

## CHAPTER IV

# Breakfast table ecumenism: From friendship to action

**M**eeting monthly in Montreal since 2003, the Theology Breakfast Club (TBC) now gathers around 12–15 committed Christian members each month. An ecumenical spirit has been at the heart of the group since its inception. Its initial members were drawn from either Concordia University’s Department of Theological Studies (broadly Christian, including faculty and students of various Christian confessions) or the Ignatian Centre of Spirituality (in the Jesuit tradition, but welcoming Christians of any denomination). Members take turns hosting a Saturday morning breakfast, and leading the discussion of an article or book chapter on a pre-agreed theological or spiritual topic. Group founder Cathie Macaulay tells unfolds the genesis of the TBC:

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*The idea to gather friends together to discuss theology came out of a very personal need: finishing my M.A. in Theological Studies, while caring for four young children at home, did not lend itself to many opportunities for theological discussion! The idea was brewing within*

*me for some time when I finally took the risk to bounce it off a friend. The immediate response was: “Nobody is going to want to get up early on a Saturday morning to discuss THEOLOGY!” The idea went underground for a while longer, until I finally extended the invitation to a few friends to gather at 8:00 on a Saturday morning at a local restaurant in April 2003 to talk the-ology. Thus, the Theology Breakfast Club was born!*

*Over the years, our membership has shifted, and our venue has changed many times. Our futile quest for a quiet restaurant with a round table to facilitate our discussions has led to simple breakfasts hosted in each other’s homes. However, the idea of sharing articles on subjects of theological interest has remained the same. At first the group was mostly personal friends and fellow spiritual directors from the Ignatian Spirituality Centre. Soon, the group attracted others who were interested in the topics and who widened the scope of our discussions. Over the years we have had members from the Roman Catholic, Anglican, United Church, Pentecostal, and Evangelical traditions around the table, and this enriches our conversation immensely. We have also been trying harder to choose topics and articles that are less ‘comfortable’, more challenging to the ideas we may already hold. For me, this has been one of the many great gifts of our gatherings: learning to think in a different way, in a deeper way about theological ideas. The friendships forged over the course of these 14 years have grown and strengthened.*



Long-time TBC member Fr. Raymond Lafontaine, Roman Catholic priest and member of the ARC Canada theological dialogue, tells the story of a particularly fruitful common witness project engaged by the TBC:

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*Shortly after the 2016 release of Pope Francis' post-synodal exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, ("The Joy of Love"), our group engaged in a stimulating discussion of the many issues touching marriage and family life raised in the papal declaration. Whatever our opinions of the "universal primacy of the Petrine office", Pope Francis' pastoral approach, wise counsel, and willingness to bring the wealth of the Catholic Tradition to bear on contemporary debates about family life resonated deeply with each of us, denomination notwithstanding!*

*With the week of prayer for Christian Unity just a few months away, I was inspired to invite some of the TBC members to form an ecumenical panel at St. Monica's, where I serve as pastor, as part of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in our west-end Montreal neighbourhood. The panel would discuss the issues raised by the papal declaration regarding the moral and spiritual challenges facing Christian couples and families today, from an ecumenical perspective.*

*Most of the group members attended the panel, and three accepted to join me on the panel. Catherine Cherry (Roman Catholic laywoman, single mother, family therapist and spiritual director); Rev. Marsha Mundy (Anglican priest, married to a United Church minister), and Mr. Willy Kotiuga (Evangelical Christian, engineer, husband and father, whose wife Nita serves as an Evangelical pastor). Together, we responded creatively (and critically) to the papal text, shared relevant personal and pastoral examples, and explored the human, spiritual, and pastoral challenges connected to supporting and strengthening marriage and family life.*

*The ecumenical event drew the enthusiastic participation of about 70 people. Feedback was excellent, and the TBC*

*members were thanked for sharing the fruits not only of their personal knowledge and experience but also their longstanding ecumenical friendship and fellowship. It was a reminder to us that we need to continue to find ways to share this gift in a way that benefits the larger church.*



*Fr. Raymond Lafontaine / Used with permission*

Is it possible for Catholics and Anglicans – let alone Christians whose denominational divisions arguably run deeper – to come together not only to discuss differences on theological and ethical questions, but also to rejoice in the considerable consensus we already share? This is a real and important question, especially in light of some of the new issues that challenge us.

ARCIC II's *Life in Christ* expresses both the context of our shared moral-ethical heritage as Anglicans and Catholics, and acknowledges the divergences which have emerged as a product of our particular histories: "In our conversations together we have made two discoveries: first, that many of the preconceptions that we brought with us concerning each other's

understanding of moral teaching and discipline were often little more than caricatures; and secondly, that the differences which actually exist between us appear in a new light when we consider them in their origin and context” (LC, 50–51).

After outlining some of these caricatures, such as the alleged Anglican insistence on liberty, personal conscience, pragmatism, and individual choice, and correspondingly, Roman Catholic tendencies to obsession with law, ecclesiastical authority, abstraction, and universally binding rules, *Life in Christ* concludes: “Caricature, we may grant, is never totally contrived, but caricature it remains. In fact, there is good reason to hope that if they can pray, think, and act together, Anglicans and Roman Catholics, by emphasizing different aspects of the moral life, may come to complement and enrich each other’ understanding and practice of it” (LC, 50–51).

After fourteen years of praying, thinking, and acting together, the experience of the Theology Breakfast Club is that this kind of ecumenical engagement is not only possible, but necessary. It has led to deep friendships, to real experiences of shared communion in faith and witness, and to a more profound commitment to the practice of Christian unity. We make these words, taken from *Life in Christ*, our own: “The Christian life is a response in the Holy Spirit to God’s self-giving in Jesus Christ. To this gift of himself in Incarnation, and to this participation in the divine life, the Scriptures bear witness. Made in the image of God and part of God’s good creation, women and men are called to grow into the likeness of God, in communion with Christ and with one another. What has been entrusted to us through the Incarnation and the Christian Tradition is a vision of God. This vision

of God in the face of Jesus Christ is at the same time a vision of humanity renewed and fulfilled. Life in Christ is the gift and promise of new creation, the ground of community, and the pattern of social relations. It is the shared inheritance of the Church and the hope of every believer” (LC, 4).

*Have you ever belonged to a faith-sharing or religious discussion group? In what way has hearing the insights and experiences of others — especially coming from a different culture or tradition — helped you to grow in your own journey of faith?*

*There is a common perception that although Anglicans and Catholics share a deep theological and liturgical heritage, where they differ most seriously is on moral questions, especially those concerning marriage and human sexuality. How might we move beyond the “caricatures” we hold of another church’s perspectives on these issues, in order to engage in a more fruitful dialogue, and even a consensus around shared values and concerns?*

*A new phase in the life of the TBC occurred when they moved from shared discussion and prayer to shared witness and mission. Are there any groups to which you belong that would benefit from this kind of a shift? How are you being called to share the fruit of your ecumenical friendships with the Church and the world?*