

U.S. bishop says Jews have no 'exclusive right' to Israel

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) A special Vatican meeting on the Middle East ended Saturday (Oct. 23) with a flare-up in Catholic-Jewish tensions, after an American bishop declared the Bible does not give Jews privileged rights to the land of Israel.

"We Christians cannot speak of the 'promised land' as an exclusive right for a privileged Jewish people," said Archbishop Cyril Bustros, a native of Lebanon who is currently a Melkite Greek Catholic bishop in Newton, Mass.

"This promise was nullified by Christ," Bustros said at a Vatican press conference marking the end of a two-week session of the Synod of Bishops. "There is no longer a chosen people -- all men and women of all countries have become the chosen people."

Bustros' remark drew swift and strong rebukes from Israeli spokesmen.

"The comments of Archbishop Bustros reflect either shocking ignorance or insubordination in relation to the Catholic Church's teaching on Jews and Judaism," said Rabbi David Rosen, director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee and an adviser to Israel's Chief Rabbinate.

Rosen, who addressed the synod in its first week, said the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s affirmed "the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish People, which is inextricably bound up with the land of Israel."

Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon called Bustros' statement "a libel against the Jewish people and the State of Israel," and expressed "our disappointment that this important synod has become a forum for political attacks on Israel in the best history of Arab propaganda."

"The synod was hijacked by an anti-Israel majority," Ayalon said.

The two-week meeting, which was attended by 185 bishops, most of them from the 22 "Eastern Catholic" Churches loyal to Rome, focused on the precarious plight of 5.7 million Catholics in 16 Middle Eastern countries.

The synod's closing document deplored both Palestinian suffering as a consequence of the "Israeli occupation," and the "suffering and insecurity in which Israelis live." It also reiterated a frequent theme of synod participants by calling for "religious freedom and freedom of conscience" in Muslim lands.