

CALLED TO BE CATHOLIC: CHURCH IN A TIME OF PERIL

Joseph Cardinal Bernardin

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Catholic Common Ground Project

Cardinal Archbishop of Chicago August 12, 1996

Will the Catholic Church in the United States enter the new millennium as a Church of promise, augmented by the faith of rising generations and able to be a leavening force in our culture? Or will it become a Church on the defensive, torn by dissension and weakened in its core structures?

The outcome, we believe, depends on whether American Catholicism can confront an array of challenges with honesty and imagination, and whether the Church can reverse the polarization that inhibits discussion and cripples leadership.

American Catholics must reconstitute the conditions for addressing our differences constructively—a common ground centered on faith in Jesus, marked by accountability to the living Catholic tradition, and ruled by a renewed spirit of civility, dialogue, generosity, and broad and serious consultation.

<It is widely admitted that the Catholic Church in the United States has entered a time of peril.> Many of its leaders, both clerical and lay, feel under siege and increasingly polarized. Many of its faithful, particularly its young people, feel disenfranchised, confused about their beliefs and increasingly adrift. Many of its institutions feel uncertain of their identity and increasingly fearful about their future.

Those are hard words to pronounce to a Church that, despite many obstacles, continues to grow in numbers, continues to welcome and assist the poor and the stranger, and continues to foster extraordinary example of Christian faith and witness to the Gospel. The landscape of American Catholicism is dotted with vital communities of worship and service, with new initiatives and with older, deeply rooted endeavors that are kept alive by the hard labor and daily sacrifices of millions of Catholics. In the face of powerful centrifugal forces, many Catholic leaders have worked to build consensus and cooperation.

We hesitate to say anything that might discourage them or add to the finger-pointing and demoralization that in too many cases already burden these exemplary efforts. But tis discordant and disheartened atmosphere is itself one of the realities which cannot be ignored. For three decades, the Church has been divided by different responses to the Second Vatican Council and to the tumultuous years that followed it.

By no means were these tensions always unfruitful; in many cases, they were virtually unavoidable. But even as conditions have changed, party lines have hardened. A mood of suspicion and acrimony hangs over many of those most active in the Church's life; at moments, it even seems to have infiltrated the ranks of the bishops. One consequence is that many of us are refusing to acknowledge disquieting realities, perhaps fearing that they may reflect poorly on our past efforts or arm our critics within the Church. Candid discussion is inhibited.

Across the whole spectrum of views within the Church, proposals are subject to ideological litmus tests. Ideas, journals and leaders are pressed to align themselves with pre-existing camps and are viewed warily when they depart from these expectations.

<There is nothing wrong in itself with the prospect that different visions should contend within American Catholicism>. That has long been part of the Church's experience in this nation, and indeed differences of

opinion are essential to the process of attaining the truth. But the way that struggle is currently proceeding, the entire Church may lose.

It is now three decades after Vatican II. Social and cultural circumstances have changed. The Church possesses a wealth of post-conciliar experience to assess and translate into lessons for the future. There is undiminished hunger for authentic faith, spiritual experience and moral guidance, but many of the traditional supports for distinct religious identities—or for the institutions that convey them—have disappeared.

Meanwhile, positions of leadership in the ministries of the Church are passing to those with little exposure, for better or worse, to the sharply defined institutional Catholicism of earlier decades. Still younger Catholics, many with absolutely no experience of that pre-conciliar Catholicism, come to the Church with new questions and few of the old answers.

The Church's capacity to respond to these changed conditions may be stymied if constructive debate is supplanted by bickering, disparagement and stalemate. Rather than forging a consensus that can harness and direct the Church's energies, contending viewpoints are in danger of canceling one another out. Bishop risk being perceived as members of different camps rather than as pastors of the whole Church. Unless we examine our situation with fresh eyes, open minds and changed hearts, within a few decades a vital Catholic legacy may be squandered, to the loss of both the Church and the nation.

<There are urgent questions that the Church in the United States knows it must air openly and honestly, but which it increasingly feels pressed to evade or at best address obliquely>. These issues include:

- The changing roles of women.
- The organization and effectiveness of religious education.
- 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 sisters and vowed religious 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 capacity of the Church to embrace African-American, Latino and Asian populations, their cultural heritages and their social concerns.
- The survival of Catholic school systems, colleges and universities, health care facilities and social services, and the articulation of a distinct and appropriate religious identity and mission for these institutions.
- The dwindling financial support from parishioners.
- 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.

As long as such topics remain inadequately addressed, the near future of American Church life is at risk. Yet in almost every case, the necessary conversation runs up against polarized positions that have so magnified fears and so strained sensitivities that even the simplest lines of inquiry are often fiercely resisted. Consider, for example, just two of these topics.

On every side, there are reports that many Catholics are reaching adulthood with barely a rudimentary knowledge of their, with an attenuated sense of sacrament and with a highly individualistic view of the Church. Some of us are tempted to minimize the seriousness of this situation out of an attachment to young people and an appreciation of their generosity—or out of loyalty to those who work, often with insufficient resources and scant rewards, to provide religious education. Others among us rush to reduce complex questions of pedagogy, theology, limited time, turnover in teachers, and the pressures of an aggressive and pervasive youth culture to some single factor—and some simple solution.

The practical realities of our young people's needs are quickly lost amid accusations of infidelity to Church teachings, reflexive defenses against criticism or promotion of pet educational approaches. It is an atmosphere unlikely to generate the massive and creative effort required to meet today's crisis of religious illiteracy or link it with young people's search for a sense of participation and belonging.

Or consider the Church's public prayer. The faith thrives where the Eucharist is celebrated worthily, drawing the Christian community into its mystery and power. Yet in many parishes, Mass attendance has plummeted; congregational participation is indifferent; and liturgies are marred by lack of preparation, casual or rushed gestures, unsuitable music and banal sentiments in hymns and, above all, in homilies. There is widespread awareness that 30 years after the council, the goals of liturgical renewal have been met more in letter than in spirit.

But again polarization blocks a candid and constructive response to the situation. An informal or "horizontal" liturgy, demystified and stressing the participation of the congregation, is pitted against a solemn or "vertical" liturgy, unchangeable and focused on the sacerdotal action of the priest.

The former is rightly feared as unable to carry the weight of the transcendent and as opening the liturgy to the trivializing currents of the culture. The latter is rightly feared as becoming a concert, a show or a spiritless exercise in rubrics closed to the particular needs and gifts of the community. No effort to assess the state of worship or develop new translations or refresh liturgical skills escapes suspicion of moving to one extreme or the other—or pressure to move in the opposite direction as a safeguard.

The same dynamic of fear and polarization afflicts the Church's discussions of other topics, from efforts to accommodate language or practice to the changing consciousness of women to efforts to define theology's relationship to the hierarchy. Unnuanced positions are espoused without encountering moderating criticism from sympathizers. Then these positions loom even more powerfully as fears in the minds of opponents, generating or justifying their own unnuanced positions. The end results are distrust, acrimony and deadlock.

<What will it take for the Catholic Church in the United States to escape from this partisanship and the paralysis it threatens to engender?>

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.

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.

This invitation to a revitalized Catholic common ground should not be limited to those who agree in every respect on an orientation for the Church, but encompass all—whether centrists, moderates, liberals, radicals, conservatives or neo-conservatives—who are willing to reaffirm basic truths and to pursue their disagreements in a renewed spirit of dialogue.

<Chief among those truths is that our discussion must be accountable to the Catholic tradition and to the Spirit-filled, living Church that brings to us the revelation of God in Jesus.>

To say this does not resolve a host of familiar questions about the way that the Church has preserved, interpreted and communicated that revelation. Accountability to the Catholic tradition does not mean reversion to a chain of command, highly institutional understanding of the Church, a model resembling a modern corporation, with headquarters and branch offices, rather than Vatican II's vision of a communion and a people.

Nor does accountability mean conceiving of faith as an ideology, an all-encompassing doctrinal system that produces ready explanations and practical prescriptions for every human question. Now, as historically, there has always been wide room for legitimate debate, discussion and diversity. But accountability does demand serious engagement with the tradition and its authoritative representatives. It rules out the pop scholarship, sound-bite theology, unhistorical assertions and flippant dismissals that have become all too common on both the right and left of the Church.

Authentic accountability rules out a fundamentalist that narrows the richness of the tradition to a text or a decree, and it rules out a narrow appeal to individual or contemporary experience that ignores the cloud of witnesses over the centuries or the living magisterium of the Church exercised by the bishops and the Chair of Peter.

Authentic accountability embraces the demands that the Gospel poses for our public life and social structures as well as for our private lives and personal relations. This accountability implies that the Church, for all its humanness, cannot be treated as merely a human organization. The Church is a chosen people, a mysterious communion, a foreshadowing of the kingdom, a spiritual family.

One implication of this is that the hermeneutic of suspicion must be balanced with a hermeneutic of love and retrieval. Another is that an essential element of Catholic leadership must be wide and serious consultation, especially of those most affected by Church policies under examination. The Church's ancient concept of reception reminds us that all the faithful are called to a role in grasping a truth or incorporating a decision or practice into the Church's life.

Finally, this accountability recognizes that our discussions about the Catholic Church take place within boundaries. Exactly how the boundaries of Catholic Christianity should be formulated will inevitably be open at times to re-examination and debate. So, too, will our attitudes toward whatever falls outside those boundaries. But the very idea of boundaries is a necessary premise, without which no identity can exist. Inclusivity, a concept that can operate at many levels, becomes a catchword and even a self-contradiction when it impugns any efforts to make distinctions or set defining limits.

<The revitalized Catholic common ground, we suggested will be marked by a willingness to approach the Church's current situation with fresh eyes, open minds and changed hearts>. It will mean pursuing disagreements in a renewed spirit of dialogue. Specifically, we urge that Catholics be guided by working principles like these:

We should recognize that <no single group or viewpoint in the Church has a complete monopoly on the truth>. While the bishops united with the pope have been specially endowed by God with the power to preserve the truth faith, they, too, exercise their office by taking counsel with one another and with the experience of the whole Church, past and present. Solutions to the Church's problems will almost inevitably emerge from a variety of sources.

We should not envision ourselves or any one part of the Church a saving remnant. <No group within the Church should judge itself alone to be possessed of enlightenment> or spurn the mass of Catholics, their leaders or their institutions as unfaithful.

We should <test all proposals for their pastoral realism> and potential impact on living individuals as well as for their theological truth. Pastoral effectiveness is a responsibility of leadership.

We should presume that <those with whom we differ are acting in good faith>. They deserve civility, charity and a good-faith effort to understand their concerns. We should not substitute labels, abstractions or blanketing terms—"radical feminism", "the hierarchy", "the Vatican"—for living, complicated realities.

We should <put the best possible construction on differing positions>, addressing their strongest points rather than seizing upon the most vulnerable aspects in order to discredit them. We should detect the valid insights and legitimate worries that may underlie even questionable arguments.

We should be cautious in ascribing motives. <We should not impugn another's love of the Church> and loyalty to it. We should not rush to interpret disagreements as conflicts of starkly opposing principles rather than as differences in degree or in prudential pastoral judgments about the relevant facts.

We should <bring the Church to engage the realities of contemporary culture>, not by simple defiance or by naive acquiescence but acknowledging, in the fashion of "Gaudium et Spes" [a document of the Second Vatican Council], both our culture's valid achievements and real dangers.

Ultimately, the fresh eyes and changed hearts we need cannot be distilled from guidelines. They emerge in the space created by praise and worship. The revitalized Catholic common ground will be marked by a determined pastoral effort to keep the liturgy, above all, from becoming a battleground for confrontation and polarization, and to treasure it as the common worship of God through Jesus Christ in the communion of the Holy Spirit.

<It is imperative that the Catholic Church in the United States confront the issues and forces that are shaping the future>. For this, we must draw on all the gifts of wisdom and understanding in the Church, all the charism of leadership and communion.

Each of us will be tested by encounters with cultures and viewpoints not our own; all of us will be refined in the fires of genuine engagement; and the whole Church will be strengthened for its mission in the new millennium.

RESPONSE TO "CALLED TO BE CATHOLIC"

Cardinal Bernard Law

August 12, 1996, given in response to the statement by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin entitled "Called to be Catholic: Church in a Time of Peril."

Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago has announced today a project which he has agreed to lead that is called "the Catholic Common Ground Project." He is joined in this effort by a group of Catholics including bishops, priests, religious, lay women and men. The several signatories from within the Archdiocese of Boston are persons for whom I have great esteem.

In connection with the announcement of this "project," a statement has been released which was prepared by the National Pastoral Life Center. This statement, titled "Called to Be Catholic," is proposed as "a good framework for fostering careful reflection on issues of concern."

It is, I think, unfortunate that the cardinal's initiative has tied itself to this statement. The statement is not very helpful. Throughout there are gratuitous assumptions, and at significant points it breathes an ideological bias which it elsewhere decries in others. The fundamental flaw in this document is its appeal for "dialogue" as a path to "common ground."

The church already has "common ground." It is found in sacred Scripture and tradition, and it is mediated to us through the authoritative and binding teaching of the magisterium. The disconnect that is so often found today between that Catholic common ground and faith and practice of some Catholics is alarming.

Dialogue as applied to this pastoral crisis must be clearly understood, however. Dissent from revealed truth or the authoritative teaching of the church cannot be "dialogued" away. Truth and dissent from truth are not equal partners in ecclesial dialogue. Dialogue as a pastoral effort to assist in a fuller appropriation of the truth is laudable. Dialogue as a way to mediate between the truth and dissent is mutual deception.

The statement raises the issue of the faithful's "reception" of a truth or in the incorporation of a decision or practice into the church's life. Surely this is an issue worthy of ongoing theological consideration. Reception by the faithful cannot be measured by polls which are subject to all the pressures of contemporary culture, however, any more than the schism of all the bishops save one in Henry VIII's England can be ascribed to an exercise of collegiality.

Recent pastoral statements of the bishops of the United States on peace and on the U.S. economy were not universally well received by the faithful. If polls are to be believed, the position of the bishops of Massachusetts in opposition to capital punishment does not enjoy overwhelming support from the faithful. The church must teach "in season and out of season, when convenient and inconvenient." Careful discernment must be used in assessing what is called "reception."

The statement proposes as the sixth of seven "working principles" for dialogue the following: "We should not rush to interpret disagreements as conflicts of starkly opposing principles rather than as differences in degree or in prudential pastoral judgments about the relevant facts." Fair enough, as long as it is admitted that "conflicts of starkly opposing principles" can occur. When such conflict involves dissent from authoritative church teaching, that conflict cannot be dialogued away. Dissent either yields to assent or the conflict remains irresolvable.

In Paragraph 18 of 27, the statement introduces the thought that "Jesus Christ, present in Scripture and sacrament, is central to all we do; he must always be the measure and not what is measured." I would have preferred to have the statement begin at that point.

The crisis the church is facing can only be adequately addressed by a clarion call to conversion. Jesus' question to Peter must be responded to by each of us: "Who do you say that I am?" Only with this beginning will institutional renewal and reform be authentic.

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