

Living Ecumenism: Margaret O’Gara’s Ecumenical Ecclesiology*

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P R E C I S

Margaret O’Gara was a prominent Canadian theologian who taught at the faculty of theology of St. Michael’s College (University of Toronto) for thirty-six years. She was deeply engaged in the ecumenical movement, mainly as a Catholic representative in international and North American ecumenical dialogues: with the Anglican Church, the Disciples of Christ, the Lutheran Church, the Mennonites, and Evangelical communities. This essay is a study of the principal features of her ecumenical theology and her involvement in ecumenical dialogues, focusing on five major themes: the purification of memory, ecumenical gift exchange, primacy in the universal church, friendship in the ecumenical movement, common prayer and intercommunion, and the ecclesiology of communion and the nature of the church. While all of O’Gara’s ecumenical involvement was in bilateral dialogues, she was totally committed to ecumenism as a principle of life—a living and lived ecumenism.



In 1990, Margaret O’Gara (1947–2012) wrote that “today in the Roman Catholic Church, there is . . . a desire . . . to live in full eucharistic communion with all our brothers and sisters in Christ, and to share fully together with them in the mission of the Church for a world that deeply needs

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the united proclamation of the Good News of Christ.”¹ This sentence aptly sums up O’Gara’s own deepest convictions and aspirations, which provided the motivation for her academic and ecumenical activities for over forty years. O’Gara was a prominent Canadian theologian who taught at the faculty of theology of St. Michael’s College (University of Toronto) for thirty-six years. She was deeply engaged in the ecumenical movement, mainly as a Catholic representative in international and North American ecumenical dialogues.

Two aspects of her life and academic career are particularly significant in considering her theology in an ecumenical perspective. First, she did her doctoral thesis on the First Vatican Council—more specifically on the thinking and role of the French bishops who constituted the “minority” at the Council opposed to the proclamation of the infallibility of the pope. Although the twenty-two French minority bishops (out of about seventy French bishops present at the Council) failed to bring the majority around to their point of view, they nonetheless had a significant influence on the terms of the Council’s declaration on infallibility, *Pastor aeternus*. O’Gara and others see in the ecclesiology of Vatican II a posthumous victory on a number of issues for the ecclesiology of the French minority bishops of Vatican I—hence, the title of the published version of O’Gara’s thesis, *Triumph in Defeat*.² As a result of O’Gara’s study of the doctrine of infallibility, she was well aware of the nineteenth-century arguments against papal infallibility, which made her sensitive to the broader question of primacy in the church in her later ecumenical discussions.

The specific ecumenical dialogues in which O’Gara was personally involved profoundly influenced her ecclesiology. These dialogues provide both the raw material for the development of her ecclesiology and examples that she constantly cited in her reflections. She acted as a representative of the Roman Catholic Church in international and/or North American ecu-

¹Margaret O’Gara, “The Petrine Ministry in the Ecumenical Gift Exchange,” *Grail* (Waterloo, ON), vol. 6, no. 1 (1990), p. 52 (hereafter, “Petrine Ministry”).

²See Margaret O’Gara, *Triumph in Defeat: Infallibility, Vatican I, and the French Minority Bishops* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988). O’Gara delivered a résumé of her thesis at the 35th Annual Convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America under the title “Infallibility and the French Minority Bishops at Vatican I.” See the *Proceedings of the Thirty-fifth Annual Convention* (San Francisco, June 11–14, 1980), pp. 212–216.

menical dialogues with the Anglican Church (1976–93), the Disciples of Christ (1983–2012), the Lutheran Church (1994–2012), the Mennonites (2002–12), and Evangelical communities (2008–12).

In 1998 O’Gara published a collection of articles under the title *The Ecumenical Gift Exchange*; a second, posthumous collection of articles appeared in 2014 as *No Turning Back*,³ which contains several previously unpublished texts and a complete bibliography of her writings—ninety-four items in all. Throughout her writings, O’Gara often expressed her own views by references and quotations from other writers, especially the popes, declarations of Vatican II, other official Roman Catholic statements, documents from ecumenical dialogues, and Roman Catholic and other Christian theologians. We can now consider major aspects of O’Gara’s ecumenical ecclesiology.

I. Purification of Memory

One of O’Gara’s constantly recurring themes was the need for ecumenical partners to purify past memories, especially painful memories of how ancestors in the respective religious denominations denigrated, mistreated, tortured, and even killed members of the other denomination. In the practice of the Catholic Church beginning with Pope Paul VI, the purification of past memories has been marked by the acknowledgement of inconsiderate or outright unchristian actions or statements by the Church, accompanied by a request for forgiveness from those who have been injured. Pope John Paul II’s reign was striking for a number of such ecumenical gestures. John Paul II wrote of the “purification of past memories” in his 1995 encyclical, *Ut unum sint*.⁴ The notion recurs frequently in O’Gara’s ecumenical theology, as an indispensable element in the healing process. Writing of the Catholic-Mennonite dialogue, she stated that “memories must be purified before they can be healed.” In rereading the past together in this dialogue, openness “allowed a broader view of Christian history and counteracted the loss

³ See Margaret O’Gara, *The Ecumenical Gift Exchange*, A Michael Glazier Book (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998); and idem, *No Turning Back: The Future of Ecumenism*, ed. Michael Vertin (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014) (hereafter, *NTB*).

⁴ John Paul II, *Ut unum sint: On Commitment to Ecumenism* (Rome: The Holy See, 1995), no. 2; available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html.

of perspective resulting from centuries of separation.”⁵ She explained in another text how she saw this necessary revisiting of the past together: “To witness together an ecumenical future, we must change our view of a divided past. While it may seem obvious, the part played in ecumenical dialogue by changing our view of the past is not always noticed or discussed. But, in fact, ecumenical dialogue means revisiting the memories of our history and seeing them in a new way.”⁶

In addition to this collective or institutional purification of memory, the purification process also entails the need for personal transformation of dialogue partners or repentance: “Dialogue between the churches must include personal transformation or it is not really ecumenical dialogue at all.”⁷ From her extensive knowledge and experience in bilateral ecumenical dialogues, O’Gara cited other examples of the purification of memories and personal transformation. As a participant in both the international and the U.S. Roman Catholic-Lutheran Dialogues, O’Gara considered the principal outcome of this dialogue, the Lutheran-Roman Catholic *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999), to be a major example of a joint rereading of the common history of these churches, going back to the origins of the Reformation.⁸ This declaration moves from a view that past positions are contradictory to seeing them as complementary: “[T]o recognize that we depend completely on God for our justification and salvation—as Lutherans emphasize—is not to deny that believers are fully involved in their faith and, moved by grace, give their consent—as Roman Catholics emphasize. . . . By re-reading history together we were led to a transformation, seeing each other in a new light, and we wanted to share this experience with our readers.”⁹

The Mennonite-Catholic international dialogue had to confront head-on the memory of past Catholic persecutions of Mennonites. This mem-

⁵ Margaret O’Gara, “Making Peace for Peacemaking,” *Benedictine Bridge* (Holy Wisdom Monastery, Middleton, WI, 2005); in *NTB*, p. 12.

⁶ Margaret O’Gara, “Witnessing the Ecumenical Future Together (Dedicated to the Memory of George Vandervelde),” *J.E.S.* 46 (Summer, 2011): 369.

⁷ Margaret O’Gara, “Ecumenical Dialogue as a Process of Personal Transformation,” paper delivered at the Washington Theological Consortium, February 2, 2012; in *NTB*, p. 43.

⁸ Lutheran World Federation and Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000).

⁹ O’Gara, “Ecumenical Dialogue as a Process”; in *NTB*, pp. 46–47.

ory constituted a “barrier to Christian unity . . . some longstanding mutual alienation that prevents appreciation of both another communion’s gifts and the needs of one’s own communion.”¹⁰ By rereading this painful history together, Mennonites and Catholics sought to develop a common interpretation of a divided past that could lead to a release from the stranglehold of the past and the development of positive shared new memories.¹¹

Another type of purification of memory results from the analysis of each other’s teachings, with a view to a correct understanding of the teachings of the dialogue partners. O’Gara gave the example of the statement of the Disciples of Christ-Roman Catholic International Commission for Dialogue on *The Presence of Christ in the Church, with Special Reference to the Eucharist*, which deals with the concept of transubstantiation. It became clear in the dialogue that there had been a misunderstanding concerning the significance of transubstantiation as employed by Thomas Aquinas and the Council of Trent.¹² The upshot of the mutual exploration of the Catholic understanding of transubstantiation is that it became obvious that “Both churches ‘affirm the mystery of Christ’s real presence in the eucharist, especially in the bread and wine,’ an agreement they could reach only . . . ‘through the elimination of mutual misunderstandings.’”¹³

Another example of the correction of false impressions of teachings concerns the Christian Reformed Church, which long adhered to Question & Answer 80 in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, accusing the Catholic Church of

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 49.

¹¹ See O’Gara, “Witnessing the Ecumenical Future,” pp. 369–370; and *Called Together to Be Peacemakers* (Report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference, 1998–2003), especially Part III, “Toward a Healing of Memories,” available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/mennonite-conference-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20110324_mennonite_en.html.

¹² See O’Gara, “Ecumenical Dialogue as a Process”; in *NTB*, p. 48. For the Disciples of Christ, Aquinas’s employment of Aristotelian philosophical categories with respect to the eucharist was no longer relevant or comprehensible, and the term transubstantiation was taken to mean “almost the opposite of what Aquinas had intended” (*NTB*, p. 48). See also *The Presence of Christ in the Church with Special Reference to the Eucharist: Fourth Agreed Statement of the Disciples of Christ-Roman Catholic International Commission for Dialogue, 2003–2009*, especially nos. 33–37 and 76; available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/discip-christ-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20090630_disciples-christ-report-2003-2009_en.html.

¹³ O’Gara, “Ecumenical Dialogue as a Process”; in *NTB*, p. 49.

“condemnable idolatry” in its eucharistic teaching and practice. Dr. George Vandervelde (1939–2007), an important C.R.C. figure and friend of O’Gara, “often prayed with Catholics,” and as a result concluded that the statement in the *Heidelberg Catechism* condemning Catholic theology of the eucharist was wrong. He set about to change the CRC view and eventually “succeeded in persuading the Christian Reformed Church to lift its accusation of idolatry against Catholic” theology of the eucharist.¹⁴ The 2006 Synod of the C.R.C. decided that the part of the *Heidelberg Catechism* that denounces the Roman Catholic Mass would be placed in brackets with a note explaining that those paragraphs “do not adequately reflect the official teaching and practice of today’s Roman Catholic Church and are no longer confessionally binding on members of the CRC.”¹⁵

II. Ecumenical Gift Exchange

A second essential feature of O’Gara’s ecumenical theology is the idea of the exchange of ecumenical gifts. The inspiration for the notion of ecumenical gifts is from *Lumen gentium* of Vatican II, which John Paul II took up in *Ut unum sint*.¹⁶ Christian denominations have certain ecclesial “gifts,” which may consist of doctrines, liturgical practices, or organizational features that they uniquely possess or particularly emphasize and that are lacking or down-played by dialogue partners. These particular features of a church can be considered potential “gifts” to be offered to ecumenical partners: “[E]cumenical dialogue can be understood as an exchange of gifts.”¹⁷ O’Gara provided many examples of such gifts, both from her own experience and on a

¹⁴ Margaret O’Gara, “‘Pray without Ceasing,’” *Bondings* (Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, Toledo-Detroit Province), vol. 21 (2008); in *NTB*, p. 26. See Christian Reformed Church in North America, *Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 80 and the Roman Catholic Eucharist, Part I* (2002; rev. ed., 2004).

¹⁵ See Bert Witvoet, “Synod 2006: CRC Ends Condemnation of Roman Catholic Mass” (January 18, 2011); available at www.thebanner.org/news/2011/01/synod-2006-crc-ends-condemnation-of-roman-catholic-mass.

¹⁶ See Vatican II, *Lumen gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) (Rome, 1964), no. 13, available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html; and *Ut unum sint*, nos. 29, 35, and 57. In *Lumen gentium* we read: “In virtue of this catholicity each individual part contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and of the whole Church” (no. 13).

¹⁷ O’Gara, “Ecumenical Dialogue as a Process”; in *NTB*, p. 51.

broader scale. She cited her friend, the Dominican theologian Jean-Marie Tillard (1927–2000), concerning possible gifts: “From the Orthodox a deeper pneumatology and from the Protestant Churches more careful distinctions in our understanding of grace,” and she gave examples of “liturgical gifts”: from the Mennonites and Methodists—expansion in number and kinds of hymns; from the Orthodox—icons and long chants of vespers; from the Anglicans—“the beauty and rhythm of plainsong and of the spoken word in liturgy”; from the United Church of Canada and the Pentecostals—more spontaneous worship; from Lutherans and Presbyterians—good sermons; from Evangelical Christians—testimony of what God is doing in our lives;¹⁸ and again from the Mennonites—“ecclesial responsibility, including mutual accountability, as a duty that is shared by everyone in the church.”¹⁹

As a fruit of dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Mennonites, she wrote, “One tradition has pushed the other to recover aspects of itself that had been neglected or underdeveloped.”²⁰ In the Bridgefolk Roman Catholic-Mennonite dialogue, “The Mennonites came to Bridgefolk because they wanted to retrieve the rich liturgical heritage largely lost to them at the time of the Reformation. Roman Catholics came to Bridgefolk in order to deepen their commitment to peacemaking.”²¹ In the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue, she remarked that Lutherans “have a good theology” of local congregations, “but their theology of the cluster of congregations shepherded by a local bishop was less strong.”²² The opposite prevails in the Catholic Church, which has “a full theology of the local church as a cluster of congregations shepherded by a bishop, [but] very often [has] no adequate theology of the parish or congregations that make up the diocese.”²³ In dialogue with the Disciples of Christ, Catholics receive the Disciples’ recognition of Christ’s real presence in several different ways: “in the proclaimed word of God and in the gathered assembly . . . as

¹⁸ O’Gara, “‘Pray without Ceasing’”; in *NTB*, p. 25.

¹⁹ Margaret O’Gara, “The Catholic Church in the World Today,” paper presented at a Mennonite-Roman Catholic Conference in Collegeville, MN, July 12, 2002; in *NTB*, p. 6.

²⁰ O’Gara, “Making Peace for Peacemaking”; in *NTB*, p. 14.

²¹ O’Gara, “Ecumenical Dialogue as a Process”; in *NTB*, p. 50.

²² Margaret O’Gara, “Christ’s Church Local and Global,” paper presented at the National Workshop on Christian Unity, Chicago, April 17, 2007; in *NTB*, p. 18.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

host at the eucharistic feast, as present at communion,” and “in the bread and wine.”²⁴

O’Gara also recognized that there is a place for well-intentioned criticism in ecumenical dialogues: “[O]ne gift ecumenical partners offer each other in the gift exchange is serious criticism. Such criticism can be heard because of the basic mutual recognition present between dialogue partners.”²⁵ Such criticism must be offered in a spirit of genuine love and respect, and she quoted approvingly the Anglican historian of the early church, Henry Chadwick (1920–2008): “‘Reception arises when it is recognized that the partner in dialogue loves God and his Church and seeks to be obedient to the gospel; moreover, that this obedience transcends allegiance to anything sectarian.’”²⁶

III. Primacy in the Universal Church

In 1990, five years prior to the publication of John Paul II’s major ecumenical encyclical *Ut unum sint*, O’Gara wrote: “The Petrine ministry is a central issue facing the ecumenical movement today.”²⁷ The sentence could have been written yesterday. A faithful daughter of the Catholic tradition, O’Gara was committed to the papacy in the universal church, yet she was painfully aware of the shortcomings of the actual exercise of papal primacy, especially since Vatican I. Her awareness arose both from her doctoral research on the French minority bishops at Vatican I and her participation in interchurch dialogues, especially with Lutherans and Anglicans, two communions that retain the episcopacy.

For O’Gara perhaps the most important gift that the Roman Catholic Church had to offer to its ecumenical partners was the papacy and “the con-

²⁴ O’Gara, “Ecumenical Dialogue as a Process”, in *NTB*, p. 49.

²⁵ Margaret O’Gara, “Friendship in the Ecumenical Movement: Its Theological Significance” (previously published as Margaret O’Gara, “The Theological Significance of Friendship in the Ecumenical Movement,” in Michael Goheen and Margaret O’Gara, eds., *That the World May Believe: Essays on Mission and Unity in Honour of George Vandervelde* [Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006]); in *NTB*, pp. 33–34.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34, quoting Henry Chadwick, “Reception,” in Gillian R. Evans and Michael Gourgues, eds., *Communion et réunion: mélanges Jean-Marie Roger Tillard* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1995), p. 107.

²⁷ O’Gara, “Petrine Ministry,” p. 51.

viction that a petrine ministry is part of God's design for the Church."²⁸ This deep conviction runs through many of her writings. But, for the papacy to be acceptable to the other churches, it must be reformed: "the shaping of a petrine ministry in such a way that it could actually serve again today and for the future as a ministry of unity in the one Church of Christ."²⁹ O'Gara chose her words carefully, referring to "a petrine ministry," not "the petrine ministry"—suggesting, in effect, that the papacy as currently conceived and exercised since Vatican I is not a suitable "gift" to be offered to the entire church of Christ. She recalled that Vandervelde "used to say that he wasn't so sure he wanted some of the gifts Catholics were offering"—notably the papacy.³⁰ However, the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission referred to "the papacy as a gift 'to be shared.'"³¹ "Anglicans can even speak of the papacy as a 'gift' God wants to give the church."³² She noted that "it is a gift for the whole of Christ's church, but first it needs repair."³³ The problem in ecumenism is clear: "In my judgment, difficulties over the exercise of ecclesial authority are the most difficult ones in ecumenical dialogue today, not because we lack understanding of what structural changes are needed but because we do not yet have the will to make them."³⁴

Listening to Catholic dialogue partners on the ministry of unity, she identified the renewing principles required as "legitimate diversity, collegiality, and subsidiarity."³⁵ She cited Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov and the Final Report of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission concerning the need for primacy in the church in the spirit of a true ecclesiology of communion, such that "the bishop of Rome should not stifle the distinctive features of the local churches."³⁶

²⁸ Ibid., p. 53.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ O'Gara, "Christ's Church Local and Global"; in *NTB*, p. 21.

³¹ Ibid.

³² O'Gara, "Ecumenical Dialogue as a Process"; in *NTB*, p. 52.

³³ O'Gara, "Christ's Church Local and Global"; in *NTB*, p. 22.

³⁴ O'Gara, "Ecumenical Dialogue as a Process"; in *NTB*, p. 54.

³⁵ O'Gara, "Petrine Ministry," p. 55, referencing the U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue, "Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church: Common Statement," in Paul Empie, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph Burgess, eds., *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), p. 34. See also Margaret O'Gara, *Re-thinking Infallibility, Chancellor's Lecture XII* (Regis College, Toronto, ON, November 17, 1994), p. 19.

³⁶ O'Gara, "Petrine Ministry," p. 57.

To account for the problems in the exercise of the papacy, O’Gara appealed to ecclesiological and epistemological paradigms. In ecclesiology, she noted a shift from “a pyramidal ecclesiology” or “an ecclesiology of jurisdiction” to an “ecclesiology of communion.” If Vatican I’s proclamation of papal infallibility and primacy represented “a highpoint” in pyramidal ecclesiology, Vatican II signaled a move “toward an ecclesiology of communion.”³⁷ O’Gara noted favorably the Catholic theologian Hermann Pottmeyer (b. 1934) for whom “Vatican I does not represent continuity with the first millennium in its teaching on papal primacy, but instead is a change of paradigm.”³⁸ Whereas the first millennium of Christianity saw the church as a community of witness, the second millennium saw the rise of papal primacy as sovereignty, as a monarchy, with the conception of papal primacy as “one-sided, centralized and defensive.”³⁹

She also appealed to a shift in epistemological paradigms as described by Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan (1904–84), from “a classicist mentality” to “historical-mindedness.”⁴⁰ The classicist mindset emphasizes “permanence of meaning and the fixity of human nature,” whereas the historical mindset “recognizes that ‘intentionality, meaning, is a constitutive component of human living . . . not fixed, static, immutable, but shifting, developing, going astray, capable of redemption’” (Lonergan).⁴¹ In this perspective, Vatican I was an example of the classicist mindset, whereas Vatican II, inspired by communion ecclesiology, illustrated the historical approach,

³⁷ Margaret O’Gara, “Understanding Vatican I on Papal Primacy” (previously published as “Three Successive Steps to Understanding Vatican I’s Teaching on Papal Primacy,” *The Jurist* 64 [2004]: 208–223); in *NTB*, pp. 70 and 74. See also O’Gara, *Re-thinking Infallibility*, pp. 15–19.

³⁸ O’Gara, “Understanding Vatican I on Papal Primacy”; in *NTB*, p. 71, referencing Hermann J. Pottmeyer, *Towards a Papacy in Communion: Perspectives from Vatican Councils I & II*, tr. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Crossroad, 1998), p. 61.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, in *NTB*, p. 71, referencing Pottmeyer, *Towards a Papacy*, pp. 73–74.

⁴⁰ See “Reconceptualizing Infallibility in Ecumenical Dialogue: Epistemology, Ecclesiology, and the Issue of Reception,” in O’Gara, *Ecumenical Gift Exchange*, pp. 65–69.

⁴¹ O’Gara, “Understanding Vatican I”; in *NTB*, p. 70, quoting Bernard Lonergan, “The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical-Mindedness,” in *A Second Collection: Papers by Bernard F. J. Lonergan, SJ*, ed. William Ryan and Bernard Tyrell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), pp. 5–6. See also “Reconceptualizing Infallibility” in O’Gara, *Ecumenical Gift Exchange*, p. 65.

making “room for the realities of reception, collegiality, and the diversity of local churches,” which counted little at Vatican I.⁴²

While Vatican I focused more on infallibility than on primacy, in practice primacy has become more important. O’Gara quoted German Jesuit theologian Klaus Schatz: “[T]he dogma of infallibility has not had the significance attributed to it in 1870 by its supporters or by its opponents. Instead, the papal primacy of jurisdiction has acquired a greater scope than it actually had in 1870.”⁴³ O’Gara commented that “papal primacy emerged as a kind of alternative infallibility after that council [Vatican I] and continues to function without many restrictions on its exercise either in theory or in practice.” Distinguishing between papal primacy and papal infallibility, she also remarked that “papal primacy received little careful theological attention at either council. . . . Hence it presents a fairly open theological project.”⁴⁴

Despite the problems associated with the papacy in the eyes of other Christian churches, O’Gara was attentive to the signs of the times, which she interpreted as favorable to a reformed or converted petrine ministry “‘at the service of Christian unity.’”⁴⁵ Christians from other communions, she wrote (perhaps more in hope than as an expression of reality), “desire a ministry that would speak the word of the Gospel in a pastoral way with a voice that could speak for all Christians; they often say they would welcome the pastoral guidance represented by the social encyclicals and they are glad to acknowledge the importance of more doctrinal oversight.”⁴⁶ Yet, this desire for a locus of Christian unity is belied by historical experience, especially failures to respect local “theological, liturgical and other traditions” or by “the imposition of wholly alien traditions” on local churches.⁴⁷

O’Gara was realistic about the reforms needed in the papacy before it could even begin to be acceptable for other denominations. Sometimes this

⁴² O’Gara, “Understanding Vatican I”; in *NTB*, p. 70. See also O’Gara, *Re-thinking Infallibility*, pp. 11–13.

⁴³ Klaus Schatz, *Papal Primacy: From Its Origins to the Present* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), p. 164, cited in O’Gara, “Understanding Vatican I”; in *NTB*, p. 74.

⁴⁴ O’Gara, “Understanding Vatican I”; in *NTB*, p. 75.

⁴⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 77, where she cites Paolo Ricca, “The Papacy in Discussion: Expectations and Perspectives for the Third Millennium,” *One in Christ* 33 (1997): 288.

⁴⁶ O’Gara, “Petrine Ministry,” pp. 57–58.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

is expressed in broad terms, for example: “The papacy needs to exercise the ministry of unity in the universal church in a more pastoral way, . . . in a way that defends the diversity of local churches and their distinctive traditions.”⁴⁸ Often her views echo ecumenical dialogue statements. The Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue “crafted a carefully articulated theology of infallibility that affirms both the authority of conciliar or papal teaching and the need for that teaching to be received by the whole church.”⁴⁹

She broached a specific sore point, the Vatican’s treatment of dissent within the Catholic Church, a theme familiar to her from her doctoral research on the French dissenting bishops at Vatican I. She defined dissent as “dissent from those teachings of the magisterium that are not exercises of infallibility, but belong instead to that wide range of teachings to which Roman Catholics give the benefit of the doubt, their presumption in favour, their religious submission of mind and will, but that they also recognize could contain error or could need to be refined or changed.”⁵⁰ The Vatican’s treatment of dissent raises a major problem in ecumenical dialogue, which O’Gara sometimes expressed as an understatement: “I am not sure that we Roman Catholics are at our best in the presentation of the gift of petrine ministry to other Christians in dialogue with us.”⁵¹ At other times she was more direct: “In some recent treatments of dissent, the local church is ignored or stifled, as is the importance of reception throughout the Church.”⁵²

She ascribed the failure of the Catholic Church to respond adequately to dissent to an incomplete transition from a pyramidal ecclesiology to an ecclesiology of communion, noting that “our treatment of dissent is one area where the Roman Catholic Church in its practice has not entirely made the shift to an ecclesiology of communion. While committed to this shift in theory, it still finds in practice, sometimes, that it slips back into old ways.”⁵³

O’Gara’s approach to infallibility is far from tied to the papacy. At the broadest level, she came close to affirming that infallibility belongs to the church as a whole:

⁴⁸ O’Gara, “Christ’s Church Local and Global”; in *NTB*, p. 22.

⁴⁹ O’Gara, “Ecumenical Dialogue as a Process”; in *NTB*, p. 52.

⁵⁰ O’Gara, “Petrine Ministry,” p. 65.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 66–67.

infallibility refers to God's assisting presence in the Church, God's reliability to ensure that the Gospel of salvation will not be utterly lost, even in times of crisis. Or again, I think infallibility refers to the assisting presence of God to enable the Church in new times and cultures to announce the Gospel in new ways.

we will see infallibility as God's assistance to us in the ongoing process of learning by which we figure out how to defend the core of the Gospel when it is attacked, and how to translate the Gospel when old words no longer carry the old meanings.⁵⁴

Thus, infallibility is not constrained to one locus in the church but is, rather, a divine gift to the church as a whole. It is in this context that O'Gara attached considerable importance to the notion of the reception of teachings: "[O]ne area that gives us new vision on infallibility is the emphasis on reception."⁵⁵ Her emphasis on reception arose especially from the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, which defined reception as "the fact that the people of God acknowledge such a decision or statement because they recognize in it the apostolic faith. They accept it because they discern a harmony between what is proposed to them and the *sensus fidelium* of the whole Church."⁵⁶ Reception is a necessary aspect of the reform of the papacy and infallibility, since, she wrote, "Reception by the whole Church is a necessary sign by which we recognize a teaching as an exercise of infallibility."⁵⁷ This notion of reception may be closer to Orthodox notions of the infallibility of the church and the significance of the reception of teachings by the entire body of the church than to conventional Catholic thinking on papal infallibility.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 60 and 64.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 61.

⁵⁶ Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Final Report* (London: SPCK and Catholic Truth Society, 1982), no. 3; cited in Margaret O'Gara, "Reception as Key: Unlocking ARCIC on Infallibility," first published in the *Toronto Journal of Theology* 3, no. 1 (1987): 41-49; this citation is from the revised version in O'Gara, *The Ecumenical Gift Exchange*, pp. 82-83.

⁵⁷ O'Gara, *Re-thinking Infallibility*, p. 18.

IV. Friendship in the Ecumenical Movement, Common Prayer, and Intercommunion

O’Gara attached considerable importance to personal friendship among those engaged in long-term ecumenical dialogue. In fact, friendships within one’s own church communion and with colleagues in other church traditions are essential to ecumenical perseverance. Friendship in the ecumenical movement “establishes the proper context of ecumenical dialogue, enhances understanding between the dialogue partners, and nurtures the perseverance necessary for making progress.”⁵⁸ From her own experience—for example, her long-standing friendship with Vandervelde of the Christian Reformed Church—she could affirm that personal friendships can breach “communions once ignorant of or hostile toward each other.”⁵⁹ Friendships are based on a common recognition that the dialogue partners are also sincere and loving Christians and spill over into common prayer: “When we pray together without ceasing for the unity of the church, we stop listening to ourselves and we can hear God speaking. . . . [W]e also hear each other praying. . . . In fact, we begin to hear God speaking through each other: and then we know that we’re really praying.”⁶⁰

O’Gara was even open to the idea that it is necessary to reconsider rules for access to the eucharist in the Catholic Church. While the ancient rules served to exclude the unbaptized and Gnostics, now they are applied to “exclude Protestants and Anglicans—other Christians whose baptism we recognize and whom we call our brothers and sisters in Christ. Although our ecclesiological perspective on them changed at Vatican II, our eucharistic discipline toward them still does not fully mirror these changes: though better than preconiliar practice, it still has an inner inconsistency.”⁶¹

V. The Ecclesiology of Communion and the Nature of the Church

O’Gara highlighted the importance of the shift from a “pyramidal ecclesiology” to an “ecclesiology of communion” for Roman Catholic involvement

⁵⁸ O’Gara, “Friendship in the Ecumenical Movement”; in *NTB*, p. 29; also see p. 34.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶⁰ O’Gara, “‘Pray without Ceasing’”; in *NTB*, pp. 23–24 and 27.

⁶¹ Margaret O’Gara, “Table Manners: Jesus’ Lavish Hospitality” (previously published in *Commonweal* 136 [February 27, 2009]: 13–14); in *NTB*, p. 40.

in ecumenism: “This is a shift,” she wrote, “that has been nurtured by our dialogue with the Orthodox and other Christians who retain the patristic emphasis on the value of the local church.”⁶² Pyramidal ecclesiology, which dominated the Catholic Church from Vatican I onward, emphasized the unity of the church, through the primacy and authority of the pope, “but sometimes it confused unity with uniformity,” and was marked by “increasing centralization in government and personal devotion around the person of the bishop of Rome.”⁶³ Vatican II, however, was inspired by the ecclesiology of communion, “the local church in its celebration of the eucharist as the locus of Church.”⁶⁴ Vatican II “wished to recover the patristic emphasis on the local churches that make up the one church of Christ, and so it emphasized the local churches in their diversity.”⁶⁵ The central problem of eucharistic ecclesiology is the question of relations between the local church and the “whole church,” with theologians of various churches oscillating between attaching prime importance to one or the other. Referring to the Kasper-Ratzinger debate on this issue, she concluded that “neither the whole church nor the local church has a priority; neither comes first”; rather, they are “simultaneous.”⁶⁶

A vision of the church emerges from O’Gara’s numerous ecclesiological and ecumenical writings. O’Gara often wrote of particular Christian communities as “communions.” This is certainly not to suggest that other Christian denominations are not “churches” in the same way as the Roman Catholic Church but arises from her commitment to an ecclesiology of communion. Thus, she often reserved the word “church” to refer to the universal church, the entire people of God. Perhaps speaking more for herself and for many of her Catholic ecumenical colleagues than expressing a universal consensus within Catholicism, she wrote, “The Catholic Church understands the one church as a communion of communions.”⁶⁷ The basis of

⁶² O’Gara, “Petrine Ministry,” p. 53.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 53–54.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁶⁵ O’Gara, “Christ’s Church Local and Global”; in *NTB*, p. 17.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* The Kasper-Ratzinger debate is a now-classic (and rare) case of public disagreement among high prelates of the Catholic Church. For an overview of the debate, see Kilian McDonnell, “The Ratzinger/Kasper Debate: The Universal Church and Local Churches,” *Theological Studies* 63 (June, 2002): 227–250.

⁶⁷ O’Gara, “Christ’s Church Local and Global”; in *NTB*, p. 17.

the one church of Christ is not institutional adherence but, rather, faith and the universal significance of baptism; Catholics are thereby in “real though not full communion with all those sharing the same faith and baptism in the one church of Christ.”⁶⁸ O’Gara affirmed the underlying unity of the church despite visible diversity and even division: “Unity is not uniformity,” she reminded her readers; Christians must “recognize the diversity of Christian expressions that come from other churches, as well.”⁶⁹ She was optimistic that the old view that the other’s diversity represented threatening incompatibility was being replaced by a vision of diversity as “a common treasure” and complementarity.⁷⁰ It is in this perspective that she affirmed that all churches are in need of reform—hence, the ecumenical “importance of encouraging and sustaining one another in our efforts to reform our own church communions.”⁷¹

It is in this light that she assessed a 2007 document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith concerning certain aspects of the doctrine of the Catholic Church. This somewhat obscure document reiterates negative statements about how Protestant and Anglican churches cannot be called “churches” in the proper sense and how the church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church. Yet, its real purpose, she argued, was to counter anti-ecumenical viewpoints in the Catholic Church, by affirming “that the Church of Christ is present and operative in the churches and ecclesial Communities not yet fully in communion with the Catholic Church.”⁷²

Conclusion: The Future of Ecumenism

In her ecumenical ecclesiology, O’Gara constantly searched for what unites, the commonalities among Christians of all denominations, rather than focusing on what divides, yet she also recognized that some things do, indeed,

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁶⁹ Margaret O’Gara, “Ecumenical Dialogue in Canada Today” (previously published in *Ecumenism* 152 [December, 2003]: 30–32); in *NTB*, p. 9.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ O’Gara, “Friendship in the Ecumenical Movement”; in *NTB*, p. 36.

⁷² O’Gara, “Christ’s Church Local and Global”; in *NTB*, p. 20, citing Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church* (June 29, 2007), response to second question; see http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070629_responsa-quaestiones_en.html.

divide. For example, in the Catholic-Mennonite dialogue, she felt that there was an incomplete agreement on the relationship between scripture and tradition. This was due at least in part, she thought, because the Roman Catholic side did not go far enough in presenting the implications of its position on scripture and tradition: “[T]here are different levels or kinds of tradition within Roman Catholic life and teaching. . . . Roman Catholics distinguish between changeable and unchangeable teachings.” “[C]entral teachings like the divinity and humanity of Christ are not changeable, although their formulation could be altered as the church enters different times and cultures.”⁷³

For all her enthusiasm and commitment to ecumenism, O’Gara was realistic in recognizing that there are significant obstacles along the path to Christian unity. We can summarize these obstacles under five headings:

1. A persistence in seeing each other’s teachings or positions as contradictory or irreconcilable. This is different from an expression of criticism of doctrines and practices; mutual criticism, as we saw earlier, is also a part of the dialogue process—and disagreement can remain on certain issues, for example, whether non-Christians could be saved.⁷⁴
2. There can be continued misinterpretations or misunderstandings of one another’s teachings or positions, which may require long study to arrive at a correct comprehension of the other’s actual teachings. This can result in recognition that old condemnations were ill-founded or based on misunderstanding, such as Question & Answer 80 in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, and some modern interpretations of Catholic teaching on transubstantiation.
3. The persistence of longstanding mutual alienations as a result of negative historical experiences impedes “appreciation of both another communion’s gifts and the needs of one’s own communion.”⁷⁵ This is, in effect, an incomplete purification of memory.
4. There may be differences between communions’ structures of authority, especially of teaching authority, which makes dialogue difficult or even impossible, notably with respect to differing, even radically conflicting, attitudes concerning primacy and the role of the papacy in the church.

⁷³ O’Gara, “Making Peace for Peacemaking”; in *NTB*, p. 15.

⁷⁴ See O’Gara, “Ecumenical Dialogue as a Process”; in *NTB*, p. 55.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49 (Roman Catholic-Mennonite dialogue).

5. Communion may have different styles of evangelization, which make it easy to overlook shared areas, such as a rich variety in interpreting scripture among denominations.⁷⁶

Yet, these obstacles can be overcome, as O’Gara’s own participation in ecumenical dialogues demonstrates, to the extent that ecumenical endeavors are motivated by a focus on truth, not primarily on confessional identity: “We can be tempted to seek our identities alone instead of seeking the truth together,”⁷⁷ she warned, and this truth-seeking together can be hard going. She described as “ascetical practices” in ecumenism, certain features typical of ecumenical dialogue, in association with a focus on truth and the process of personal transformation. These practices include fasting from the eucharist at each other’s liturgies, the long and detailed study of the positions of other churches, and “the embarrassment and frustration that flow from the sins of [one’s] own church communion and from those of the dialogue partner’s church communion as well.” In addition, the efforts of those involved in ecumenical work may be “feared or suspected by members of their own church.”⁷⁸ O’Gara advised that “ecumenical work today is a long-term enterprise and it demands survival tactics. . . . [E]cumenical dialogue is a form of asceticism. It invites Christian scholars to enter into a process that may achieve no tangible success or rewards during their lifetime.”⁷⁹

In 1928 Pius XI, in his encyclical *Mortalium animos*, condemned the ecumenical movement and forbade Catholics from participating in ecumenical endeavors. Less than forty years later, Vatican II opened wide the door of the Catholic Church to the ecumenical movement. O’Gara was a post-Vatican II Catholic theologian, one who was totally committed—mind, heart, and soul—to the Council’s decisions on ecumenism. For O’Gara, learning from the life of the church in the broadest sense, including from non-Catholic denominations, must be central to the very life of the church. In her ecumenical theology and activities over a period of forty years, Margaret O’Gara represented a fresh, open, luminous, loving spirit, characterized by honesty, sincerity, and a positive outlook—always seeking what is true and best and highest in the teachings of other churches, institutions,

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 45 (Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue of Canada).

⁷⁷ O’Gara, “Pray without Ceasing”; in *NTB*, p. 26.

⁷⁸ O’Gara, “Friendship in the Ecumenical Movement”; in *NTB*, p. 35.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

and events and always ready to confront obstacles and move forward in the search for the unity of the one church of Christ: a living and lived ecumenism.

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