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THE CATHOLIC COMMON GROUND INITIATIVE

- Topic: The Challenge of Reconciliation:
 Analyses of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative
- Convener: Angela Senander, Boston College
- Moderator: Juliann Heller, St. John's University
- Presenters: Catherine Patten, National Pastoral Life Center
 Robert Imbelli, Boston College
 Katarina Schuth, St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity

Given growing divisions in the Catholic Church in the United States, this session examined the Catholic Common Ground Initiative as a means of reconciliation from historical, pastoral, spiritual and theological perspectives.

Catherine Patten identified the origin of the initiative with Cardinal Joseph Bernardin's 1992 letter "The Parish in the Contemporary Church," which recognized the need to move beyond the liberal/conservative divide so that parishes in the Archdiocese of Chicago could be common places where all come together. At the National Pastoral Life Center, this letter was the impetus for semiannual meetings, which resulted in the development of *Called to Be Catholic: Church in a Time of Peril*. In response to Bernardin releasing this statement at a press conference August 12, 1996, four cardinals (Maida, Bevilacqua, Law and Hickey) issued critical press releases which were a public expression of division among Catholic leaders.

Patten identified participation by "the right" as a challenge because of a lack of perceived need to dialogue about truth and the perception that dialogue is a liberal project. She also highlighted the need for listening to the other, a challenge for those on either side of the divide. The Catholic Common Ground Initiative works to remain centrist, encourages others to sponsor dialogue, organizes an annual Cardinal Bernardin Conference (to which 25 people are invited to participate in dialogue with committee members about papers on a particular topic), sponsors an annual lecture and publishes a quarterly newsletter entitled *Initiative Report*.

Katarina Schuth described "the context of the Church today that gives rise to the great need for reconciliation and dialogue" in terms of five observations. First, as the Church experiences the influence of religious pluralism and multiculturalism through immigrants, refugees and global communication, people disagree about whether unity comes from embracing diversity or from uniformity. Second, ideological and theological difference often results in intolerance expressed in

name calling, shunning and rejecting the person with the opposite viewpoint. Third, in addition to religious and racial/ethnic diversity, educational, age, economic and gender differences among church members "affect the way church teaching is understood, how liturgy is practiced and how prayer is experienced." Fourth, with decreasing numbers of priests and religious, structural changes and collaboration are needed to meet diverse ministerial needs. Fifth, the combination of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative's spiritual foundation and dialogue principles has produced good results with pastoral staffs, faculties and parish councils where people come together as peers or as members of a working group to solve a particular problem. Schuth notes that two disappointments have been minimal participation by bishops and a lack of participation by traditionalists.

Robert Imbelli described the spiritual foundation of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative as christological and sacramental. Imbelli identified three witnesses, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, Cardinal Basil Hume and Monsignor Philip Murnion, who promoted reconciliation and provided guidance and hope for mutual understanding. Each chose to dedicate time and energy to the Catholic Common Ground Initiative as death was imminent. Bernardin gave his last public address at the first annual conference in October 1996. Hume wrote "One in Christ" on his deathbed, and Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb delivered this Catholic Common Ground Initiative lecture on the day of his funeral. Murnion wrote a letter to the bishops promoting common ground that was mailed on the day of his death. Recognizing the spiritual life as a marathon, Imbelli identified spiritual practices for a "spirituality of communion" based on the monastic terms: *lectio*, *meditatio* and *contemplatio*. In a spirituality of communion, *lectio* is an attentive listening to others, *meditatio* is pondering and spiritual discernment in which one is vulnerable to others' truth and to untruthfulness in one's own attitude, and *contemplatio* is seeing the face of Christ and the face of the other.

Following the presentations, there was lively conversation among the twenty-five people at the session. Among the topics discussed were: (1) similarities and differences between dialogue within the Catholic Church and ecumenical dialogue; (2) the relationship between the ecclesiology of Vatican II and a spirituality of communion; (3) the importance of the pastor's participation in dialogue; (4) the value of integrating dialogue principles in seminary education as preparation for encountering conflict in parishes; and (5) the question of how to reach those under the age of forty who are often not associated with a parish. The final topic received the greatest attention.

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