



New Stories to Tell: Living Ecumenism Today

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*Dr. Margaret O'Gara delivers a lecture /
Courtesy of The Catholic Register*

CHAPTER I

Finding family: Learning Christ together again

Margaret O'Gara was a Roman Catholic theologian, ecumenist, and Catholic representative on many formal ecumenical dialogues, including ARC Canada. She often spoke and wrote of the ecumenical movement as an experience of rediscovery, and she delighted in recounting instances of long-divided Christians encountering one another in new ways. The ecumenical journey is full of surprises, as we see in this, one of Dr. O'Gara's favourite stories:

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*It was the end of the spring semester in a class on Christology. Our discussion had been deep. Students turned to somewhat more personal conversation.*

*Two of them found family roots several generations back in Nova Scotia. One, a Roman Catholic man from Toronto, was entering the Augustinian monastery as a young monk. The other, an Anglican woman about the same age, was a candidate for ordination. Two Christians, a Roman Catholic and an Anglican, facing a common future in ministry, though in two different communions.*

*As they talked, the woman mentioned the name of her great-grandmother. The man's great-grandmother had the same name. The two began firing a series of questions at each other about names, marriages, families, children, as the rest of us looked on in surprise, until, at last, one of them leaned across the seminar table and gave the other the kiss of peace.*

*Then the story came out.*

*Long ago, two sisters had grown up in an Anglican family in Nova Scotia. One had become a Roman Catholic and then married a Roman Catholic. Her Anglican family was so upset with this decision that they banished her from the family and cut off all further contact with her. This was common in Nova Scotia at the time – exclusion if a family member left the communion or married someone from another communion. So these two sisters, parted in life for conscience's sake, never saw each other again. Gradually their families lost all contact with each other. What remained was the knowledge that a branch of the family was missing.*

*Those two sisters were the grandmothers of my two stu-*

dents. Each student, raised in a fervent religious home, had been drawn by the love of Christ to seek ordination. And now, at last, the two branches of this divided family had found each other again – through a course on Christ.

That summer there were two ordinations. Each of my two students and their families attended the ordination of the other and shared in reading from the Scriptures. Each included a prayer that their ministries would be an instrument of reconciliation, not only for their families but also for their churches, so that they could again live as sister churches. Each has made ecumenical work central to their ministry.



This story of a remarkable encounter between an Anglican and a Roman Catholic is not only a meeting of strangers who turn out to be family, but also a meeting of their two churches which reflects the ‘real but imperfect communion’ between them (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3).

There is a real communion between Roman Catholics and Anglicans, as the ARCIC II text *The Gift of Authority* (GA) reminds us. This communion is a gift to be received and lived – a bond that connects different Christian traditions, even when we do not remember or cherish it. Because it is as yet an imperfect communion, Anglicans and Catholics need “to make a deliberate effort” to retrieve their shared understanding, “to recognise in each other elements of the apostolic Tradition which they may have rejected, forgotten or not yet fully understood. Consequently, they have to receive or re-appropriate these elements, and re-consider the ways in which they have separately interpreted the Scriptures” (GA, 31).

Family division, in Dr. O’Gara’s story, kept these kin apart for several generations. But in Christ they were brought face-to-face again. They recognized each other as relatives, that is, as belonging to each other in some way. Still, they needed to do some work to get to know each other again. They willingly did so, because they took joy in rediscovering each other and wanted to find ways to grow closer, and to tell their shared and different stories. What their ancestors were unable to achieve, these cousins, in their time and place, were given a way to do.

We see in this story of Catholics and Anglicans rediscovering each other that “their life in Christ is enriched when they give to, and receive from, each other” (GA, 31). The ecumenical movement calls us to “grow in understanding and experience” of the entire apostolic Tradition. We take this not as an onerous duty, but as a joyful opportunity. As part of their studies in preparation for ordained ministry, the two students from different churches were each able to enroll in the same class on Christology. Another ARCIC II document, *The Church as Communion*, urges Catholics and Anglicans “not to neglect or undervalue that certain yet imperfect communion we already share” (CC, 50). Being able to participate in joint study and theological education, without fear that anybody will be harmed by learning and reflecting together, is one of the fruits of our communion (CC, 52); it is a gift that strengthens the communion between us. Studying Christ together, we discover we are family, with all the treasures family life gives, the pains it endures, and the work it requires.

Canada is enriched by many institutions of higher education in theology, where students can learn the discipline and science of their faith in an ecumenical

environment. In these schools, students of different Christian communions take courses together, taught by professors of various Christian traditions. Such institutions embody the changed relationship among our traditions, balancing the need for both denominationally distinct studies and studies that benefit from being carried out together. In this way we acknowledge the incompleteness of our communion, while growing towards a deeper unity.



*Students in class at Newman Theological College /  
Credit: Scott Sharman*

And so our shared history of ecumenical engagement grows, and we find we are able to meet each other again in ways that help us not to forget the past, but to understand that past in a new light through our rediscovered relations in the present.

*The family in Dr. O’Gara’s story suffered from their separation and rejoiced in being reunited. When have you felt the pain of separation among Christians? Where do you*

*see the need of reconciliation among them, either close to home or around the world?*

*What surprising moments of encounter between different Christian families have you experienced? How do such encounters affect your vocation and your work of evangelization, either personally or within your church community?*

*When have you come to know Christ better through connection with Christians of other traditions? How do you experience and understand the “real but imperfect communion” between your church and another?*