

The Catholic Common Ground Initiative

Dialogue, Discernment, Discipleship

Robert P. Imbelli

This author recalls the legacy of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago and discusses how this legacy lives on today in the lively and productive efforts of the Common Ground Initiative. This work is careful, intentional, Spirit-guided, and painstaking, but much has been accomplished to bring peace to a divided church and the world.

On the evening of October 24, 1996, a dying Cardinal Joseph Bernardin spoke these words to those gathered for the official beginning of the Common Ground Initiative that he had founded:

I hand on to you the gift that was given to me—a vision of the church that trusts in the power of the Spirit so much that it can risk authentic dialogue. I ask you . . . to examine our situation with fresh eyes, open minds, and changed hearts, and to confront our challenges with honesty and imagination. Guided by the Holy Spirit, together, we can more effectively respond to the challenges of our times as we carry forward the mission that the Lord Jesus gave to us, his disciples. It is to promote that mission that the constructive dialogue we seek is so important. (Bernardin, 1997, 75)

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This moving statement presents the three key elements of Bernardin's vision for the Catholic Common Ground Initiative. In the midst of polarization in the church, verging at times on acrimony, civil conversation and dialogue become an ecclesial imperative. For, as Paul once wrote to the Galatians: "If you bite and devour one another, take care you are not consumed by each other" (Gal 5:15).

However, this is not an understanding of dialogue emanating from liberal enlightenment principles: a tolerance for differing, even incompatible, opinions. It is dialogue understood as an ecclesial practice whose overarching aim is the discernment of truth. Its inspiration derives from Loyola, not Locke (see Dulles, 2001).

Yet we still have not reached the ultimate goal. For the dialogical discernment of truth seeks to serve a more faithful following of the Lord Jesus and a more wholehearted commitment to his mission for the life of the world. What characterizes the Common Ground proposal is the interplay of dialogue, discernment, and discipleship as the only adequate response to the peril and promise of being Catholic in America today.

Model Not Monopoly

When the Initiative was launched, it was greeted for the most part with enthusiasm and hope. It seemed to articulate and address so palpable a need. As a member of the Advisory Committee of the Initiative, I spoke to a number of audiences and was struck by their eager reception of the undertaking. But I was always keenly aware of the relative modesty of what the committee could achieve.

In the almost ten years of its existence the Initiative has established a rhythm of sponsoring two major events a year. The annual public lecture held in Washington has been delivered by such prominent figures as Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J., Cardinal Walter Kasper, and John Allen of the *National Catholic Reporter*. All have explored some aspect of Common Ground from the perspective of their experience and concern. The presentation is further enriched by a respondent who models respectful, and sometimes critical, engagement with the position set forth. The lecture and response are subsequently printed in an attractive booklet and made available to a wider public.

The second major event sponsored by the Initiative is an annual conference, limited to about fifty participants. Here the effort is made to assemble a diversity of participants representing different perspectives along the Catholic spectrum. Benefiting from prepared papers read prior to the gathering, those assembled address, over a three-day period, issues such as "Church Authority in American Culture," "Young Adult Catholics," and "Participation in the Church." Some of

these proceedings have been published; others summarized and commented upon in the Initiative's quarterly newsletter.

It is in the conference that the principles of dialogue find their full scope. Since papers have been prepared and already read, the time together is given to intense discussion, often guided by a facilitator. Shared meals provide opportunities for more spontaneous exchanges. Moreover, seating arrangements at tables vary from meal to meal to facilitate the widest interaction. Finally, essential to the common experience is the celebration of morning prayer and Eucharist. This liturgical dimension is key. As "Called to Be Catholic: Church in a Time of Peril" (the Initiative's inaugural statement) puts it: "Ultimately, the fresh eyes and changed hearts we need cannot be distilled from guidelines. They emerge in the space created by praise and worship" ("Called to Be Catholic," 1996, 44).

The Initiative has sponsored several other projects in partnership with other groups: Holy Cross College, the College of New Rochelle, and the University of Notre Dame. But it has sought, above all, to model the "spirit" of Common Ground, of respectful and attentive dialogue and prayerful discernment, so that others, in their own situation, be it parish, school, or diocese, might respond more creatively to the common challenge we face. Common Ground claims no monopoly. It welcomes multiplicity. But it also cautions that dialogue does not come easily. Indeed, it is a most demanding spiritual exercise.

The Cost of Dialogue

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's well-known phrase, "the cost of discipleship," applies to the practice of dialogue as well. Indeed, as I have already suggested, the dialogue that Common Ground envisions aims ultimately to promote a more faithful following of Christ. It is noteworthy that, in his 2004 Common Ground Lecture, John Allen, with welcome honesty, pressed the question: "Why didn't Common Ground work?" Allen elaborated his point further. Despite the evident hard work and the many successful undertakings, "most observers would probably agree that measured against the aspirations of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, which were to transform the public conversation in the American church, the Initiative has not had the desired impact" (Allen, 2004, 7).

Certainly the Initiative never pretended to be able to single-handedly accomplish so daunting a task. Moreover, the unprecedented crisis provoked by the sexual abuse scandal and revelations of complicity on the part of some bishops has exacerbated division and undermined dialogue to an extent undreamed of by the founders of the Initiative. Peter Steinfels' portrayal of "a people adrift" sums up all too well the magnitude of the disarray (Steinfels, 2003).

Still, Allen's question deserves to be pondered. He himself offers a "hunch" that I find promising. What is required, he tentatively suggests, is "a spirituality

of dialogue.” He writes: “We must have a spirituality before a program for dialogue can realize its potential” (Allen, 2004, 7). He then goes on to enumerate and discuss aspects of such a spirituality, including deep acquaintance with the Catholic tradition, humility before the truth, and patience in coming to understand the other.

In important respects Allen’s proposal recalls that of Pope John Paul II in the wonderful Apostolic Letter he composed to mark the beginning of the new millennium: *Novo Millennio Ineunte*. John Paul begins with a brief personal reflection on the experiences of the Jubilee Year: the throngs of pilgrims come to Rome, the penitential liturgy and purification of memory, the pope’s own pilgrimage to the Holy Land and prayer at the Western Wall. He then offers, in Chapter Two, a lovely and moving reflection, under the title: “A Face to Contemplate.” This mystagogical evocation and appropriation of the New Testament witness to the Lord Jesus constitutes the very heart of the Good News and of the pope’s letter. John Paul sums up his conviction in these words: “We are certainly not seduced by the naïve expectation that, faced with the great challenges of our time, we shall find some magic formula. No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: *I am with you!*” (John Paul II, 2001, 39).

A Spirituality of Communion

Only after having professed and meditated anew upon the church’s one foundation does the pope present the most innovative part of his letter: his call to “promote a spirituality of communion.” “To make the Church *the home and school of communion*: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning” (John Paul II, 2001, 56). The pope roots this ecclesial imperative in the vision of a God who is trinitarian communion of persons. Hence the very nature of the church is to be sacrament of trinitarian communion in history.

This vision is, of course, ever ancient and ever new. However, it must be realized in the manifold and concrete circumstances of different times and places. Yet it always incarnates the trinitarian “rhythm” of God’s own life of gift and mutual sharing. The church as “home and school of communion” has the pedagogical task of training its members in a spirituality of communion that implies, among other things, “the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a ‘gift for me’” (John Paul II, 2002, 57).

John Paul clearly recognizes that spirituality in the Catholic tradition requires institutional embodiment. Hence he goes on to speak of the “need for forums and structures” whereby participation (one of the dimensions of communion) can be

promoted and enhanced. Some already exist, such as parish councils, diocesan pastoral councils, and presbyteral councils, but these need to be strengthened so as to serve the purpose of participation and communion. Others must be established in response to new needs.

I suggest that the Common Ground Initiative could be considered such a forum or structure, established to respond to a pressing need in the contemporary church in the United States. But structures alone cannot save us. They can at best serve as vehicles for the action of the Holy Spirit. It is spirituality, the growth to holiness and maturity in the Spirit of each participant, that “supplies institutional reality with a soul” (John Paul II, 2001, 60).

Spiritual Practices

In the heady years immediately following Vatican II there was, in certain quarters, a sloughing off of traditional spiritual practices that seemed to have become stale. Rather than reappropriation there often ensued repudiation. As one member of a religious community once acknowledged, ruefully: “we’ve gone from formal prayer to informal prayer to no prayer.” That trajectory, I suspect, marks the experience of not a few.

Thus it is heartening to find, more recently, a rediscovery of the crucial importance of practices to embody a spiritual and theological vision. Indeed, one theologian even suggests that “sustained prayer practices are clearly the *pre-requisites* of certain forms of theological knowledge” (Coakley, 2002, 88). The work of theologian Robert Barron represents one creative effort to recover, in contemporary colors, many traditional Catholic practices (see Barron, 2002).

On the basis of my ten years’ experience with the Common Ground Initiative, as committee member and participant in many of its projects, I have become convinced that, absent a robust spiritual vision and commitment, “dialogue” cannot be sustained in season and out of season. John Paul II’s call for a “spirituality of communion” is the very condition for the possibility for undertaking and sustaining activities like the Common Ground Initiative. Adopting an insight from Ronald Rolheiser: such activities are not “a quick sprint to a well-marked finish line, but a marathon . . . a journey into an ever-widening horizon” (Rolheiser, 1999, 214).

Three classical spiritual practices seem to me to take on new resonance within the context of dialogue and discernment. Their traditional names are *lectio*, *meditatio*, and *contemplatio*. Let me briefly suggest how they might be transposed into a relational and dialogical key.

Lectio, the careful and attentive reading of the text in the patristic tradition, assumes the form of an attentive listening to the other, the partner in dialogue. This may sound simple, but “being attentive” is a demanding spiritual exercise,

especially in a sound-bite culture increasingly marked by a society-wide attention deficit disorder. The experience of dialogue requires one to listen “with a third ear,” one that seeks to hear not merely the *concepts* employed, but the real *concerns* that underlie the always faltering articulation.

A sensitivity acquired in the course of prolonged participation in Catholic Common Ground is that of moving beyond ideology and rhetoric to discern the legitimate concerns seeking expression. This leads, then, to the second spiritual practice required: what the tradition terms *meditatio*.

The patristic tradition sometimes spoke of *meditatio* as thoroughly “chewing” the word that had been received through *lectio*. We might speak, in the context of dialogue, of carefully pondering what one has heard with the “third ear.” To “ponder,” as the Latin root indicates, is a “weighty” exercise. It demands the freedom to bear with a certain tension, since what has been heard and received may go counter to one’s own settled views. One is often tempted to dismissal rather than discernment.

Yet discernment is the crux of the matter and may, indeed, entail a cruciform experience as the Spirit leads “into the full truth” (John 16:13). Dialogue and discernment are so difficult because they require us to be vulnerable to the other’s truth and open to acknowledgment of the untruthfulness in some of our own attitudes and dispositions. In the light of the cross, the Spirit of truth “convicts” by convincing us that each of us bears responsibility for the body of Christ, that no one is innocent of its violation. Dialogue and discernment are so difficult because they demand ongoing conversion.

The third traditional practice, *contemplatio*, flowers as the fruit of such conversion. It is significant, as we have seen, that John Paul’s *Novo Millennio Ineunte* presents the face of Christ as “A Face to Contemplate.” The pope issued anew to the church the invitation to behold the beauty of the Lord as it remembers and celebrates the incarnation of God’s love.

But, in the words of Augustine, it is the mystery of the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ, head and members, that we are called to contemplate. The importance of eucharistic worship in the Common Ground Initiative is that it provides space for such contemplation. Sitting silently in the Spirit, having received the body and blood of Christ, one is newly conscious that those with whom one may have dialogued, even argued, a short time before, are “the brother and sister for whom Christ died” (1 Cor 8:11).

Perhaps this experience is what the spiritual tradition has termed “acquired contemplation.” It moves beyond *meditatio* to a silent resting in the realization of what Gerard Manley Hopkins has expressed in incomparable poetry:

For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men’s faces. (Hopkins, 1967, 90)

Christ the Measure

Too often, in discussions about church, conversation can become fixated upon intra-ecclesial issues. Though I by no means minimize the importance of such concerns, they can narrow our vision, our contemplative gaze. We risk replicating the Psalmist's lament, becoming "like a dry, weary land, without water" (Ps 63:1). We forget that the title of Vatican II's epoch-making Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, refers not to the church at all, but to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the "Light of the nations."

The Common Ground Initiative strives to keep Christ at the center of its vision. As "Called to Be Catholic" puts it: "Jesus Christ, present in Scripture and sacrament, is central to all that we do; he must always be the measure and not what is measured" ("Called to be Catholic," 1996, 40). He is ever the Lord, and we the disciples who seek to put on "the mind of Christ" (see Phil 2:1-5).

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Certainly the mystery of Jesus Christ is inexhaustible, and every age, indeed every person, can only comprehend finite aspects of the mystery. The great religious orders throughout the church's history often embody their founders' distinctive vision of Christ: the poor Christ of Francis, Christ the teacher of Dominic, Christ the king of Teresa of Avila. Provided they do not become exclusive and sectarian, they all enrich the church catholic.

If I may make bold to offer a perspective on the mystery of Jesus Christ that seems to orient the vision of John Paul II and to animate the

Catholic Common Ground Initiative, it is Christ's passion for communion. A spirituality of communion and of dialogue responds to the Christ whose very being is eucharistic communion, who continues to give himself so that all "may have life and have it to the full" (John 10: 10). From this vision springs the mission to extend communion in Spirit and in truth. "Dialogue" is but a means to this (never-ending) end.

Pondering the question of "The Church: Who Cares?," I recalled what someone who cared deeply wrote. In her correspondence with "A," Flannery O'Connor, in characteristic "no frills" manner, homes in on the heart of the matter. "I think that the Church is the only thing that is going to make the terrible world we are coming to endure; the only thing that makes the Church endure is that it is somehow the body of Christ and that on this we are fed" (Flannery O'Connor, 1979, 90). This conviction drives the quest for Common Ground.

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