

A Catholic Dialogue on Immigration

National Pastoral Life Center

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Foreword

In March 2007, the Annual Cardinal Bernadin Conference of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative focused on Immigration Policy in the United States. Catholics who attended brought different experiences, expertise, and perspectives to the dialogue. One striking realization to come out of the conference was that Catholics now are in leadership positions in the government, in labor unions, and in the business community. In addition, many of the new immigrants are Catholic, whether they come from Latin America (Mexico, Columbia, Peru), the Caribbean (Haiti, the Dominican Republic), Africa (Nigeria, Somalia, Zimbabwe), Asia (the Philippines, Vietnam, Korea) or Eastern Europe (Poland, Russia). And so our church includes people on all sides of this issue.

Moreover, although the bishops of the United States have spoken clearly and even prophetically about the need for comprehensive immigration reform, our Catholic community is as divided as the general United States population.

“Our dialogue taught us...that listening to one another, sharing our concerns, and learning together about different aspects of this very complex issue can bear fruit.”

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Origins and Foundations

The Catholic Common Ground Initiative arose from the conviction that tensions and polarities threaten the unity that should characterize our faith community. There are varying perspectives on the truth that result at times in heated arguments; these divisions can foster an acrimony that seems devoid of charity and results in a divisiveness that strains fidelity. The goal of the initiative was to become an environment in which some of this divisiveness could be overcome.

Its origins are found in a statement that the late Cardinal Joseph Bernadin of Chicago sent to his priests in February 1992. “The Parish in the Local Church” focuses on the role of priests in relationship to the people, and encourages Chicago priest to combine fidelity to church teaching with deep pastoral sensitivity. In effect, it encourages a “both/and” approach to issues that could be divisive, for example, concerns about liturgical life, parish devotions, and approaches to religious education.

As Msgr. Philip J. Murnion, the founder of the National Pastoral Life Center and a friend of Cardinal Bernadin, described it, the cardinal sent him the statement as a courtesy, and a conversation ensued between them about how such pastoral concerns might be addressed. Over the next four years, they gathered a small group of pastoral leaders to assess together the situation of the church. At the end of that time, the group began to think about writing the statement that eventually was published as *Called to be Catholic*.

The group then suggested that gathering a committee to model and foster such dialogue would be a good idea. Thus, the Catholic Common Ground Initiative was born. Msgr. Murnion has written, “The Initiative would have a few modest purposes: conducting periodic conferences that would be an example of pursuing the common good and of constructive dialogue among people representing different perspectives and positions in the life of the church; occasional consultations that would assemble the best information about a subject so that those discussing it might be well informed in their discussions; occasional publications with the same approach and purposes; and an invitation to others in the church to consider the relevance of the statement and proposals for dialogue in their work” (*Foundational Documents*, p. 14).

The Initiative was announced by Cardinal Bernadin on August 12, 1996 and the first meeting of the committee was held on October 24 of that year. Cardinal Bernadin gave a public address on the Initiative that evening, knowing that his cancer had returned and he did not have long to live. His words are memorable: “A dying person does not have time for the peripheral or the accidental. He or she is drawn to the essential, the important—yes, the eternal. And what is important, my friends, is that we find the unity with the Lord and within the community of faith for which Jesus prayed so fervently on the night before he died” (FD, p. 75)

Theologically speaking, the common ground sought by the Initiative is not something created but something that is to be found, or more correctly, experiences anew in prayer and brought to bear on our ecclesial life. The common ground is a community of faith that celebrates its unity; that is so acquainted with the truth that it is able to proclaim the Word in good season and bad; that others view and comment on by saying “see how they love one another”; and that experiences the tranquility associated with fidelity.

The theological foundation for this desire is rooted in Scripture and in tradition. As Catholics, we look to Jesus who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life; who has sent the Spirit to us, a Spirit that draws us into the life of our Triune God. By baptism, we are initiated into and nourished in this life in the Christian community. That life in God fulfills the deepest

yearnings of the human spirit and also calls us to live, as individuals and as a community, in the triune life of God—relationships of truth, love, and fidelity.

Dialogue is also rooted in our understanding of the dignity of the human person and in our recognition that by baptism the Spirit of God dwells in each member of the community. We approach one another, then, with respect, with an awareness that the Wisdom of God may speak to us through the least among us (Rule of Benedict), with vibrant belief in Jesus' promise that "Where two or three are gathered, there am I in the midst of you" (MT 18:20).

"What is important, my friends, is that we find that unity with the Lord and within the community of faith for which Jesus prayed so fervently on the night before he died."

Principles of Dialogue

- 1. We should recognize that no single group or viewpoint in the church has a complete monopoly on the truth.** While the bishops united with the Pope have been specifically endowed by God with the power to preserve the true faith, they too exercise their office by taking counsel with one another and with the experience of the whole church, past and present. Solutions to the church's problems will almost inevitably emerge from a variety of solutions.
- 2. We should not envision ourselves or any one part of the church a saving remnant.** No group within the church should judge itself alone to be possessed of enlightenment or spurn the mass of Catholics, their leaders, or their institutions as unfaithful.
- 3. We should test all proposals for their pastoral realism** and potential impact on living individuals as well as for their theological truth. Pastoral effectiveness is a responsibility of leadership.
- 4. We should presume that those with whom we differ are acting in good faith.** They deserve civility, charity, and a good-faith effort to understand their concerns. We should not substitute labels, abstractions, or blanketing terms—"radical feminism", "the hierarchy", "the Vatican"—for living, complicated realities.
- 5. We should put the best possible construction on differing positions,** addressing their strongest points rather than seizing upon the most vulnerable aspects in order to discredit them. We should detect the valid insights and legitimate worries that may underlie even questionable arguments.
- 6. We should be cautious in ascribing motives.** We should not impugn another's love of the church and loyalty to it. We should not rush to interpret disagreements as conflicts of starkly opposing principles rather than as differences in degree or in prudential pastoral judgments about the relevant facts.
- 7. We should bring the church to engage the realities of contemporary culture,** not by simple defiance or by naive acquiescence, but acknowledging, in the fashion of *Gaudium et spes*, both our culture's valid achievements and real dangers.

Characteristics of a Dialogue

I may, in fact, be changed by what I hear.

- 1. All Dialogue sponsored by the Initiative in intra-church.** We have much to learn from those who have worked at ecumenical and interfaith dialogue over the years, and also from those who are using dialogue for conflict resolution or as a management tool. Nonetheless, our focus is fostering dialogue on issues about which Catholics are polarized.

We distinguish dialogue from debate, discussion, or advocacy. In the dialogue we:

- Stand accountable to the teachings of the church
- Respect diverse viewpoints within the church
- Seek to strengthen unity as well as to identify more precisely points of disagreement

In the words of *Called to be Catholic*, our dialogue, “Promotes the full range and demands of authentic unity, acceptable diversity, and respectful dialogue.”

- 2. Because we stand within the community of Catholic Church, our dialogues begin and are sustained by prayer together.**

Participants in each of our conferences testify to the power of our common worship—Eucharist and Morning or Evening Prayer. Our common commitment to Jesus Christ and the empowerment of the Spirit urge us to openness to one another, to a recognition that we each bear responsibility for the good of the whole community, and to awareness that each of us has contributions to make.

- 3. Initiative dialogues include persons of diverse viewpoints at the same time and place.**

One symptom of the polarization within the church at the present time is the tendency to separate into like-minded groups who belong to like-minded associations, who write for like-minded publications. In fact, it has been an ongoing challenge for the Initiative to be able to gather people at the “poles” of an issue and to engage directly their different viewpoints. When we have succeeded in doing so, most often minds aren’t changed, but relationships are forged and understanding grows about why a different view is held passionately.

- 4. A dialogue is a structured conversation, with clear guidelines. All Participants in Initiative dialogues agree to abide by the principles of dialogue in *Called to be Catholic*.**

Sometimes people are so committed to advocacy for a point of view that they are unwilling to enter into a dialogue which requires respectful, empathetic listening and a realization that I may, in fact, be changed by what I hear. We need to accept this reality.

- 5. Once again, the goal of any Initiative activity is pastoral.**

Our aim is to learn how to make our differences fruitful so that they may enhance the life of the church as a community of faith, workshop and witness.

Distinguishing Debate from Dialogue: A Table

DEBATE	DIALOGUE
Pre-meeting communication between sponsors and participants is minimal and largely irrelevant to what follows.	Pre-meeting contacts and preparation of participants are essential elements of the full process.
Participants tend to be leaders known for propounding a carefully crafted position. The personas displayed in the debate are usually already familiar to the public. The behavior of the participants tends to conform to stereotypes.	Those chosen to participate are not necessarily out-spoken “leaders”. Whoever they are, they speak as individuals whose own unique experiences differ in some respect from others on their “side”. Their behavior is likely to vary to some degree and along some dimensions from stereotypic images other may hold of them.
The atmosphere is threatening attacks and interruptions are expected by participants and are usually permitted by moderators.	The atmosphere is one of safety facilitators propose, get agreement on, and enforce clear ground rules to enhance safety and promote respectful exchange.
Participants speak as representatives of groups.	Participants speak as individuals, from their own unique experience.
Participants speak to their own constituents and perhaps, to the undecided middle.	Participants speak to each other.
Differences within “sides” are denied or minimized.	Differences among participants on the same “side” are revealed, as individual and personal foundations of beliefs and values are explored.
Participants express unswerving commitment to a point of view, approach or idea.	Participants express uncertainties as well as deeply held beliefs.
Participants listen in order to refute the other side’s data and expose faulty logic in their arguments. Questions are asked from a position of certainty. Those questions are often rhetorical challenges or disguised statements.	Participants listen to understand and gain insight into beliefs and concerns of the others. Questions are asked from a position of curiosity.
Statements are predictable and offer little information.	New information surfaces.
Success requires simple impassioned statements.	Success requires exploration of the complexities of the issue being discussed.
Debates operate within the constraints of the dominant public discourse. (This discourse defines the problem and the options for resolution. It assumes that fundamental needs and values are already clearly understood.)	Participants are encouraged to question the dominant public discourse, that is, to express fundamental needs that may or may not be reflected in the discourse and to explore various options for problem definition and resolution. Participants may discover inadequacies in the usual language and concepts used in the public debate.

Distinguishing Discussion from Dialogue

Discussion	Dialogue
The individual's goal is often to bring others over to his or her way of thinking.	The group's goal is to explore and expand understanding of a topic and incorporate varied perspectives.
Individuals present and defend their views.	The focus is on listening to one another, putting aside one's own views in order to fully listen to others.
There is a search for the best view to support a decision or action.	There is a free-flowing exploration of the complexities of an issue.
There is a back-and-forth discussion of differing and often opposing views.	People are not primarily in opposition, but are speaking and listening in an attempt to gain deeper insight and clarity.
Controversial topics often become sources of tension.	Controversial topics become discussible because participants are seeking to increase their understanding and because they deeply respect each other.
There is a constant flow of conversation with someone always speaking.	The pace of the conversation varies with times of silence for thinking and absorbing what has been said.

*Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, New York, Doubleday, 1990, pp. 239-43.

Planning a Dialogue

Our experience is that fostering a dialogue within a parish can be more challenging than planning dialogues with other groups. There are several reasons for this. In many parishes the “hot issues” like immigration which divide parishioners have personal dimensions. For example, issues about religious education, liturgical practice, or the roles of the laity, are not distant and theoretical, but deeply felt and concrete. They often touch parents’ concerns about their children and the pastor’s commitments to certain policies. If the parish is truly polarized, what is needed may be conflict resolution, help with administrative procedures, or healing and reconciliation, rather than dialogue.

Another important factor is that, in a parish, the polarization occurs within a network of ongoing relationships in a community. Parishioners may not want to risk addressing a conflict directly because they want to have a peaceful future together. Others are simply reluctant to introduce conflict into parish life, which they see as a “safe space” and source of comfort. Some will withdraw rather than confront issues. This is particularly true if they don’t believe they will be “heard” or if they perceive great risks in speaking out.

One of the struggles the church faces is what someone called “horizontal excommunication,” i.e., the position that anyone holding a particular view is automatically outside the bounds of the church and therefore not able to be a faithful participant in a dialogue. Is one is unable to suspend that judgment, even within the confines of the dialogue,

dialogue will not be possible, we have to accept that there are people of good will in all groups who simply cannot accept the legitimacy of dialogue.

Nonetheless, a well-planned dialogue with clear ground rules and an astute facilitator can minimize these risks and greatly enhance the life of the community.

Dialogues have been successful when the following points have been taken into consideration:

- Participants agree to abide by the principles of dialogue
- The “issue” being discussed is clear. Some common “input” in the form of an article, a book, or a film (see resource list), can help focus a dialogue. A statement of the question and the “sides” before beginning the dialogue can be helpful.
- The participants agree to the expected outcome of the dialogue—greater mutual understanding, building of relationships, clarification of perspectives, consultation for a decision to be made.
- Recognition that dialogue is not a decision-making activity. However, it can be a prelude to decision-making and those decisions can be enhanced by the fruits of a dialogue.
- If the dialogue is a prelude to decision-making, the participants need clarity about how the decision will be made, by whom, how and when.
- The pastoral leaders participate in the dialogue. When the pastor and the parish staff do not participate in the dialogue, they miss the relationship-building, creative thinking, and insight that the dialogue can provide and the participants feel that their contributions may be fruitless.
- The pastoral leaders participate as equals in the dialogue. All recognize that the pastoral has unique authority within the parish, but for a dialogue to reach its full potential, the pastoral needs to “level the playing field” as much as possible by being an equal within the group.
- In a true dialogue, no one is asked to give up his or her deeply held convictions. Each one is asked to share those convictions as honestly as possible.
- A facilitator guides the conversation.

Facilitating a Group

Engaging someone skilled in facilitation to train facilitators and to consult in developing the process is important. Many parishes and diocese have such people readily available. The Initiative is also willing to provide consultant services.

Notes for Group Facilitators

Personal Preparation

Know the setting; know the group; know the goals of the dialogue. Take quiet time to center oneself.

Recall that being a facilitator is different from being a leader.

Leaders typically have a vision, possess information, and want the group to move in a particular direction.

Facilitators, on the other hand, are asked to attend to the goals of the process: that everyone's view is respected, that all are listened to, that everyone has an opportunity to speak without being contradicted by another. They are asked not to lead in a particular direction. They are asked to listen very carefully and to enable others to listen. They may also be asked to collect the feedback sheets and to fill out a facilitator feedback sheet.

Communication Skills

Employ the best skills to put people at ease and to guide the conversation appropriately. Some of the following examples may help:

- Establish eye contact with the person who is speaking
- Speak in a supportive tone/wording
- Ask open-ended questions, e.g. "How do you feel about immigration?" "Why is this so important to you?"
- Check responses as to content/facts; sentiment/feelings; intent/reasons.
- Be comfortable with silence
- Encourage people to begin with the values they wish to protect rather than the positions they hold.

Active Listening Skills:

- Ask for clarification or expansion of statement
- Paraphrase or reframe as feedback
- Check assumptions
- Check our underlying messages
- Listen for agreement
- Hear people out even when it means through a silence
- Ask: "Have you learned anything new?" "Has anything you have heard changed your view and, if so, how?"

Responsibilities

- Introduce self and the recorder, if there is one, and have all the participants introduce themselves, too. You may ask them to say one thing about themselves.
- Consider offering each person a chance to speak before opening the general discussion.
- Suggest that those who know they are vocal in groups focus on listening to the others, and that those who are very quiet make an effort to speak.
- Listen for underlying values rather than positions.
- Keep the energy flowing. Encourage quiet folks by asking for their opinions.

If the group has a task:

- Appoint a time-keeper if tasks are to be completed by a certain time.
- Keep people on task without being too quick to cut someone off, yet watch for those who monopolize the group's time.

- Keep the discussion focused on the subject.
- Don't ignore the undercurrents—they are part of the process and should be dealt with.
- Avoid your opinions and stories; your job is to draw others out.

Reminder: we all have trouble listening, but the revealing question for each of us is “Do I think my position is discussable? Can I learn anything from the other?”

Suggested Format

“The Church and Immigration Reform”

A Three-Session Parish Dialogue

Week 1 (1hr., 50 min)

Welcome and Opening Prayer (5 min.)

You may choose any format or prayer. The prayer of St. Francis or a prayer to the Holy Spirit would be appropriate.

Introduction to the Principles of Dialogue (45 min.)

You will want to introduce the process of dialogue. You may want to say something like: “dialogue is a process of listening—to the teaching of the church and to one another. Let’s look together at the ‘Principles of Dialogue’ proposed by the Initiative. We’ll allow sufficient time to be sure that everyone has a chance to understand each principle and ask questions.”

At the end, you may wish to say something like: “Does this sound like a different way of entering into a conversation from the way we normally speak?” And this is a good moment to emphasize that dialogue is a structured conversation and we are all learning a new skill.

Break into Small Groups (5min.)

If you have advance registration, it is wise to form groups that have a diversity of opinions in them. If you don’t have pre-registration, asking people to count off numbers to form groups can help to diversity them.

Small Group Warm-up Exercise (15 min.)

It is wise to begin with a “warm-up” exercise in listening to one another that does not involve a controversial topic. So, you might say, “We’re now going to spend a few minutes just listening to one another and getting to know one another. I’m going to pose a question. After a moment’s reflection to gather your thoughts, we’ll go around the group giving each person two minutes to speak. I’ll signal when two minutes are up. This is simply listening, so please don’t respond or ask questions at this point.” A facilitator in

each group is charged with ensuring that each one gets to speak and that the process is observed.

Discussion question: Would you be willing to share something that you had to give up to come tonight? Perhaps you wanted to see a movie, or one of your children had a game, or you have other work to do but you decided this was more important.”

After a moment’s reflection, ask the person sitting to the right of the facilitator to begin and then go around. Of course, if someone doesn’t wish to speak, he or she may pass.

Discussion question: What values do you bring to the discussion about U.S. immigration policy?

You may then say, “After a moment’s reflection to gather your thoughts, we’ll go around the group giving each person two minutes to speak. I’ll signal when two minutes are up. This is simply listening, so please don’t respond or ask questions at this point. A facilitator in each group is charged with ensuring that each one gets to speak and that the process is observed.”

Repeat the process for a second question: Would you be willing to share a time when a value you hold dear about immigration bumped up against another value that is also important to you. In other words, can you think of a time when you felt pulled in two directions about immigration?

Homework, Closing Prayer, & Dismissal (5 min.)

Ask everyone to read the USCCB document, *Strangers No Longer* before next week’s session. Ask them to identify the values expressed in the document. Close with a prayer.

Week 2 (2 hours, 10 minutes)

Welcome and Opening Prayer (5 min.)

You may choose any prayer or format. The Prayer of St. Francis or a prayer to the Holy Spirit would be appropriate.

Principles of Dialogue & Debate/Dialogue Chart (30 min.)

Briefly review the “Principles of Dialogue” and introduce the “Distinguishing Debate from Dialogue” table. Allow time for participants to absorb the differences and to think about examples from their own experience.

Ask participants to identify the values expressed by the US Bishop’s document *Strangers No Longer*.

Introduce and View *The Line in the Sand* (50 min.)

Explain that this film was produced by Catholic Relief Services from interviews with people struggling with the issues on the U.S./Mexico border in Arizona.

Small Group Discussion (30 min.)

Break into the same small groups as Week 1. Invite participants to begin with an attitude of listening to one another, inquiring to understand, rather than to express positions on the

issues. Then begin a discussion of the play using questions derived from the CRS discussion guide:

- What moment in the video stands out for you?
- Which character did you most connect with? Why?
- How do the stories compare with stories of other immigrants you have known?
- What are some of the competing values you heard in the film?

Homework, Closing Prayer & Dismissal (5 min.)

Ask all participants to read “The Catholic Church’s Rich Understanding of U.S. Immigration” and the accompanying timeline (from the Jesuit journal *In All Things*, Winter 2006-2007) before next week’s session. Close the meeting with a prayer.

Week III (1 hr. 45 min.)

Welcome and Opening Prayer (5 min.)

You may choose any prayer or format. The Prayer of St. Francis or a prayer to the Holy Spirit would be appropriate.

Review Principles of Dialogue (5 min.)

Ask participants to quietly reread the “Principles of Dialogue”.

Presentation: Perspectives and the Common Good

Invite a resource person (the diocesan coordinator for the US Bishop’s justice for Immigrants campaign, for example) to give a presentation about the values different groups (labor, business, faith communities, teachers, farmers, law-enforcement personnel, etc) bring to the immigration policy discussion.

Small Group Formation and Discussion (35 min.)

Invite participants into new small groups of six, remembering that you want to incorporate a diversity of perspectives on immigration. Identify a recorder/reporter for each group.

Identify a specific immigration policy issue (the Justice for Immigrants campaign, www.justiceforimmigrants.org, will help you identify a current public policy issue) and present it to the group.

Ask the group first to go around giving each person a chance to share a core value he/she brings to the issue. Then, open the conversation. Then, ask them to look at the same issue through the eyes of the different groups identified above.

Reporting Back (25 min.)

As the recorder from each group to report on: (1) how the group did with the process of identifying values, (2) what insights or surprises emerged in the discussion, and (3) what agreements and/or disagreements were expressed in the group.

Facilitator's Feedback Form

1. Were group members able to identify the values they bring to the immigration policy discussion? Please elaborate.
2. What insights or surprises emerged in the discussion?
3. Were there specific points of agreements at your table? Please describe.
4. Were there specific points of disagreements at your table? Please describe.
5. Is there anything else you think we should know or address in moving forward?

Facilitator's Name _____
(for follow-up purposes)
Email _____

Resources on Immigration

Website:

Justice for Immigrants: A Journey of Hope

www.justiceforimmigrants.org

Video:

“The Line in the Sand” Catholic Relief Services. Available for order online at

<http://www.crs.org/dramaproject/>

Articles:

“New Immigrants in New Places,” Anne Farris, *Carnegie Report* 3:3 (fall, 2005).

Available online at www.carnegie.org/reporter/11/newimmigrants/index.html.

“Principled Immigration,” Mary Ann Glendon, *First Things*, 164 (June/July 2006): 23-

26. Available online at http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=129.

“The Catholic Church’s Rich Understanding of U.S. Immigration,” Rev. Rick Ryscavage.

In All Things: A Jesuit Journal of the Social Apostolate, pp. 1-6. Available online at

www.inallthings.org

Church Documents:

Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope, USCCB, 2003. Available from USCCB publishing at 800-235-8722 or online at www.usccb.org/mrs/stranger.shtml.

Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity Among Diversity, USCCB, 2000. Available from USCCB publishing at 800-235-8722 or online at www.usccb.org/mrs/unity.shtml.