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NEWS

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WASHINGTON--The Executive Secretary of the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the Roman Catholic Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs has declared that the Oberramergau passion play "offends" in its portrayal of Jews.

Rev. Edward Flannery said portions of the Oberramergau passion play, performed every ten years in a Bavarian village, "do not correspond to the text of the Gospels" and are also not in conformity with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council's statement on the Jewish people and with norms for Jewish-Catholic relations laid down by the U.S. bishops in 1967.

"Passion plays should be considered not as a question of Catholic-Jewish amity alone, but also as a problem of authentic Catholic spirituality," Father Flannery said. "Their aim should be to increase in the hearts of their audience a greater love of God and of all mankind.

"They should help to convey to their viewers that Jesus' enemies in the drama are representatives of all of us. If they do not do so, they fail grievously in their basic purpose and become

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instead a source of scandal and ill will."

Following is the text of Father Flannery's statement:

In February 1968 a statement was issued by the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations which drew attention to passion plays as a possible source of anti-Semitic reactions. Though few passion plays are performed in the United States today, large numbers of American tours to Oberammergau have been scheduled this year to facilitate attendance at the famous decennial drama on the passion of Christ that is staged in that Bavarian village. Even though the presentation is not sponsored by the Church, the widespread popular interest in it prompts this statement.

Eminent Catholic as well as Protestant and Jewish leaders and scholars have insisted that, despite some minor changes, the present text of the Oberammergau play still portrays Jews in an offensive manner and remains a potential source of anti-Semitic feelings. An inspection of the text, in fact, shows that parts of the play do not correspond to the text of the Gospels and, further, are not in conformity with the spirit of the Vatican Council statement on the Jewish people (Nostra Aetate, 4) or with the norms laid down in our own Bishops' Guidelines issued in 1967. For the sake of those, therefore, who plan to see the play it may be helpful to recall some principles of interpretation for viewing passion plays.

Our first inspiration as Catholics is taken from II Vatican Council's statement on the Jewish people. That document enjoined, with respect to Jews or Judaism, that "all see to it that nothing is taught in catechetical work or in preaching the word of God that does not conform to the truth of the Gospels and the spirit of Christ." Passion plays must be judged by this same norm. The Council also recalls the fundamental Catholic teaching that "Christ underwent his passion and death freely because of the sins of men and out of infinite love." The Council, furthermore, reminds us that "what happened in his (Christ's) passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive or against the Jews of today," and goes on to say that "the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures." Lastly, the Council Fathers, relying on St. Paul (Rom 11:28,29), declare "Now as before God holds Jews most dear for the sake of their fathers."

Fidelity to these principles is particularly relevant for viewers as well as writers and producers of passion plays. It is all too easy in dramatic presentations, which must at times resort to artificial oppositions in order to heighten interest, to portray their characterizations in sharpest contrasts. Thus are Jews made to serve as the villains of the piece. These plays often use simplistic and erroneous interpretations of the sacred writings which tend to burden the Jewish people with a unique, if not sole, responsibility for the death of Christ. In this manner, presentations that are intended to promote Christian piety can become purveyors of prejudice and injustice. A few examples will show how this may be done.

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1. Jews may be portrayed as avaricious and blood-thirsty, implacable enemies of Christ. Thus are eliminated those parts of the Gospel which show that the Jewish populace not only did not will his death but were well disposed toward him.

2. By changing the "crowd" at the Governor's palace into a teeming mob, the impression may be given that all Jerusalem, all Israel, indeed all Jews called for the death of Christ.

3. It is possible to depict Pilate, whom the Gospels portray as a coward and perverter of justice, as an innocent and kindly bystander, involved against his will in the prosecution of Jesus.

4. It is also possible to conceal the fact that Jesus was a Jew Himself and that His apostles and friends in the drama were also Jews.

5. By characterizations, type-casting, and costuming, it is easy to caricaturize all Jesus' opponents as stereotyped Jews, displaying them as evil and unattractive figures in contrast to the handsome and appealing personages who stood apart from them.

In these ways, and in others again, unfortunately, the Oberammergau drama offends.

Passion plays should be considered not as a question of Catholic-Jewish amity alone, but also as a problem of authentic Catholic spirituality. Their aim should be to increase in the hearts of their audience a greater love of God and of all mankind. They should help to convey to their viewers that Jesus' enemies in the drama are representatives of all of us. If they do not do so, they fail grievously in their basic purpose and become instead a source of scandal and ill will.

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