

Reactions to project reveal need for dialogue

I want to start this week with a postscript to last week's column about Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and the Catholic Common Ground Project initiated jointly by him and the National Pastoral Life Institute.

That endeavor, intended to bring Catholics together to address a growing polarization in the church, received criticism from Cardinal James Hickey of Washington and Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston. They judge that the Bernardin initiative would give too much say to those who have questions about or problems with church teaching and discipline.

To put it another way, they are concerned that among the practical effects of the Common Ground Project would be an erosion of the church's magisterial teaching authority. (In the meantime I have read that Cardinal Adam Maida of Detroit and Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua of Philadelphia have expressed reservations in this matter, but I have not as yet seen their statements.)

Sunday's *New York Times* reported that Cardinal Bernardin issued a statement last week in which he addressed the concerns expressed by the other cardinals. In that (Sept. 1) article reporter Gustav Niebuhr cited the following points from the Bernardin statement:

- 1.) The sharp criticisms already received "confirmed the need for this initiative."
- 2.) Common Ground fully recognizes the

along the way

By BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK



primacy of Scripture and church tradition.

3.) Common Ground's call for dialogue "no more legitimates dissent" than does church discussions with members of non-Catholic faiths.

Niebuhr ends his article by quoting Cardinal Bernardin's statement: "The church is built up, not brought down, by genuine dialogue anchored in fundamental teachings ... While millions of Catholics of good will cannot deny their concerns and dissatisfactions, they do not want to be drawn into some basically hostile posture toward the church and its teaching. It is essential that we offer these faithful people guidelines and models of dialogue."

I return to this issue this week because in my opinion the exchange that has already occurred demonstrates the need for the kind of dialogue called for by the Catholic Common Ground Project. If we have this kind of disagreement about how to handle such sensitive pastoral issues among the

cardinals of our country — faithful, intelligent individuals who love the church — is it surprising that equally divergent points of view would exist among large numbers of faithful Catholic people in our nation?

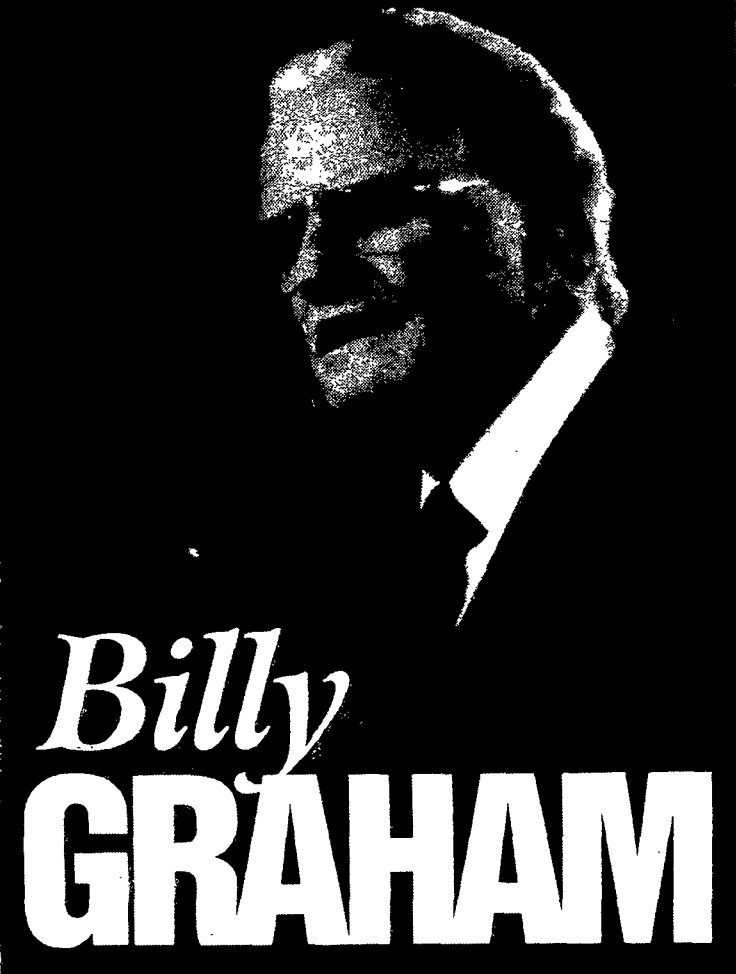
I think we all recognize that such divergence exists. The question addressed by Common Ground is whether we will move into hostile, opposing camps and continue the process of polarization or whether we'll come together in a spirit of faith and trust to discover what the Holy Spirit asks of us in this very lively but sometimes complex era in which we live.

A week from now I will be in Washington for a meeting of the Administrative Committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. I will be disappointed if we do not devote some agenda time to this issue, especially in view of the fact that several of the key players mentioned above are members of the committee. It seems to me that how we deal with the honest concerns of faithful Catholic people and how we bishops handle differences among us are issues that are critical to the life and health of the church in the United States.

The Niebuhr article cited above reports that at the news conference called to discuss criticism of Common Ground, Cardinal Bernardin also announced that he suffers from inoperable liver cancer (See article, Page 4). I know that when I write to him I can assure him of your prayers.

Peace to all.

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