

Ecumenism as a Way of Life: *The Collegeville Institute*

The School of Theology-Seminary is blest by the rich resources that make the entire campus a place for learning. Among these resources is the Collegeville Institute that lies along the shore of Lake Watab and has become an international gathering place for those interested in the pressing issues of religion, culture, and the well-being of humanity. Its resident scholars share their wisdom with SOT-Sem students formally in their public lectures and informally as they join students for Thursday Convivium. Founded in the mid-1960s as the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, the Center is a quiet witness to the transformative power when individuals meet individuals in a setting marked by cooperation, deep listening, and mutual building up for the common good. This article captures some of the dynamic character of the Institute, renamed the Collegeville Institute in 2005. More detailed information can be found at www.collegevilleinstitute.org.

If asked, many of us would say that ecumenism involves finding a path to unity in Christianity and harmony among religious traditions. That is the classical understanding of the Ecumenical Movement often characterized as meetings of theological scholars and church leaders to argue the fine points of doctrine in an effort to achieve mutual understanding and, sometimes, common ground. It is not an incorrect response, but it is incomplete. So too is the notion that ecumenism is found in local activities where people of different faiths and denominations come together from time to time for shared prayer, witnessing of marriages, addressing social issues, and responding to disasters. Again, it is not a wrong view of ecumenism. It is just too incomplete in itself.

While the Collegeville Institute has its roots in the Ecumenical Movement, its mission actually lies between these two images of ecumenism. “Ecumenism,” says executive director, Don Ottenhoff, “is changing globally. What were the predominant issues and dynamics of dialogue have changed. That said, the Institute has never been a place for the sort of official doctrinal dialogue among designated theological experts often associated with ecumenism. Instead, the Institute has consistently focused on creating a place where people meet face-to-face to share the experience of being formed in a particular religious tradition. That doesn’t mean that the conversation has been unscholarly or trivial. On the contrary. At the Institute, people come to the table with their life stories of how their traditions shape their views of the world and the interpretation of issues affecting the world, communities, and individual lives. Speaking of ecumenism in a recent interview, Pope Francis said that Christians ‘must walk united with our differences: there is no other way to become one.’ That’s the kind of ecumenism the Institute has practiced for over 40 years.”

In the mid-1960s when he returned from doctoral studies, Fr. Kilian McDonnell, OSB began imagining an American center of scholarly research to nurture Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox theology. Helping him translate that vision into reality was the philanthropic couple, Patrick and Aimee Butler of St. Paul. They were instrumental in establishing the Institute as a permanent part of Saint’s John’s Abbey and University. It was indeed meant to be a permanent, physical place but a place unique in its approach to fostering

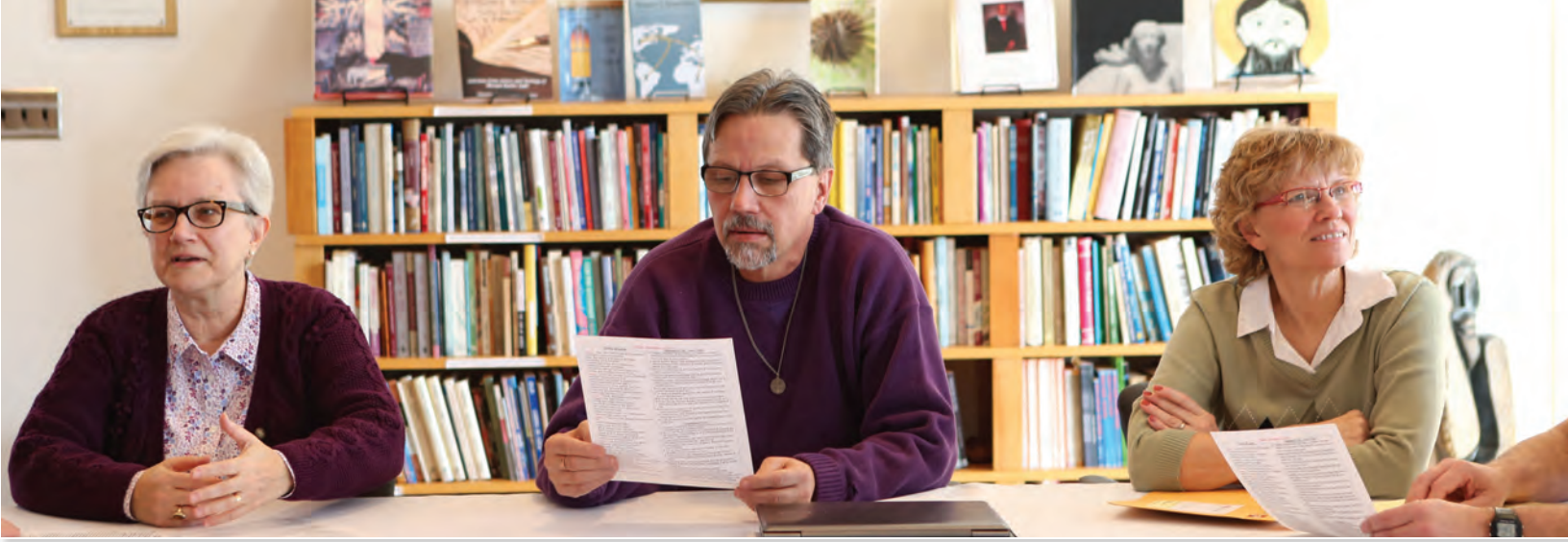
understanding across differences.

“Our location on the banks of Lake Watab accomplishes two things,” Ottenhoff says. “It takes advantage of this natural setting to accent the importance of quiet and beauty for doing one’s best thinking. At the same time, the Institute literally lives in the shadow of the Abbey, the University – and by extension, St. Benedict’s Monastery and the College of St. Benedict. We benefit by the wonderful resources each provides. But even more importantly, how we carry out our mission of engaging the religious and cultural issues of our day is shaped by a Benedictine rhythm of life.”

The Institute forms “bridge builders,” people who enter into deep conversation with others around new and passionate religious, moral, and humanistic visions of life. The Institute’s reach is wide in terms of who participates in its programs. They include traditional scholars from universities and seminaries around the world who settle in for long-term residencies. At any one time, one will find at the Institute Orthodox laity, African American biblical scholars, Christians living in non-Christian cultures, emerging religious and civic leaders, artists, poets, pastors, and even women and men who have found hope and renewal outside the church. What binds them together in their diversity is how the Institute invites them into conversation.

“The first person method we developed defines the way we approach theological discourse,” Ottenhoff explains. “Institute participants convene as their own persons, not as representatives of a denomination or other body. They speak out of their traditions, not for them. They do that in settings where the goal is not to find the flaw in each other’s positions but to listen in order to help illuminate mutual understanding. Our goal is never to re-tell someone else’s story or to redirect their research. But we encourage each other to go more deeply into it, to learn from it, and to get unstuck if that happens to be the case.”

The first person method is more than a clever process. It is characteristic of the rhythm of life the Institute maintains. As Ottenhoff notes, “The search for understanding happens in an atmosphere where both the mind and heart are engaged.” For him, the staff, and the Board of Directors, the success of the Institute depends on the active cultivation



of community among resident scholars and other program participants. Community as a marker of the Institute's culture values conviviality as a scholarly resource. It encourages the pursuit of leisure and quiet reflection as much as full involvement in spirited discussions. The love of ideas and the accomplishments of Institute participants do not obscure the fundamental power of relationship as the foundation of creative thinking.

"This is a place that cultivates relationships that allow people to know one another at a deep level," Ottenhoff says. "People learn about the impact of being raised in a religious tradition, or, increasingly, in multiple traditions. They gain new appreciation for differences of perspective because they know more than words. They know the person who is speaking and the deep conviction with which they speak. That level of knowing, quite frankly, is transformative."

In addition to the Resident Scholar Program, the Institute convenes people around particular themes. Currently, those include an ecclesial writing project aimed at encouraging pastors, ministers, and others who think on behalf of the church to write in ways that help interpret

the dynamics of contemporary life theologically for the lay reader. Other projects focus on vocation and faith in the professions, vocation across the lifespan, and integration in theological education and ministry. Dr. Kathleen Cahalan, professor of pastoral theology in the School of Theology-Seminary has provided major leadership for these three projects.

What has the institute accomplished in its nearly forty years? Perhaps that can best be summarized in its own website statement about its impact on the world:

[Our work is] measured in terms of people and relationships. Through each of the Institute's offerings, leaders of diverse Christian faiths and beyond come together to study, write, pray, eat, and learn with one another. In so doing, they form unlikely networks of friendships that have far-reaching consequences for the places and organizations to which they return after their time at the Institute.

Victor Klimoski

