Bernardin and Bergoglio: What the Cardinal's Legacy Offers to a Church Led by Pope Francis

by Kevin J. V. Mannara, CSB

Although Pope Francis (the former Archbishop of Buenos Aries, Jorge Mario Bergoglio) has been the bishop of Rome only two-and-a-half years, he has assertively and dynamically set forth his vision for the church in word, symbol, and gesture from the moment he stepped onto the balcony of Saint Peter's. Those familiar with the history of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States since the Second Vatican Council see some striking similarities between where he is pointing the church and the vision that the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin (1928–96) was pursuing. Thomas Reese, SJ (National Catholic Reporter and America Magazine), David Gibson (Religion News Service), Kevin Ahern (Daily Theology),1 and Nicholas Hahn (Wall Street Journal) are but a few across the swath of Catholic commentators who forecast a renewed interest in Cardinal Bernardin during this papacy. I will address consistencies between Bernardin and Francis in the hope that leaders of the US church today will look to the writings of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin for insight and wisdom in their effort to follow the direction of Pope Francis. In particular, seminaries and other schools of Roman Catholic theology can study Bernardin’s writing when implementing Pope Francis’s vision into their curricula as they shape future church leaders. Such a fresh look will require refinement so that Bernardin’s contributions can mature, applying the wisdom of the years since his death to develop those concepts for today’s context.

The Enduring Legacy of Joseph Bernardin

The Bernardin legacy is proving to hold lasting value for the Catholic Church in the United States, especially now that he has an ally of sorts in the current pontiff. Bernardin’s 1989 biographer, the late Eugene Kennedy, optimistically stated “Bernardin’s story . . . will continue to parallel and reflect the larger narrative of American Catholicism.”2 In the decade that followed, Kennedy’s optimism was derailed by both a clear shift from Rome toward a more conservative church and the cardinal’s untimely death at age sixty-eight on November 14, 1996. Nineteen years have passed since Cardinal Bernardin succumbed to pancreatic cancer and over these years some would argue that the church took a direction other than the one the cardinal pursued, especially

---

1 Dr. Ahern gave the Catholic Common Ground Initiative Spring Lecture on March 19, 2015, at the Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, entitled “Toward a Vibrant Church: The Ecclesial Visions of Cardinal Bernardin and Pope Francis.” Most of this journal article was written before that lecture. Dr. Ahern also notes similarities in the personal backgrounds of Cardinal Bernardin and Pope Francis as well as the increased tensions that result from the current polarization in the church, but this article addresses a different direction where the cardinal’s legacy can lead us today, namely directing us toward intentionally exposing today’s graduate students of theology to the work of Cardinal Bernardin. To view Dr. Ahern’s lecture go to https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDHXE1QdtWM.

in the United States. Currently a shift in Catholicism is taking place that is redirecting us toward a more dialogical church that engages US culture rather than disparages it, an approach consistent with Bernardin’s vision.

There are those who have indirectly affirmed the power of the Bernardin legacy by continuing to attempt to discredit or devalue it. One such naysayer is American author and political activist George Weigel. As recently as four years ago, fifteen years after the cardinal’s death, Weigel was still trying (unsuccessfully) to nail the cardinal’s coffin shut. The simple fact that he still felt the need to dedicate an entire essay to Bernardin was an admission of the power of Bernardin’s ongoing relevance, one that threatened his own view of the church. In February 2011, Weigel stated, “In his prime, Joseph Bernardin was arguably the most powerful Catholic prelate in American history; he was certainly the most consequential since the heyday of James Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”³ He then went on to argue that the Bernardin era had come to an end and pondered what the post-Bernardin era would be like. The papal election of Jorge Bergoglio, now Pope Francis, seems to indicate (to paraphrase Mark Twain) that the report of the death of the Bernardin era was greatly exaggerated.

Pope Francis and Cardinal Bernardin

There are a number of similarities in the backgrounds of Joseph Bernardin and Jorge Bergoglio. Both were born of parents who emigrated from Italy to the New World; the Bernardin family settled in South Carolina in the United States and the Bergoglio family in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The mothers of both young men encouraged their sons to go into medicine; instead each pursued a vocation to heal souls. Both rose at young ages through ecclesiastical ranks holding various positions that would serve as incubators of learning, preparing them for service both as archbishops of major sees as well as service to the larger church. Each was a man well aware of the broad context of his own time and place, using the tools of communication available as those tools developed.

In Francis, the world has a pope fully immersed in today’s information age. He regularly goes off script in speeches and offers impromptu interviews during long airplane rides. Social media buzzes with his words. His daily homilies from Casa Santa Marta are immediately translated and sent around the world. In preparation for his apostolic visit to the US, Pope Francis employed yet another tool of our age to engage his flock: a live-streamed town hall meeting with a virtual audience in multiple locations. Possibly more powerful than his words are the images broadcast around the world. If a picture is worth a thousand words, photos of his embrace of a disfigured man, selfies with young people, and those of him going to confession have evangelical power beyond the written word of the past.

Although none of these carry any weight as official teachings of the church, they do offer insight into the mind of Pope Francis and are helpful in discerning his overall stance. In the face of such a significant amount of Francis’s writings, homilies, and interviews, this essay primarily focuses on two specific ways Francis has shared his vision for the Catholic Church. First is his wide-ranging interview with Antonio Spadaro, SJ, editor in chief of La Civiltà Cattolica, the Italian Jesuit journal, published in America Magazine on September 30, 2013, under the title “A Big Heart Open to God.”⁴ Second is his apostolic exhortation Evangelii Gaudium,⁵ The Joy of the Gospel, which has been called his Magna Carta for the church. In the time since its release on November 24, 2013, eight months into his papacy, we have seen that vision beginning to take shape.

---


⁴ Antonio Spadaro, SJ, “A Big Heart Open to God,” America (September 30, 2013), http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview.

The Francis papacy has breathed new life into a number of issues that were significant to Cardinal Bernardin. For the sake of brevity and focus, only two are surveyed here, namely the Consistent Ethic of Life and the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, to show how Bernardin had been leading the church in a direction congruous to the one set forth so far during Francis’s papacy. As appropriate, Catholic attempts at influencing public policy will be noted.

**Consistent Ethic of Life**

“The point that [Bernardin's] consistent ethic makes is exactly the same point that Pope Francis is making—let's look at the whole picture and not just focus almost exclusively on three or so issues,” said Archbishop Michael Sheehan of Santa Fe, NM.⁶

A recurring theme of Pope Francis is that the church must go to those who live on the periphery. In his interview with Spadaro, Francis notes that society’s outsiders as well as the church’s “outsiders” bear deep wounds, occasioning his image of the church as a field hospital after battle.⁷ Later in that same interview, Francis stated “We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage, and the use of contraceptive methods. This is not possible. I have not spoken much about these things, and I was reprimanded for that. But when we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in a context.”⁸ These are three areas on which the US church hierarchy in the past staked much of its moral capital; the pope was not dismissing their importance but was calling the church to see them in a broader context.⁹ Along with moral capital, incredible financial capital has gone into addressing these three issues, leaving one to wonder if those resources would have been better spent attending to clear gospel mandates.¹⁰ By looking at a wider context as the pope suggests, the church’s overall understanding of the human person could better be elucidated, thus its stance on all these issues would be more credible and appreciated. His call to look at the larger view occasions us to again look at Cardinal Bernardin's Consistent Ethic of Life, also known as the Seamless Garment.

At Fordham University's Gannon Lecture on December 6, 1983, Cardinal Bernardin presented an address entitled “A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American Catholic Dialogue.” This was a follow-up to the US Bishops’ 1983 pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, which he had been instrumental in shaping. Bernardin believed there was a prophetic role for the US bishops in our government’s strategy of using war to bring about peace in the age of nuclear weaponry. Of interest in this pastoral letter was the linkage of war and abortion. At the Gannon Lecture, Bernardin sought to flesh out that concept more. He believed this discourse should take place at American Catholic universities, not fearing that academic discourse in that locus would imply ecclesiastical approval of all aspects of such robust debate and discernment. Bernardin stated that he wanted to “discuss the pastoral letter in terms of the relationship of our Catholic moral vision and American culture... as a starting point for shaping a consistent ethic of life”¹¹ in a comprehensive manner drawing on “the Catholic moral position and

---

7  Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God.”
8  Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God.”
9  One might question which has wounded people more: these three realities or the way the church has obsessed on them.
10 In just one example, in 2010 the Catholic bishops of Minnesota produced and mailed 400,000 DVDs to Catholics in the state urging them to vote against same-sex marriage. In the same state in that same year 9000 homeless wandered the streets, 10 percent of Minnesotans (540,000) lived below the poverty level (among them a disproportionate number of women and minorities) and 25 percent lived near poverty, according to the US Census Bureau. Same-sex marriage is legal in Minnesota (as well as nationwide) despite the exorbitant resources the bishops invested to oppose it.
the public place the Church presently holds in the American civil debate.” Aware of the pluralism of the American context, Bernardin was a leader who sought dialogue between the church and society, rather than attempt to strong-arm US public policy. It was a dialogue of various intellectual equals, dependent on the power of persuasion such that people of faith could state their argument in terms appealing even to those of other or no faith traditions. Bernardin stated that “The principal conclusion [of the bishops’ pastoral letter] is that the Church’s social policy is at least as important in defining key questions in the public debate as in deciding such questions” and its central idea is “the sacredness of human life and the responsibility we have, personally and socially, to protect and preserve the sanctity of life.”

Bernardin went on to address the multiple ways that life is threatened beyond war and abortion in an attempt to unify a common respect for human life as the basis for how to respond to threats against it. Although the threat of nuclear war is no longer at the forefront of our concerns, many topics from his day remain, including war in general (including war by terrorism), abortion, capital punishment, and euthanasia. Others have taken on new urgency, such as undocumented workers, political refugees, access to health care, and environmental degradation.

A consistent ethic of life is inclusive of not only the right to life but also the dignity, livability, and quality of life for those who are alive. Too often the term “pro-life” is limited to being “anti-abortion,” diminishing the church’s witness to valuing all human life and leaving ourselves vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy and myopic vision. We cannot insist that life be respected from the womb to the tomb, and neglect the span in between. Bernardin warned, “Consistency means we cannot have it both ways: we cannot urge a compassionate society and vigorous public policy to protect the rights of the unborn and then argue that compassion and significant public programs on behalf of the needy undermine the moral fiber of the society or are beyond the proper scope of governmental responsibility.”

Bernardin met resistance to the Consistent Ethic of Life approach from some of his contemporaries, as Pope Francis acknowledges he does today when espousing a similar broad, inclusive perspective. In Bernardin’s early attempts to clarify, he made this distinction: “A consistent ethic of life does not equate the problem of taking life (e.g. through abortion and war) with the problem of promoting human dignity (through humane programs of nutrition, health care, and housing). But a consistent ethic identifies both the protection of life and its promotion as moral questions.” Opponents said he was clouding the central issue of their interest, namely abortion. Bernardin’s more nuanced and intellectual approach was resisted by those who wanted a straightforward enemy to fight against, and they used abortion as a simplistic, one-dimensional political litmus test. Pope Francis has reaffirmed the church’s position on abortion, but has challenged us to not lose sight of other issues related to life within the whole range of moral issues.

Euthanasia is one prominent and timely topic within the Consistent Ethic of Life that has evolved since Bernardin’s time. Pope Francis has time and again expressed concern that the elderly are neglected in today’s “throwaway culture.” In an interview with Eugenio Scalfari published October 1, 2013, in the Italian newspaper La Repubblica, he

---

12 Bernardin, “A Consistent Ethic of Life,” 82.
14 Bernardin, “A Consistent Ethic of Life,” 84.
18 See Kristen Heyer’s Prophetic & Public: The Social Witness of U.S. Catholicism (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006) to see why some are against any engagement that compromises with those who hold opposing views.
went so far as to say that youth unemployment and neglect of the elderly are the two most serious evils afflicting the world today. This devaluing of those approaching the end of life, often based on an attitude of utilitarianism, easily leads to euthanasia. Last year a young woman named Brittany Maynard went public with her intention to euthanize herself on November 1, 2014, in Oregon, where it is legal. Using the nomenclature of “death with dignity,” she made a convincing argument that swayed much of public opinion. Juxtaposing her choices in the face of illness with Cardinal Bernardin’s, we see how he showed us another approach to “death with dignity,” one based in courage rather than fear; one that relied on life, not death, as the path to dignity. Like Pope Francis, Bernardin taught not only with words but with powerful symbols and images from his own life.

As a child Bernardin had experienced firsthand the devastation of cancer during his father’s final illness and death, and its aftermath on his family. After his own diagnosis of cancer in June 1995, Cardinal Bernardin called a press conference to share the news with his “family,” the people of the archdiocese of Chicago. That began the drama, described by a non-Catholic Chicagoan and quoted in the New York Times as “He has shown us how to die.” One might also say he showed us how to live in the face of death. To help us better understand this final leg of his earthly journey, the cardinal published his journal in a book entitled The Gift of Peace. In it, he revealed a life filled with meaning and importance, even as cancer ravaged his body. Rather than only looking inward, Bernardin continued his missionary stance by turning outward. In the hospital, he ministered to other cancer patients and followed up with them after their discharge. He continued his work as the leader of the archdiocese and lived his life as he had always tried his best to: publicly and transparently.

The treatment bought him some more time but the cancer returned in August 1996. The time of his final illness was filled with great suffering, from both the cancer and the consequences of the treatment he underwent. Unlike those who would opt out by choosing euthanasia, the cardinal found meaning and provided witness until his death occurred naturally. But unlike many of the neglected who concern Pope Francis, the cardinal was surrounded by people who loved him until the very end. The pope identifies the sad situation of many who face the end of their lives lonely and without adequate care. Cardinal Bernardin’s witness of “how to die” comes face to face with those who do not have the means to such a death with dignity nor the companionship of loved ones. How can we assure all people that they will have the medical care, including pain relief, to allow them both a meaningful life and a dignified death? It is worth noting a distinction between those who refuse to live a life they feel has been compromised, and those who do not have the financial means or personal relationships needed for dignified final years and days. While we must work for systemic changes to our health care system, we must also give our time and love to the elderly and suffering in our families and communities.

Bernardin's Consistent Ethic of Life received less attention as the years went on and the church and American society drifted into an era of black and white approaches to complex moral issues. During this same time, the attacks on human life have broadened and some have taken on new urgency. War is carried out in alarmingly new ways (terrorism, chemical and biological warfare) and on multiple fronts, prompting Pope Francis to warn of a Third World War being fought piecemeal. The internet is showing itself to be a tool of both great benefit and grave con

---

19 Critical voices such as US cardinal Raymond Burke were quick to express their disapproval and question how the pope could have not named abortion.

20 Such naming often masks or confuses the issue at hand. For example, who could argue with a term like “pro-choice,” until one learns the political baggage that is attached to it?


23 This role, often one of support and advocacy, must be kept in mind when preparing candidates for church ministry in a rapidly changing social context.

cern. The world is facing new crises related to human migration and refugees on a scale it has not seen since the
Second World War. Concern for the environment is in fact concern for whether or not the Earth will be capable
of supporting human life. These must be the concerns of our bishops today, and they must be addressed by those
who are being prepared to lead the church into the decades ahead. Bernardin’s Consistent Ethic of Life provides
material to be studied, developed, and honed by today’s seminarians and other graduate students of theology, and
then applied to today’s moral life issues.

The papacy of Francis is directing us to again look at Bernardin’s Consistent Ethic of Life, one that “identifies both
the protection of life and its promotion as moral questions.”25 This broad approach to life issues is not only valuable
within the church and US society, but will lend credibility to US bishops still attempting to recover their moral
voice in the aftermath of the sexual abuse crisis. Unlike paternal attitudes reeking of “Father knows best,” taking
the holistic, relational view and speaking with a consistent and coherent voice while both creating room for and
calling US society into a dialogue offers us a path forward on many issues related to the human person.

Catholic Common Ground Initiative (CCGI)

In August 1996, Cardinal Bernardin was told that the cancer had returned and he had six months to live. (He lived
only three more months.) With death approaching, he focused his remaining strength and resolve to launch what
he initially called the Catholic Common Ground Project as his chosen legacy to the Catholic Church in the US.
The amount of work this dying man put into it is reflected in no less than four documents in the final three months
of his life.26 What is the CCGI and why does it have relevance during Francis’s papacy?

Francis does not fit into politicized categories of left and right, liberal and conservative, progressive and tradi-
tional. In his November 6, 2014, speech at the Catholic University of America entitled “Theological Background
of the Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Vision of Pope Francis,” Walter Cardinal Kasper said that Francis cannot
be trivialized, “categorized, much less appropriated, by any specific school—he’s not an academic theologian in
the professional sense, but a man of encounter and practice. . . . Reality has primacy over ideas.”27 Subsequently,
ideas espoused by any such categorization would shrink in Francis’s vast perspective. For both Bernardin and Pope
Francis, political labels of moderate or centrist should be rejected: the only valid label is that we are followers of Je-
sus Christ. “Jesus Christ, present in scripture and sacrament, is central to all we do; he must always be the measure
and what is measured;”28 that is the criterion for Christian discipleship.

It seems everyone can find support as well as challenge in Francis’s broad, Christocentric view of Catholicism, what
scripture scholar Donald Senior, CP, has referred to as the “big tent” as opposed to the “small chapel.”29 Once we
are committed to overcoming the polarization30 present in the church and focus on the common good, Bernardin’s
CCGI provides a road map for us to follow. It would be a struggle to find a specific quote of Pope Francis to sup

26 Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb, Catholic Common Ground Initiative: Foundational Documents (New York: Crossroad,
1997).
27 Walter Kasper, “Theological Background of the Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Vision of Pope Francis” (lecture, Catholic University of America,
olic.
29 Donald Senior, “Small Chapel or Big Tent: What Should the Church Be?” (lecture, Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, IL, January 13, 2014), http://
learn.ctu.edu/what-should-church-be.
30 At the 17th Annual Cardinal Joseph Bernardin Jerusalem Lecture on March 6, 2012, at Northwestern University, guest lecturer John Allen Jr. claimed
the US church is beyond being polarized and has become tribalized, divided into factions that are intolerant of opposing views even as we claim a
common Catholicism. He said the only way forward would be for the US church to embrace the principles of Bernardin’s Catholic Common Ground
Initiative.
port the claim that Bernardin's CCGI will find a place of distinction in Francis's papacy. The struggle is because there are so many, forming an attitude toward how the church engages society that is consistent with Bernardin's.

In the CCGI's inaugural document of August 12, 1996, *Called to be Church in a Time of Peril*, Bernardin asked “whether American Catholicism can confront an array of challenges with honesty and imagination,” and identified several urgent questions for the US church to face, questions that still have relevance and questions that in some form or other have been raised by Francis. These include but are not limited to:

- the changing roles of women
- the Eucharistic liturgy as most Catholics experience it
- the meaning of human sexuality, and the gap between church teachings and the convictions of many faithful in this and several other areas of morality
- the image and morale of priests, and the declining ratios of priests and vowed religious to people in the pews
- the succession of lay people to positions of leadership formerly held by priests and sisters, and the provision of an adequate formation for ministers, both ordained and lay
- the ways in which the church is present in political life, its responsibility to the poor and defenseless, and its support for lay people in their family life and daily callings
- the manner of decision-making and consultation in church governance
- the responsibility of theology to authoritative church teachings
- the place of collegiality and subsidiarity in the relations between Rome and the American episcopacy.

Which of these topics does not remain a struggle in the US church today? Pope Francis has commented on them all from a universal perspective; it would behoove US Catholic leadership to look to the CCGI set before them nineteen years ago in order to offer insight for today's context.

We might ask why it has not done so before now, or maybe it would be better to ask why the CCGI has caught on in some areas of the US Catholic Church but not others. Bernardin himself acknowledged that the Catholic Church in the US is “dotted with vital communities of worship and service.” The divisions he observed in the wake of Vatican II’s implementation have sharpened in the years since 1996. The role of church leadership should be to connect those dots, to unify them into a tapestry that can beautify US culture and society, drawing us closer to the Kingdom of God. Instead we have often focused on the areas between the dots, empty areas of separation and tension.

One such area where the recent tactics of the US bishops has had limited effectiveness is in their handling of the recent debate on religious liberty. Do Bernardin's later thoughts, from which the CCGI derived, offer us any insights into a more effective approach?

Aware that his death was imminent, Bernardin delivered a speech at Georgetown University on September 9, 1996, entitled “Reflections on the Public Life and Witness of the Church in US Society and Culture.” In it he addressed

31 National Pastoral Life Center, *Called to be Catholic*, no. 1.
the “intersection between the Catholic moral vision and US society” and “how Catholic teaching speaks to American society [and] how these issues should be reflected upon in the internal life of the Church itself.”

32 His reflection on Vatican II’s Declaration on Religious Liberty has timely import for today’s emphasis of the US bishops on resisting the Health and Human Services mandate regarding health insurance and its inclusion of contraception for women. Bernardin was one to navigate away from confrontations with win/lose consequences, as we have seen of late, toward a conciliatory approach based on dialogue. Such discourse aims for the common good: all at the table must listen to each other long enough to find their commonalities and respect their differences. His approach to church–state relations was one of “engagement, not separation.”

33 We can only speculate what Bernardin would have thought about the way the US bishops are conducting the current debate on religious liberty. He would certainly have advocated that the voice of the church remain included in the debate and it would be fair to suggest that he would have found a less antagonistic path. Pope Francis has warned us against obsessing on artificial contraception, the de facto topic that occasioned the religious liberty debate and continues to fuel it. This particular topic is one that directly affects women, and the bishops have a long history of being poorly informed in regard to women’s issues. A group of celibate men making a case against access to artificial contraception, whatever the other circumstances are, fuels the perception of the US bishops as being against women, or at minimum leads the American public to question why the bishops have invested so much into this one issue (regulation of pregnancy) at a time when their decades of attempts at expanding health care are finally being realized. Is there a better way?

At its core the CCGI calls for dialogue. Opponents feared dialogue would lead to dissent being considered on the same level as truth, thus compromising or clouding church teachings. Bernardin was given a final opportunity to address them in an August 29, 1996, press statement. Disagreements can be legitimate and valuable but “must be accountable to Catholic tradition and the Church’s teaching authority.”

34 Asked whether dialogue itself is questionable he acknowledged it can be cheapened into single-minded advocacy (similar to Pope Francis’s warning against lobbies and ideologies). The misuse of a method does not invalidate the method, but rather calls for its refinement and careful application. Unfortunately, there are those who refused the method of dialogue. Why? Perhaps this happened out of intellectual laziness or incapacity, fear of their power being threatened, or inability to subject the church and its teaching to reasoned debate in the public square of an educated, pluralistic society. What is one to do when dialogue with a variety of informed, intelligent voices leads us in a direction other than what the church currently teaches?

For example, inviting experts in the social sciences into a dialogue on a number of church issues could be informative but also threatening of the status quo. Would this cause confusion among the faithful? Or can careful discernment of the issues and questions lead to a fruitful dialogue that holds the church accountable to critical inquiry? In cases where dialogue leads to further questions and discernment, is the church willing to admit error, not of a malicious nature, but possibly due to a lack of understanding or as a response to new knowledge? The church has already had to admit error in a number of the natural sciences. One wonders if both the church and the social sciences would mutually benefit from open dialogue. Would the church gain credibility among an educated, pluralistic US populace through such authentic, intellectual engagement, including with those who hold conflicting but informed opinions? Given Francis’s call for honest and open discussion at the 2014 Extraordinary Synod on the


33 Bernardin, “Reflections on the Public Life.”

Family, it seems he would favor such dialogue, confident that it will lead us closer to the truth, even when it means change, refinement, or development in a teaching. The CCCI offers us a look at how to structure such dialogue.

A concrete way Pope Francis has already engaged in this form of dialogue is in the development of *Laudato Si’*. He chose a topic of universal concern, the environment. It is an encyclical of symphonic character written from the best in our tradition along with that from the natural and social sciences. While the degradation of the environment is a popular topic about which much has already been studied and written, Pope Francis focuses our attention on how it disproportionately affects those who live on the peripheries of life, the very place Jesus repeatedly directs our attention in the gospels. The encyclical brings into dialogue the best the church, society, and academia has to offer. What emerged has become an instrument that proclaims the mission of Christ and his church, challenging the entire world in regard to a critical issue that affects all humankind and our ability to live in our common home. It demonstrates how our engagement with society results in a fresh perspective, one centered in the gospel, grounded in our care for creation in such a way that it might lead all people to our creator.

**Conclusion**

Heeding Pope Francis’s call to attend to “the seamless garment of the Lord,” leaders in the US church today should look to the writings of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin for insight and wisdom in their effort to follow the direction of Pope Francis, in particular Bernardin’s Consistent Ethic of Life and Catholic Common Ground Initiative. There are many other similarities that could be developed, but it is hoped that these have invited the reader to give Cardinal Bernardin’s legacy to the US church another look. It is especially important for younger students of theology who may not be familiar with Cardinal Bernardin or his writings to be introduced to his thought. The Consistent Ethic of Life and the Catholic Common Ground Initiative should become a part of the educational formation in schools of theology and ministry for all those preparing for future church leadership, seminarians and lay students.

As with all great church leaders, the passage of time is the test of their lasting contributions, especially those whose work was not fully appreciated in their own era. As with all those who have left a lasting contribution to the church, their work should not be accepted simply as originally proposed, but like a true gem should be subjected to ongoing refinement until its beauty shines more brightly.

---