

BUILDING ON THE LEGACY OF ECUMENICAL
TRAILBLAZERS—SELECTED SESSION

- Topic: “No Turning Back”: Building on the Legacy of Ecumenical Trailblazers—Margaret O’Gara, Jeffry Gros and Ralph Del Colle
- Convenor: John Borelli, Georgetown University
- Moderator: Kristin Colberg, College of St. Benedict/St. John’s University
- Presenters: Richard J. Sklba, Auxiliary Bishop Emeritus, Archdiocese of Milwaukee
Ann Riggs, Loyola University Chicago
Brett Salkeld, Archdiocese of Regina

Though the topic of the session begins with the title of a just published volume of Margaret O’Gara’s essays, “No Turning Back: The Future of Ecumenism,” edited by Michael Vertin (Liturgical Press, 2014), panelists addressed ecumenical contributions of all three recently deceased CTSA members: Ralph Del Colle, Jeffry Gros, and Margaret O’Gara. O’Gara and Gros were long involved in the official US Lutheran-Catholic dialogue that “operated with a sustained level of theological excellence and remarkable fruitfulness,” in the words of Bishop Richard Sklba. Sklba’s paper was entitled “The National Lutheran/Catholic Dialogue: Convergences, Challenges and Opportunities.” Impasses centuries old need insight, and Sklba attested to O’Gara’s exceptional ability to find a fresh starting spot, often in rephrasing an issue to open new perspectives. Gros would then suggest resources from the vast literature of ecumenism, which he knew well and had even edited in several collections. Sklba concluded by reiterating specific convergences, challenges, and opportunities revealed in Lutheran-Catholic ecumenical dialogue, making the point that dialogue provides excellent theological education and opportunities for writing fresh theological treatises.

In her paper, “Ecumenical Ecclesiological Possibilities of Mutual Recognition of the Personal Witness and Good Works of the Redeemed,” Ann Riggs touched on Jeff Gros’ success as Director of the NCCC’s Faith and Order Commission (1981–1991) in drawing in smaller church groups seeking ecumenical connections but reluctant to join. Riggs, who also served as Faith and Order Director after Gros (2002–2007), recounted an experience with Gros at the Wesleyan Theological Society when those of the holiness tradition showed little patience with denominations that worried about church order issues. All three honored by this panel “believed in the Church,” and Riggs’ point was to show that to inherit their legacy toward effective engagement and even agreement among all Christian bodies from the perspective of an historically ordered church requires new ever pathways. Like Sklba, Riggs underscored the achievement of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification because it reached into an ever-widening circle of church bodies. She focused on the formulation in par. 15, where a framework is offered for dialogue on good works—for which the Holy Spirit equips us—and how we might speak productively about those good works and the faith and order of the one church. Riggs drew the witness to contemporary Christian martyrs and the pneumatalogical framework, which Gros and Del Colle knew well in their experiences particularly among Pentecostals, for sharing

commitments to holiness and life and how all focused on questions of holiness might reconnect with a common heritage for ecumenical discussion.

In his presentation, "Apprenticing with Margaret O'Gara," Salkeld touched on ecumenical friendship, at which O'Gara excelled (along with Gros and Del Colle), which involves discipline, asceticism, and imaginative understanding. He also noted that in her 2008 CTSA presidential address, she listed imagination, faithfulness, and perseverance as virtues for those involved actively in ecumenical relations. From O'Gara's example Salkeld drew a profile of an ecumenically committed teacher of theology. Part of the good news that teachers of theology need to get right is the unity of the church. Ecumenical dialogue requires and produces good theology. Theologians themselves need to learn what ecumenical dialogue is about and to experience how ecumenical dialogue produces better theology than they what we might do alone. One particularly important memory for Salkeld was how O'Gara's drew inspiration from the joint reflection by Dr. Runcie and Paul VI, "No pilgrim knows in advance all the steps...our conversations will in fact help to deepen and enlarge our understanding."

Discussion turned immediately to the future of ecumenism and how committed scholars and theologians today can nourish the zeal and hope that these three so exemplified through theological reflection and dialogue, particularly in recognizing Christ in the diversity of Christian life today. New forms of dialogue need to be imagined and the sense of the faith needs to be explored in new ways. This session provided a rich discussion of suggestions for just such future ecumenical work.

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