interpretation given by Melkite bishop Cyrille Bustros of Newton, Massachusetts, at a final press conference October 23 at the Vatican. According to Catholic News Service, Bustros told reporters that Jews could no longer regard themselves as God's "chosen people" or Israel as "the Promised Land" because Jesus' gospel showed that God loved and chose all people to be his own.

Israeli deputy foreign minister Daniel Ayalon quickly responded in a statement that the Vatican should distance itself from Bustros's remarks. Israel's ambassador to the Vatican, Mordechay Lewy, told Catholic News Service that the Melkite bishop's comments were "outrageous" and would make Israelis wary of rapprochement with the Catholic Church.

Lewy said he had "no problem" with the 44 resolutions approved by the synod, though he took issue with parts of the final message. "The Israeli government does not use the Bible to determine our political borders," he said to CNS.

Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi said October 25 that the remarks of the U.S.-based bishop should be considered his personal opinion. The final message of the assembled 185 bishops and patriarchs was the only approved text, said Lombardi, a Jesuit priest.

Rabbi David Rosen, who directs interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee and was the only Jewish figure to address the synod, termed the bishops' final message "appalling" for making the Israeli-Palestinian conflict their primary focus. "The bishops did not have the courage to address challenges of intolerance and extremism in the Muslim countries in which [the bishops] reside," Rosen said.