

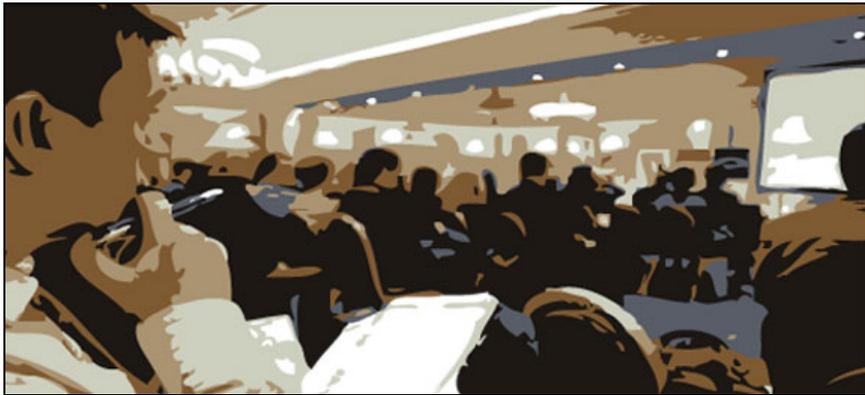
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UP FRONT

Catholic Common Ground Initiative: Still Needed Today

Sharon Euart | Spring 2009



The Catholic Common Ground Initiative provides a venue where the people of God can share their diversity in a Trinitarian perspective.

“A common ground centered in Jesus, marked by accountability to the living tradition and ruled by a renewed spirit of civility, dialogue, generosity and broad and serious consultation.” These words first appeared in the opening paragraph of *Called to Be Catholic*, the statement announcing the vision set forth by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin for the Catholic Common Ground Initiative he founded in 1996.

Beginnings

The Catholic Common Ground Initiative was both applauded and criticized at its inception. Perhaps few things epitomized the state of dialogue in the church at the time as much as Cardinal Bernardin's decision not to seek the formal participation of the U.S. bishops' conference in it. He wrote the conference president, Bishop Anthony Pilla of Cleveland, only to inform him about it.

This seemed an unusual step for someone who was such a great champion of bishops' conferences. However, Cardinal Bernardin's instinct that this call to dialogue would be too controversial for the conference quickly proved well founded when several cardinals criticized it. They disliked the idea for the same reason others praised it: as a possible signal that settled church teaching and practice might be changed.

Cardinal Bernardin attempted to clarify the Initiative's purpose and eliminate this distortion, but he did not persuade all the critics.

If some saw danger in dialogue, Cardinal Bernardin and those involved with him in shaping the Initiative were equally convinced that, left unaddressed, tensions and polarities present in the church—now as then—also threaten the unity and communion that should characterize the community of faith (“CCGI Resources for Dialogue,” 24).

The various perspectives on the truth that result at times in heated arguments can foster hostility that lacks charity and results in a divisiveness that strains the church's unity. The goal of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative was very simple: to create an environment in which some of the divisiveness could be overcome. It is not a set of new conclusions; rather it is a way of exploring our differences. Since its inception, the Initiative has sponsored conferences, reflection papers, publications, and processes for Catholic people to address their differences constructively in order to move together toward a deeper understanding of the meaning of discipleship in our time. Its call for honesty, imagination, discussion, and leadership is still relevant.

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In the intervening years since the Initiative began in 1996 a series of events have, indeed, changed the institutional face and structure of the church not only in the United States but throughout the world. The context out of which the Initiative was launched may have changed; yet the values and goals of the Initiative remain the same even as new challenges to unity call for meaningful dialogue. The bonds of trust that have been broken will not be easily or quickly repaired.

The situation that has focused the need for promoting common ground and dialogue within the church is the clergy sexual abuse crisis that has gripped our church for the past six and a half years. As I wrote this we were also facing an election, a potentially polarizing experience in which the need to bring together people with different perspectives for reflection and conversation was crucial. These situations highlight the importance of dialogue within the church, the role of participative forums and structures, and the urgent need to utilize them effectively.

Theological Basis for Common Ground

Our pursuit of common ground is rooted in a theology of church and revelation. It is based on the belief that the Spirit of God's wisdom is communicated throughout the people of God. In *Lumen gentium*, the Vatican II Constitution on the Church, we find the following teaching: "The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful, as in a temple, prays and bears witness in them that they are his adoptive children. He guides the Church in the way of all truth and, uniting it in fellowship and ministry, bestows upon it different hierarchic and charismatic gifts, and in this way directs it and adorns it with his fruits" (LG 4).

An expression of this teaching is found in canon 212 of the Code of Canon Law which affirms the right of the faithful to make known their needs and desires to the church's pastors (c. 212§2), and to express their opinion about matters that pertain to the good of the church (c. 212§3). This right and the other rights enumerated in the code are not peripheral or inconsequential in our lives. They depend on the relationship of *communio* with God and with the people of God and are central to participation in a Christian community of faith and love.

Canon 212 makes it clear that the Christian faithful, in accord with their knowledge and competence, have not only the right to express their opinion about matters that pertain to the good of the church (c. 212§3), but at times the duty to do so. Canon 212, a very important canon for our understanding of common ground, goes on to say that such expression of opinion is to be done with due regard for the integrity of faith and morals and reverence toward pastors and with consideration for the common good and the dignity of persons. Such expression of opinions, then, is not intended to divide a particular community of faith but rather to build up that community. As important as the expression of the right is the means to ensure its usefulness in the life of the church.

This right of expression reflects not only the personal dignity of individual members of the church but also the nature and need of the church as community. Communication within the church is necessary for its effective functioning. In 1950, prior to Vatican Council II, Pope Pius XII said that both pastors and laity are responsible for creating public opinion in the church. He said that "an attitude of mute servility is as undesirable as an attitude of uncontrolled criticism."

Fifty-five years later, in January 2005, Pope John Paul II issued a little-known apostolic letter directed to those responsible for communications entitled "The Rapid Development." In this letter he reflects on the role of public opinion in the church and the role of the church in public opinion. He refers to the recognition in the Code of Canon Law of the right to the expression of one's opinion under certain circumstances. He states, "While it is true that the truths of the faith are not open to arbitrary interpretations, and that respect for the rights of others places intrinsic limits upon the expression of one's judgments, it is no less true that there is still room among Catholics for an exchange of opinions in a dialogue which is respectful of justice and prudence" (#12). Indeed the church should be a sign to the world of that human solidarity that permits and strengthens genuine dialogue.

Pope John Paul II spoke of a spirituality of communion grounded in "the heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us" in his apostolic letter *Novo millennio ineunte*, At the Beginning of the New Millennium (#43-45). Since ecclesial communion flows from the Trinitarian communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, there can be no other starting point for the spirituality of communion. The late pope says that a "spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God...as a 'gift for me.'" This is a very important thought if we look at it from a Trinitarian perspective. Just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sustain by a common and constant action the infinite variety of matter and life in the energies of the universe, so too do these divine persons in their relationships create and bring about the infinite variety of ways in which the gospel is lived out by individuals and communities. Their faith and love of the people of God is a shining forth of God's presence and action in the church. The gift of one another in the church is God's gift to us.

Presuppositions in Entering into Dialogue

The spirituality of communion is fostered through dialogue. But one's presuppositions in

entering into dialogue can affect the ways of participation and the goals of the dialogue. We can approach dialogue as a way of mutual learning or as a means of conveying the truth we confidently possess already. In the first way, we know who we are and what they believe, but also gain insights that enrich our always limited grasp of truth. In the second way, we are secure in our knowledge and want to lead our dialogue partners into that same knowledge.

For example, in a 2006 address to the Canon Law Society of America, Msgr. John Strykowski illustrates this by comparing Jesus' way of dialogue in the Synoptic Gospels and in the Gospel of John. In the Gospel of John, we see Jesus as Lord in calm and confident

possession of the truth that he is. In his conversations with the Samaritan woman and with the crowd after miraculously feeding them, he uses bread and water to lead his listeners through his questions and comments to the profound revelation of the mystery of his identity. In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), Jesus is the Son of Man who through his conversations with others discovers faith in surprising places and responds to it. Consider the case of the Canaanite woman (Mt. 15:21-28), in which Jesus is moved to extend his mission beyond the house of Israel to a non-Israelite because of her great faith.

Both the Johannine and the Synoptic ways of dialogue are valid. But they must be kept in balance. We might ask whether the Johannine way has not been more prevalent in ecclesial discourse in recent years. It would seem that John Paul II makes a plea for a greater use of the Synoptic way in his apostolic letter when he states that "...we need to make our own the ancient pastoral wisdom which, without prejudice to their authority, encouraged pastors to listen more widely to the entire people of God." He then goes on to quote St. Paulinus of Nola: "Let us listen to what all the faithful say, because in every one of them the Spirit of God breathes."

Listening to others then, making it a point to draw on the wisdom of others, is not just a concession to the demands of our culture or a tactic for winning acceptance for a teaching or policy or practice. Rather, it is a requirement for the development of teaching and policy and practice, for without listening we do not acquire as much of the truth as the church has been endowed with.

Central to the message of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative is the call to dialogue, which, of course, means speaking to one another. It has become quite clear in recent years that equally important is mutually listening to one another and enabling one another to listen. For dialogue to flourish individuals must develop the abilities to speak well and to listen well. Bradford Hinze describes the twofold habit of speaking and listening as the heartbeat of dialogue. It requires us to remove the obstacles that prevent us from hearing one another, from truly hearing the message of the gospel, from being open to the truth. It is equally clear that this begins with us.

How We Must Listen to One Another

We need to be able to put aside our prejudices and stereotypes so we can truly hear what others are saying. Indeed, in *Called to be Catholic*, the ground rules for dialogue are mostly about how we must listen to one another. They caution against resorting to dismissive labels—like radical feminism, right-wing conservative, or the hierarchy; against looking immediately for holes in another's argument; against assigning unworthy motives or disloyalty to another; as well as against adopting the view that we are in complete and sole possession of all the truth.

After beginning with ourselves we need then to provide the opportunities and structures for others to feel that they will be listened to. Msgr. Philip Murnion described the Initiative and its call for dialogue as creating the space that allows people to feel that when they express themselves, they are on solid ground; that they are not in jeopardy; and that their identity and integrity are not at stake if their views are challenged, their feelings exposed, and they find themselves at odds with others. For people need to feel they are respected, their good faith is presumed, and their desire to be faithful to the Lord is as great as our own. It means also taking into consideration how people will hear us when we make our own statements—what people may find offensive, insensitive, or simply confusing in our language. Indeed, the pursuit of common ground involves a whole disposition in our approach to others.

While dialogue is essential to a spirituality of communion, such listening to one another is enabled through various structures of the church which are means for helping the church to be more clearly the sign and instrument of communion with God and with others. John Paul II states that the new century will have to see us more than ever intent on valuing and developing the forums and structures that, in accordance with the Second Vatican Council's major directives, serve to ensure and safeguard communion (NMI 44). Theology and spirituality of communion encourage a fruitful dialogue between pastors and the faithful (NMI 45).

Some people wonder whether dialogue is truly possible in our parishes. The parish is where church happens. It is the key building block of pastoral conversations, discussions and, when necessary, debates. We know that in parish life heated discussions can arise around a number of issues, for example, liturgical language; liturgical arts including music, architecture, and environment; Mass schedules; membership on consultative bodies; parish programs; diverse cultures and their customs. In December 2007, for example, the Catholic bishops of Maryland urged the one million Catholics in their state to engage in a faith-filled dialogue on immigration. These issues beg for a common ground approach, one that calls for respectful

listening and dialogue, an approach which is a necessary condition of our relationship with God and with one another.

Forums for dialogue such as councils (whether parish or diocesan), synods, and other participative structures are not just mechanisms that are supplementary to the work of the church; they are themselves expressions of what it means to be church, a gathering of believers. The effort to bring together people of varying viewpoints and concerns is an essential part of expressing and building up the body of Christ. We are called to achieve and express in communities of the church what has been accomplished for us in Christ and realized in us through our baptism into the body of Christ. In the words of the late Msgr. Murnion, "it is to make the communities we fashion expressions of the communion the Lord formed."

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