

Letter from Bulletin of September 7, 2003

Two days before his death, Msgr. Philip J. Murnion sent a letter to all the bishops of the United States. Following are excerpts:

In his final public address on Oct. 24, 1996, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin spoke these moving words: “A dying person does not have time for the peripheral or the accidental. He or she is drawn to the essential, the important – yes, the eternal. And what is important, my friends, is that we find that unity with the Lord and within the community of faith for which Jesus prayed so fervently on the night before he died”

Now in God’s providence, I too write this reflection as a dying person with no time for the peripheral or accidental. In many ways the crisis in the church and the ensuing polarization, which so preoccupied Cardinal Bernardin, have only grown more acute. Your own credibility and ability to guide God’s people have been severely compromised

In the mind of the Pope there is no contradiction between legitimate authority and careful consultation . . . Consultation, listening and dialogue only enhance true authority, because they issue from a lived trust and they serve to increase trust. It is imperative that we work together to restore the trust that has been eroded.

If I were to sum up my final plea to you, it would be: “dialogue, dialogue, dialogue!” I do not mean this as a facile or pious slogan, for I am only too aware of its cost and conditions.

A spirituality of communion and dialogue is as demanding in its asceticism as a spirituality of the desert or the cloister. Like them, it also requires its own appropriate structures. The Catholic tradition knows well that spirituality and structure are not opposed. Here, as elsewhere, it affirms the “both/and” of charism and institution, invisible grace and visible embodiment. Both are essential, though only one is eternal. We can ill afford to be less Catholic than the

Pope himself, who insists: “The spirituality of communion, by prompting a trust and openness wholly in accord with the dignity and responsibility of every member of the people of God, supplies institutional reality with a soul.”

For more than 20 years I have been blessed by working with many of you in different programs of the National Pastoral Life Center. I know from experience that many have sought diligently to consult and communicate with your priests and people alike. But in this time of crisis, of both possibility and peril, we face the urgent need imaginatively to expand present structures and to create new ones that will enable us to draw more effectively upon the rich wisdom of those baptized

Permit me, then, with the last breaths the Spirit gives me to implore you: Do not be afraid to embrace this spirituality of communion, this “little way” of dialogue with one another, with your priests, with all God’s faithful. Doing so, you will touch not only the hearts of your brothers and sisters; you will draw closer to the very heart of Jesus, the Lord and brother of us all

(Rev. Msgr.) Philip J. Murnion