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## Review of Joseph Bernardin: Seeking Common Ground

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**Joseph Bernardin: Seeking Common Ground. Steven Millies.**  
Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016. 137 pp., \$14.95, ISBN 9780814648063

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Cardinal Joseph Bernardin (1928-1996) was the most influential United States bishop of his era. Millies provides a concise though thoroughly researched, positive though fair-minded, clear-written biography. This book is part of the Liturgical Press “People of God” series.

Bernardin was born about seven months after his immigrant parents arrived in South Carolina. The family came from the Trentino region in what today is northern Italy and was ethnically Italian in language, food and all aspects of their culture. Bernardin’s father died when he was six-years old and he was then raised by his mother and by extended family. South Carolina was less than one percent Catholic during Bernardin’s time there. He attended public high school and began pre-med studies at a public university.

Millies traces Bernardin’s confidence, his ease with Protestants and non-Christians and his gentle compassion to these childhood and young adult influences; i.e. processing the loss of his father, depending on relatives and regularly interacting with non-Catholics.

Bernardin was ordained in 1952. Prior to becoming the youngest bishop in the United States in Atlanta at age 38, Bernardin, like most bishops, had scant parish experience. Instead he spent most of his early priesthood in the Charleston, South Carolina Chancery, including as chancellor and vicar general.

The book proceeds more or less chronologically. Along the way Millies provides some intriguing, little-known facts. For example, in 1972 Bernardin, without publicity, became a first order Franciscan. He maintained a Franciscan spirituality thereafter and requested to be buried in his Franciscan habit.

As in Chicago’s Democratic machine, to move ahead within the Catholic clergy it is necessary to have a patron. Bernardin’s first patron was Archbishop Paul Hallinan (1911-1968), who served as bishop in Charleston for about five years and then was archbishop of Atlanta. Millies takes us inside the mutually beneficial Bernardin/Hallinan relationship. When Hallinan contracted a hepatitis infection, he summoned Bernardin from Charleston to, for all practical purposes, run his Atlanta Chancery. The two navigated race relations in Atlanta. They were so respected that at Hallinan’s funeral segregationist Gov. Lester Maddox (1915-2003) and Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968) shared the same pew.

Three weeks after the Hallinan funeral, King was murdered. Bernardin soon left Atlanta for his new post as general secretary of what today is called the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in Washington, DC. It was Bernardin’s second mentor, Cardinal John Dearden (1904-1988) of Detroit, who put him in charge of the conference. Both Hallinan and Dearden, as Millies describes them, were changed by Vatican II (1962-1965). Schooled in a clerical, self-

assured church, these two bishops embraced the Vatican II vision of a church in dialogue with the modern world. Bernardin caught the same spirit.

In Washington and at his subsequent positions, as Millies writes, Bernardin had to balance two sides of his public personality: a hard-working “cautious bureaucrat” and a compassionate pastor. Millies recounts how, in casual conversation with two young Cincinnati priests, Bernardin admitted that his practice of prayer and reflection had faded away, while his administrative duties had taken over all his waking hours. The priests challenged him, and Bernardin resolved to spend the first hour each day in prayer.

As this biography moves to Chicago, where Bernardin served as archbishop from 1982 until his 1996 death, Millies delves into areas of controversy. Through the USCCB, Archbishop John Roach selected Archbishop Bernardin to Chair an ad hoc committee on war and peace. Millies mentions that characteristically Bernardin insisted on diversity among the members of the committee, including a bishop in the Military Ordinariate and a Pax Christi bishop involved with anti-war protests. With the strong encouragement of bishop members of the committee, other bishops, and USCCB staff members Fr. Bryan Hehir and Edward Doherty, Bernardin also introduced a new process for ecclesial statements by inviting experts and interested citizens to testify before the committee. In May 1983 the bishops, voting 238 to nine, approved *The Challenge of Peace*. The document was widely covered in newspapers and magazines, making Bernardin a national figure (see USCCB 1983).

Millies mentions the “national political storm” caused by this document, including objections from the administration of President Ronald Reagan (1911-2004), who served two terms as President from 1981-1989, and from neoconservative Catholics. He explains that the document’s process and the reaction to it reinforced for Bernardin a concept that would later bring more controversy: a consistent ethic of life.

Millies is straight-forward on the clerical abuse crisis. Bernardin “followed the familiar pattern and transferred [deviant] priests from one parish to another,” he writes. On the other hand, Bernardin eventually realized that the abuse was a national problem that required a national policy of reporting. His Chicago plan became a model for the so-called Dallas Charter on abuse, enacted (though not consistently followed) six years after Bernardin’s death.

Millies also recounts the incident in which Bernardin was accused of abuse; the retraction of the accusation; and the reconciliation between Bernardin and his accuser. Millies, like others who recount this incident paints Bernardin as an innocent victim. That’s accurate to an extent. But Millies leaves out a fact: The accuser, a former seminarian in Cincinnati, was indeed abused by a priest whom Bernardin failed to monitor.

In the latter part of this biography Millies supplies some history that pertains to the current dysfunction of the United States bishops’ conference. From his earliest days of priesthood, Bernardin was clear in his opposition to abortion. Beginning in 1974, however, he strove to explain that the sacredness of life is not just a Catholic thing. Further, he believed that focusing exclusively on abortion was too narrow an approach to promoting dignified life. He began to use the phrase “seamless garment” to describe an inclusive social ethic. In his final months Bernardin launched

the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, an attempt to advance his thinking through civil dialogue. Unfortunately, Bernardin—usually a savvy insider—didn’t have the support of enough fellow bishops. Even as he was in his final days, an east coast Cardinal attacked the Initiative. Others piled on to undermine the seamless garment metaphor; their campaign said opposition to abortion has to be “the preeminent issue.”

It would be nice to say that now 26-years after his death Bernardin’s legacy as a conciliatory peace bishop is solidly in place. He directly influenced a handful of bishops, though they are retired or soon to retire. There are a few other Bernardin-like bishops. But to judge by their recent votes, the majority of United States bishops now prefer to righteously call out politicians and others who do not meet their standards rather than engage in the Vatican II-inspired dialogue with the world.

What about Bernardin in Chicago? There is a school and a cancer clinic named for him. Plus the Bernardin Center at Catholic Theological Union ([www.ctu.edu](http://www.ctu.edu)) nobly keeps his spirit alive. Millies was a professor in South Carolina when he wrote this book. Fittingly, he now directs that Bernardin Center.

Catholicism can still be an instrument for peace. It will take a new generation of young adults who, perhaps inspired by Bernardin and others, apply their own thoughts and experiences to Christian engagement with the world.

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*Droel edits a free printed newsletter on faith and work, INITIATIVES (PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629).*