

- Topic: Common Ground Project—State of the Question  
Moderator: Stephen J. Pope, Boston College  
Presenters: Oscar A. Lipscomb, Archbishop of Mobile  
Elizabeth A. Johnson, Fordham University  
Robert P. Imbelli, Boston College

Three presentations by panelists who are members of the Advisory Committee guiding the Common Ground Initiative offered an instructive session. Professor Elizabeth A. Johnson opened with a presentation on Cardinal Bernardin's reasons for initiating the project (later more modestly termed "initiative"). Its goal was to be pastoral—to overcome the polarization of the Church and to move beyond acrimony. Its method is to pursue dialogue in order to recover "common ground" centered in faith and capable of mutual respect in the face of disagreements. Those involved in the dialogue would need to "learn the hard task of genuine disagreement," as John Courtney Murray once put it. The goal of the initiative is best attained through dialogue within the parameters of doctrine and with room for responsible dissent. Cardinal Bernardin's personal commitment to the project, communicated in spite of great pain from his illness, was particularly inspiring for participants in the inaugural meeting held in Chicago, October 1996.

Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb, chair of the Advisory Committee, began his presentation with a discussion of an important theological issue facing the contemporary Church, namely, the Christological and ecclesiological nature of its polarization. Following a recent article by David Schindler in *Communio* (Winter 1996), the archbishop noted that a critically important clarification needs to be made regarding the proper interpretation of the unity of all the faithful in Christ. The archbishop asked that theologians reflect upon and discuss in a serious manner the "centrality of Christ" and related theological issues in "a reasoned and charitable way."

The archbishop then endorsed the proposal of Bishop Edward O'Donnell, bishop of Lafayette, Louisiana, of the four qualities needed to carry forward the Initiative: a willingness to acknowledge truth, the virtue of humility and a recognition of the underlying mystery of theological truth, mutual respect among theologians who disagree and a rejection of ad hominem arguments (here the archbishop suggested that seeking common ground within the academy would be a significant accomplishment in itself), and, finally, love for the Church and an appreciation of magisterial teaching as "an opportunity not an obstacle." The archbishop concluded his remarks by suggesting that theologians can assist the Initiative by combating the religious illiteracy that so often underlies misunderstanding and division within the Church and by exemplifying in their own work the relevance of the theory and practice of dialogue.

Professor Robert Imbelli discussed the first Initiative conference, 7-9 March 1996, when a number of scholars presented papers on the topic, "U.S. Culture and the Challenge of Discipleship." The conference had a pastoral focus, encom-

passed a broad range of viewpoints, and intended to foster mutual appreciation of insights and integrity. To the end of genuine dialogue, the participants were encouraged to take the time to learn trust, attend to the particular kinds of experience that underlie different perspectives, establish fair ground rules for discussion, and require no one to give up his or her convictions but all to be self-critical.

The next Initiative meeting will take place on 5-7 March 1998 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Professor Imbelli suggested that it might include representatives from the younger generation of theologians and pastoral ministries and that it would spend more time discussing fewer assigned papers than was the case for the first conference. He underscored the importance of "face to face" encounters for overcoming suspicions based on caricatures of alternative perspectives. He also suggested that work is being done on developing guidelines for implementation of the Initiative on the parish level. His presentation closed with reflections on the "spirituality" implied in the Initiative, particularly what he termed the "discerning generosity" and "generous discernment" that will be needed for its success.

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