



INITIATIVE REPORT

CATHOLIC COMMON GROUND INITIATIVE

November 2015



Fr. Bryan Massingale gives the Murnion Lecture, "Is Common Ground Possible in the Pursuit of Racial Justice?"

The Struggle of Dialogue and Dialoguing Toward Struggle

Dannis M. Matteson

The Catholic Common Ground Initiative (CCGI) is committed to facing difficult issues in the Church which create polarization and lifting these issues up for dialogue. At our annual Murnion Lecture in June, Fr. Bryan Massingale of Marquette University challenged us to go beyond dialogue in his lecture "Is Common Ground Possible in Pursuit of Racial Justice?" The challenge gave us pause as an audience, especially the CCGI Advisory Committee. How should CCGI, an initiative dedicated to dialogue, respond when confronted by this challenge?

Fr. Massingale exposed the crisis of racism in our country and church during his lecture on June 26th, 2015. He did this with a striking and painful litany of African Americans who have died as a result of police violence. The long list of victims, Fr. Massingale explained, is a tragic sign that the civil rights movement remains unfinished.

Why does racism persist? Fr. Massingale synthesized four points that help to explain how racism continues to be perpetuated in the United States. First, he explained, there has never been a serious commitment to racial equality in our country. His second and third points emphasized the serious problem of white ambivalence and the lack of willingness to "pop the white bubble." The fourth reason was psychological: sympathy can be racially selective.

Given racism's continued persistence and the reasons it still grips our society, Fr. Massingale outlined the Catholic Church's response to racism, critiquing it as inadequate. Fr. Massingale elaborated that the Catholic approach to racism focuses too much on individual acts of malice instead of seeing racism as a communal ill. It responds to racism by promoting dialogue and education, but it does not extend beyond dialogue and education to foster action. Further, he argued that the Church does not do enough to uphold African American agency and leadership, and, it still identifies itself as a white institution.

Dr. Martin Luther King's approach to racism stands in stark contrast to that of the Church, as Fr. Massingale pointed out. Dr. King imagined a beloved community whose goal was to complete the civil rights movement and exist in genuine equality. Dr. King described racism as a soul sickness, a spiritual crisis gripping our society. He saw the soul of America is in desperate need of redemption which must be set into motion by widespread lament and conversion.

What does this look like practically? Fr. Massingale evoked Dr. King's wisdom that any call for social change incorporates conflict and struggle, emphasizing that, "we need to undertake practices of conflictual solidarity!" According to Fr. Massingale, for common ground to happen, we are required to move beyond dialogue and be willing to engage in active struggle.

To conclude the lecture, Fr. Massingale addressed the question within the title of his presentation: is common ground possible in the pursuit of racial justice? "I find myself caught between tense hope and realistic despair," he told the audience. He shared that he finds himself troubled by questions that ask whether the Church can be something different, or if it even wants to be. The grave reality of racism leaves many, including Fr. Massingale, with a sort of "blues hope" that provides a hesitant "perhaps" in answer to these questions. He ended the lecture noting that sociologically, human change is possible. "What is does not have to be...therein lies the hope and the change."



Fr. Bryan Massingale delivers the 2015 Murnion Lecture

How does CCGI address the questions brought to the forefront by Fr. Massingale? How do we as an initiative face Fr. Massingale's challenge to "go beyond dialogue" and enter the struggle? Perhaps some history around CCGI and racial justice might help us to find a way forward.

CCGI has a history of contending with the reality of racism within the Church. An example of this can be found in *Called To Be Catholic*, one of CCGI's founding documents, which describes a list of 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." This critical list includes mention of African American communities and the Church's need to embrace African American cultural and social concerns.

Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, former Chicago Archbishop and founder of CCGI, also made strong statements challenging the Church to face racism. The following are some excerpts from his writings that address racism:

"To follow the Lord, we must love all those whom he loves. There is no other way...Racism is thus an attack on Christianity at its roots. ...This is not the way of Jesus and the community of friendship with God which he founded." (1)

"...racism is a terrible evil. It's a sin! It is extremely destructive... As a society, but especially as a Christian community, we have an obligation to do everything in our power, first to condemn it, but that's negative. Positively, we must do all that we can to bring people together." (2)

"But in this [Chicago] metropolitan area there is a low-key, chronic racism that manifests itself every day in the usual ways: inadequate housing, jobs, healthcare, and education, as well as certain distance between people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. This form of racism has been described...as 'the quiet riots' gripping our society today.

"We often assume that the silent wounds of chronic racism are incurable conditions of contemporary life. So, we try to live with the 'quiet riots.' However, upon further reflection, even the perennially optimistic person recognizes that such silent racism is a problem waiting to turn into a deafening crisis. To put it bluntly, there will be no end to acute racial crises until we attend to the chronic problems of racism and cultural misunderstandings in Chicago..." (3)

In light of CCGI's collection of resources that deal with racism, how might we respond to Fr. Massingale's challenge to take racial justice concerns beyond dialogue? Perhaps our first step in embracing the challenge — as an initiative and as a Church — is to finally make racial justice a priority. How can we move beyond dialogue when an honest examination shows that we rarely talk about about racism?

The urgent challenge to move beyond dialogue is an uncomfortable one. This call pushes us to ask ourselves how serious we are about equality. It snaps us into reality and hopefully prompts us to ask ourselves "where do we start?!" Pope Francis has declared dialogue to be the general prayer intention for the month of November. He noted that, "When leaders in various fields ask me for advice, my response is always the same: dialogue, dialogue, dialogue... It is the only way for individuals, fami-

lies, and societies to grow along with the culture of encounter." He counseled that dialogue should be done "in a way that everyone can see in the other not an enemy, not a rival, but a brother or sister to be welcomed and embraced" (4). Let us do the dialogue, so that we can move beyond it towards active struggle for real racial equality.

(1) Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, "Christ Lives in Me: A Pastoral Reflection on Jesus and His Meaning For the Christian Life, 1985" in Selected Works of Cardinal Bernardin: Homilies and Teaching Documents, ed. Alphonse P. Spilly (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 132.

(2) Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, "Here and Now: Pastoral Statement on Youth, 1994" in Selected Works of Cardinal Bernardin: Homilies and Teaching Documents ed. Alphonse P. Spilly (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 224.

(3) Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, "Civic Unity in Chicago: Is it only a dream?" Hesburgh Forum Luncheon, Chicago, IL 1989, in Selected Works of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin: Church and Society ed. Alphonse P. Spilly (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 651.

(4) http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/10/31/popes_general_prayer_intention_for_november_is_for_dialogue/1183565

Pope Francis: The Church's Mouthpiece for Dialogue

Andrew Cirillo

Pope Francis promoted the importance of dialogue in the Church clearly and abundantly throughout his September visit to the United States. Beginning with his address to the joint-session of Congress, Francis charged the political leaders of our nation "...to defend and preserve the dignity of [our] fellow citizens in the tireless and demanding pursuit of the common good..." (1) Indeed, Pope Francis challenged all Americans to recognize the critical nature of dialogue both in his speeches and his actions. He demonstrated the art of dialogue by listening and taking every option into consideration regardless of the topic at hand.

In his statement to the United Nations, the Argentinean-born Pontiff focused on our delicate relationship with nature, urging his audience to dialogue with the environment. "First...we human beings are part of the environment. We live in communion with it, since the environment itself entails ethical limits which human activity must acknowledge and respect...Second, because every creature, particularly a living creature, has an intrinsic value, in its existence, its life, its beauty and its interdependence with other creatures." (2) Thus, his message of

dialogue as reaching out, listening, and collaborating in the presence of love extends beyond human relationship to our relationship with nature.

Francis explicates his message of care and concern for the world, using the vehicle of love, by promoting the difficult, yet necessary process of dialogue. Bradford E. Hinze reflects this dialogical attitude necessary for effecting change within the world: "...this approach is distinguished by its stress on the importance of listening to and learning from the polyphony of voices, both complementary and conflicting voices, in scriptural texts and in the history of the Church, those marginalized voices within the community, those silenced in our midst and at the borders, especially the poor, but also neighbors and those from alien lands with different beliefs and practices." (3) Francis' mission to the U.S. exemplified these words.



As Catholic Christians, we are called to heed Pope Francis' — and Cardinal Bernardin's — advice to seek right relationship with the Church. If we are truly serious about building ekklesia upon the precepts and teachings of love, we must search for the common good. The late George Basil Cardinal Hume, OSB, underscores Cardinal Bernardin's passion for dialogue: "...the Catholic Common Ground Initiative itself must not be divisive, it is a search for the common ground where we all stand, not the different pieces of land from where we can proclaim differing opinions." (4)

Pope Francis has truly become a mouthpiece of dialogue especially in light of today's harsh realities. Human trafficking, destitution, incessant violence, environmental degradation, and the impasse between technological advancement and governmental stability affect families, workplaces, faith communities, and the world. If we are to solve any of these problems, we must grow in what Francis displays in his acts of encounter. At the September 11 Interreligious Memorial Service at Ground Zero, Pope Francis intoned, "This place of death became a place of life too, a place of saved lives, a hymn to the triumph of life

continued on back

over the prophets of destruction and death, to goodness over evil, to reconciliation and unity over hatred and division.”(5) Let us heed our Holy Father and become instruments of goodness, reconciliation, unity, and life through listening, through challenging, through upholding the common good, and most importantly through dialogue.

(1) Pope Francis, “Visit to the Joint Session of the United States Congress: Address of the Holy Father,” September 24, 2015.

(2) Pope Francis, “Meeting with the Members of the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization: Address of the Holy Father,” September 25, 2015.

(3) Bradford E. Hinze, “Ecclesial Repentance and the Demands of Dialogue,” *Theological Studies* 61, no. 2 (May 2000).

(4) Cardinal Basil Hume, “One in Christ: Unity and Diversity in the Church Today,” *National Pastoral Life Center* (1999): 2.

(5) Pope Francis, “Interreligious Meeting: Address of the Holy Father,” September 25, 2015.

2016 Bernardin Conference: In The World and In The Church: The Identity of Catholic Institutions

In his 1991 address to Fordham University, entitled “Catholic Identity: Resolving Conflicting Expectations,” Cardinal Bernardin addresses the topic of Catholic institu-

tional identity and calls for dialogue among all stakeholders. The Cardinal raised important questions that continue to challenge — questions such as: How do we maintain a Catholic culture in a pluralistic society? How do we infuse



Participants at the 2012 Bernardin Conference

institutions with a Catholic culture, especially as they move toward a mixed model of identity? How can we maintain authorization by, and accountability to, the Church? These and other challenging questions will be addressed at our upcoming conference to be held **September 30 to October 2, 2016** at Techny Towers, Techny, Illinois.

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