

## COLUMNISTS

*Critics give glimpse into how bishops argue*

Kenneth Untener, bishop of Saginaw, Mich., has an important article in the Oct. 19 issue of *America* magazine, although its title, "How Bishops Talk," is misleading. It should have been, "How Bishops Argue."

In the article Bishop Untener comments on the reactions of four U.S. cardinals to the recent initiative of Chicago's Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, known as the Catholic Common Ground Project, designed to foster dialogue between alienated groups within the church, and on the reaction of a fifth cardinal to a paper critical of the Vatican's exercise of authority, given last June by retired San Francisco Archbishop John Quinn at Oxford University.

"This public written exchange," Bishop Untener notes, "provides an unusual opportunity to look in on a discussion among bishops and see not only what we discuss, but how we discuss."

What do we learn from these discussions? First and most obviously, we learn that "there are disagreements at the highest levels about structures and procedures in the church — as there have been since the days of Peter and Paul."

While Bishop Untener gave a passing grade for the tone of the discussion (no name-calling, no nastiness), he gives what approaches a failing grade for its quality.

He identifies, for example, "an occupational hazard among religious leaders to seize the high ground in discussions," enunciating truths in a debate that no one is questioning.



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

Thus, two of the cardinals critical of the Bernardin project insist on the need for conversion, and a third refers piously to Jesus as "the way, the truth, and the life" — as if Cardinal Bernardin would not or did not. In fact, he did.

The cardinal who was critical of Archbishop Quinn rushed to the defense of the motives and dedication of members of the Roman Curia as if the archbishop had questioned them. He did not.

At other times, the cardinals rebut proposals that the other side never made. Thus, Archbishop Quinn is made to appear as if he might favor returning the appointment of bishops to emperors and kings, or even yielding the right to the President of the United States! The archbishop only called for "some modification" of the present procedure, not radical surgery or amputation.

At still other times, the counter-arguments are simply inaccurate. The four cardinals who criticized the Bernardin project hit hardest at their fellow cardinal's call for "dialogue."

They made it appear as if Cardinal Bernardin's concept of dialogue were equivalent to accommodation, compromise, or reaching the lowest common denominator. That isn't what dialogue means. It means talking together.

"The purpose of dialogue," Bishop Untener reminds us, "is clarity, not compromise. It is the basic, first step in trying to understand each other's position."

"The negative interpretation of dialogue read into Cardinal Bernardin's paper by those who criticized it," the bishop writes, "does not reflect a high standard of discussion."

The cardinals' responses also tended to include general statements of criticism without citing specifics.

For example, one cardinal accused the Bernardin paper of making "gratuitous assumptions" throughout, and "at significant points" of breathing "an ideological bias."

But this "broad accusation of 'gratuitous assumptions' is itself a gratuitous assumption," Bishop Untener retorts. Not one reference or example is given by the critic.

Another "occupational hazard" of religious leaders in public debate is "to resolve something with personal conviction and/or opinion rather than available data."

"It is my own conviction," Archbishop Quinn's critic writes, "that the crucial obstacles to Christian unity remain doctrinal, including the very concept of this primacy of the pope, and not simply the mode of exercising the primacy. But his "conviction" is not backed by

facts.

After 11 years of discussion of authority in the church, the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission issued a final report that contradicted the cardinal-critic's personal "conviction": The issue is not the primacy, but the exercise of the primacy. Indeed, the pope himself made this very distinction in his 1995 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*.

There is, finally, a clear element of orchestration in the responses of the four cardinals to the Bernardin initiative. Although the project statement only mentions the "reception" of doctrine once, all four cardinals jump all over the issue in remarkably similar language.

Unfortunately, they all misunderstand "reception" as a process of determining doctrinal truth by polls or politics. No one, least of all Cardinal Bernardin, holds such a view.

Bishop Untener points to a clear difference between the way bishops argue public issues outside the church (as in testimony before Congress) and the way they argue church matters, such as these.

The bishops treat public policy issues "with great care, at the highest level of discourse and with staff assistance."

In church matters, he suggests, the style of argument often "shifts down to another level."

Far down.

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