



# INITIATIVE REPORT

CATHOLIC COMMON GROUND INITIATIVE

Fall 2016

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Sr. Helen Prejean, CSJ receives the Cardinal Bernardin Award on June 24, 2016.

## Awakening to Grace

This past June, Sr. Helen Prejean, CSJ, received the annual Cardinal Bernardin Award from the Catholic Common Ground Initiative at its gathering at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Honored because of her life's witness and work with the Ministry Against the Death Penalty, Prejean spoke of the importance of community in inspiring one another to acts of justice and love. "When we share our faith with one another, it's like we blow on the coals of our souls and we alight in us the spirit of God who's in us."

She spoke of the moment when she first heard the call to radical accompaniment as a kind of deeper conversion, saying, "For a long time, I wasn't awake to the call of the Gospel to do justice in the world...whenever we wake up, it is always grace that awakes us."

Walking with those deemed the least among our society was for Prejean a great privilege. "It is the suffering that holds me. I accompany people on death row and they teach me. They help me. They keep me awake. They hold me close to the fire, because their suffering is enduring."

Sr. Prejean's life is a testament to one of the core CCGI

values, courage to enter into respectful dialogue. The citation from her award sums up a life dedicated to this form of dialogue: "Sr. Prejean embodies this mission to lead our church into wisdom and understanding around critical issues such as the death penalty. Her life's work has been an encounter with those our country deems disposable. She has engaged the public in her pursuit for justice. And she has done all of this through dialogue."

## Catholics and the 2016 Election

At this same gathering this past June, John Carr, Director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University, gave the annual Murnion Lecture. His lecture, "Faithful Citizenship in 2016: Is There Common Ground to Pursue the Common Good?," explored issues surrounding the 2016 presidential campaign. In particular, Carr considered the "political homelessness" of many Catholics and encouraged the building of "common ground for the common good" in universities, parishes, and workplaces. The following is an excerpted column by Carr on this topic, "Staying Consistent" (reprinted with permission, *America* 215, no. 2).

*For "Consistent Ethic of Life Catholics," these are good times ecclesiastically and bad times politically. Within our church, Pope Francis is making clear by word and deed that a consistent and comprehensive commitment to protect human life is morally right, theologically sound and pastorally powerful. With his haunting metaphor of a "throwaway culture," Francis calls us to protect "innocent victims of abortion, children who die of hunger or from bombings, immigrants...the elderly or the sick who are considered a burden, the victims of terrorism, wars, violence and drug trafficking, the environment..."*

*In his historic address to Congress, Pope Francis brought some Republicans to their feet, insisting on "our responsibility to protect and defend human life at every stage of its development." But many stopped clapping and some*

*Democrats rose when he continued, "This conviction has led me...to advocate...for the global abolition of the death penalty.... Every life is sacred; every human person is endowed with an inalienable dignity." This congressional confusion and polarization are signs of the difficult days for the consistent ethic of life in American politics. Its place seems to be threatened in both parties.*

Carr continued by examining the-then impending nominations of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, underlining the ways both of the candidates fail to satisfy a Catholic understanding of human dignity from the beginning of life to its end. For Carr, however, this dilemma for Catholics is not an excuse for inaction, nor a reason to abandon the basic tenets of Catholic Social Teaching.

*...Being politically homeless does not mean that Catholics who support a consistent ethic of life can avoid hard choices or engage in simplistic moral equivalency on either issues or candidates in this election. Homelessness is not a virtue but a sign that we need to find new ways, allies and arguments to make a persuasive case for the protection of the life and dignity of all—in both parties and in a "throwaway culture."*

## Sharing the Secret: Reflecting on the Work of Prejean and Carr

Sr. Mary Johnson, SNDdeN, PhD

At the presentation of the Annual Bernardin Award and Murnion Lecture, I was struck that the lives and words of both Prejean and Carr put into stark relief the gift that Catholic Social Thought (CST) is to the Church and to the societies in which the Church ministers, and, indeed, to the global society, especially at this time of polarization. While it is both a gift to the Church and the world, Catholic Social Thought has been called "the best kept secret" of the Church, because of its absence in some important organizational spaces. But the good news is that situation is now changing, and the social teachings of the Church are becoming known in an increasing number of places. It has been my experience over the last several years that young adults, both Catholic and those of other faith traditions or no faith tradition, are embracing the principles contained in CST. They are studying them, reflecting upon them, and applying them to complex political, social, and economic realities in local, national, and international spheres.

As I reflect upon John Carr's critique of the positions held

by the Republican and Democratic parties, and as I recall Sr. Helen's longtime witness against the death penalty, it seems to me that the framework of principles that the Church has developed over the last century and a quarter contain necessary keys to understand, proclaim and live the Gospel in our day. Where can Catholic Social Thought be introduced and re-introduced today? Here are four examples:

- This framework of the principles of Catholic Social Thought can be used to animate discussions of Catholic identity in our extraordinary national network of Catholic institutions of education, health care and social service.
- The principles can be used as a bridge for dialogue in the search for common ground across ideological lines within polarized religious and political discussions.
- The principles can illuminate dimensions of the consistent ethic of life as theorists and activists work for justice and peace.
- And finally, the framework of principles can also undergird ecumenical and interfaith efforts in which more and more young adults wish to be involved.

*Sr. Mary Johnson is Distinguished Professor of Sociology and Religious Studies at Trinity Washington University, Washington, DC.*



*Inaugural meeting of the Catholic Common Ground Project at the Sheraton Hotel, Chicago, IL, October 24, 1996.*

## Twenty Years Later: Gratitude for the Past...Hope for the Future

Rev. Michael D. Place, STD

This Fall we mark two anniversaries. First, it was twenty years ago that the Catholic Common Ground Initiative (then Project) Advisory Board had its first meeting. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin attended that meeting and gave what turned out to be his last major public address. Then a few weeks later the Cardinal left us and went home to

his loving God.

Anniversaries offer us an opportunity to both look to the past and to the future.

The origin of CCGI is found in the ecclesial controversies that were particular to the U.S. Church in the early and mid 90's. The enthusiasm of the conciliar and early post conciliar years had been replaced with acrimony over the best way to carry forward the work of the council. Not surprisingly because of the centrality of liturgy to the life of the Church one of the areas of contention was often described as the "liturgy wars".

It was in this environment of increasing polarity that two great churchmen, Cardinal Bernardin and Monsignor Phil Murnion, convened a group of leaders for an off-the-record series of conversations that eventually led to the founding of CCGI. As a central figure in those conversations, and in the founding of CCGI, it is not a coincidence that the pastoral stance of CCGI and Cardinal Bernardin are quite similar.

The Cardinal's pastorate was grounded in the person of Jesus Christ, marked by a Franciscan spirit of inclusiveness, reconciliation and peace, and defined by the hopefulness of a resurrection people. CCGI is grounded as well in the person of Jesus as found in the theology and authentic tradition of the Church. It seeks to strengthen the life of the Church through a process of authentic dialogue and is optimistic about the possibility of finding true common ground.

The last twenty years have not been easy ones for the Initiative. It was attacked from the beginning by some church leaders who felt that dialogue about the truth was the same as negotiating the truth away. In hindsight these unwarranted attacks were reflective of a much larger ecclesial discourse. The Initiative also was hindered by the loss of its champion, Cardinal Bernardin. Because of the Cardinal's illness there had not been time to build an infrastructure to support the Initiative or to gain significant visibility within the life of the Church.

Due to the generosity of Monsignor Murnion for many years CCGI found a home at the National Pastoral Life Center which allowed it to carry on a modest agenda of developing resources, holding the Annual Murnion Lecture and convening periodic conferences on topics apt for ecclesial dialogue. In recent years the Bernardin Center at the Catholic Theological Union (CTU) in Chicago has been

home to the Initiative. By going to the CCGI website ([catholiccommonground.org](http://catholiccommonground.org)) one can find much of what has transpired over these twenty years.

By "doing" common ground initiative work we have learned a great deal. Most importantly we have learned that the search for common ground through dialogue is not a "thing," or an "instrument," but a way of life, yes, a "spirituality". All CCGI efforts are grounded in prayer. To that end I would suggest that if one wants to really understand CCGI one needs to read the writings of Cardinal Bernardin, particularly his Pastoral Letters. In them you find the profound sense of spirituality that was one of the Cardinal's gifts to the Church. One also finds the deep commitment the Cardinal had to the ecclesial vision found in the documents of Vatican II.

This look back takes us to the future. It is no secret that the Church is in another moment of significant ecclesial change. Pope Francis in his leitmotif of mercy has invited the church to a type of ecclesial conversion from an inward looking church to a missionary, evangelizing church that goes first to the margins with a spirit of inclusivity. And central to that evangelizing effort is the work of dialogue.

The similarity between the current Bishop of Rome's ecclesial vision and that of Bernardin/CCGI is striking. It should serve as an impetus to CCGI to renew its efforts to reach out to the Church in the United States with its resources and methodology.

And so on the occasion of these two anniversaries those of us who have labored in the CCGI vineyard for these twenty years are grateful for the inspiration of Cardinal Bernardin, thankful for the many who have supported the work of the Initiative and participated in its efforts, and hopeful for the future of the Church under the universal pastorate of Pope Francis.

*Fr. Michael Place served as Cardinal Bernardin's theologian and has been on the CCGI Board since its inauguration. He served as President and CEO of the Catholic Health Association of the United State and is currently a Corporate Ethicist for Franciscan Alliance.*

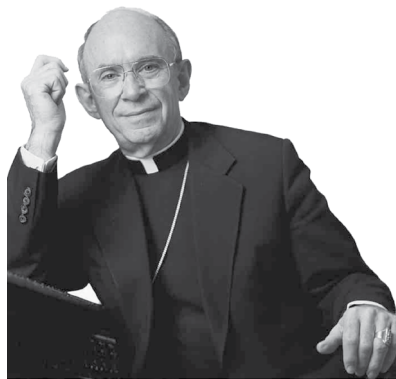
# Remembering Cardinal Bernardin

Join us November 6 at 3 p.m. for a celebration of Cardinal Bernardin's life and legacy

The afternoon will begin with a lecture by Kevin Ahern, PhD, "Being Church in a Divided World: The Legacy of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin for the 21st Century."

Following Ahern's lecture, Msgr. Ken Velo will preside at a Memorial Mass commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Cardinal's death.

*Photographs from Cardinal Bernardin's life, including work from Pulitzer Prize Winner John H. White, will be unveiled in the 4th floor art gallery at the reception.*



*Gratitude for the past..*



*..Hope for the future*

*This year, 2016, we commemorate the 20th anniversary of the death of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, founder of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative. Please consider honoring the legacy of Cardinal Bernardin with a donation to CCGI.*

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