

COLUMNISTS

Divergent views warrant open discussion

The Common Ground Initiative is a national Catholic project inspired by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago who hoped that Catholics of differing points of view could come together for dialogue and, through it, discover that they have more in common than not.

Cardinal Bernardin's proposal evoked immediate opposition, even from some of his brother cardinals, who said, in effect, that the teachings of the church are unequivocal and, therefore, not subject to critical review, much less to negotiation and amendment.

Cardinal Bernardin was not proposing a watering down of doctrine nor a splitting of theological differences to achieve a cheap form of reconciliation. Rather, he intended that Catholics of divergent opinions about church issues might come to know one another as persons, as brothers and sisters in Christ, and learn from one another in a spirit of mutual understanding and respect.

For too many Catholics, however, there is only a right way (theirs) and a wrong way (their opponents'). They do not seem to understand that even the "right way" is open to various legitimate interpretations, and that the "wrong way" has some redeemable aspects that should not simply be dismissed. Only di-



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

alogue can bring the fuller dimensions of truth to light and to life.

Although the original advisory committee of the Common Ground Project (now the Common Ground Initiative) was moderate-to-conservative, the leadership and programming seemed to edge even further to the right after the cardinal's death.

A project conceived to bring people of differing viewpoints together now excluded certain voices in the church, relying increasingly on others who enjoyed a "safe" reputation within the hierarchy.

One of the names frequently linked with Common Ground in these years has been that of Mary Ann Glendon, a distinguished professor at Harvard Law School and a member of the Holy See's delegation to the fourth United Nation's

Women's Conference in 1995.

Her views on church issues, from the ordination of women to the limits of theological dissent (she once referred to "chameleon theologians" in a commencement address at Notre Dame), mark her as a conservative voice in today's church, one warmly appreciated by the Vatican and the U.S. bishops alike.

It is not surprising that she is a member of the board of trustees of The Catholic University of America — a board otherwise dominated by cardinals and bishops — and of the editorial board of *First Things*, a journal of opinion that has a discernibly different approach to church issues than, let us say, *America*, *Commonweal*, or the *National Catholic Reporter*.

In a recent Common Ground program on the role of women in the church, Prof. Glendon shared the podium with another Catholic laywoman, Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D-Ohio), who urged Catholic women to draw upon their American political experience to move the church toward adopting democratic structures more open to women.

By way of rebuttal, Prof. Glendon warned against "importing secular notions of governance into the Church."

One cannot count the number of

times this "argument" has been employed against any and all efforts to broaden the participation of the laity, religious, and so-called lower clergy in the governance of the church.

The assumption is that Christ left the Apostles a precise blueprint by which they would organize the church for all time, a point vigorously rejected by such eminent and widely respected biblical scholars as the late Father Raymond Brown. As a matter of historical fact, the organizational structure of the church (with divisions of dioceses, provinces and such, along with a precise, military-style chain of command) has more to do with the Roman Empire than with Jesus.

"Importing secular notions of governance into the Church"? Alas, it has ever been so. The only question is: which notions do we import? Secular models that are in force, for example, in the autocratic, tightly controlled Arab states? Or secular models that respect the voice and vote of the people, and that place careful limits on the power of those who govern?

Politicians and law professors may debate this point, but in the end it is a question of ecclesiology and church history.

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Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

To relate to God, we must relate to each other

4th Sunday of Lent (March 25): (R3) Luke 15:1-3, 11-32; (R1) Joshua 5:9, 10-12; (R2) 2 Corinthians 5:17-21.

Few stories are as loved as the parable of the prodigal son. A wayward son comes home and his father greets him with unrestrained love and affection.

When a linebacker makes a tackle, he is often praised for "staying at home." This means that he did not fall for the distracting maneuvers of the wide-receiver or running back. When the game is over, it is the flashy players who make the headlines. The "stay-at-home" player is admired, but not idolized.

So it was with the elder brother in Jesus' parable. The flamboyant, sinful, younger brother receives top billing, not the stay-at-home elder son. Even the name of the parable reflects the younger brother's star status.

At first, the elder son appears to be a sympathetic character. While his kid brother is off "in a distant country" doing God-knows-what, the elder brother maintains the family farm. One day he comes home from the field and finds a party in full swing. Even though it is a spontaneous party, the elder son is rightly indignant because no one came out to the field to tell him about it. His already



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

foul mood is not enhanced when he learns that the party is in honor of his good-for-nothing brother! He complains to his father, "You never gave me so much as a kid goat to celebrate with my friends."

We can almost sympathize with his resentment. Still, the elder brother is a sinner also. Which is worse, the riotous living of the younger son or the deep resentment of the elder brother? By never resolving the elder brother's resentment, Jesus is suggesting that in the long run self-righteousness which does not see the error of its way is more difficult to correct than overt sinfulness which at least knows that it is wrong!

A superb portrait of this parable was painted by Rembrandt in his master-

piece, "The Return of the Prodigal" (1662). On the left side he portrays the prodigal son kneeling in supplication before his father. His head is shaved, as if infected by lice. His clothing is tattered; he wears but one sandal. His father bends over him, drawing him close in reconciliation and forgiveness. The elder brother, in contrast, stands stiffly on the other side of the painting with clasped hands, keeping his distance.

Rembrandt reveals the character of the "stay-at-home" brother. He appears to be a younger version of the father, bearded and wearing a red cloak. But he doesn't have his father's heart. While the father "bends over his returning son," the elder brother stands stiffly erect. While the father's hands are open to embrace his wayward son, the elder brother's hands are clasped to his body. Older children tend to be industrious and responsible. Standing with hands clasped in anger, they resent the freedom and forgiveness given the younger kids.

The stay-at-home brother is as lost as his flamboyant brother. When he learns that the party is to honor his wayward brother, he refuses to enter the house. This is an insult to his father. Both sons

suffer from the illusion that they can be in a relationship with their father without relating to each other. Jesus implies, "How can we expect to relate to God, if we refuse to relate to each other?"

The father has two lost children. Out of love, he seeks both of them. So God loves us all, for all of us need his redeeming love.

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Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, March 26

Isaiah 7:10-14, 8:10; Hebrews 10:4-10; Luke 1:26-38

Tuesday, March 27

Ezekiel 47:1-9, 12; John 5:1-16

Wednesday, March 28

Isaiah 49:8-15; John 5:17-30

Thursday, March 29

Exodus 32:7-14; John 5:31-47

Friday, March 30

Wisdom 2:1A, 12-22;

John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30

Saturday, March 31

Jeremiah 11:18-20; John 7:40-53

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