

MARGARET O'GARA[†]

1947–2012

David M. Thompson

It is an honor to be invited to write this tribute to Dr. Margaret O'Gara. I first saw (but did not meet) her in the Basilica of San Marco, Venice, Italy, at Mass, before the opening of the second round of the Catholic-Disciples International Dialogue in 1983, without realizing the extent to which our lives would be related for almost thirty years, regardless of the North Atlantic Ocean. Our last meeting was in June last year in Toronto, a little more than six weeks before her untimely death. When we parted, we each knew, without saying so, that we would not see each other again in this life. We worked as principal co-drafters for the Catholic-Disciples International Theological Dialogue, initially under the careful tutelage of Fr. J.-M. Tillard, OP, and after his death with ourselves in the lead role. During that time I came to know and appreciate her lifelong commitment to dialogue and the search for Christian unity. Jean-Marie Tillard taught us both to emphasize points of agreement, while not disguising those where difference remained. Margaret's thorough knowledge of the conciliar documents, principally but not exclusively those of Vatican II, could always be relied upon. As a modern church historian, I came early on to appreciate her own work on the minority French bishops at Vatican I in her book *Triumph in Defeat* (1988), which I was invited to review. They left Rome early, rather than stay for the final vote on *Pastor Aeternus* in 1870, and I had always wondered what happened to them. Similarly I delighted in her later book, *The Ecumenical Gift Exchange* (1998), which demonstrated the conviction of every true ecumenist that he or she has something to receive as well as to give. This was well described

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by another ecumenical colleague of mine, in writing about the process that drew the Churches of Christ in Great Britain (my own tradition, as Disciples in Britain were called) and the United Reformed Church into a single united church in 1981. He said that each group was able to stand back from its own position sufficiently to envisage the possibility of any of the outcomes as a theological option. Neither group was required to conceal or minimize its conviction; rather, each group was liberated “to express itself fully and freely, without pre-supposing that one of them must ‘win’”.¹ Margaret was a genuine listener and possessed a remarkable capacity for seeing elements in the traditions of other churches that they had scarcely been aware of themselves. She and I were responsible for the final drafts of the reports of the second, third, and fourth rounds of our dialogue (*The Church as Communion in Christ*, 1992; *Receiving and Handing on the Faith: The Mission and Responsibility of the Church*, 2002; and *The Presence of Christ in the Church, with Special Reference to the Eucharist*, 2010). She was also responsible for the idea that will shape the fifth round of that dialogue, indicated by her original suggested title, “Formed and Transformed at the Table of the Lord,” and she participated in the two planning meetings of 2011 and 2012. Thanks to her I can look back upon those meetings as some of the most enjoyable of my ecumenical life.

Margaret’s engaging personality and her innate intellectual curiosity led her readily into discussion with those whom she had not previously encountered. Her determination in dialogue meetings never to give up, even when differences seemed intractable, was memorable, just as was her readiness to think of new ways of tackling old problems—a readiness that continued beyond the limits of formal meetings. Sometimes I would receive an e-mail, almost out of the blue, beginning with the words “I have been thinking more about . . .” She delighted in new insights. The discipline of ecumenical drafting is a demanding one. It is quite different from writing an article or book of one’s own; indeed, often one has to try to present, with all the conviction of the original speaker, a point of view with which one may personally disagree. Few discussions lend themselves to the writing of a straightforward record. Sometimes the drafters are left to make sense of a discussion that seemed to lead nowhere yet was somehow full of promise. It is important that the drafter is faithful to what was said and resists the temptation to simplify matters by setting out his or her own thoughts—but at the same time it is often necessary to bring out assumptions that were made but not articulated. It is then for the group to decide whether they recognize their own discussion in what has been written. Inevitably this results in a process of iteration and re-iteration that can be frustrating to the author in each of us. This is also where

1. Martin Cressey, “How Open-Minded Should We Be?” in *Heaven and Earth: Essex Essays in Theology and Ethics*, ed. Andrew Linzey and Peter J. Wexler (Worthing, UK: Churchman Publishing, 1986), 59.

two pairs of eyes, or in our case more often four, are usually necessary to act as the necessary corrective. Margaret never tired of this task, though in other ways her more natural *métier* was the free-ranging discussion. In many ways our talents complemented one another, and I like to think that we made a good team. Other things remained a challenge: her handwriting was not always easy to decipher, and her computer skills were insufficient to master a laptop with ease. However, her natural charm and good humor overcame most problems. Always there was meticulous attention to detail; but perhaps above all, there was that concern expressed in the conclusion of her study of the French minority bishops: "The breadth of the church extends backward and forward through time, and outward to include even those whom we call 'minorities.'"²

Margaret's commitment to the process of dialogue as a means of ecumenism was absolute. Similarly she was firmly committed to the Catholic Church, in which she had been brought up. It was her good fortune to live in an era when, through the Second Vatican Council, theological and ecclesiological horizons were being extended. She was a keen student of the teaching of Vatican II, but that entailed an understanding of Vatican I as well. Margaret's appreciation of the historicity of doctrinal formulations was a carefully nuanced one that avoided simple historical relativism. Here she and I were at one, and sometimes in our meetings we found ourselves at odds with colleagues on both sides who failed to grasp the significance of that. In her essay "Ecumenism, Dissent, and the Roman Catholic Church" in *The Ecumenical Gift Exchange*, she argued that "dissent is part of the process by which a community learns," invoking *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973) from the Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith in aid of her argument. So also in that essay, and the concluding one, "Roman Catholic Theology Today," she suggested that recovery of the treasures of the past and transposition of those ideas into the contexts (in various parts of the world) of the present were both crucial to the theological task, and in the same way to the ecumenical task.³ It was fitting that her last major lecture, when she received the Ecumenism Award from the Washington Theological Consortium sponsored by Mr. Jack Figel, should have been titled "A Dialogue of Transformation." Drawing on Pope John Paul II's words in his encyclical *Ut unum sint* (1995), she noted that repentance was necessary before transformation could take place, the transformation that could lead to "a calm, clear-sighted and truthful vision . . . capable of freeing people's minds of things and of inspiring in everyone a renewed

2. Margaret O'Gara, *Triumph in Defeat: Infallibility, Vatican I, and the French Minority Bishops* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 255.

3. Margaret O'Gara, *The Ecumenical Gift Exchange* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 117–22 (quotation 120), 162–71.

willingness" to preach the gospel to every people and nation.⁴ She went on to discuss five aspects of the transformation required, illustrating each from her experience in a particular ecumenical dialogue.

It is easy to understand why Margaret was loved and appreciated by her many research students at the University of St. Michael's College, Toronto, where she taught from 1975 until her death. A series of scholars have worked under her and testify to her care and thoroughness in her supervision. By all accounts her seminars were memorable occasions, and she would often test out the latest findings in the dialogues to which she belonged: the Anglican–Roman Catholic Dialogue of Canada (1976–1993), the Disciples of Christ–Roman Catholic International Dialogue (1982–2012); the U.S. Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue (1994–2012); the Lutheran–Roman Catholic International Commission for Unity (1995–2006), for which she took the trouble to learn German; Bridgefolk, a North American group for dialogue between Roman Catholics and Mennonites (2002–2012); and the Evangelical–Roman Catholic Dialogue of Canada (2008–2012). Like all those involved in ecumenical work, she was keen to ensure that new ecumenists would be trained to take the place of older participants, and she was an enthusiastic member of the Board of the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at St. John's Abbey and University, Collegeville, Minnesota, from 1990 to her death. In the fullness of time her persistent advocacy led me to spend a fruitful month at the Institute as a short-term visitor.

Margaret was born on 24 June 1947 in Chicago, Illinois, the daughter of James O'Gara (later the editor of *Commonweal* magazine) and his wife, Joan. Educated at Trinity College, Washington, D.C., and Yale Divinity School, she did her doctoral work at the University of St. Michael's College, Toronto, where she met her future husband, Professor Michael Vertin. Appointed an assistant professor at St. Michael's in 1975, she became a full professor in 1998 and was appointed to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto Chair in Systematic Theology in 2007. She was president of both the North American Academy of Ecumenists (1987–1989) and the Catholic Theological Society of America in 2007–2008, when she made a determined effort to mend fences with the U.S. Bishops' Conference. Originally diagnosed with cancer in 2010, she made a good recovery, but she suffered a recurrence in Lent 2012 and died on 16 August.

4. Margaret O'Gara, "A Dialogue of Transformation," http://washtheocon.org/files/2012/11/Figel_Lecture_2012_Dialogue_of_Transformation_OGara.pdf, 2 (accessed 11 January 2013), quoting John-Paul II, *Ut unum sint*, §2, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint_en.html (accessed 11 January 2013). She had discussed the theme of transformation earlier in her seminar paper of 1994 about the Ecumenical Directory, "Formation for Transformation," in *The Ecumenical Gift Exchange*, 151–56.



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