What Happened to the Common Ground Initiative?

After the inaugural statement of the Common Ground Project, *Called to be Catholic: Church in a Time of Peril*, was issued by Joseph Cardinal Bernardin on August 12, 1996, even he was astonished by the overwhelmingly positive initial reaction among so many Catholics around the nation. It appeared that many Catholics from all walks of life had been waiting for just such an initiative. Bernardin had expressed clearly what was on their minds and had described in that statement what others felt but had not been able to articulate. From academic circles to rural parishes there was a rising chorus of support. One could say that he touched the pulse of the Catholic population in the United States and suggested a new way to relate one to another that would avoid the lack of civility and animosity that seemed to be prevalent in the political arena and that had made its way into the Church as well. He summed up where people were and helped them dream of new and positive ways of looking at the divisions in our Catholic community.

That the Common Ground Initiative was a germinal and exciting idea that could assist the Church in the United States at this particular moment of crisis was certainly the conviction of those of us who gathered with the Cardinal for discussion some years before the publication of the first document of the Initiative. One could sum up those discussions by saying that they culminated in a concern about the divisions within the Church and the potential ruptures that could weaken it at a time when the Church had so many opportunities for influencing in a positive way the future of our society.

FIRST REACTIONS

The reactions to the statement indicated that many Catholics were tired of the bickering between extreme groups and felt that no progress would be made in the Church unless people, rather than engage in name-calling, would begin to talk to each other and discuss their differences. Underneath the project was the assumption that there were issues in the Church where legitimate diversity was possible. It was also assumed that historically such diversity had always been present in the Church and was one of the factors that ensured its continual growth and development. Newman’s *Essay on the Development of Doctrine* was often cited in this regard.
More than anything else, then, from the reactions to the initial document one sensed among Catholics here in the United States a fear of a growing division within their Church. They saw that in the history of other religious groups in the United States such divisions had weakened their impact. In the Jewish community the split into Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform traditions meant that it became difficult for Jews to form a united front when that unity was needed. One also saw how the Lutheran community was weakened by the division into Synods that did not pray or associate with one another. These examples left many Catholics concerned that the same phenomena could so easily occur among them and weaken their own influence in American society, at the very time when unity would be most helpful. Would Catholicism fall into the same kind of divisions, each one claiming to be right, condemning the other without reserve, and not engaging in fruitful dialogue? It was considered ironic that we were putting so much effort into dialogues with other Christian bodies and other great religions of the world but neglecting the need for dialogue among ourselves, threatened by fragmentation.

Perhaps there was a certain naiveté that, if only people with opposing views could sit down together around the same table and discuss their differences, most of the problems would be solved or at least there would be mutual agreement that these differences should not cause acrimonious divisions and separations. Good will was always presupposed. The Initiative was presented as “pastoral,” that is, not as a way of arriving at solutions to theological issues, but rather as a method for gaining mutual respect and trust in the process toward arriving at common modes of action. The Initiative was conceived of more as a process toward understanding than as a method for arriving at consensus.

The Common Ground Initiative was never meant to be a movement within the Church. That word “movement” was deliberately shunned in favor of the more neutral “initiative” in order not to give the impression that this was just another organization to be founded within the Church. It was not conceived of as an organization that sought to have more and more members committed to the same project or ideals. The binding force was the acceptance of the desire to reach out to those one disagreed with in the hope of arriving at some agreement or at least at a modus operandi. Given this positive initial reaction, one could rightly ask what has happened to the Common Ground Initiative. Often one hears the statement that it died with the Cardinal or that it did not succeed in living up to the great expectations that people had for it when it was first announced. Perhaps some, in spite of the statements to the contrary, did expect a movement with national impact and quick measurable results.
The following remarks present six groups of reflections in an attempt to answer the question about what has happened to the Initiative. Having been an “insider” to the project, both before its inception and since then, I have often asked myself that same question. This is my attempt to answer it. I find it is too easy a response to say that the Initiative was so tied up with Bernardin’s person and charisma that his death meant that the project would not continue. Other factors were at work and need to be examined. Reflecting on them says something about the situation of the Church in the United States at this moment and can be helpful in itself.

SIX HURDLES TO BE OVERCOME

1. Initial Reactions of the other American Cardinals

The immediate reactions of some of his fellow cardinals (Bernard Cardinal Law, Anthony Cardinal Bevilacqua, James Cardinal Hickey, and Adam Cardinal Maida) may have shocked Cardinal Bernardin by their force and total rejection of the idea. It seemed like a personal attack and not the way in which the Church usually faces disagreements among its leaders. It also resulted in deep personal wounds for Bernardin at a time when he needed more support than criticism. For these cardinals the solution to the issue of division was presented as what seemed to most readers rather simplistic: more obedience to official Church documents and less dissent. Their fear was that the Initiative would legitimate dissent in the Church and weaken the role of authority. This point of view was supported by several theologians, including the eminent and much revered scholar Fr. Avery Dulles, S.J.

Although the Initiative was always described as a pastoral one, so many critics rightly pointed out that the distinction between pastoral and doctrinal, without clearer definitions, could be a slippery one. Some said that if the tensions among Catholics have a doctrinal source, then the answer is simply to read the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. If they are pastoral, then it should be clear that all pastoral solutions have to be solidly grounded doctrinally—and, thus, we end up searching for solutions in the same place, the *Catechism*.

In all of these discussions it should be noted that the cardinals and theologians were not denying the existence of the differences, but only reflecting on how they should be solved. The chief criticism concerning solutions aimed at the Initiative centered on the need for doctrinal clarity that could support pastoral actions. It is true that the document was vague to a point in its assertion that Christ, and especially the Scriptures and the sacraments, would be the point of unity. On the other hand, the critics did not engage the serious issue raised by the Initiative concerning legitimate disagreements within the Church and the whole
question of a possible plurality of theologies. It often struck me that one of the hopes of Bernardin was that from the Initiative a clearer answer to that question of limits could be found as the dialogues went forward. Perhaps he felt that it was too soon to set the limits in each issue, as it would immediately lead into the hot debate about dissent in the Church, a terrain that had been touched upon in recent controversies, such as the dismissal of Fr. Charles Curran from the theological faculty of The Catholic University, but which seemed at that moment a quagmire.

Even though the Initiative had hoped to skirt this issue of the fine line between legitimate differences and dissent, in retrospect it is clear that it could not really do so. The cardinals saw that weakness, even though they seemed to give the impression that the Church’s magisterium had all the answers to solve the problem of divisions in the Church. I recall a meeting of Superiors General in Rome where Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J., asserted that, if authority is the problem, a statement by the same authority is the least effective way to solve it. It must be acknowledged that the Catechism of the Catholic Church has been a most useful tool and has led to greater unity. But the disunity that remains shows that Cardinal Bernardin’s intuition was correct: not all the divisions in the Church have theological roots that can be solved by the Catechism.

I have been very much edified by the way in which Father Dulles, in spite of his initial reservations, joined in the spirit of the Initiative and willingly and fully participated in dialogues where he had differed publicly from other scholars.

2. The Lack of a Theology of Dialogue

In the ecumenical movement dialogue has a clear and unambiguous purpose: working toward unity, both doctrinal and ultimately structural. It leads to agreements and a recognition of areas of disagreement that need not be the cause of separation. In the dialogue with other faiths the dialogues lead to mutual support and cooperation concerning values and modes of effecting greater unity in society and societal action. It was evident from the beginning, however, that among some in the United States the word “dialogue” seemed synonymous with “least-common-denominator” theology and did not enjoy good repute. Dialogue within the Church was also looked upon as a weakness. Many accepted dialogues between the Catholic Church and other groups, but not within the Church itself.

Although statements to the contrary by contemporary popes were cited, this did not allay the fears. Many cited the various Common Ground efforts in American culture where precisely this kind of compromising with moral stands was the result if not the aim. In hindsight,
perhaps it would have been wiser to have started with some clarity about the theology of dialogue itself and some mutual agreement on what it means and what result it should effect. Without this theology, the Initiative can easily be reduced to just a plea for civility and politeness in disagreeing, or avoidance of name-calling, and, most of all, a cessation of mutual excommunicating. It is that, but much more. It is true that the Initiative hoped to raise the tone of the rhetoric used in debates in the Church, but it really wanted to go beyond such a simple aim to a more structural recognition of points of agreement in areas where disagreement seemed to abound and to a better understanding of legitimate disagreements that need not be divisive in the Church.

Without an articulated theology of dialogue and a clarification of the effects desired, the Initiative has always limped in expressing clearly its aims and desires.

3. Analysis of Pluralism

If the Initiative has limped because it did not articulate clearly its theology of dialogue (perhaps that is one of the areas yet to be considered by the Initiative), the same could be said about its assumption concerning pluralism in theology and in pastoral practice. That such pluralism exists is a fact, but there is less agreement on how the Church should react to it. The lack of a clear position on this phenomenon has also crippled the Initiative.

Taking the position that a certain pluralism (or “plurality,” as some prefer) is in itself a good thing was already divisive and in need of a preliminary dialogue. It is easy to point out the pluralism of theologies in the New Testament and within the body of the Church throughout history and how such a pluralism led to further theological evolution, but the fear that such pluralism is in itself a threat to unity remains. Simply put, the fear behind the acceptance of a pluralism of theologies in the Church is that it could easily lead to relativism. The difference between pluralism and relativism must be confronted.

Often we hear that we are living in a postmodern age, one in which we simply have to accommodate to such pluralism and accept it, even living with differences that are contradictory and mutually exclusive. Modern culture often assumes that there is no truth, only many ways of looking at life that have to be accepted. This dialogue with modern culture and its assumptions forces each one to accept or reject its presuppositions and to take a stand on the whole question of a pluralism of theologies in the Church. Gone are the days where one philosophy acted as the basis for all theological interpretations. Although the Holy Father has again spoken of the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas as the basis for a uniform theological approach, Cardinal Ratzinger has admitted publicly that St. Thomas is not the source of his own theology.
and, we might presuppose, is not the basis on which judgments are made by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. But the lack of a clear approach to pluralism, acceptable to even the majority of Catholic scholars, has made the Common Ground Initiative more difficult.

The relationship between Catholicism and modern culture (especially physics and bioethics), between Catholicism and other Christian Churches, between Catholicism and non-Christian Religions, continues to open up new challenges, especially to christology and ecclesiology, the answers to which are not found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. In other words, there are debates that continue to go beyond the Catechism, as good as it may be as a synthesis of what the Church believes at this point of history. The stances one takes on pluralism and the development of doctrine affect how one enters into the Initiative. These are assumptions too that need to be discussed before the Initiative can be effective.

Moreover, within the Catechism there are various levels of teaching, not all of the same degree of creedal worth. The pluralism of theological evaluation on this material could also be the source of division. The Common Ground Initiative, although welcoming the Catechism for doctrinal issues, could not very well refer to it as the sole source for solving all the ongoing questions that arise and will continue to spring up in the life of the Church.

4. Issues Behind the Issues

At every meeting sponsored by the Common Ground Initiative, regardless of the topic picked, certain issues arise that then dominate the discussion and lead it away from the selected theme. There are divisions of concern that surface at once among the participants, especially if a broad spectrum of scholars and pastoral ministers are present. These issues could be divided into two classes, those that affect the various ethnic groups that make up the Church in the United States and those that involve the role and participation of women in Church life.

Perhaps we have not reflected enough on the sociological makeup of the Church in the United States and how our dialogues begin with a cultural pluralism that needs to be taken into account at once. Those issues that seem divisive in the Anglo community are not the ones that are of interest or even potentially divisive in the African American or Hispanic community. So much of the discussion has centered around issues that are proper to the upper-class, to those who have been successful in the American system and are now asking the questions about how their beliefs relate to the American culture. The pastoral problems treated are of importance to those who have been successful in the American system but these are not the issues that affect the other ethnic groups. The lack of cultural unity among Catholics themselves poses a
problem for the Initiative. Only a token presence of these other cultural
groups, so that the Anglo present can discuss their concerns, is de-
meaning. Not to invite them is to hide one’s head in the sands and not 
see the fullness of the Catholic reality in the United States. The agenda 
of African Americans is much more centered on inculturation and their 
distinct role in the Church in the United States; the agenda of the His-
panic population centers more on social justice issues as well as cul-
tural assimilation.

The recognition that we are already a culturally pluralistic Church 
dictates how the Initiative must always begin. Is it wise to separate out 
smaller groups because their concerns are different from the larger 
group? If so, then their wisdom and experience, often helpful to shed 
light on the Anglo problem, will be lost.

The role of women in the Church is still an underlying theme in al-
most all discussions. The hurts and legitimate concerns of women sur-
face regardless of the theme selected for discussion. The contribution of 
feminist theology is real and must be present whatever theme is dealt 
with. How it is to be integrated, however, is not always clear.

These themes that lie underneath the topics selected for discussion 
should be themselves the source of preliminary discussion so that they 
are not lost and can contribute to the whole. Every conference I have at-
tended has had to wrestle with them. If nothing else, they alert us to the 
vast and rich cultural pluralism that is already a part of our Catholic 
community.

5. Non-interest in the Initiative

Although it was stated that there was a general enthusiastic re-
sponse about the Common Ground Initiative when Cardinal Bernardin 
first announced it, one should not be naive: there were strong voices of 
resistance, not just from some of the other cardinals. Many more con-
servative groups felt the Initiative was nothing else than a “liberal” 
agenda trying to co-opt all the others. The hope of the organizers was 
to have a majority of middle-of-the-roaders on the organizational com-
mittee and then in the conferences it sponsored to broaden the field to 
include more participants with views that were more contrasting. The 
idea was good, but the results not easily accomplished. Some protested 
that all the extremes were not asked to be around the initial formative 
table. Many hesitated to come to any dialogues because they feared the 
agenda was “stacked.”

It has not been easy to bring together for a Common Ground dia-
logue those who could be considered as presenting extreme points of 
view on issues that divide. Many of those who represent more extreme 
views in the Church are not used to dialogue of any kind. Their ap-
proach is mostly one of confrontation. One could say that there is a
psychological gap between how they approach their advocacy role and the presuppositions of the Common Ground Initiative. Many are so deeply committed to a position that they see their role as one of persuading and convincing, not of dialoguing. Some even hold the view that the Common Ground Initiative is a deterrent to the search for truth in the Church, that we need less dialogue and more confrontation. When one sees the Church as a battleground with winners and losers, when one has spent years in trying to effect certain changes, it is not easy to be a part of the Common Ground Initiative. It seems to be a betrayal of everything one stands for. Many saw such an Initiative as capitulation. One could say that these advocates were found on both extremes. Because they seemed to have been marginalized from Catholic life for decades, they approached the question of dialogue with fear or indifference—everything to lose and nothing to gain. It remains a serious question for the Initiative and seems unsolvable.

Although it seemed to us who were involved in this Initiative from the beginning that the majority of our Catholics were tired of these intransigent positions, we knew that they did not represent the whole of the Catholic population. Perhaps only with time can the Initiative have any effect on those who do not want to dialogue with others, and perhaps never. Many, having taken strong positions and invested their whole life in them, are not interested in any kind of dialogue that could lead to compromise or loss of their identity. These groups, not always large in number, still remain a force in American Catholicism.

6. Role of the Press

From the inception of the Common Ground Initiative the role of the press has been ambiguous. For the meetings of the committee and for most of the conferences sponsored by it, the press was not present. Often the acceptance by some to participate in the Common Ground Initiative was dependent on the promise that their views would remain anonymous. Many, pro dolor, felt they could not speak freely about their position on given issues, if their opinions were then to appear in the press. Some asserted they felt that their academic standing might be ruined if this happened. (Now they might say their mandatum could be withdrawn.) Personally I was saddened by the number of times such statements by professional theologians were made. To assure freedom of discussion, so needed for the Initiative, the committee decided at first not to invite the press. When it was finally decided to do so, restrictions were placed on them. For example, they were not to quote people directly without explicit permission. This stance on the part of the committee of the Initiative toward the press is one of the reasons why many may have felt that the Initiative died with the Cardinal. They were reading nothing about it in the Catholic press.
A deeper reason concerning the Catholic press surfaced in the discussions. So much of our press thrives more on controversy than on resolutions. They find little to report when people agree on some aspect of an issue where formerly they were thought to differ. Many Catholic newspapers have their own clientele, their own supporters. They do not come to such a meeting to write up an unbiased report. They bring their own agendas. Many were totally opposed to the Common Ground Initiative from its inception and had theological, perhaps even ideological, reasons against it. It was not newsworthy to say that some of our most prominent theologians did not mutually excommunicate each other, but listened with respect and even admiration, to the positions of others.

The role of the Catholic press continues to be one of the stumbling blocks of the Initiative. It is understood that one cannot do anything worthwhile without them, but one is also frustrated in seeing how they are often the source of division or at least stoke the fires. For the most part, the press continues to ignore the Initiative.

CONCLUSION

Since the Common Ground Initiative is as much a method, a mindset, a conviction, as it is a logically conceived program, it can have more effect than the projects sponsored by its committee. All over the country Common Ground Initiatives, inspired by its initial thrust, have taken place. These have happened in parishes and universities, on diocesan and interdiocesan levels, at meetings of learned societies, and on college campuses. Because these were not based on the format of some of the TV shows, namely, just shouting matches, they too have not received much press.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the Initiative is that it has drawn together people whose paths seldom if ever cross because they usually attend national meetings with people who are more like-minded. In the new setting they have come to know and even like people personally whom they would have previously easily dismissed.

It has also been a part of the experience of those involved that praying together is as important as the discussion. The Holy Spirit can act in many ways. God does not speak only to the hierarchy who then speaks to the laity. The Initiative tries to accept that the Spirit is operative in the whole Church and all its members. That the Holy Spirit can also use dialogue as a means of creating unity seems self-evident. The Common Ground Initiative and its founder, Cardinal Bernardin, believed strongly that the presence of the Holy Spirit could be operative when people enter into honest dialogue in their search for truth—even with those whose opinions they do not accept, perhaps even more so in such cases. These moments can be and have been moments of grace for many. Perhaps that is sufficient vindication of the whole project.
REFERENCES


---

Rembert G. Weakland, O.S.B., former Abbot Primate of the Benedictines, is Archbishop of Milwaukee.