

***Symposium in Honor of Rev. John Crossin, OSFS  
Ecumenism and Spiritual Friendship  
Spirituality as our Common Language***

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I had the great privilege of knowing Father John Crossin for about thirty years. Our paths crossed many times, as we worked both in ministry and the academic world over the course of our careers. I was teaching at the Washington Theological Union, then Virginia Seminary, when John was head of the Washington Theological Consortium. We were *both* also part of a group called the Salesian Scholars Seminar. Over the years of knowing each other in those different contexts, we became good friends.

When John retired from his position with the Bishop's Conference, but still was not ready to retire completely, he came to work at the Saint Luke Institute in Silver Spring, where I have worked for the past several years. Saint Luke's is a psychiatric and psychological treatment facility for clergy and religious – mostly Catholic clergy and religious, but not all. We also treat clergy and religious of other denominations. Our clients are in need of emotional, psychological, and often spiritual, healing. John came to Saint Luke's to direct our spirituality department. What we do in that department is essentially spiritual direction, but we do it as part of our clients' treatment program and integrated with the rest of their treatment.

When you think about that shift at the end of John's career, from the Bishop's Conference to Saint Luke's, it might at first sound like a total departure from his work in ecumenism, but a careful reading of his book, along with knowing John as a person, tells a different story.

John's work in ecumenism, as well as his work in spiritual guidance, as well as the rest of his life – especially his friendships - were not separable from his spiritual life. As noted in Mitzi Budde's forward to the book, John described himself as an "optimistic ecumenist." That optimism was deeply, spiritually rooted in John. It was rooted in his optimistic image of God as loving and inviting, and also rooted in his optimistic view of the human person as fundamentally good, made in the image of that loving God. That was the source of the mutual respect that grounded the spiritual guidance that John offered, and it was also the source of his belief in the power of spiritual friendship.

John and I had many conversations about spirituality, spiritual companionship and spiritual friendship, and I remember him saying that he found, in his ecumenical work, that spirituality is our common language. We can have many differences about theological and biblical interpretation, about liturgy or organizational issues, but our spirituality, our experience of God, is at a level much deeper than all of those differences. The spiritual friendship that John mentions so frequently in his book is capable of bridging differences, when it is offered with humility, compassion, and a willingness to listen at least as much as we talk. John believed that the need for healing, the need for bridging differences, that he encountered in his ecumenical work could be brought about by sharing on the level of spiritual experience, when that sharing

is done with compassionate listening - recognizing that none of us has all the answers, and sometimes we need things pointed out to us.

John saw the spiritual guidance he offered at Saint Luke's in much the same way he saw his ecumenical work – a kind of spiritual friendship in which both persons are open and attentive to the voice of the Holy Spirit. His work as a spiritual guide was filled with that same compassion and mutual respect, and that is what made it so powerful.

In both his ecumenical work and in spiritual guidance, John believed that our spiritual stance needs to be one of discernment, and he uses the word *discernment* many times in his book. Often, we equate discernment with making decisions. Hopefully, we make decisions as a result of careful discernment, but discernment is far more than the process of making a decision. Discernment is an attitude of the heart, an openness to learning God's will, and to making all of our life decisions – the large ones and the small ones – in accordance with God's will. That openness requires what both Saint Ignatius and Saint Francis DeSales called "holy indifference," an openness to doing God's will simply because it is God's will. Saint Vincent DePaul, who learned from Francis DeSales, called it "unrestricted readiness."

Discerning God's will does not mean surrendering human freedom. Rather, it engages human freedom, John writes, as it "moves us toward - not absolute clarity, but - relative certainty."

That is the spiritual stance to which John called the ecumenical movement, and the spiritual stance to which he called those who came to him for spiritual guidance. In both areas of his work, John believed that a discerning attitude of the heart is the way to healing. "Part of the accompaniment is to be a listening and loving presence that facilitates healing," he writes in the book.

The Salesian virtue of gentleness, respect for each human person as made in the image of God, is foundational for spiritual friendship, the foundation for what Episcopal priest and author Margaret Guenther called "Holy Listening". John listened with gentleness, compassion, and love.

He says in his book – and this might very well have come from his experience at Saint Luke's - that "for someone to speak aloud of a trauma or difficulty buried deep within them to an accepting and merciful person can be very healing." John offered that gift, that "safe space." And he recognized that patience is also important, because healing comes in God's time, not ours. Because of the way John approached spiritual accompaniment, people trusted him, and that in itself was a source of healing. John knew that when someone opens their heart and shares their deep inner experience, especially when it is painful, it must be treated with the utmost reverence.

In the book, John references Archbishop Rowan Williams, who also believes that spiritual ecumenism is central to ecumenical work. We seek to discern the Spirit's work in our midst, and that requires a willingness to let go of some of our own thoughts, feelings, and presuppositions, and to "follow the road the Spirit walks with us." Any one person's understanding of God is necessarily limited. When we listen with openness and respect, we can learn, we can deepen our understanding. Spirituality becomes our common language.

John writes that an important aspect of ecumenical ethics is “emphasis on the uniqueness of everyone made in God’s image,” hence “the importance of *relationships* and relational theologies.” As a result of spiritual friendship, John writes that “Christian thinking moves from the hyperclarity and conflict of the post-reformation period to a more nuanced view of diversity of thought.” Room to grow, room to learn, room to move together into to a deeper understanding the mystery of God.

John writes, “*Healing* is necessary if we are to continue to move toward the unity Jesus prayed for at the Last Supper –that we all might be one.” John was a healer, in his ecumenical work *and* in his interpersonal work. He has called us to carry on that work of healing.

Thank you for this opportunity to honor my dear friend.