

ADDRESS**“Discourse in Church and Society: Dialogue, Dialectic, Diatribe”****July 30, 2011**

It is customary to begin with some disclaimers – what this talk is **not**. It is not a scholarly presentation. It will be more anecdotal. While the title might suggest something like the biblical method of form criticism, this will not be a technical analysis of texts.

Moreover, the way I use the terms “dialogue,” “dialectic” and “diatribe” are not the same as the ancient literary forms of Plato, for example, who used the dialectic method through his dialogues. Or St. Paul’s use of the ancient form of diatribe, especially in his Letter to the Romans. Nor am I invoking a Hegelian dialectic or Kantian epistemology. (My poor philosophy grades here at St. Charles simply won’t allow that!) Rather, I am using these terms as they are commonly understood today.

Why did I choose this topic? When Joe Hanish asked me to give this address, he needed a title almost immediately. I noticed that several of you have written articles for the *Amici Newsletter* about your life’s journey. A person’s task in the latter years of life is sometimes called integration – bringing together the various strands of one’s life and making some sense out of them. I’ve been writing and talking for the past forty-four years. I also am a consumer. I hear a lot of talks and newscasts and read a lot of articles and books. So, I’m pretty much like each of you – a communicator and a consumer of communication. And I’ve been thinking a lot recently about three kinds of communication – diatribe, dialectic, and dialogue.

A basic theory of communication helps to distinguish **effective** communication from mere verbiage. The communication process can be described as a triangle: speaker, message, and hearer (or writer, text, and reader). All three are clearly important, but which is most

important for effective communication? Some speakers worry about how they're coming across or try to wow their audience – putting the spotlight on **themselves**. Others focus on the **message** – making sure it is clear, cogent, or at least clever. But effective communicators focus on the **audience**: who are they? What is their background? With what are they coping at the moment? What are their dreams and their anxieties?

From experts in advertising – a basic form of communication -- I learned that first you have to get the audience's attention. Then have them walk away saying: "I never thought of it that way before." Not superficial "newness" for the sake of newness. A new insight. A new approach. A new way of thinking about or appreciating a message. I'm going to explore some examples of dialogue, dialectic, and diatribe and give a brief assessment of their relative advantages and disadvantages. I'm eager to hear your reaction and your insights as well.

Diatribes

Let's begin with **diatribe**. A diatribe can be defined as a bitter, abusive denunciation, attack, or criticism of someone or someone's views and/or actions. How sharply abusive a diatribe is may vary, but it usually uses an *ad hominem* approach to a person's views – a person with whom one disagrees. We don't have to look far these days to find examples. Consider national politics – for example, the "debate" about extending the national debt ceiling. My focus is not on the relative merits of the arguments or positions of either party or segments of either party but the way they are communicated, especially in and through the media. Punch/counter-punch. Assigning blame exclusively to the other side. A lot more heat and smoke than light!

The advantage of the diatribe format is that we citizens are very used to this form of communication today – witness talk shows on radio and TV or bullying on Facebook and

Twitter. Many take the matter so serious – that is, demonizing the opposition – that some pundits claim the outcome of the national 2012 elections may hinge on how vicious each side attacks the other! So, diatribes may help win elections or defeat opponents. The disadvantages are fairly clear: the government is paralyzed, the economy worsens, the unemployed and underemployed suffer, the middle class weakens, the nation becomes more sorely divided.

Are there examples of diatribes in the church? Yes. For example, when a pastor uses the pulpit to proclaim a pet peeve rather than the Gospel, putting down women, for example. Or when parishioners demonize the pastor or bishop with whom they disagree on a matter of church policy or practice.

A diatribe may occur on a more subtle scale. Last February, George Weigel published an essay, “The End of the Bernardin Era” in *First Things*, a publication of the Institute on Religion and Public Life, founded by Richard John Neuhaus. Weigel holds the William E. Simon Chair in Catholic Studies at the Ethics and Public Policy Center. His essay is not “sharply abusive,” but it is a diatribe. Its subtitle gives the reader a hint of what is to come: “the rise, dominance and decline of a culturally accommodating Catholicism.” The key words are “culturally accommodating” – which hang there like an accusation, suggesting compromise of fundamental Christian values, a watering down of the gospel message. In effect, Weigel interprets Cardinal Bernardin’s entire episcopal career in strictly political terms, using the term “Bernardin machine” twenty-two times to explain his leadership role in the episcopal conference. He describes the Cardinal’s style of leadership as “silken on the outside (for Joseph L. Bernardin was a thoroughly charming man) and quite tough on the inside (for Bernardin knew what he wanted the conference to do, knew how to make the conference do it, and knew how to get anyone who might be an obstacles out of the way),” He sounds very much like a ruthless

politician, doesn't he? Two of the Cardinal's key concepts were collegiality and consensus – both of which Weigel interprets as manipulative and calculating rather than the characteristics of a theologically principled church leader.

In a recent issue of *Commonweal* (May 20, 2011) Peter Steinfels, a Fordham University professor and religion columnist for the *New York Times*, published a rebuttal of Weigel's essay, exposing it as "a political and ecclesiastical vendetta." He correctly demonstrates that the Cardinal's efforts were precisely the opposite of what Weigel has accused him: "a **refusal** of cultural accommodation." Steinfels' article carries the provocative title: "Fabricating Bernardin: How Not to Write About the Cardinal & His Time." He says that "evidently the specter of Bernardin's stature still haunts American Catholicism, and a stake must be driven through its heart." Steinfels points out that

the relationship between Weigel the dispenser of Catholic truths and Weigel the reporter of concrete facts is slippery. Clarity is his strength. Accuracy is something else. To say nothing of complexity or doubt or even elemental fairness. Too often he manhandles history or runs roughshod over evidence, sometimes personifying the case for a debatable principle as a battle between his favorite saints and sinners, or alternatively using the cover of an unexceptional principle, like the need for a distinct Catholic identity, to conduct a polemical campaign on behalf of his political agenda. And make no mistake: Weigel is a highly political creature.

I have long been aware of Weigel's opposition to Cardinal Bernardin, in particular regarding the consistent ethic of life. I doubt that we have heard the last word from him on this topic.

The diatribe gives expression to bias and prejudice; it is misleading and divisive. In a diatribe, I think, the emphasis is actually (although subtly) on the **speaker** who assumes that he or she is righteous, orthodox, correct, or whatever over against the opponent(s).

Dialectic

Dialectic refers to the art or practice of logical discussion as employed, for example, in investigating the truth of a theory or opinion. It is about winning an argument with carefully thought-out reasoning. Dialectic was the way theology was done in the Church prior to the Second Vatican Council. It was the way theology was taught and studied here at St. Charles. It was so much a part of our lives, it was taken for granted ...like breathing! Perhaps you will recall the lectures given here on the Feast of St. Thomas Aquinas each year in “the good old days.” Dialectic is the language of Scholasticism that had dominated Catholic theology since the thirteenth century.

Frankly, I’ve found it difficult to find examples of good dialectic in the public forum – apart from university lectures. However, I think President Obama is a civic leader who can do dialectic quite well. He can dispassionately parse complex public policy questions, calmly explaining their origins, their consequences, their relative merits – often losing his audience in the process. Lots of homilists do something similar. (Are you still with me?)

In terms of dialectic there are many ecclesial documents to choose from. A particularly good example is *Dominus Jesus*, the Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, which was published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on September 5, 2000. The document was severely criticized within the Church and without because it did not seem to take into consideration over forty years of ecumenical and

interfaith dialogue, especially with the Jewish community. On September 17, the Chicago *Tribune* published a letter to the editor I had written in which I said in part: “The recent Vatican Declaration issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, while reiterating traditional Catholic teaching, has understandably been received as controversial, especially by those with whom the Catholic Church has been in dialogue for the past thirty or more years. However, this is yet another reason why the dialogues must continue.” What made the timing even more important is that the Bernardin Center for Theology and Ministry, of which I was the executive director at the time, was about to launch a Catholic-Muslim Studies program within a few weeks.

I was then invited by the American Jewish Committee in Chicago to explain *Dominus Jesus* to them at one of their luncheon meetings in early October. I pointed out that the text itself indicated a concern about religious relativism creeping into ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and reported that this concern apparently arose during the 1998 Synod on Asia and that some Asian bishops had asked the Holy See for a clarification about the relationship between evangelization and interfaith dialogue, especially in regard to dialogue with Hindus and Buddhists. Because the document was vague about what prompted its publication, there was further speculation about possible motivation.

I also pointed out that there is a tension between interreligious dialogue, on the one hand, and evangelization, on the other. Both are part of the Church’s mission, but they stand in tension with each other. The Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith naturally tend to emphasize evangelization. The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue naturally tend to emphasize ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Pope John Paul II emphasized evangelization in some of his addresses and ecumenical/interfaith dialogue in others.

I acknowledged that the document was written in a very Catholic theological style using highly technical theological language and was addressed primarily to Catholic bishops and theologians. I said that it seemed quite naïve not to expect that people throughout the world would read the document and be confused – and disturbed – by its use of such technical language. In reality, there is basically **nothing new** in the document. Nevertheless, while striving for clarity, its reception was very mixed because of the style of communication chosen. (My talk was warmly received by the members of the AJC.)

The main advantage of dialectic is clarity. It is especially suitable and appropriate when there is confusion or the danger of a blurring of important concepts. However, it also has disadvantages. It may seem quite insensitive to some people or irrelevant to new circumstances. Sometimes the clarity is also deceptive. It may seem to explain a religious phenomenon or reality fully – taking away its mystery. Moreover, as Margaret Steinfels has pointed out, our notion of reason has expanded, especially since the Second Vatican Council:

The church had held for most of its long history to a vigorous commitment to reason and to reasoned explanation. We were not fundamentalists or literalists. But the assumptions of this Catholic notion of reason, perhaps too mechanical or innocent, even naïve, were overtaken, above all, by historical consciousness and a more expansive practice of reason. Reason used to support authoritative statements turned out to be different from reasoning based on empirical evidence and human experience. The Catholic apologetic came to seem more rationalizing than rational. (*Commonweal*, December 3, 2010, p. 12)

Those of us who studied Scripture here under the tutelage of Fathers Siebeneck, Siegman, and Joyce learned how historical consciousness aids our understanding of biblical texts. Reading

the biblical text in the light of archaeological, historical, literary, and linguistic studies gave us a deeper, multi-faceted understanding of revelation than we received in our fundamental theology classes.

Cardinal Bernardin gave about 450 major addresses as Archbishop of Chicago – on war and peace, the consistent ethic of life, religion and society, interfaith dialogue, and many more topics. In 2000, I published a number of these in the two volumes of *Selected Works of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin* (Liturgical Press). When I first began to work for him, I was told that his talks were to be “theologically impeccable” and “pastorally sensitive.” The “theologically impeccable” part of the equation refers to the dialectic mode of communication. I had a complete set of *Origins*, the weekly national Catholic documentary series, at my fingertips as well as access to a broad spectrum of theological consultants. Cardinal Bernardin was a great devotee of clarity as well as nuance. We often focused on a single sentence or phrase until we had precisely the right words to express what he wanted to say. But his major addresses for university audiences had at times to be “translated” into more down-to-earth language for popular consumption – for example, in his weekly columns in the archdiocesan newspaper. (The same was true of Blessed John Paul II’s encyclicals!)

So, yes, there are both advantages and disadvantages to dialectic. In the triangle of communication – speaker, message, hearer – the primary focus of dialectic is on the **message** rather than the speaker or the audience. There are times when this is appropriate, but one must keep in mind both the intended audience and the **real** audience in today’s world of multiple vehicles of communication.

Dialogue

According to Father John O'Malley, Vatican II largely avoided Scholastic language. "It... moved from the dialectic of winning an argument to the dialogue of finding common ground. It moved from abstract metaphysics to interpersonal 'how to be.' It moved from grand conceptual schemes or *summae* with hundreds of logically interconnected parts to the humble acceptance of mystery. In so doing it largely abandoned the Scholastic framework that had dominated Catholic theology since the thirteenth century" (*What Happened At Vatican II*, p. 46)

In his first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, Pope Paul VI focused on three fundamental issues facing the Church: its identity, its renewal, and dialogue. The letter had a great impact on the three remaining sessions of the Second Vatican Council, especially his extensive treatment of dialogue. Listen to this early paragraph in the encyclical:

Our present aim is not to expound new or duly developed insights. That is the proper task of the Ecumenical Council. It is certainly not Our wish to disrupt the work of the council in this simple, conversational letter of Ours, but rather to commend it and to stimulate it. Nor do we propose to make this encyclical a solemn proclamation of Catholic doctrine or of moral or social principles. Our purpose is merely to send you a sincere message, as between brothers and members of a common family. (##6-7)

In describing the Church's relation to the world, Pope Paul said that "The Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives. It has something to say, a message to give, a communication to make" (#65). But how are we to make this communication? The Holy Father says that "although the truth we have to proclaim is certain and the salvation necessary, we dare not entertain any thoughts of external coercion. Instead we will use the legitimate means of

human friendliness, interior persuasion, and ordinary conversation. We will offer the gift of salvation while respecting the personal and civic rights of the individual” (#75).

The encyclical lists certain characteristics that dialogue should have: (1) Clarity before all else; the dialogue demands that what is said should be intelligible. (2) Our dialogue must be accompanied by that meekness which Christ bade us learn from himself. It would be a disgrace if our dialogue were marked by arrogance, the use of offensive bitterness. (3) Confidence is also necessary, confidence in the good will of both parties to the dialogue. (4) It requires the prudence of a teacher who is very careful to make allowance for the psychological and moral circumstances of his hearers. In a dialogue conducted with this kind of foresight, truth is wedded to charity and understanding to love.” (##81-82) In this regard, one of Cardinal Bernardin’s favorite Scriptural phrases was St. Paul’s “living the truth in love” (Eph 4:15) – echoes of “theologically impeccable and pastorally sensitive.”

The Holy Father also points out that the crucial question that the Church must face is this: To what extent should the Church adapt itself to the historical and local circumstances in which it has to exercise its mission, and how is it to guard against the danger of relativism which would make it untrue to its own dogmas and moral principles? (#87) This remains an ongoing challenge for the Church in every time and place.

The Council Fathers were already committed to dialogue, but the encyclical gave further impetus to this mode of communication. O’Malley has pointed out that Vatican II so radically modified the legislative and judicial model that had prevailed since the Council of Nicaea (in 325 AD) that it virtually abandoned it and put in its place a model largely based on persuasion and invitation.

He writes that the style or genre of the conciliar documents is designed to raise appreciation of its conclusions:

it creates or fosters among those it addresses a realization that they all share (or should share) the same ideals and need to work together to achieve them. To engage in persuasion is to some extent to put oneself on the same level as those being persuaded. Persuaders do not command from on high. Otherwise, they would not be persuading, but dictating. Persuasion works from the inside out. To be successful, persuaders need to establish an identity between themselves and their audience and make clear that they share the same concerns and even the same sentiments, such as hope, joy, and sadness. (Ibid., p. 48)

I have already suggested that Pope Paul's first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, was not only **about** dialogue but also **was** a kind of dialogue quite different from earlier papal encyclicals. In 1963, shortly after his election as Pontiff, Pope Paul also began work on a social encyclical, *Progressio Populorum*, which did not appear until 1967. Besides having access to the usual written and personnel resources of the Vatican, for four years he widely consulted theologians, economists, statespeople, and other internationally known persons. This encyclical, which updated the Church's social teaching, was basically the result of dialogue – something quite new and unexpected in the Catholic Church.

In 1971, as the 80th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII's social encyclical approached, Pope Paul was torn between writing an encyclical and issuing a lesser Apostolic Letter. (His nickname was "Hamlet," you may recall.) He decided on an Apostolic Letter (*Octogesima Adveniens*) in which he indicated that the task of Christians in each country is to come up with solutions appropriate for their situation – rather than for the Pope to issue decrees

from Rome that had universal validity for all local circumstances. This modest assessment of the pope's role in offering solutions to world problems immediately caught people's attention. Moreover, he describes a new method for developing social teachings – beginning with social analysis, then reflection on the results in light of the gospel, and then decision-making. There are echoes here of the Council's challenge to “read the signs of the times.” Thus, as Marvin Mich has observed, Pope Paul shifted away from the static, ahistorical worldview of some of his predecessors, overturning “any vestiges of the static, natural law approach employed in earlier social teachings” (*Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, p.180). Ironically but understandably, this Apostolic Letter, which carried less formal authority than an encyclical, received more attention and respect than many encyclicals!

Throughout his pontificate Pope Paul alternated between the dialogic and the dialectic approaches in his communications. Blessed John Paul II clearly preferred dialectic, which is not surprising for a former professor of philosophy.

Cardinal Bernardin was a master of dialogue – whether one-on-one or with a crowd of over a quarter of a million people (as, for example, at Czestochowa on August 15, 1984). His pastoral sensitivity was very evident in his commitment to dialogue, and this was evident in his talks and writings. Before he went somewhere to give a homily, remarks, or an address, we sent a form requesting detailed information about the event and the audience. In a typical four-page (double-spaced) homily, he often devoted the first two pages to building bridges with the congregation – showing that he understood their community and shared their hopes and dreams, their fears and anxieties. Then in the light of that common ground he reflected with them on the meaning of the biblical readings for that day and event.

From what I have said, you may surmise that I prefer the dialogue approach to communication. It places the focus on the **audience**, and so, I think, it is usually more effective.

However, dialogue itself is also time-consuming. It involves listening as much as, or even more than, speaking – listening carefully **before** speaking! For people who are action-oriented, people who need a decision about something **now**, and a clear-cut decision at that, dialogue can be disconcerting. [At a party Msgr. Ken Velo did a marvelous, hilarious impromptu spoof of Cardinal Bernardin – with the Cardinal sitting right in front of him – of Bernardin’s saying no to drugs!] Dialogue can also leave certain matters somewhat ambiguous rather than clearcut. Consensus is not the same as compromise, and consensus is not always attainable. And even when it is attainable, it is often only at the end of a long, sometimes painful process.

Dialogue does not mean simply being nice to one another. In March 1995, Cardinal Bernardin led an interfaith pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It was sponsored by the Jewish community in Chicago. On the day of the last meeting in preparation for the trip five Christian leaders in Washington – including Cardinal Keeler – issued a statement sharply criticizing the State of Israel for its treatment of the Palestinians. Two of the archdiocesan priests who were helping the Cardinal prepare for the journey were furious at development, and he asked me to attend the meeting at his Residence that afternoon with the representatives of the Jewish community. He also predicted precisely what would happen and how he would respond.

As soon as the Cardinal had welcomed everyone to his home, the Israeli consul-general stood up and issued a rather formal protest about the statement of the Christian leaders – immediately raising the level of tension in the room. Cardinal Bernardin gave a calm, respectful reply. First, he said he had not had an opportunity to study the statement because he had been in

meetings all day. Second, from what he had heard about it, there was nothing new in it. Third, because there are differences of opinion about the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, this was all the more reason why the dialogue must continue and why the upcoming interfaith pilgrimage was so important. Everyone smiled and relaxed, and the meeting went on smoothly. I thought this was brilliant; he said it was simply common sense! (Many in the room that afternoon participated in a wake service for Cardinal Bernardin in Holy Name Cathedral eighteen months later – something unheard of in Jewish-Christian relations.)

This exchange illustrates some of the important characteristics of true dialogue. It demands a capacity to listen to someone with integrity – listening attentively to a different point of view (without letting go unnecessarily of one’s own values or view). It requires a mutual trust and respect among dialogue partners. Dialogue partners must have the willingness to speak the truth in love. It involves a common search for the truth. For people of faith, it involves an awareness that the Holy Spirit extends beyond the confines of the Christian community to the whole world.

Cardinal Bernardin was an effective speaker – not because he used a carefully prepared written text or because he was a dynamic or clever speaker – but, rather, because he listened attentively to, and cared about, his audience, and this came through in his communications. He always treated them with respect and spoke like a brother to his family. He was also clear about what he believed and valued. He used persuasion rather than commands. Yes, he was “thoroughly charming” but also sincerely persuasive. He was also a prayerful man of faith.

At his first press conference upon being appointed Archbishop of Chicago, Francis George was asked some questions about his predecessor. He said at one point, “When Cardinal

Bernardin spoke to an issue, there seemed to be more room in the room.” More room in the room.

Is there dialogue in public discourse in our society today? We could reach back into our history and examine, for example, Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address or his Second Inaugural Address as well as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. However, I think there are some noteworthy recent examples as well. For example, speaking at a memorial service for the victims of the shooting in Tucson, Arizona, on January 12, 2011, President Barack Obama said: “...at a time when our discourse has become so sharply polarized – at a time when we are far too eager to lay the blame for all that ails the world at the feet of those who happen to think differently than we do --- it’s important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we’re talking with each other in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds.” His remarks helped a city, a region, and a nation cope with its grief and distress in the face of meaningless violence without inciting to further discord and division.

There was considerable controversy when the University of Notre Dame conferred an honorary degree on President Obama in 2009 [May 17]. His remarks on that occasion were dialogue, not dialectic (and certainly not diatribe). Acknowledging the controversy, he directly confronted the fact that there is a great diversity of viewpoints in our country, but the basic question, he said, is: How do we work through these conflicts? First he invoked the example of Father Ted Hesburgh:

Father Hesburgh has long spoken of this institution as both a lighthouse and a crossroads.

A lighthouse stands apart, shining with the wisdom of the Catholic tradition, while the

crossroads is where “differences of culture and religion and conviction can co-exist with friendship, civility, hospitality, and especially love.”

Then the President described his experience of hearing Cardinal Bernardin speak at one of the first organizing meetings that Barack had attended on the South Side of Chicago:

He stood as both a lighthouse and a crossroads – unafraid to speak his mind on moral issues ranging from poverty and AIDS and abortion to the death penalty and nuclear war. And yet, he was congenial and gentle in his persuasion, always trying to bring people together, always trying to find common ground. Just before he died, a reporter asked Cardinal Bernardin about his approach to his ministry. And he said, “You can’t really get on with preaching the Gospel until you’ve touched hearts and minds.”

Touching hearts and minds: that is at the core of a dialogue approach to communication.

Dialogue is difficult. It is time-consuming. It can be exhausting. Taking a dialogue approach to public discourse means listening to and caring very much about one’s audience. It is fairly easy to express one’s pet peeves or anger and blast opponents; it can be fun. It is also quite easy to focus primarily on one’s message, making sure that it is clear, cogent, and even clever. But will anyone still be listening?