

SPECIAL SESSION

- Topic: The Nature and Authority of Doctrine:
A Search for Common Ground
- Moderator: Robert P. Imbelli, Boston College
- Presenters: Avery Dulles, Fordham University
Richard A. McCormick, University of Notre Dame

This year's Catholic Theological Society of America Convention featured a two-part Special Session attended by several hundred participants. In the spirit of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, it sought to foster a conversation of different voices on a theme of mutual concern.

Introducing the session, Robert Imbelli quoted the address of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin at the launching of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative on October 24, 1996, in Chicago. The Cardinal stated that the purpose of the initiative was "to demonstrate how [the] call for a civil and generous dialogue, Christ-centered and accountable to the church's living tradition and teaching of the authentic magisterium, could be put into action" (see Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb, *Catholic Common Ground Initiative: Foundational Documents* [New York: Crossroad, 1997] 62). The aim of the Special Session was to put such dialogue into action within the CTSA.

The format of the session was as follows. In part one, each of the presenters delivered his prepared paper, taking approximately a half-hour each. Since each had seen the other's paper prior to the presentation, each then took ten minutes to offer some preliminary reflections on the other's paper, highlighting both agreement and possible disagreements. Part one then concluded with some initial observations from the floor.

Part two began with a brief further exchange between Dulles and McCormick, followed by observations and reflections from approximately fifteen of the participants. The Moderator stressed that, notwithstanding the large number in attendance, what was desired was to hear the concerns of those present and not merely to raise questions to the speakers. Since the prepared presentations are printed in these *Proceedings*, this report will focus on some of the concerns and issues addressed in the discussion.

Though the papers had broached a number of issues, the discussion, perhaps inevitably, narrowed to a consideration of the respective roles of the papal and episcopal magisterium and that of theologians, with particular focus on the nature and legitimacy of dissent. Two general orientations characterized the interventions. Some stressed the special role and responsibility of the ecclesial magisterium and cautioned against a perceived tendency on the part of some to

counterpose to this a magisterium of theologians who systematically critique official teaching.

Others stressed the need to foster a legitimate pluralism in the church and feared a maximizing of claims by the magisterium to the detriment of genuine dialogue. A number also cautioned against a style of teaching that can verge on the authoritarian and not facilitate a mature discernment in the Spirit.

Toward the end of the often spirited exchange, Margaret O'Gara of the University of St. Michael's College offered a reflection that many found to be a helpful summing up of the afternoon's conversation. She suggested that both perspectives see the teaching authority as a gift given to the church and that official, noninfallible teaching always merits the presumption of truth. Moreover, all the speakers desire an exercise of magisterium that is authoritative and credible. However, she also identified two areas of perceived difference. The first concerns the amount of significance accorded the discernment of the whole church and not merely that of the magisterium. The second concerns how much emphasis should be placed upon past change as a springboard for possible change in the present.

O'Gara's observations seemed to suggest that, depending on the relative emphases given these two issues, the role and legitimacy of dissent would be differently construed. Nonetheless, no one present condoned an approach that elevated dissent itself into a "policy and method" (an attitude explicitly deprecated by Pope John Paul II).

There was consensus that the special session set a tone of open and civil discussion and generated a felt sense of inclusivity that positively marked the entire convention. For their exemplary contribution to this, Dulles and McCormick deservedly received the warm thanks of the membership.

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