

Forum on Dialogues, 22-23 June 2015, Saskatoon
Panel in Honor of Dr Margaret O'Gara
Introduction
by Mary Marrocco

Last fall, I received by mail a welcome surprise: a complimentary edition of *No Turning Back: The Future of Ecumenism*, by Margaret O'Gara. The book was kindly sent to me by the very first philosophy professor I ever had, Michael Vertin, who edited the volume. It was like having a couple of old friends drop in and get into a deep, fulfilling conversation with you.

This publication (Liturgical Press, 2014) was most timely for the working group planning the fifth Forum on Inter-Church Dialogues. It's a collection of essays and talks by Dr O'Gara on ecumenical theology and dialogue, some previously published and some not. What a delight for us to plan to spend some time, at this Forum, recognizing, reflecting on and learning from Margaret O'Gara's personal, academic and ecclesial contribution to ecumenism in Canada. Which is immense.

Margaret was one of the theology professors I studied with while working on my Master of Divinity degree at St Michael's College in the Toronto School of Theology, where she was professor of theology for 36 years. Doing theology was an O'Gara family legacy, Michael Vertin tells us in the introduction to the book. Her parents Joan and James gave her an orientation "not just to devout Christian living but also to thoughtful reflection on that living:" that is, to doing theology (p. xix). Her doctoral dissertation, published in 1988, was entitled "Triumph in Defeat: Infallibility, Vatican I and the French Minority Bishops". That writing, like the essays in *No Turning Back*, shows her gift for finding hope, movement and life in places where everything seems broken, stuck and lost--which may be another way of saying, she believed in the resurrection.

As a professor, Margaret O'Gara was one of those instructors all students knew about. Everybody knew she would give you serious, "head-cracking" readings (to use her own expression), lead you deeply into the heart of theology with all its profound questions, expect you to work hard, and break open your mind and your faith. Whether or not you thought that a good thing varied from one student to another, but she always lived up to expectations. She was passionate about the ecumenical movement and--as the book title suggests--not turning back from it. As a theologian, an academic, a teacher, and a lay Catholic, she saw its urgency and devoted herself to the long, hard, painstaking, sometimes glorious, serious work of ecumenical dialogue and research. She herself served for many years on five international ecumenical dialogues. To her it was important that her students read the theologians--not just read about them--and read the dialogues--not just read about them. In 2010, when she made a presentation to the Governing Board of the Canadian Council of Churches, she was delighted to discover that eight or ten Governing Board members -- of different denominations -- had been her students.

Though she was never a member of the Faith and Witness Commission, she was present in others, including the late Dr George Vandervelde who represented the Christian Reformed Church - North America on the Commission. George liked to tell the story of how he worked to have the expression "condemnable idolatry" changed in the Heidelberg Catechism because, as he said, he saw that his friend and colleague Margaret O'Gara was not a condemnable idolater, so he decided the church should study the question in our own era and find out what Catholics now believe and teach.

It was Margaret who, when I had finished my doctorate and was exploring possibilities, suggested I apply for the then-opening on the Faith and Witness Commission. She also encouraged me to teach

courses on ecumenism, which I have done in several academic institutions. She similarly influenced my colleague Dr James Pedlar, now Assistant Professor of Wesley Studies and Theology at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto. James, who was raised in the tradition of the Salvation Army, served as staff member for Faith and Witness in 2010 and 2011. Two days after Margaret's death from cancer in August 2012, he wrote about her, including this excerpt (from "Remembering Margaret O'Gara," by James Pedlar, <https://jamespedlar.wordpress.com/2012/08/17/remembering-margaret-ogara/>, accessed 21June2015):

When I began my doctoral studies in September of 2007, I found out that Margaret was on my supervisory committee ... I enrolled in her class "Breakthroughs and Barriers in Ecumenical Dialogue" in January of 2008. I was somewhat unsure if I should take the class. The course description looked good, and I was already convinced of the importance of doing theology ecumenically. But I suppose I carried with me some of that typical evangelical reticence towards ecumenism. One evangelical colleague even advised me that I should not take the course. However, I was very glad that I did, because the course material, along with Margaret's own teaching, played a significant role in shaping the direction of my dissertation. In fact, I appreciated the course so much that I signed up for another in September of that year, "Ecumenical Dialogue on Authority."

... Margaret's approach to ecumenical dialogue was to conceive of it as a "gift exchange." This idea was not unique to her – she drew it out of magisterial sources in her own Catholic tradition – but she was able to express it in a way that brought helpful conceptual clarity to the process of ecumenical dialogue.

James calls her "a great theological mentor." And justly so.

Margaret led me deeper in my theological studies. When I was finishing my Master of Divinity, she wrote on a paper of mine she had graded: "Have you thought of publishing it? Talk to me." I did talk to her, and a few years later when I was doing pastoral work and thinking of returning for doctoral studies, it was Margaret I went to see. She was sure I could and should do it. But, I mused, I don't necessarily want to be an academic professor; I want my theology to be of service pastorally. "There are many ways a doctorate in theology can be pastoral," she said instantly, and gave me at least five examples; and as I thought it over, I realized that her own work as professor of theology was completely pastoral. She had helped me deepen my love of, knowledge of and faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. She had helped give me a sense of having a mission in the Church, a mission stemming from my baptism which nobody could give me or take away from me. She'd witnessed for me how a lay woman could be a strong, powerful, faithful pastor, teacher and leader in the Church.

Let me pray with you the prayer she herself chose to have printed on her memorial card:

"Father of all, you call us to be one flock in our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. In following him, may we so care for others that all see in us the love of the one true Shepherd, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen."