

THE ROLE OF DIALOGUE IN THE PASTORAL LIFE OF THE DIOCESE
Catholic Common Ground Initiative Conference
Loyola University, Chicago
August 11, 2006
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It is a unique privilege to address you on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative. It is altogether fitting that this celebration take place in Chicago from which Cardinal Joseph Bernardin announced the Initiative.

Every talk has a point of view; the point of view of this talk is that of a pastor. I often ask myself why I accept extra obligations outside of the diocese, such as positions with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Council of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) and on the Catholic Common Ground Committee. The reason is a selfish one. I am always interested in learning things to bring back to the diocese. Many things that I do in the Diocese of Las Cruces are not all that original, they are usually something I have stolen or borrowed from some one else.

What I have to share with you today is what I have learned from the Catholic Common Ground Initiative in the past ten years and how I have tried to apply Common Ground in my diocese. Basically, I have learned the importance, yes, the necessity for the church to be always in dialogue. The bishop has to be the model, the catalyst and the one who promotes dialogue in his diocese. The challenge is how to be an authority without being authoritarian. For the bishop, dialogue happens in the balance of listening and teaching, engaging and leading, to establish a community of justice and love in the name of Jesus Christ. The bishop does this not only on church and pastoral matters but also on secular issues. The bishop has the aim to help the people he serves to recognize that they are called to be, with their bishop, the prophetic voice in the

place and time in which they live. The bishop must be a bridge and lead the faithful to be a bridge between cultures, peoples, and generations, and to form communities that have an impact on the rest of the church and the world.

Communion in Christ is our goal—that all may be one with Him and with one another at the deepest level of the spirit and of humanity—brothers and sisters all, who in a world of evils and hardships, want only the best for one another.

Communion necessarily has to be in every diocesan or parish mission statement. After all, was not this the most fervent prayer of the Lord Jesus?...that all may be one as you, Father are in me, and I in you; I pray that they may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me...” (Jn. 17:21). We, at Mass join our prayer to his: “In mercy unite all your children wherever they may be” (III Eucharistic Prayer). “By your Holy Spirit, gather all who share this one bread and one cup into the one body of Christ, a living sacrifice of praise” (IV Eucharistic Prayer). One of the ways to arrive at communion is by way of dialogue.

At our first Catholic Common Ground lecture, we learned from Cardinal Basil Hume, OSB, that dialogue means “exploring truth together.” He said, “It involves listening sympathetically to what others have to say, without questioning their motives. It implies respect for the other and not reducing church discussions to crude polemics. The measure of true dialogue is not success or failure but the ability to make differences fruitful.”¹

Later, from John Allen, the *National Catholic Reporter* correspondent for the Vatican, I heard that we live in an era of instant opinion, where everyone is expected to have an opinion on every topic. But, the truth is that we do not know everything. In Allen’s words, “we have to re-learn the discipline of withholding final judgment, realizing that we may not always have the requisite data or reflection to draw definitive conclusions....Dialogue is, in other words, an

¹ Hume, OSB, Cardinal Basil, “One in Christ: Unity and Diversity in the Church Today”, 1999.

essential element of our search for truth, but only if we are open to being shaped by the experience.”²

Bishop Weisgerber reminded us, in his Initiative lecture last year, that we pastors can lead effectively only if we are pursuing a life of holiness. Pastors are shepherds, who lead by example and who love the flock and live for the flock. “Holiness in pastors or bishops requires an openness to others, a confident trust in others, and a passionate desire to include all the gifts in the building up of the church.”³

John Paul II, in his letter on the new millennium, encourages pastors to listen more widely to the entire People of God. He uses as an example St. Benedict, who instructed the abbot of a monastery to consult even the youngest members of a community before making a decision because, “by the Lord’s inspiration, it is often the youngest person who knows what is best.” John Paul II also quotes St. Paulinus of Nola: “Let us listen to what all the faithful say, because in every one of them, the Spirit of God breathes.”⁴

These are some of the things that Catholic Common Ground has taught me. The past ten years have given me a privileged place where I have met people, some with very critical views of the church, who yet possess a passionate regard and deep love for the church. I have come to respect them and have concluded that they are critical precisely because they love that church family to which they belong. In Common Ground meetings there can be moments of intense conversation but always in a spirit of civility and respect. I have learned to pay attention to people who uphold dialogue as a paramount element in the life of the church.

I have learned to see dialogue called for and modeled by our recent popes—known not only for their wisdom, love, prudence, but also for their anxiety to respond to pressing

² Allen, Jr., John, “Catholic Common Ground Lecture”, June 25, 2004.

³ Weisgerber, Archbishop James A., “Building a Church of Communion”, 2005.

⁴ *Novo Millennio Inuente*, No. 45

happenings in our church and society today. I will go backwards, referring, first of all, to Pope Benedict XVI. Early in his pontificate he invited his friend and sometimes critic, Hans Küng for dialogue. We may never know what they talked about, but it must have been very interesting. Pope Benedict also met with representatives of the Society of St. Pius X, founded by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre and that, too, must have been an interesting conversation. At these meetings agreement could not have been reached—they probably agreed to disagree—but the important thing is that the Pope had a respectful exchange with these people.

I recall our conversations and dialogue with Pope John Paul II at lunches during our *Ad Limina* visits. No question was insignificant, and to every question there was a response. His body language and his entire demeanor made us feel at ease and invited our input.

Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical dedicated almost entirely to the theme of dialogue, *Ecclesia Suam*, stated, “Here, then, Venerable Brethren is the noble origin of this dialogue: in the mind of God Himself. Religion of its very nature is a certain relationship between God and man. It finds its expression in prayer; and prayer is a dialogue. Revelation, too, that supernatural link which God has established with man, can likewise be looked upon as a dialogue. In the incarnation and in the Gospel, it is God’s Word that speaks to us...Indeed, the whole history of man’s salvation is one long, varied dialogue, which marvelously begins with God and which he prolongs with men in so many different ways.”⁵

Paul VI goes on to say that in “Christ’s conversation” with us, God reveals something of himself, of the mystery of his own life, of his own unique essence and trinity of persons....The dialogue of salvation sprang from the goodness and the love of God. “God so loved the world as to give his only Begotten Son.”⁶

⁵ *Ecclesiam Suam*, No. 70.

⁶ *Ecclesiam Suam*, No. 70-73.

There is a rich theological theme that relates dialogue to the Trinity. It goes something like this: “God, in the ultimate mystery of His Trinitarian life, manifests the model for human speech. The Father generates the Son. The Son is generated. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son in the eternal dialogue of divine love.”

In his first encyclical, *Ad Petri Cathedra*, “On Truth, Unity and Peace, in a Spirit of Charity,” Pope John XXIII teaches that dialogue on religious controversy can lead to a fuller and deeper understanding of religious truths: “Far from jeopardizing the church’s unity, controversies, as a noted English author, John Cardinal Newman, has remarked, can actually pave the way for its attainment. For discussion can lead to fuller and deeper understanding of religious truths; when one idea strikes against another, there may be a spark. But the common saying, expressed in various ways and attributed with various authors must be recalled with approval: in essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity.”⁷

I found something similar in *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, issued in 1973 by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The document refers to the possibility of the development of doctrine and how the faithful contribute towards increasing the understanding of faith in the church. It refers to the Second Vatican Council where it says, “There is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down.”⁸

In the ten years of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, I have been deeply moved by two individuals who believed so very much in the importance of dialogue, that on their death beds they appealed to us, the church, to embrace dialogue and not to be afraid to engage in it. You know who I am talking about: Joseph Cardinal Bernardin and Msgr. Philip Murnion. Those of us who were present at the funeral of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin at Holy Name

⁷ *Ad Petri Cathedra*, Nos. 71-72.

⁸ *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, Declaration in Defense of the Catholic Doctrine on the Church Against Certain Errors of the Present Day, June 24, 1973.

Cathedral here in Chicago will never forget the tribute paid to the Initiative by Msgr. Velo when he said, “Common ground is sacred ground;” the reaction was spontaneous, everyone stood and applauded.

The last letter of Monsignor Murnion was to the U.S. bishops. This is what he said to us: “If I were to sum up my final plea to you, it would be: ‘dialogue, dialogue, dialogue!’” Referring to the letter of John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Inuente*, he wrote, “In his letter the Holy Father advocates and advances a ‘theology and spirituality of communion,’ for they ‘encourage a fruitful dialogue between pastors and faithful.’ Indeed, does not the living out of such a spirituality of communion require dialogue as its very life-breath: the dialogue of prayer with Jesus Christ, the dialogue of mutual building up on the part of the members of Christ?”⁹

Last spring 30,000 people gathered in Los Angeles for the annual Religious Education Congress. One of the keynote speakers was Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., who spoke of the need for dialogue in the church. In his speech he pointed to two categories of thinkers in the Catholic Church today. He called one group the “Kingdom Catholics” and the other “Communion Catholics.” He described Kingdom Catholics as are “those who have a deep sense of the church as the pilgrim people of God on the way to the Kingdom. The theologians who have been central to this tradition have been people like Karl Rahner and the Dominicans Edward Schillebeeckx and Gustavo Gutiérrez. This tradition stresses openness to the world, finding the presence of the Holy Spirit working outside the church, [for] freedom and the pursuit of justice. They became very much identified with a publication called *Concilium*.”¹⁰

Then he described Communion Catholics as are those who “feel the urgent need to rebuild the inner life of the church. Theologians like Hans von Balthasar and the then Joseph

⁹ Murnion, Rev. Msgr. Philip, “Priest’s Letter to Bishops at Time of His Death,” August 19, 2003.

¹⁰ Radcliffe, Timothy, “Overcoming Discord in the Church,” National Catholic Reporter, May 5, 2006, p. 5.

Ratzinger represent this way of thinking. Their theology often stressed Catholic identity, was wary of too hardy an embrace of modernity, and they stressed the cross. They had their publication, too. It was called *Communio*.”¹¹

Father Radcliffe points to the difference in the words of consecration and applies that difference to these two theologies. The words over the bread and over the wine differ slightly. “The bread is given to the disciples with the words, ‘This is my body, given for you.’ The sharing of Christ’s body gathers the community together around the altar. This is the community of Christ’s small band of friends, who have shared his life and now his death. But the cup of wine is blessed for ‘you and for all,’ as it says in the Eucharist. This is the cup that Jesus will not drink again until the Kingdom. He looks forward to when the whole community will be gathered into the communion in Christ.”¹²

He goes on to say that the sharing of the bread is *centripetal*, for it gathers us into the community of Christ’s friends and disciples. “It is a sign of that interior life of the church which is so crucial for Communion Catholics.” The cup of wine, on the other hand, is *centrifugal*. “It expresses that outwards thrust which is important for Kingdom Catholics, the reaching out to all humanity, ready to find the Holy Spirit working in all people.” He says that is a double tension that is healthy. “It gathers in and reaches out. It is like breathing.”¹³

Father Radcliffe urges that dialogue take place between Communion Catholics and Kingdom Catholics. We need not be afraid to dialogue, it is not a trendy liberal fad, he rightly contends, but lies at the very roots of the western intellectual tradition. The pedagogical method of Plato, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius, is dialogue. St. Paul dialogues throughout the Acts of the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Apostles; St. Justin wrote dialogues in the second century, Saint Anselm of Canterbury in the twelfth, and St. Catherine of Siena in the fourteenth.

The diocese which I lead is at the frontier, which means that it is far from centers of power, influence, and control. Things look different from the frontier. Perhaps that is why prophets emerge from the frontier, including Jesus himself who, being from Galilee, was far from both Jerusalem and Rome. From the vantage point of the frontier we may recognize the flaws in what is going on in the great centers of learning and authority. In the category of frontier I would also place minorities, or people on the edge, those who are marginalized, and who at times recognize that the “status quo” is not in keeping with the highest ideals of human wholeness and excellence in keeping with the dignity and respect demanded by human personhood. These are the people who help create a better world when they claim their own human and civil rights. Think of the African American people who, under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., woke us up to the reality of racial bias and discrimination, and led us to a greater appreciation and attainment of civil rights. Think of the farm workers led by César Chávez who alerted us to the inhuman condition of farm workers. It seems to me that the message of the American Indian is yet to be heard. Their message has to do with a world vision and a system of values that are based on a deep spirituality. The American Indian possesses a profound reverence for Mother Earth, and this is consonant with our growing concern for the environment.

The Catholic Common Ground Initiative has helped this bishop bring the frontier and minority experience to the mainstream of our church life. In other words, we in the frontier have something to share with the rest of the world and the rest of the church.

I have to admit that I am *not* a model of dialogue. There have been times in my 25 years as a bishop that I have failed miserably at dialogue— just talk to some of my priests and parishioners.

I try to conduct my parish visits along the lines of dialogue. For several years my parish visits took three days. I would arrive on Friday evening for dinner and conversation with the pastor. The next day was spent in conversation with consultative bodies; i.e., the parish and finance councils, religious educators, liturgical ministers, and parish organization leaders. I would say, or at least preach at, all the masses that weekend. On Sunday, with the help of my chancellor, I would have a report ready to read to the congregation. We would end the visit with a potluck dinner. It was an exhausting exercise. I don't do that anymore.

I now send forms to all those involved in parish leadership, including the pastor, and ask for a self evaluation of their ministries. These are compiled at The Pastoral Center. During the parish visit I read them their self evaluation and have an extended discussion on the various aspects of their parish life. I usually ask a lot of questions and the people provide what then helps me formulate a fairly thorough assessment of the parish. I am sure many other bishops conduct their parish visits in their own dialogical manner.

I have learned to consult before writing pastoral letters. I learned this from the experience that we U.S. bishops had in the experience of writing the pastoral letter “The Challenge of Peace” chaired by none other than Cardinal Bernardin. The process involved a good deal of consultation with experts on war and peace. I also learned to consult from the process of writing the pastoral letter, “Economic Justice for All.” That letter involved even more consultation than the one on peace. Hearings for the pastoral letter on the economy were organized throughout the United States and involved professors of economics, bankers,

entrepreneurs, farmers, labor union leaders and union members, community organizers and others who work with the poor. Among those who were invited and who accepted the invitation to the hearings were economists, including several Nobel Prize winners in economics.

The hearings had a simple format. Archbishop Rembert Weakland, O.S.B., chairman of the committee responsible for the pastoral letter, would ask a question, “if you were a bishop, what would you say about the economy?” Ron Krietemeyer, N.C.C.B. staff member, remembers the archbishop’s casual style and the hearings being “civil and smooth.”¹⁴ Some bishops such as Archbishop John Roach of St Paul-Minneapolis held hearings with their parishioners. Forms were distributed throughout the country to be filled out. There were 10,000 responses! The writing of the economic pastoral, however, involved more consultation than any other writing endeavor of the U.S. bishops. When the bishops were criticized that they were supposed to be teachers and therefore had no business being taught by others, the bishops’ response, as I recall, was a reminder of the Aristotelian principle of pedagogy: “The universal instrument of all good teaching is the question.” In asking questions, the bishops were already functioning as teachers.

The last three pastoral letters that I have worked on I have tried to follow that pattern. The first one was on domestic violence in general, and for this we held six hearings in various parts of the diocese. This involved listening to victims of domestic violence, their perpetrators, law enforcement officers, members of the judiciary, personnel from women and family shelters and pastors of various denominations. I discovered that the process itself is a powerful message. These hearings helped raise awareness to the insidious crime and sin of domestic violence.

I then wrote another pastoral letter on infant victims of domestic violence; this, too, involved meetings with various people, and experts on the subject. The most memorable of

¹⁴ Telephone interview with Mr. Ron Kreitermeyer, May 2006.

these meetings was the one I held at our Pastoral Center with teenage moms and their babies. I believe that every bishop should have this experience!

Currently I am working on a Pastoral Letter on “Handing on the Faith.” I was inspired to do this letter by Dr. John Cavadini and Peter Steinfels who have written with alarm about what is going on, and mostly, what is not going on, in religious education and formation. In preparation for this letter I consulted with those that I confirmed this year. One hundred newly-confirmed have answered ten questions such as “Who is Jesus Christ for you?” “What do you like and dislike about the Catholic Church?” “Who was most influential in your journey of faith?” I began to consult with catechists, pastors, parents, grandparents, and concerned laity. We plan to have a dialogue with Protestants as well. I hope to publish the pastoral letter when we celebrate our 25th anniversary next year.

Bishops have ample opportunities to dialogue with the faithful and their pastors; there are built into our parish and diocesan structures have such consultative bodies built into them—diocesan pastoral and finance councils, presbyteral and deacons’ councils, liturgical commissions, boards for almost every ministry and diocesan department.

The immigration issue has created intense debate, especially as the U.S. Congress tackles immigration reform. There is much debate but unfortunately not much dialogue on proposed laws. There are those who are for punitive measures and exclusionary statutes, and those who favor a more humanitarian and welcoming approach. Sadly some of the fear, suspicion, anger, and emotions found in our society today have crept into the church. Those whose families have been in our parishes for generations are not always welcoming of the stranger or the new immigrant. We forget that we have all been welcomed by Jesus Christ himself. In parishes heated discussion can arise regarding language, or languages used, the music, mass scheduling,

and membership on consultative bodies. Not everyone is happy when a new culture arrives at the parish with its own customs and traditions. All these issues beg for a common ground approach.

To prepare for the third millennium the U.S. bishops organized “*Encuentro 2000*” in Los Angeles. It was one of the finest events the U.S. bishops have organized. It brought together dozens of cultural groups, under the theme “Many Faces in God’s House.” The main thing that happened at the *Encuentro* was a sharing of peoples’ stories and a process leading to a celebration of reconciliation. It brought to mind that every culture, every people has its Exodus story and its own valley of tears. We heard the story, for example, of an African American woman religious who shared that when her mother was gravely ill, the community that she joined, who ran a hospital, would not take in her mother because she was Black. They finally found a closet where they were able to house her. Then there was the story of a Catholic Native American woman who spoke of her anger at Christianity because years ago she heard the story of a tribe that was completely annihilated in Colorado. The order for the genocide was given by a Christian minister.

Listening to one another’s stories can be very effective in bringing people together. In our parishes we need to promote these kinds of events.

In a parish where various cultures are present, it is an enormous help for the various ministries, such as the liturgical ones, to come together. In some parishes liturgical musicians are creating avenues for mutual understanding among themselves; it matters a lot when those in charge of liturgy can organize such major celebrations as the Triduum in such way as to include all groups, with each bringing its own musical style and language. Singing and worshipping together is a step towards better understanding among peoples. What we should pray and hope for, is people getting to know one another at a deeper level. We have all experienced the

profound joy of discovering the mystery of the other, through the discovery of another culture. Furthermore, in the discovery of the other we discover aspects of ourselves that we didn't know before.

Whether we consider a one-to-one relationship or relationships between groups, one essential element is an absolute and that is, *listening*. Listening is the necessary foundation in our relationship with God and with one another.

Listening is a must when it comes to marriage, family, friendship, and for those who live in religious communities. To be good counselors, confessors or spiritual directors we have to be, above all, good listeners. To be a member of a consultative body on the church, be it a parish council, a finance council, or some council in the diocese, our major participation is not so much that of speaking, but of listening.

Real listening is one of the greatest gifts we can give to another person. Listening is healing; it establishes lasting relationships; it gives substance to words of love and friendship; it heals and allows us to grow in our knowledge of ourselves, of others and of God.

In the dialogue between persons of opposing views, real listening may or may not lead to mutual agreement, but it always leads to greater and deeper understanding of the other's viewpoint. This in itself is worth something.

All this is great, especially when people are reasonable and factual. But the reality we sometimes face is different. Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, in a talk entitled, "Moderation and Civility," states: "There are times when it probably is better not to reply to articles that unfairly or even irresponsibly distort one's own teaching on issues, lest one gives more importance to the misinformation than it deserves. Sometimes, however, it truly is important to set the record straight in the face of half truths or innuendo, lest the old axiom that silence presumes consent

gives the impression that one has no reply, and the field is left to those who manipulate words into fanciful concepts with little relevance to the facts.”¹⁵

Even St. Gregory the Great had something to say about times when bishops have to listen to frivolous talk. This is what he wrote back in the sixth century: “With my mind divided and torn to pieces by so many problems, how can I meditate or preach wholeheartedly without neglecting the ministry of proclaiming the Gospel? Moreover, in my position I must often communicate with worldly men. At times I let my tongue run, for if I am always severe in my judgments, the worldly will avoid me, and I can never attack them as I would. As a result I often listen patiently to chatter. And because I too am weak, I find myself drawn little by little into idle conversation, and I begin to talk freely about matters which once I would have avoided. What once I found tedious I now enjoy.”¹⁶

I believe that for bishops, one of the most useful words in the foundational document of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, “Called to be Catholic,” are the following: “Around this central conviction, the church’s leadership, both clerical and lay, must reaffirm and promote the full range and demands of authentic unity, acceptable diversity, and respectful dialogue, not just as a way to dampen conflict but as a way to make our conflicts constructive, and ultimately as a way to understand for ourselves and articulate for our world the meaning of discipleship of Jesus Christ.”¹⁷

What are some of the areas that in our contemporary world call for dialogue? The more secular, but not less moral are the following: globalization, world trade and agriculture, energy questions, the environment, nuclear armament, and as I mentioned before, immigration. In the church there is a crying need to discuss issues such as: gender, human anthropology, kingdom vs.

¹⁵ McCarrick, Cardinal Theodore, “Moderation and Civility”, July 26, 2006.

¹⁶ Office of Readings, on the Feast of Saint Gregory the Great.

¹⁷ “Called to be Catholic: Church in the Time of Peril”. National Pastoral Life Center. August, 1996.

communion ecclesiology, liturgical language, liturgical postures, liturgical arts including music, architecture, and the environment, priestly formation, religious life today, the age of confirmation, and the option for the poor.

Many years ago when I was serving as a missionary in a rural diocese in Mexico, I had the opportunity to attend a seven-month course on missiology at the East Asian Pastoral Institute in Manila, Philippines. There were about ninety priests, women and men religious, and lay persons from thirty different countries doing the course together. The language used by the lecturers and in the discussion groups was English. Some of the participants from Asia had a hard time with English. During the course I tended to engage in conversation mostly with those who spoke a better English, i.e., Americans, Filipinos, Australians, and New Zealanders. Towards the end of the course I realized what I had been doing and decided to seek out some of those Asians with whom I had had little contact. One day I went for a walk with a sister from Indonesia. As we walked I was doing all the talking, telling her all the things I was going to do upon my return to our mission in Mexico. After I had spoken quite a bit, she stopped me, and said, in a very kind tone, “Ricardo, remember, before you do, be.” That’s all she said. From that conversation I learned two things: that whatever pastoral activity I would undertake would have to come from an authentic relationship with my Lord. Secondly, and equally important, was that I must not let myself be deceived by people with accents. Just because people do not have the command of my preferred language, doesn’t mean that they do not have something to share. There is a wealth of wisdom that I might be depriving myself of by not making the effort to listen to the stranger.

Yes, dialogue, including the essential ingredient of listening, is not easy. But we cannot give up just because it is difficult. Let us proceed with the initiative taken by Cardinal Bernardin

and Msgr. Murnion, without fear, without hesitation, and be confident that the Spirit who spoke through the prophets, will speak through this generation in today's church.