

WORLD & NATION

Passion Play struggles with anti-Jewish image

OBERAMMERGAU, Germany (CNS) — The Jews who've seen it seem to be united: The worst moment for them in the Oberammergau Passion Play is the moment when "the Jews," played by hundreds of the village's population, shout "Crucify him!"

Rabbi Leon Klenicki, who was present at the first night of this season's performances, said, "It gave me the chills."

Even after years of serious attempts to revise the world's most famous passion play to remove anti-Jewish passages, the play remains difficult for Jews.

The play has been performed roughly every 10 years since 1634, in fulfillment of a vow made by the villagers when they were saved from the plague.

In the town of about 5,300, almost 2,000 residents take to the stage for each performance. Actors must either have been born in Oberammergau or have lived there at least 20 years.

For the last 30 years, Jews, mainly from the United States, have been pushing for change.

For this year's performance, the director, Otto Huber, invited Jewish critics to discuss possible changes ahead of the production and made many changes in the script to remove its traditional anti-Jewish references.

In the past, Jews wore horned costumes, the end of Judaism was prophesied as a punishment for the denial of Jesus, and Judas was portrayed as the devil incarnate.

Among the Jewish leaders consulted was Rabbi Klenicki, director of interfaith affairs for the Anti-Defamation League. When he read the new script, he appreciated the writers' efforts to make changes.

But then he saw the play.

In the scene where "the Jews" call for Jesus's crucifixion, the script called for a group of actors to counter the shouts with a cry not to crucify Jesus, in order to make it clear that not all Jews were against him.

"But they were completely overwhelmed," Rabbi Klenicki told Catholic News Service. "The problems in the script have been enlarged by the performance."

Not all those who viewed the show took such a critical line. German Rabbi Henry Brandt admits, "It's a Christian play for Christians and is effective as such."

He said he, too, felt uneasy at the crowd scene, but he emphasized the big efforts made to put Jesus in a Jewish context: He's called "Rabbi" by his followers and



Reuters

Actors rehearse a scene from the famous Passion Play in Oberammergau, Germany, prior to its May 21 opening. Based on the life of Jesus Christ, the play has been staged there every 10 years in a 350-year-old tradition. About a half million people are expected at performances, which run for five months.

makes a blessing in Hebrew over wine at the Last Supper, which is clearly modeled on the Jewish Seder meal for the eve of Passover.

Rabbi Brandt said that in spite of the improvements in the script, he agreed that the visual experience has a different impact.

For example, the political power in first-century Jerusalem seems to lie with the high priest: "The temple guard is more powerful and better equipped than the Romans," said Rabbi Brandt, adding that does not reflect the reality of the political conditions of the time. But, he

added, "They're on the right path."

Father John Pawlikowski of the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago was not at a performance, but he was one of a team of eight rabbis and Christian theologians asked by the American Jewish Committee to examine an English translation of the revised script. He remains strongly critical: The strongest identifiable Jewish figures are clearly evil, he said.

Father Pawlikowski said the Oberammergau passion plays are marketed throughout the world, and that some 350,000 of the 500,000 people who will see them this year come from the United

States. Several group trips, arranged by Rochester diocesan priests, as well as area Protestant groups, are among those.

"The American bishops' conference has issued guidelines for passion plays, and Oberammergau would not fulfill those guidelines," the priest said. "If they want to market it internationally, they should meet international standards."

Rabbi Brandt does not agree and is not the only German Jewish observer to resent American interference.

"The play is a German play in a Bavarian mountain village to which Americans are welcome. I know what is possible, and in the realm of the possible a lot has been done," he said.

Proposals have been made as to how the play could be improved further.

Three U.S. professors — Leonard Swidler, Ingrid Shafer and Racelle Weiman — who came to the first night recommended that the responsibility and power of the Romans be emphasized further, and that there be more similarities in costuming between Jesus' followers and other Jews. They also recommended a Jewish adviser should be available to consult on the staging and costuming, not just on the text.

Axelrod said she feels that, whatever is done, it should be part of a process of developing awareness of the issues among the population as a whole. The anti-Judaism in the play, she said, is part of a tradition that includes the 11th-century Crusades and the deadly 14th-century campaigns against the Jews during the Black Death, as well as the Nazi period.

She also said she was disappointed that local people among the shopkeepers and souvenir-sellers she asked were not aware of the controversy over the anti-Jewish elements in the play out of which they make their living.

Vatican approves bishops' norms for colleges

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — The National Conference of Catholic Bishops announced June 7 that the Vatican has approved the U.S. bishops' particular norms for Catholic colleges and universities.

They will take effect May 3, 2001, one year from the date of the Vatican decree of "recognition" or approval.

Bishop Joseph A. Fiorenza of Galveston-

Houston, NCCB president, said the purpose of the U.S. norms "is, above all, to strengthen our Catholic colleges and universities, especially by helping them to maintain their Catholic identity."

The bishops approved the norms at their general meeting last November in a document titled "Ex Corde Ecclesiae": An Application to the United States.

The Latin part of that title, which means "from the heart of the church," comes from the name of Pope John Paul II's 1990 apostolic constitution on Catholic higher education.

The papal document set out a vision of the mission and role of Catholic institutes of higher learning and established general norms applicable to such institutions worldwide. It called on bishops' conferences to develop more specific applications of the papal text to Catholic colleges and universities in their own countries.

In a statement sent to bishops June 1 and released June 7, Bishop Fiorenza said the yearlong period before the U.S. application takes effect will be used to resolve questions and deal with "practical matters of implementation."

During that time, he said, "the issues behind many of these inquiries will be addressed in dialogue with college and university presidents, theologians and canonists."

The application discusses the theological and pastoral principles of the role of Catholic institutions of higher learning in the life of the church and civic community.

It says what Catholic identity means for those institutions and spells out ways in which that Catholic identity and inspiration is to be nurtured in a university's foundational documents, board, administration, faculty and student body, in campus life, service to others and academics, research and interaction with culture.

It speaks of the collaboration, mutual

trust and ongoing dialogue that must mark the relationship between the university and church authorities.

Throughout development of the U.S. application, one of the most vigorously debated issues was how to apply in the U.S. context the general church law that theology professors need a "mandatum," or mandate, to teach from the competent ecclesiastical authority, the diocesan bishop.

Participants in the debate struggled to achieve a delicate balance of institutional autonomy for the university, academic freedom for its professors and the right and responsibility of the bishop to safeguard the faithful teaching of Catholic doctrine to the people of God in his diocese.

The Vatican approved the principles the bishops adopted for the "mandatum" — including their theological and legal description of what it is and is not and their principle that ordinarily once a theologian has received a "mandatum" it goes with him, even if he takes up a new post in a different diocese.

The "mandatum," as described in the norms:

• "Is fundamentally an acknowledgment by church authority that a Catholic professor of a theological discipline is a teacher within the full communion of the Catholic Church."

• "Should not be construed as an appointment, authorization, delegation or approbation of one's teaching by church authorities. Those who have received a 'mandatum' teach in their own name in virtue of their baptism and their academic and professional competence, not in the name of the bishop or of the church's magisterium."

• "Recognizes the professor's commitment and responsibility to teach authentic Catholic doctrine and to refrain from putting forth as Catholic teaching anything contrary to the church's magisterium."

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