

*“In necessariis, unitas...in dubiis, libertas...  
in omnibus, caritas”*

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As we approach the first anniversary of the death of Cardinal Bernardin, may we dare to hope that one part of his legacy, the inauguration of the Common Ground initiative, has already borne some fruit in the American church? I am not speaking primarily of the formal initiative in which members of the task force have already met once behind closed doors to begin important discussions. I am speaking of the way in which the initiative has already begun to inspire the imagination of Catholics throughout the country in parishes, diocesan chanceries, Catholic seminaries, universities and Newman centers, to begin exploring new ways to address the issues that divide so many in the church.

Of course, some questions have been raised of late regarding the real extent of this polarization. Andrew Greeley is probably right in his assessment that the polarization about which the initiative was so concerned is a serious issue not so much for rank and file Catholics as for the Catholic intellectual and leadership elites ( “Polarized Catholics? Don’t Believe Your Mail!” *America* 176 [February 22, 1997]: 11-15). But polarization among these elites does have important pastoral implications for all Catholics. To the extent that this polarization becomes a factor in ecclesiastical appointments, in the determination of curricula and textbooks in Catholic schools and religious education programs, in the choice of speakers at church sponsored events, in the hiring of seminary

faculty, in decisions regarding the seminaries which a diocese chooses to support, and finally in the issues within the Catholic church which the media brings before the public eye, this polarization *is* or at least should be a matter of concern for the whole church.

Clearly, wherever Catholics gather today under the inspiration of the Common Ground initiative, their dialogue will have to be governed by some basic principles. Some of these were sketched out in the founding document of the initiative. In this article I would like to propose as one guiding principle a maxim, the theological roots of which go back to the early church.

In his first encyclical, *Ad Petri cathedram*, Pope John XXIII quoted a well-known maxim, *In necessariis, unitas...in dubiis, libertas...in omnibus, caritas*, “unity in that which is essential, liberty in matters of doubt, and charity in all things,” (a variant of this maxim substitutes *in non necessariis* for the middle clause’s *in dubiis*). It would reappear in article 92 of Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. I believe this maxim offers some much needed theological and historical perspective for those of us who wish to find more productive ways of dealing with the difficult issues that divide us in the church.

### **“Unity in Essentials, Liberty in Doubtful Matters...”**

The Catholic Christian tradition has always insisted on the need for a unity in essentials. Less clear has been how to determine those matters of belief and practice that must be counted essential. In the early church St. Vincent of Lerins gave us the most famous criterion, *Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*, “that which is believed everywhere, always and by all.” The problem, of course, lies in the proper

application of this criterion. If taken too literally, much of what we generally take as of the essence of the church’s sacramental life, for example, would not qualify. St. Vincent’s canon does not seem to take sufficiently into account what we have come to speak of as the development of doctrine, the recognition that some matters of belief actually took a good bit of time, often centuries, before one could ever speak of them as believed “everywhere and by all.” It was in part for this reason that at Vatican II the council’s Theological Commission rejected proposals to have St. Vincent’s canon included in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation.

Clearly, the task of developing some specific set of rules or guidelines for distinguishing the essential from the non-essential in the faith and life of the church is a daunting one. The central insight, however, is that within the life of the church there has always been a healthy tension between the necessary unity of the Christian faith, and the real diversity which enriches that unity. Let me offer a couple of observations that help put this task in some perspective.

**Vatican II Affirmed a Legitimate Diversity in Spirituality, Liturgy, Ecclesiastical Discipline and Theology**

In the council’s Decree on Ecumenism # 17, the bishops affirmed the distinctive heritage of the Eastern rite churches in full communion with the church of Rome. These churches possess a distinctive spirituality, liturgy, ecclesiastical discipline and theological tradition. This text presents a clear but not always acknowledged recognition that within the one Catholic church there is already a rich diversity. This must be clearly affirmed in the face of tendencies in the church to limit ecclesial diversity to, at most, peripheral matters of church discipline. When we speak of liberty regarding “that which is not

essential” the Decree on Ecumenism suggests that along with disciplinary matters, this liberty must be extended to such significant spheres of Christian life as spirituality, liturgy, and theology.

We must keep in mind what history suggests to us regarding the parameters for an acceptable diversity within the unity of the church. For St. Paul this unity in diversity freed the Gentiles from adherence to the works of the Mosaic law. Yet at the same time Paul recognized the legitimacy of Jewish-Christians continuing to follow the works of the law. A century later St. Justin Martyr would reaffirm this stance of tolerance toward those who continued to adhere to the law of Moses. St. Irenaeus sought to persuade Pope Victor that the church of Asia Minor’s practice of celebrating the Easter feast on a date different from the West did not compromise but rather celebrated the unity of the faith. St. Augustine, in his letter to Januarius, observed, “for anything that is neither against the faith nor against good morals must be a matter of indifference and observed with due regard for those in whose society one lives.” In the eleventh century Anselm acknowledged the diversity in liturgical practice between East and West, noting that one might legitimately celebrate Eucharist with either leavened or unleavened bread. At the Council of Florence bishops from the East and West sought to restore union and addressed the delicate question of the procession of the Holy Spirit. Recall that in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed Roman Catholics profess that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father *and the Son.*” The phrase, “and the Son” is a translation of the Latin, *filioque*, and was first added to the creed in the late sixth century, over the objections of the East. By the fifteenth century this had become a major doctrinal dispute. At the Council of Florence representatives of the East and West acknowledged the different

teachings but concluded that “all were aiming at the same meaning in different words.” Finally, I would mention the sixteenth and seventeenth century *de auxiliis* controversy between the Jesuits and the Dominicans regarding the relationship between divine grace and human freedom. After considerable theological debate in which each side condemned the views of their opponents, a papal commission was created to investigate the matter. A definitive conclusion came only when Pope Paul V prohibited either side from condemning the views of the other.

In conclusion, what history teaches us is that we must be very cautious in our assessment of that which constitutes the non-negotiable “essentials” in the Christian life. When we consider this significant diversity in church life, it puts in a rather different perspective the viewpoints of those who question, for example, the validity of a Eucharistic liturgy when a priest uses inclusive language in the canon of the mass or when there is a slight change in the recipe for the bread to be consecrated, or when a certain church chooses to stand during the eucharistic prayer. These differences may represent departures from an ecclesiastical norm but they pale in comparison to the wide ranging diversity in church practice which we have witnessed in past times. Even regarding more doctrinal matters, we must be cautious in assuming for example, that a Catholic who affirms Christ’s “symbolic” eucharistic presence over a “real” presence (the symbolic being, perhaps, an acceptable way to describe *how it is* that Christ is truly present in the eucharist), is in fact rejecting orthodox eucharistic doctrine. These things can only be discerned by careful investigation and dialogue.

**We the Church Need to Celebrate the Considerable Unity in Faith and Life  
which Already Exists**

There are those who would characterize the church at large as facing a crisis of belief. They cite polls which claim that a significant percentage of Catholics no longer believe many central church teachings. One might mention the Gallup poll of several years ago and the Diocese of Rochester’s recent study of common Catholic understandings of the Eucharist. Frankly, I look upon these studies with some suspicion. It may be that Catholics today cannot match previous generations in their ability to quote precise catechism definitions but in my experience, not only as a theologian but as a pastoral minister and frequent public speaker at parish and diocesan events, I do not find widespread dissent among Catholics regarding central Catholic beliefs. I believe, for example, that among active Catholics one might find widespread acceptance of all of the following: 1) Scripture is the inspired Word of God and Tradition is the Spirit-assisted mediation of that Word in history, 2) the hierarchy is the authoritative interpreter of that Word, 3) the salvation of God has come to us definitively in the person of Jesus Christ, 4) the bodily resurrection of Jesus, 5) our hope in the resurrection of the body and life eternal, 6) the efficacy of the sacraments, 7) the effective real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, 8) the exemplary role of Mary in the life of the church, 9) the necessity of an ordained ministry in the church, 10) the shape of the moral life offered by the ten commandments and Jesus’ law of love. There may be, it is true, significant differences among Catholics regarding what each of these affirmations mean, but at what point in history would this have *not* been the case? Put simply, the vast majority of Catholics recite the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed every Sunday and do so on the presumption

that this is *their* faith. Following the renewal of baptismal promises, they give a proud and unambiguous “Amen” to the priest’s assertion: “This is our faith. This is the faith of the Church. We are proud to profess it in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

In this so called “age of dissent” I look around and do not find bishops excommunicating one another as they did in the early centuries of the church. I do not find wide ranging doctrinal battles among bishops and theologians over such central matters of faith as the divinity of Christ. If we take a closer look at the supposed epidemic of dissent in the church we find that it by and large coalesces around two poles: 1) the application of the church’s moral vision to questions concerning specific sexual behaviors and the means to aiding/controlling human reproduction; 2) questions regarding who may or may not be ordained to ministry in the church and the proper exercise of authority on the part of those so ordained. These are serious issues, but when one looks at the totality of the Christian faith, I think it is clear that these two sets of issues are quite specific and are eclipsed by the overwhelming acceptance of the apostolic faith as it finds classical expression in the church’s scripture, liturgy and creeds.

### **“...And in All Things, Charity”**

It is difficult to dispute the fact that discourse within the church today is becoming increasingly “uncivil.” The reasons for this are many, not the least of which is that discourse within the church closely mirrors the character of discourse in our larger society. I will occasionally tune in to a talk radio show and what strikes me about these shows is not so much the substance of the positions being espoused, but the unwillingness to grant good intentions to one’s opponent. What we have instead is what some have called the

“politics of demonization.” It is regrettable that this same quality is found more and more on the pages of the *National Catholic Reporter*, *The Wanderer* and even many diocesan newspapers. Two things appear to be lacking in this development, an eschatological modesty and Christian charity. The importance of both was affirmed in several texts from Vatican II.

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation reminds us that the church is a pilgrim people and as such is progressing “towards the fullness of God’s truth” (DV # 8). This fullness of truth is not yet, and will not be, short of the eschaton, in our possession. As the council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World put it:

The church is guardian of the deposit of God’s word, and draws religious and moral principles from it, but it does not always have a ready answer to every question. Still, it is eager to associate the light of revelation with the experience of humanity in trying to clarify the course upon which it has recently entered (GS # 33).

This means that even if we accept the clear parameters of orthodox Catholic belief as determined by the magisterium, there is much to be discussed in a spirit of eschatological modesty and openness. Doctrinal pronouncements always represent both an end and a beginning for theological reflection in the life of the church.

Later in the Pastoral Constitution, the council writes that it is the principal task of the laity to integrate the gospel into every sphere of human life:

Very often their Christian vision will suggest a certain solution in some given situation. Yet it happens rather frequently, and legitimately so, that some of the faithful, with no less sincerity, will see the problem quite differently. Now if one or other of the proposed solutions is readily perceived by many to be closely connected with the message of the Gospel, they ought to remember that in those cases no one is permitted to identify

the authority of the church exclusively with his or her own opinion. *Let them, then, try to guide each other by sincere dialogue in a spirit of mutual charity and with a genuine concern for the common good of all* (GS # 43).

This “spirit of mutual charity” and “genuine concern for the common good” is desperately needed in the church today. What does this spirit of charity mean concretely? First it means giving the benefit of doubt to those with whom we disagree. Let us take the question of the ordination of women. The “spirit of mutual charity” would mean that those faithful to the church’s position on the matter not accuse women seeking ordination of a brazen clerical power grab. It means that those who oppose the present teaching not characterize the pope and bishops as sexist misogynists. The “spirit of mutual charity” may mean a willingness to at least sympathetically entertain the arguments of the opposing side.

For some this stance may smack of an unacceptable relativism. But to “sympathetically entertain” the viewpoint of another is not to acquiesce to another’s position; it is to try and discover the grounds and logic of an alternative position with an attitude open to new insight. New insight frequently can come without a substantive change in a particular position. But what of questions that have been declared “closed” by the papacy? First, where such a matter is deemed closed because the corresponding teaching belongs to the deposit of faith we must remember the distinction which the church makes between the binding character of a doctrine and both the theological formulation of that doctrine and the theological arguments adduced in support of the doctrine. It seems to me that even on such “closed decisions” dialogue could well lead to new insight into the doctrine’s best formulation and the relative adequacy of the

arguments given in support of the doctrine. Moreover, a study of church history should remind us of the danger of too quickly concluding that since a pope has spoken authoritatively on a matter, that matter must be closed in perpetuity. When a pope solemnly defines a matter of faith or morals, he does so with the infallible assistance of the Holy Spirit. When a pope, on the other hand, makes a pastoral judgment to end discussion of a particular topic, while this may be a legitimate exercise of his pastoral ministry, such actions fall under the category of prudential judgments, and such judgments are *not* protected by the charism of infallibility.

I think many underestimate today the real discipline demanded by authentic dialogue. This discipline is suggested in David Tracy’s description of real conversation.

He writes:

Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it (David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 19).

I would suggest that this is a rigorous view of disciplined dialogue informed by Christian charity which has rarely been practiced by many of the voices of either the left or the right.

Finally, let me offer a more practical example of the way in which the church is being hurt by the lack of charity manifested by some. I recently received a letter from a person who attended a parish mission which I conducted. The letter suggested that this person was offended by a number of things which I had said. He also chose this opportunity to complain about some local parish decisions regarding the placement of the tabernacle in a side chapel and about the pastor’s appearance in public without clerical

garb, matters about which, quite obviously as a guest speaker, I had very little control. Okay, so he needed to let off some steam--fair enough. At the end of the letter he admitted that he might have misunderstood some of what I said and invited my clarification. So far so good. However, I came to the bottom of the final page only to discover that he had sent copies of his letter to the apostolic nuncio in Washington, the local archbishop as well as the local pastor. Furthermore he derisively gave the title “Mr.” rather than “Rev.” to the pastor, obviously in reference to the pastor’s attire. At this point what began as a letter inviting respectful conversation over different viewpoints takes on the character of a derisive and sarcastic “report to authorities.” So much for mutual charity!

I would like to conclude by recalling last year’s Lenten message to the church of Los Angeles offered by their pastor, Cardinal Roger Mahoney (“Fasting from the Condemnation of Others,” *Origins* 26 [February 20, 1997]: 572-3). In this message he explained what lead him to serve on the Catholic Common Ground initiative begun by the late Cardinal Bernardin. He had begun to observe that “a spirit of harsh judgment, bitterness and disunity were beginning to take hold at many levels in the church here in our country.” He goes on to say: “I was becoming ever more sad to see this meanness replace the ideal to which Jesus has called us. The harm to relationships within the church itself was growing, and the real public scandal exhibited to people outside the church was becoming embarrassing.” Consequently he proposed the following as Lenten observances: 1) fasting from the spirit of judgment and condemnation of others; 2) prayer for the unity of the Catholic community and especially for those with whom we disagree; 3) study of biblical passages which reflect Jesus’ own patience with us and

generous forgiveness of our failings; 4) reflection on the sections of the Catechism of the Catholic Church which deal with the four marks of the church: one, holy, catholic and apostolic; 5) charitable works which would include reaching out to those with whom we differ such that our dialogue and conversation will reflect Jesus' call in our lives.

There are important issues at stake in the church today. Many of them are tremendously complicated and have profound consequences for the lives of many people. If these important issues provoke disagreement we should recall the lessons of history that remind us that disagreement has always been present in the church. I do not believe the credibility of the church is undermined by such disagreement. Within limits these differences can be seen as healthy tensions which speak to the vitality of the Catholic faith today. What *can* undermine the credibility of the church is the way in which we as a community handle this disagreement. When we demonize the opposition, when we caricature the positions of our opponents, when we usurp the proper role of the magisterium for ourselves, we are both ignoring basic canons for good church order and violating the most fundamental law of the Christian life, the law of charity. Let us make it our covenant together, as a community of disciples seeking to imitate our Lord in every way, to prayerfully, respectfully and honorably address that which divides us in the church. If we are faithful to this pact, I have every confidence that we can offer a most powerful witness to the world as a community that dares to face disagreement and conflict fearlessly, in a spirit of love and reconciliation.