

In Defense of the Common Ground Initiative

A Letter to the *National Catholic Register*

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The Catholic Common Ground Initiative promoted by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin turned out to reveal divisions within the hierarchy of the United States. The controversy soon involved theologians as well, two of whom, Fr. Avery Dulles and Prof. David L. Schindler strongly criticized the notion of dialogue they believed to underlie the Bernardin proposal. Fr. Dulles's essay was delivered as the McGinley Lecture at Fordham University on November 19, 1996, and then published as "The Limits of Dialogue" in *Crisis* (February 1997): 16-19, and then again, much later, in *Church and Society: The Lawrence J. McGinley Lectures, 1988-2007* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008) 221-233. Professor Schindler's critique was published as "On the Catholic Common Ground Project: The Christological Foundations of Dialogue," *Communio*, 23 (1996): 823-5

It may be that it was an article by Jim Cosgrove, "The Common Ground Project and the Art of Dialogue," which appeared in the *National Catholic Register*, on April 6, 1997, that led me to get involved. I dimly recall that I communicated with the editor of the newspaper, Joop Koopman, who invited me to write about the controversy. The result was the following long essay which he published in full in the pages of a journal that had always been rather conservative editorially and in 1995 had been bought by the Legionaries of Christ. In my accompanying letter, dated April 25, 1997, I wrote to Koopman: "I thank you for the invitation to contribute this. I appreciate it that the *Register* is interested in this kind of 'dialogue'." It was not long afterwards that he was replaced as editor of the newspaper, and I wondered whether his publishing of my critique had anything to do with his departure.

When the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin announced the Common Ground Initiative (CGI) last August, American Catholics witnessed the rare sight of four other American Cardinals publicly expressing reservations about the project and in particular about the document that accompanied and in some degree legitimated it, "Called to Be Catholic: Church in a Time of Peril."¹ Some observers immediately invoked these responses as proof of the need precisely for the effort Cardinal Bernardin had endorsed for American Catholics to overcome polarizations in their midst.

Recently Fr. Avery Dulles, S.J., and Professor David L. Schindler have written reflective essays which in large part echo the reservations of Cardinals Law, Hickey, Maida, and Bevilacqua. Fr. Dulles' article, "The Travails of Dialogue," originally given under the title, "The Limits of Dialogue," as a Lawrence J. McGinley Lecture at Fordham University (November 19, 1996), was concerned less with what the proposals for the CGI actually said than "with what they seemed to imply, and would be understood as implying in the current atmosphere. Their statements on dialogue were inevitably interpreted in light of prevailing conceptions of dialogue

¹ Available at: <https://catholiccommonground.org/called-to-be-catholic-church-in-a-time-of-peril/>

in use among contemporary theoreticians, rather than in the context of the classical concepts used by Plato and Aristotle and the personalist concepts proposed by the popes.” Fr. Dulles gives two illustrations of his second sentence. He refers to two theoreticians of inter-religious dialogue who espouse a relativistic pluralism for which, he says, dialogue implies that one must set aside one’s conviction of the truth of one’s faith and presumes the equal validity of all religions in order to reach some measure of peaceful coexistence. He then invokes a recent analysis of what passes for public discourse in the United States which avoids substantive questions of truth in favor a merely “procedural republic,” based upon a consensus empty of moral and religious conviction and content. Fr. Dulles is speaking of what John Courtney Murray called “the idolatry of the democratic process.” He claims that the calls for greater dialogue within the Church have been understood and interpreted in the light of either or both of these positions. Unfortunately, he supplies no evidence in support of this claim.

Professor Schindler’s much longer essay, now published in *Communio*, refers several times to these words of Fr. Dulles and adopts them as part of the method of his own analysis of the CGI and responses to it. He sets out two incompatible notions of dialogue, one “as understood within Catholicism,” the other “as understood within the climate of contemporary American culture, with its dominant influence of liberalism.” The problem with the statements associated with the CGI, he argues, is that the authors have not sufficiently indicated the christology and ecclesiology which must be presupposed by a Catholic notion of dialogue and have not taken sufficient steps to exclude the possibility that their call for dialogue for the sake of “common ground” will be interpreted in a liberal sense.

To explain his position, it will be best perhaps to begin with Prof. Schindler’s description of “conventional American liberalism, in the matter of dialogue.” This, he says, sees an inverse relation between claims to truth and the possibility of dialogue, that is, that dialogue is more possible the less participants make prior claims to possessing the truth. It assigns priority to process over substance. The common ground becomes more “formal” or “procedural” and “empty” than “substantive” and presupposes that participants lay aside their own subjectivity. That this preference for process implies substantial claims is commonly overlooked. Finally, liberalism sees dialogue as a “contractual” negotiation between “discrete or private individuals” and ignores the dimensions of community and its constitutive role in the search for truth.

The Catholic notion of dialogue, on the other hand, begins with the eternal dialogue within the Trinity and its extension into humanity, indeed into the cosmos, through the Incarnation of the eternal Word of God. This unique, and therefore “exclusive,” dialogue between God and man is utterly “inclusive,” that is, it is directed toward and affects every creature, every person; all of them are called to participate in a communion with God that will be fulfilled only in the Kingdom but is already anticipated in the hierarchical and sacramental communion that subsists in the Catholic Church. Catholics undertake any dialogue within the conviction of the truth given in the objective revelation of Jesus Christ, and this dialogue must also have the same characteristics of both exclusivity (the claims made about Christ) and inclusivity or universality. Finally, because this dialogue must be patterned after Christ, it must be a dialogue of love, which means that it presupposes Christ’s liberation from sin and our repentance and conversion from sin to holiness.

On the basis of these two ideal-types of dialogue, Prof. Schindler then criticizes the statements associated with the CGI, less, again, for what they say than for what they do not say, less also for their content than for the ordering and integration they give it. He finds their ecclesiology defective: a “sociological” or “moral” notion of the Church is favored over an “ontological,” hierarchical, and sacramental notion. The statements ignore the need for conversion from sin as the existential condition of genuine dialogue, something illustrated by their “one-sided preference for the language of civility, as distinct from that of the call to sanctity.” Their analysis of the “time of peril” being undergone by the Church in the U.S. is too “horizontal,” a matter of disagreements among discrete individuals, and ignores the “vertical” dimensions of the threat to the christologically based communion that is the Church and the “asymmetrical” relationships that exist within it (the distinct role of magisterial authority). The ecclesiology and, it seems, the christology implied in the statements are not “high” enough. In fact, a statement of Cardinal Bernardin could be interpreted, Prof. Schindler believes, to mean that issues of doctrine or their relevance to practice could be postponed for resolution *by means of the dialogue itself*, whereas for him, the resolution of these differences is itself a condition for a genuinely Catholic dialogue. For all these reasons, he concludes, the statements calling for the CGI are at least likely to be understood, in our contemporary American context, more in a “liberal” than in a “Catholic” sense.

This is a very short summary of a long and closely packed argument. To its merit is, first, the fact that Prof. Schindler offers a genuinely *theological* response to the CGI and its statements. He is correct in insisting that questions about the unity or communion of the Church are from the beginning and in the end about matters of substance, indeed about the substance of the truth and grace revealed and given in Christ and his Spirit that *constitute* the Church as a distinct community (exclusivity) with a universal mission of evangelization and dialogue (inclusivity). Secondly, he has read the pertinent documentation carefully and respectfully and deals with its defenders always respectfully and courteously, one might even say, “civilly.” There would have been no need for a call to overcome polarizations among us if this were a more common phenomenon.

Besides these merits, however, one may be allowed, one hopes with equal respect and courteousness, to raise some questions about his method and analysis. The first problem concerns a method he borrows from Fr. Dulles: that is, his concern about how the text is likely to be understood in our present American context. On the one hand, this is a legitimate concern: anyone has to take care how his words are likely to be understood and to express himself in a way that will best avoid misunderstandings. On the other hand, no author, no matter how careful he is, can avoid all misinterpretations of his words and should not be held responsible for them, or at least not for all of them. Thus, for example, the capsule-description of the Church’s faith that there are three Persons in God has been misunderstood to mean that there are three Gods. Closer to home, and related to one of Fr. Dulles’ illustrations, when I said that I believed that Jesus Christ is the unique Savior of mankind, a graduate student replied, “Oh, so then you think that only a Christian can be saved.” When I said that I believed in the ancient axiom that “outside the Church there is no salvation,” he said, “Oh, then you have to be a Roman Catholic to be saved.” Now, to my mind neither of my statements carries the implications my partner in dialogue drew from them, and I had to say that he has misinterpreted both me and the classical

claims I had invoked.

This conversation illustrates the danger of fixing on interpretations that are given and even more that simply *might be* given to a person's words and claims. No speaker or writer can be held responsible for all the implications another person or persons may draw from them. Too many theologians have been unjustly accused of implications which others have drawn or fear that others will draw from their statements. Speakers or writers should be held responsible for what they say; others should be held responsible for what they understand them to say. The best method is precisely a dialogue in which statements are made, interpretations are offered, and a conversation ensues in which ambiguities can be clarified and misinterpretations corrected. But I think that appeals to what *might be thought to be implied* is a dead-end street.

A more substantive problem in Prof. Schindler's theological response has to do with the question of ecclesiology, with the notion of the Church. He himself admits that he has a very "high" ecclesiology, derived from a very "high" christology. I cannot disagree with him here: the inner reality of the Church is the mystery of communion realized within it, a communion that is not only horizontal--reaching back across generations to the Apostles and across cultures today to all our fellow believers--but vertical--a communion in the trinitarian life of God (see 1 John 1:1-4). The Church is not just another social body, but the *Body of Christ* and the *Temple of the Holy Spirit*.

But Prof. Schindler counterposes this high, "ontological" notion of the Church to a "moral" or "sociological" notion of the Church, which he thinks is favored in the CGI statements. Leaving aside the accuracy of this judgment, the more important issue is that Prof. Schindler's essay does not succeed in what I take to be the chief ecclesiological challenge: the integration into a single vision of the "moral" or "sociological" with the "mysterious" or "ontological" dimensions of the Church. In *Lumen gentium* 8, the Second Vatican Council insisted that "the communion of faith hope and love" that is the Church was established and is sustained by Christ as a "visible structure," and that "the hierarchically structured society and the mystical Body of Christ, the visible group and the spiritual community, the earthly Church and the Church endowed with heavenly gifts, should not be considered to be two realities but form a single complex reality constituted by a human and a divine element." The Council even compares this complex reality to Christ himself, fully human and fully divine.

These statements occur in the last paragraph of a chapter entitled "The Mystery of the Church." That mystery is not a simple puzzle or enigma; mystery is understood theologically: the extraordinary claims, first, that in Jesus of Nazareth, one like us in all things except sin, so human that he could even die, the eternal Word of God took flesh, and, second, that in the imperfect community of Christian believers, all of whom are sinners, is realized the People of God, the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Spirit. When the Scriptures, the tradition, the liturgy make their glorious statements about the Church, they are not speaking about something that existed before creation or something that exists somewhere above us, half-way between us and God, but about the community that gathers for worship in our parishes and that gathers you and me and all the other quite ordinary and quite ordinarily sinful believers in this particular place at this particular time. *This* is the mystery of the Church, in all its scandalous particularity. Take away from this quite ordinary-looking community what transcendently constitutes it--its relation

to the Trinity--and you eliminate the mystery. Take away from it its humanity--its embodiment in the subjectivity and intersubjectivity of its members--and you once again remove the mystery, in its precise christological sense. As with regard to Christ, so with regard to the Church, mystery requires that the divine and the human be affirmed simultaneously, and the chief challenge of an ecclesiology is to understand them synthetically.

Now I do not expect that Prof. Schindler would disagree with these remarks. Where, then, does the difference I sense lie? It lies, first, with the statement of the issue as between an ecclesiology that is "ontological" and an ecclesiology that is "sociological." To my mind it is fatal to make this dichotomy. The "ontology" of the Church *is* "sociological," that is, it refers to a social reality. The mystery of the Church is that in this society of men and women believers, so like many other human communities in its imperfect history and concrete realizations, in having structures of authority, community-constituting rites, language, memories, and hopes--in this very human community the mystery of God-in-Christ is present and at work. There is no Church apart from these quite concrete social realities, and if these latter, in all their humanity, are ignored then it is something other than the mystery of the Church that one is studying and talking about.

Prof. Schindler's essay in some respects illustrates an unfortunate development in the years since the Second Vatican Council: the idea that one has to choose between the Council's designation of the Church as the "People of God" and its designation of the Church as "Mystery" or "communion." (If I am not mistaken, he never once refers to the Church as "People of God.") But it is quite contrary to the Council to turn these notions into rivals. The Doctrinal Commission explicitly reminded the bishops of the Council that the discussion of the Church as People of God continued the discussion of the Church as Mystery. Only now, in the second chapter of *Lumen gentium*, the focus would shift from the grand vision of the origins of the Church in the eternal plan of God and of its consummation in the Kingdom (ch. 1) to that same Mystery as realized on earth as the People of God in the course of time between the Ascension of Christ and his return in glory. Perhaps one could say that the Council's integrated notion of the Church sees it as the historical People of God in whom is realized the mystery of communion in the life of God.

One of the oldest "definitions" of the Church is the *congregatio fidelium*, the "assembly of believers;" St. Thomas Aquinas invoked it often. It has been dismissed as purely nominal or even as merely sociological. But its great merit is that it is both sociological and theological: among the many assemblages of human beings, this one gathers those enabled by God's grace to believe in Jesus Christ. Its defining and constitutive meanings derive from him, center around him, intend him and his God and Father. Other "definitions," sometimes considered more "theological," describe the mysterious depths of this social group, but they all not only presuppose this notion of the Church as their concrete referent in the world and in history, but also presuppose the grounding reality of the faith without which there is no justification for individuals and no communion among them.

This is why even a primarily "sociological" approach to the Church, as in polls and surveys, has much to offer, sometimes quite disturbingly, for a knowledge of the present state of any Church; and it is why even the sociological elements in the CGI's description of division and

polarization and its proposal of a search to “revitalize” the common ground in faith and practice that makes the Church the Church is not some superficial analysis but one that goes to the heart of the existence and effectiveness of the Church. A Church divided over issues of doctrine and practice is less than what the Church ought to be, less fully realizes the communion (common share) of life given and possible in Christ and his Spirit, less effectively realizes the Church’s redemptive purpose in history. I think, therefore, that there is far more in common between the concerns of the leaders of the CGI and those of Prof. Schindler than he allows for. They are *both* talking about the substantive reality of the Church.

For this reason I appreciate Prof. Schindler’s essay more as an effort to supply one possible theological foundation for the effort to strengthen or even, if necessary, to recreate the common ground without which there is no community of faith than as a defensible critique of the CGI’s vision. It fills in some aspects perhaps only implicit in the latter’s statements or other aspects unstated because perhaps taken for granted. This is a useful contribution. Less useful, I believe, as already hinted above, is the method, in the end perhaps unverifiable, that criticizes authors for what others are considered likely to understand them to be saying. (The adequacy of contrasting ideal-types of dialogue--“Catholic” and “liberal”--may also be questioned, but that can perhaps be left for another occasion.) Finally, there is something lacking in Prof. Schindler’s essay: an effort to show how his high christology and ecclesiology and his insistence on conversion from sin translates into practical directives or methods for a “Catholic” dialogue and how these will differ from those proposed in the CGI texts. In the meantime, one may be grateful to him for an essay which illustrates Hilaire Belloc’s poem:

Of Courtesy: it is much less
 Than Courage of Heart or Holiness,
 Yet in my Walks it seems to me
 That the Grace of God is in Courtesy.