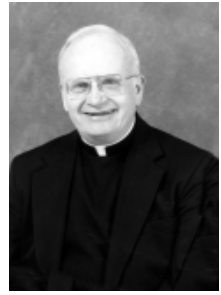


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## Dialogue or monologue?

"Dialogue" literally refers to "conversation between two or more people." At a deeper level the term connotes both talking and living together, for dialogue is the basis of community. A rich civic life presupposes an ability to engage in constructive dialogue.

The late John Courtney Murray, S.J., (1904-1967) asserted that the death of dialogue destroys civility. Father Murray named a number of circumstances where public conversation becomes uncivil.

In *We Hold These Truths* (1960), Murray noted that barbarism replaces civility when pride or passion or subjectivism dominate public discourse. Dialogue turns into "monologue" when conversation is marked by a selective hearing filtered through ideological sounding boards.

Such distortions have been dubbed "*the dialogue of the deaf*." That sort of interaction focuses on listening in order to overturn an argument. It tends to give the worst possible spin to what is heard. It often becomes the launching pad for one-eyed crusades for "the truth." In a word, the atmosphere changes from listening to polemics.

Polemics will inevitably polarize viewpoints. Embattled positions at times have become heretical. In its Greek roots "heresy" signifies "choice." In this vein, G. K. Chesterton expressed the etymology

perfectly when he described a heresy as "an exaggeration of the truth."

The advent of the ecumenical dialogues more than 30 years ago has contributed much to reversing prejudices and misunderstandings fomented in the polemical atmosphere of the Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation. Over time, however, the ecumenical dialogues have achieved a growing consensus on matters which formerly were church-dividing,

In *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), an encyclical on commitment to ecumenism, Pope John Paul II recognizes that the ecumenical dialogues have made surprising discoveries in mutual understanding possible. The Holy Father also acknowledges the destructive effects of polemics. Hence, he writes: "Intolerant polemics and controversies have made incompatible assertions out of what was really the result of two different ways of looking at the same reality." (UUS n. 35)

Pope John Paul II reaffirms the teaching of the Second Vatican Council in its call for attitudes required for doctrinal discussion, namely, love for truth, charity, and humility. (UUS n. 36)

Church history is replete with moments when the spirit of dialogue has had the ascendancy. Nonetheless, there have been times, like the epoch of the Reformation, when the conditions for dialogue have

waned.

At this point in American church history there are cultural indicators which prompt questions about the need to renew the conditions for dialogue within the Catholic community itself. Such hopes have inspired the origins of the Common Ground Initiative. The ecumenical dialogues present a viable model of how to move from polemics to dialogue.

For centuries, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) has been the paradigm of the Catholic theologian-philosopher. His works represent a major achievement in a theological synthesis. But, it can be argued that his creativity stemmed from his genius and from the temper of his mind displayed by the methodology followed in the pursuit of truth.

Josef Pieper published several introductions to the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas. According to Pieper, a key for understanding Aquinas can be located in the dynamics of the scholastic method.

The high point of medieval theology centered on the disputation or reasoned argumentation. The literary form of the scholastic disputation was rooted in the concept of conversation or dialogue.

In his *Guide to Thomas Aquinas* Pieper analyzes that methodology in relation to St. Thomas' intellectual style ... "the spirit of the *disputatio*, of disciplined opposition; the spirit of genuine discussion which remains a dialogue even while it is a dispute." Pieper concludes: "This spirit governs the inner structure of all of St. Thomas' works." (pp. 77-78)

Perhaps Josef Pieper romanticized this methodology 'a tad.' Yet his critique clusters together some helpful insights into the conditions for authentic intellectual engagement.

Pieper maintains that St. Thomas Aquinas practiced "the principle of benevolent interpretation." Before developing his own thesis, the *doctor communis* first presented the opposing views with clarity and in the best possible light. The operational premise assumed that even an opinion which would be rejected did, in fact, embody an element of right and truthfulness.

The interlocutors in the scholastic disputation would not be viewed simply as adversaries. Rather, they are in some real way part-

ners in a dialogic search for truth.

Josef Pieper explains why disputation or debate suppose a common effort in the search for truth. He defends the need for collaboration on the basis that no single man or woman is self-sufficient. Each "needs the other; the teacher even needs the student." In the discovery of truth, the student or learner as well as the teacher have indispensable roles to play. (p.82)

There is a striking passage from St. Thomas which illustrates this point. St. Thomas wrote: "We must love them both, those whose opinions we share and those whose opinions we reject. For both have labored in the search for truth and both have helped us to find it." (A more idiomatic translation reads: "For both study to find the truth and in this way are collaborators.")

A cursory sampling of the writings of the "Common Doctor" emphatically demonstrate that St. Thomas did not indulge in the "politics of demonization."

His methodology was dictated by more than pragmatic rules for group dynamics or communications. It was grounded in the consciousness of the complexity of the search for truth and in reverence for all who were willing to participate in the dialogue.

The disputation served as a vehicle for clarifying the substance of the truth. It emanated from a conviction that truth was secure and strong enough to be open to clarification and to correction when necessary.

Undoubtedly, a seasoned realism must face those situations where opposing viewpoints are irreconcilable. The method is only one component of the process; method must be counterbalanced with substance or content.

The method of a dialogue does not ask interlocutors to recant their beliefs. Nor does it sanction dismissal of sincerely held beliefs. But dialogue does require that convictions be articulated clearly and that opposing opinions be dealt with fairly and with empathy.

Just as the medieval period gradually declined, there is a possibility that the term "dialogue" can deteriorate into just another "buzzword." Yet the promise of dialogue bespeaks the hope to initiate and sustain the project.