



NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

SOUTHERN BAPTIST/ROMAN CATHOLIC CONVERSATIONS LIKELY TO CONTINUE

WASHINGTON--Participants in the recently concluded third round of the 10-year-old Southern Baptist/Roman Catholic Interchurch conversations "strongly affirmed the need for the conversations to continue," a Catholic spokesman said.

Father Thaddeus Horgan of the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (BCEIA) said of the talks in New Orleans, "The participants said these conversations witness against sectarianism in America today and witness to Christianity's ability to be an agent of reconciliation, and therefore have to continue." He said that was true despite "tensions within both church communities" that led to speculation that "these conversations are doomed."

Bishop James Niedergeses of Nashville, the episcopal member of the Catholic dialogue team, gave a homily during a joint worship service at the Dominican Sisters' motherhouse in New Orleans. He said that if Christians are to have the mind of Christ, "our dialogue and also those among all groups of divided

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Christians today are an important and necessary activity," adding that this is "part of our humble obedience to the Father."

"Isolation and division among Christians are contrary to the mind of Christ," Bishop Niedergeses said. "It prevents others from believing in Christ. It obstructs others from experiencing the love that God wishes them to know through us and from our spiritual and visible unity in Christ.

"Our dialogue," he said, "is not a mere option."

Dr. Gary Leazer of the Interfaith Witness Board of the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, which cosponsored the dialogue with the BCEIA, said that after a year's recess the conversations probably would resume with new representative teams. The recess, he said, is necessary because of restructuring within Southern Baptist sponsoring agencies.

Participants of the third round prepared an Agreed Statement, "How We Agree; How We Differ," scheduled to be published later this year. In addition, the Southern Baptist/Roman Catholic Conversations has a book in final preparation. It is entitled "To Understand Each Other." Its editors are Mercy Sister Mary Aquin O'Neill, formerly of Salve Regina College in Rhode Island and now on sabbatical, and Dr. Fisher Humphreys of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

The Agreed Statement, Father Horgan said, differs from others stemming from interchurch dialogues "because it does not claim that its subject matter states what Southern Baptists and Catholics both agree and disagree on when it comes to matters of

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belief and practice. Rather it sets forth specific subjects and notes that through conversation about them, despite very real differences in the language we use to explain our faith, a basic understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ by the grace of God clearly emerges.

"This dialogue initially had as its purpose, not visible unity as such, but mutual respect and right awareness of one another," Father Horgan said. "In this light these past 10 years of conversation have to be considered a success."

The Statement will reflect interchurch conversations that considered the authority of the Bible; salvation as an unmerited free gift of God's grace; discipleship or spirituality that is biblical, communal and, for Catholics, sacramental; devotion to Mary and the saints; worship, the Church and ministry; eschatology and millennialism; sin and grace, Baptism and the Eucharist; proselytism, mission and evangelization.

"To Understand Each Other" will be published as a special issue of The Theological Educator, the publication of the New Orleans Theological Seminary and by a Catholic publisher yet to be named. It will carry testimonies by Catholics and Southern Baptists concerning the 10-year conversations, articles on topics for the dialogue, a piece on the Agreed Statement, and suggestions for local Southern Baptist and Roman Catholic Encounter.

Dialogue with United Methodists

In another recent interchurch meeting in New Orleans, the

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United Methodist/Roman Catholic Dialogue participants began development of an agreement or consensus statement addressing the theological, ethical, pastoral and social dimensions of medical science.

Father Horgan said that the dialogue, in its fourth round after 22 years, addressed the issues under the title, "Holy Living, Holy Dying." He said that issues, on no one's agenda 20 years ago, including transplants, in vitro fertilization, and prolonging bodily functions after death, need to be addressed ecumenically. Another longstanding ethical issue is euthanasia, he said.

"Because these two Christian traditions have the most extended church-related systems of health care facilities in the United States," Father Horgan said, "it was natural for the issue to emerge as a dialogue topic. When published, the agreement will mention areas of divergence. This is being done not so much to highlight differences, but to raise up those issues still in need of further dialogue between us."

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