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The church must continue the dialogue started more than 20 years ago by the Catholic Common Ground Initiative — and it has a model for how to do dialogue well in Pope Francis, Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich said Sept. 29 at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

“Dialogue is not a dirty word; it’s our word,” Cupich told those gathered for the annual Msgr. Philip J. Murnion Lecture sponsored by the Catholic Common Ground Initiative. Murnion and Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, archbishop of Chicago from 1982-1996, co-founded the initiative in 1996 to combat polarization in the church. The initiative is now housed at the Bernardin Center at CTU.

“The church is not fully church if it lacks dialogue,” Cupich said, adding that Pope Francis has brought “fresh energy” to the life of the church “by emphasizing the importance of dialogue, not just to solve thorny problems but to be true to ourselves as church.”

Cupich’s lecture was entitled “Dialogue in the Key of Pope Francis.”

His remarks touched on current events, with an aside about the controversy regarding Jesuit Fr. James Martin, who lost a speaking engagement because his

latest book asks for dialogue between the church and LGBT Catholics.

Cupich's suggestion that Martin's critics should actually read his book drew applause from the audience. "And they should do so before ceding their intellects to blogosphere posts that make claims on their infallibility that would make Pius IX blush," he added.

Later, in response to a question about LGBT Catholics, Cupich said he was "outraged" by the way Martin was treated and called priests and religious who try to encourage dialogue "easy targets."

"He's a good priest," Cupich said about Martin, adding, "That's why he's coming to Chicago next spring." Cupich responded to Martin's speech cancellation with an invitation to speak in Chicago during Lent.

Cupich said he also has invited LGBT Catholics to come talk with him as part of his own desire for dialogue. "I want to know more about what's happening in their life," he said, adding that church language can dehumanize gay and lesbian people.

"They feel alienated," he said, noting the high suicide rate among LGBT youth. "The church has to step forward and talk to people."

In his talk, Cupich noted dialogue is especially important in a church and broader culture that can be marked by lack of civil conversation, yet he noted that disquiet in the church is "louder than it is large."

True dialogue, he said, must be "generous and want the good of the other, not victory over them," he said.

Unfortunately, the church has not always prepared its people for the discernment necessary for dialogue, he said. However, the church has a model in Pope Francis, whose papacy has been defined by dialogue since the beginning.

He noted that while Bernardin lived to see his consistent ethic of life integrated into papal teaching, "it unfortunately has taken a while longer for this approach to dialogue and common ground to achieve similar visibility — at least until now with the election of Pope Francis."

Cupich cited four images from Pope Francis' 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) — which he called the pontiff's "magna carta" for his papacy — as helpful for how to dialogue in the church. Those images included friendship, the church as mother, fellow companions and synodality.

He said those images have inspired him to work for discernment and dialogue in archdiocesan projects, including anti-violence initiatives and the "Renew My Church" reorganization program.

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"We model dialogue by doing dialogue," he said. "We benefit everyone — not just the church — by being true to our nature as a church marked by dialogue."

Bernardin, who died of pancreatic cancer in 1996 at age 68, would be proud of how dialogue and synodality have taken root in the church, he said, but challenges and obstacles remain.

Bernardin "would tell us to keep moving. He would tell us: Don't delay, for there must be urgency to put aside what divides us and seek common ground," Cupich said.

He ended by quoting Bernardin's advice not to waste time on acrimony and division. "So get to work," Cupich said.

The evening also included the presentation of the initiative's Cardinal Joseph Bernardin Award to Bishop Emeritus Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces, New Mexico, who has been involved in the Common Ground project since its founding.

Ramirez noted that "the first ingredient of good conversation" is listening. "Listening is the biggest gift we can give one another," he said. But listening with our "whole selves" can be risky "because it might change our ideas about something."

He also called disagreement a "gift" and a "grace" because it can lead to a clarifying or sharpening of one's position as well as understanding of another's. Disagreement can ultimately lead to "the prayer of Jesus, that all may be one," Ramirez said.

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