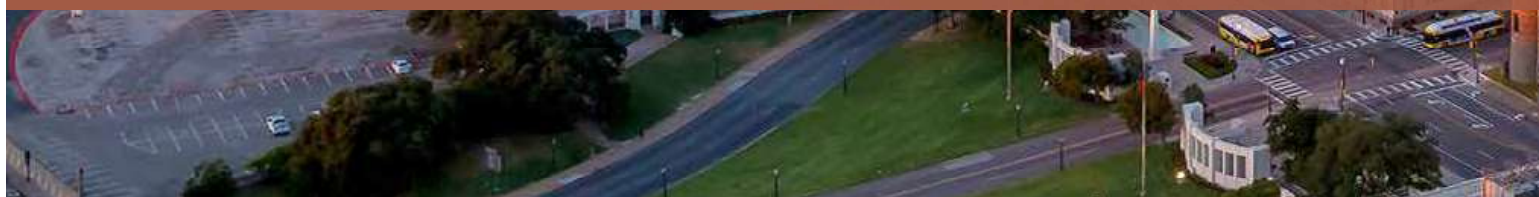




ECUMENICAL CONVERSATIONS

Dr. Daniel A. Keating





FROM CATHOLIC GHETTO TO ECUMENICAL INTERACTION

I grew up in a lively, vigorous Catholic “ghetto” in which nearly all my relationships were with (practicing) Catholic families and friends. Twelve (mostly delightful) years of Catholic school contributed to this experience. The one exception to this Catholic ethos was the family next door to the east: they attended a Lutheran church. The one notable difference between them and us was that we had to go to church on Sunday and they did not. It seemed to me as a young boy that they had a pretty good deal as Lutherans.

But otherwise, apart from attending an Eastern Orthodox Easter vigil liturgy as a teenager, I had no experience or interaction with non-Catholic Christians, despite the fact that they were living and worshipping all around me. The numerous church buildings that dotted the corners of many streets were simply a closed book to me: they were part of a world with which I had no interaction. My parents, however, took ecumenism very seriously. Every Sunday as we gathered for dinner we prayed a special Hail Mary for “Christian unity,” and though I didn’t really know what this meant, the constant rhythm of prayer for this intention made a strong imprint on my mind.

The Catholic ghetto experience changed dramatically when the time came to go off to college. In a summer geology class of over forty students camped in the backwoods of Wyoming, only three of us went to church on Sunday: myself, another Catholic student, and an African-American evangelical Christian. I was no longer in my Catholic environment where I could take things for granted. That summer, for the first time, I had to give witness to what I believed to be a large majority that did not share my views or my experience.

More positively, I found myself connecting with an ecumenical Christian student group. Though Catholics were the majority, there was a strong presence of students from a wide variety of Protestant backgrounds. This was my first real introduction to ecumenical interaction and conversation—and it was a profound experience for me. As I reclaimed and expanded the Catholic faith that had been mine since birth, I found helpers along the path, not only older and wiser Catholics but also Protestant friends who helped me grow in my faith and experience of Christ. Together we studied the Scriptures, prayed for other students in our dorms, shared with each other our struggles, and sought to give a living witness to a common Christian life on campus. This intense experience with other students imprinted on me a commitment to ecumenism and a genuine regard for other Christians that have marked my life ever since.

Two dorm rooming situations contributed greatly to my experience of ecumenical conversation and common living. In my second year, I shared a room with Dave, an intellectually-minded engineering student from a Presbyterian background. Here I learned a great deal about the Reformed tradition stemming from John Calvin. I recall many nights when, after we turned out the lights, we would converse (and sometimes debate) about many topics, often having to do with differences in our Christian conviction and practice. Once again, however, this

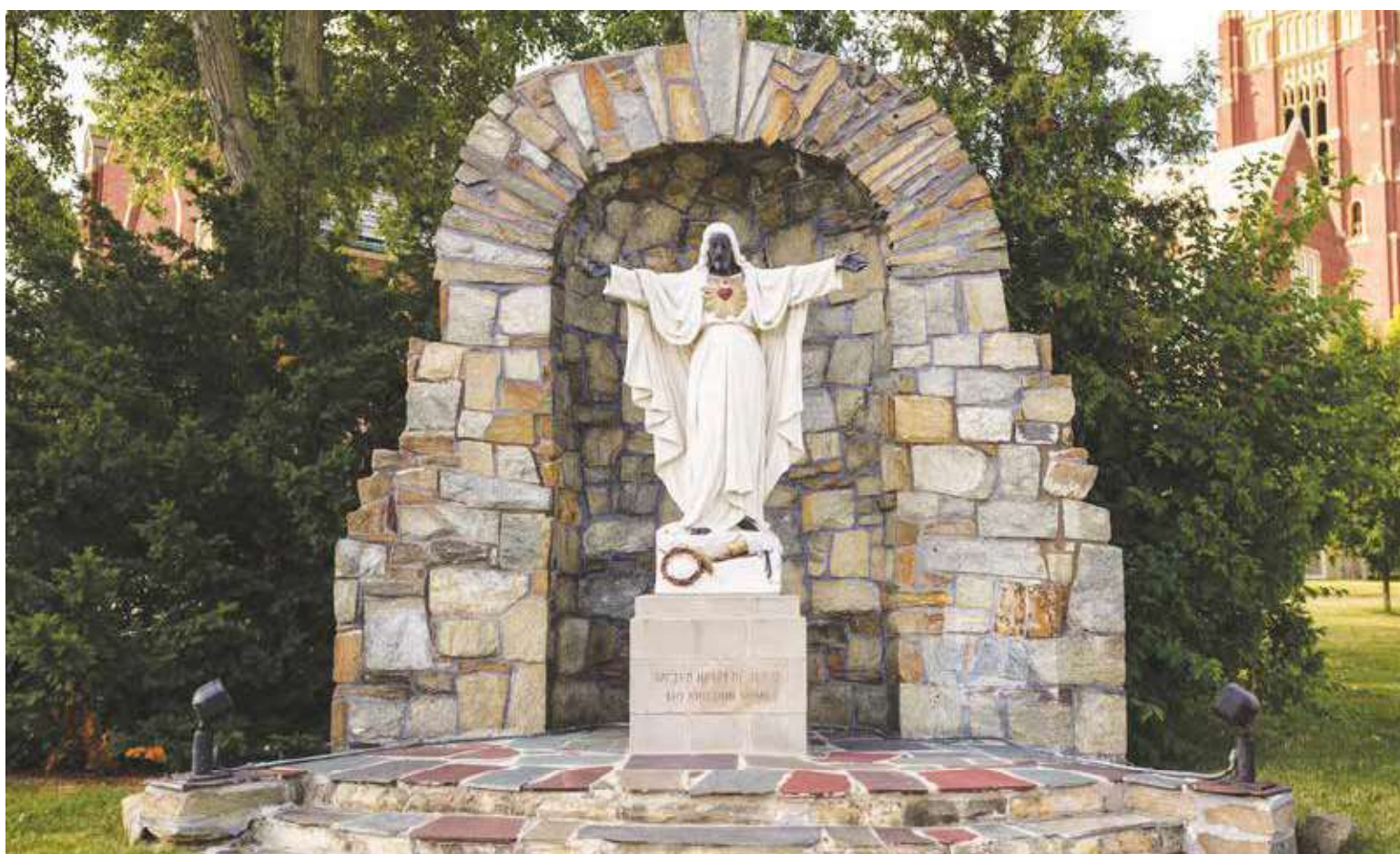
year-long conversation blossomed into a friendship that has continued to the present day. We both learned a great deal, not only about the other person but about the Church tradition that he inhabited. Because of my friendship and conversations with Dave, I have an “inside” understanding of the Reformed tradition and how it is lived out in the challenge of each day.

In my third year of college, I roomed with a friend named Hayward, a black Baptist from the south (Dallas); I was a white Catholic from the north (Cleveland). We had precious little in common apart from our firm commitment to Christ and our desire to witness Him. Hayward and I were attempting to bridge two or even three divides at the same time: a confessional divide, a racial divide, and a geographical divide. I would count that year as a great success. It had its moments of lively interaction and humorous cultural misunderstandings, but we became great friends and witnessed together to fellow students from our two different ecclesial and racial worlds.

FIVE AVENUES FOR ECUMENICAL INTERACTION AND CONVERSATION

For the past nine years I have been teaching the M.Div. course on ecumenism to seminarians and lay commuter students at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit. My background for teaching this class came in part from my studies in history and theology, but one major reason I was asked to prepare and teach this class was due to my extensive “lived” experience of ecumenism on the ground. Since my student days, I have been involved with Christians of many backgrounds, and I am a member of an ecumenical lay brotherhood, the Servants of the Word, which includes community-formation, evangelization, and Christian unity in its apostolate.

The students that I teach are marked by a lively faith and an energetic desire to serve Christ in the



Church—and this is wonderful to see. By the time they find their way into my class, they have already received an excellent foundation in theology and (if seminarians) are only a year or so away from ordination. But this is the first time they are directly confronting what the Church teaches and counsels about ecumenism, which is the task of seeking unity among those who call themselves Christians. Most of my students have had some ecumenical interaction and experience, but usually not a great deal, and often this experience was not positive: for some it has left a sour taste in their mouths.

In fact, one of the challenges we face as lay and ordained Catholics is that our views on ecumenism are often strongly colored by very brief ecumenical interactions (whether positive or negative). While experience is essential to the work of ecumenism, experience alone often gives an imbalanced or one-sided perspective on the ecumenical venture. I see my classroom role as informing and energizing ecumenism with the teaching and counsel of the

Church, so that our practice of ecumenism may be integrated with all that we believe and confess as Catholics.

At the start of the class I introduce students to (what I call) five avenues for pursuing the task of ecumenism. Typically, we limit ecumenism to one or two of these avenues—I find it important to open up the field of play by showing that there are several distinctive avenues along which we can make progress toward the goal of Christian unity and united witness to Christ in the world. As we consider the topic of “ecumenical conversations,” it is important to have in view the various contexts in which these conversations can take place.

... The Truth of Our Faith

The first avenue is probably what most people think of when they consider ecumenism: unity in the faith believed and confessed. I participate annually in the National Evangelical-Catholic Dialogue where

our team of four to five Catholics engages with eight to ten Evangelicals from a variety of church denominations, exploring various topics of Christian faith. Our primary task is to discover, through our conversations together, what we hold in common, and at the same time to locate those areas where we have ongoing disagreement. This process is both fascinating and delightful: not only do we learn things about each other that we did not know before, but we gratefully discover common ground that we can pass along to those in our churches. At the same time we run up against real differences that we need to acknowledge in truth, and so recognize that our communion in the faith is real but still imperfect. Many of the best conversations happen during informal times—on breaks or during meals together. Crucially, we have formed genuine friendships with each other as Christians, even as we converse about our agreements and differences.

This engagement around Christian belief is often expressed in shorthand as the “ecumenism of truth.” We cannot circumvent or ignore the “truth” aspect of Christian faith if we are seeking genuine unity. As Pope Saint John Paul II reminds us, “The unity willed by God can be attained only by the adherence of all to the content of revealed faith in its entirety. In matters of faith, compromise is in contradiction with God who is Truth” (Ut Unum Sint, 18). While disunity among Christians has many causes, certainly one of them is disagreement about matters of Christian teaching and doctrine. Another way to state this is that certain ecumenical conversations will be primarily about matters of Christian truth—and we need to be ready to engage these in a constructive way.

... Shared Prayer

The second avenue in ecumenism is unity expressed in common prayer. In his Encyclical on Ecumenism, Pope Saint John Paul says that “along the ecumenical path to unity, pride of place certainly belongs to common prayer,” and he recalls that Vatican II identified common prayer with other Christians as “the soul of the whole ecumenical movement” (Ut Unum Sint, 21-22). We cannot yet join in the fullness of common prayer with other Christians (a shared Eucharist), but we can make progress together and express the partial unity we already share by joining together in many forms of common prayer. Praying together for one another, for the mission of the Church, and for the good of the world enhances our unity and opens doors to further kinds of ecumenical conversations. When we pray together, our orientation toward one another changes—we are not simply discussing or debating issues of Christian doctrine, but calling upon God together in prayer. To put this differently, when we together converse with the living God in prayer we experience and express unity in a unique way.

... Unity in Action and Mission

The third and fourth avenues of ecumenism are unity in common action and unity in common mission. The first, unity in common action, concerns working together for some good in the wider society. This would include things like working with the poor and homeless or involvement in the prolife movement. This form of activity is often called the “ecumenism of the trenches.” In these cases, we are together not

“The “ecumenism of love” and the “ecumenism of truth,” which both naturally remain very important, must be complemented by an “ecumenism of life.”

to seek Christian unity directly but to promote the common good of the society by uniting our efforts as Christians.

The second, unity in common mission, occurs when we join together to further an aspect of explicit Christian witness in the world. This may happen through a bible study at work or through an Alpha course run by a group of neighboring churches. This form of common activity has an excellence all its own: we experience the joy and delight of witnessing to our faith alongside Christians from other churches, helping others to experience the love of Christ in their lives. Conversations naturally arise from these environments, because the concern for Christian truth is involved. Here we have faith in action, and the conversation often turns to the fruitfulness we can expect from the grace of God at work in our lives, and to the means of grace that are available for this growth. The experience of common mission offers unique opportunities to speak about the way that we experience Christ in our own lives, as we seek together to pass this along to others. Common action and common mission are the avenues where most Catholics have a chance to experience real ecumenical contact and conversation.

... The Ecumenism of Life

A fifth and final avenue of Christian unity is the fruit that is borne from a common experience of life. During his tenure as prefect for the Congregation for Promoting Christian Unity, Cardinal Walter Kasper placed special emphasis on this avenue to unity, which he calls an “ecumenism of life” or an “ecumenical spirituality.”

We have to fill the interim stage that we have reached (of a real if not complete church *communio*) with real life. The “ecumenism of love” and the “ecumenism of truth,” which both naturally remain very important, must be complemented by an “ecumenism of life.” We have to apply all that we have achieved to the

way we actually live (‘That They May Be One, 72).

This involves more than occasional common events; it means sharing together in a way of life grounded in Christ. For many of us, the community at Taizé in France is the best expression of this incarnational ecumenism of life. In this kind of ecumenical context, a great deal of ecumenical formation is required in order to live together peacefully and fruitfully. The conversations that arise typically focus on expressions of common life, spiritual growth, common mission, and our witness to the world around us. They occur mostly in informal contexts of daily life together.

The five avenues help us identify the locations and environments where various kinds of ecumenical conversations occur. Though the five avenues cover the formal situations where ecumenical conversations typically happen, there remains another context in which many ecumenical interactions actually take place: the informal, unplanned daily interactions in real life. For many of us, encounters with Christians from other traditions happen most frequently when we are not looking for it: and we want to be ready and equipped to engage those conversations well, in a way that furthers Christian unity and advances the glory of God. How, then, can we prepare ourselves so that our conversations with other Christians end up being fruitful?

FRUITFULNESS IN ECUMENICAL CONVERSATIONS

So much could be said about what goes into making an ecumenical conversation fruitful. Much of this includes what makes any conversation, of whatever kind, fruitful. But I would like to identify qualities that pertain especially to this ‘genus’ of conversation that concerns interactions with other Christians. To repeat and specify the question: What goes into making an ecumenical conversation fruitful for the kingdom of God?



The most important qualities have to do with the character and formation of those engaging in this conversation. The first and foundational quality can be described by the following question: As a Catholic, do I know my faith well and am I happily living a Catholic way of life, seeking to integrate what I believe and how I live? It was Pope Emeritus Benedict who constantly underlined the core task of ecumenism as each party living more deeply a life in Christ. As we grow more deeply in holiness, so we grow (necessarily) closer to one another. Interactions with other Christians require us to explain our faith, and so we are ‘tested’ in what we know, and we grow in our ability to explain what we believe in terms that others can understand.

A second quality concerns our attitude toward other Christians. Does hostility or fear characterize our attitude? Do we come with an attitude of arrogance seeking to discredit other churches and their beliefs? Or at the other extreme, do we come with a cringing insecurity that only apologizes for being a Catholic? I recommend to my students that they adopt a posture of ‘humble confidence’ when engaging with other Christians.

Why ‘confidence?’ Not because we are supremely confident in ourselves but because as Catholics we believe that Jesus has truly founded a Church that He will sustain by His grace. We are confident that Christ has endowed the Catholic Church with the fullness of the means of grace and we see this through the many saints who have welcomed and lived this faith across the centuries.

Why ‘humble?’ Because we also recognize that the members of the Church, including ourselves, fall (far) short of all that we are called to be, and that oftentimes other Christians demonstrate a greater godliness and Christlikeness than we do! This is cause for a deep humility, and it enables us to approach others with appreciation for what Christ has done in them, even as we witness to what Christ has done in us. If we know our faith well, if we are seeking to live what we know, and if we approach our conversations as Catholics with a humble confidence, our ecumenical conversations have a good chance of being fruitful and providing a blessing for many.

It is also important to recognize how much our ecumenical interactions and conversations are

dependent on the specific context in which we find ourselves. Yes, we have many good principles for the task of ecumenism—and these principles are wonderfully expressed in the Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism and in Pope Saint John Paul's Encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*. But the practice of ecumenism - how we implement these principles - is strongly dependent on context. Let me offer two examples to illustrate the importance of context.

If I am in conversation with people from the Eastern Orthodox Church, my interaction with them is very much dependent on what they believe, what issues are important to them, what they feel they can do together with Catholics, and what we have in common. I can (probably) assume that they have a deep appreciation for the Church Fathers; I know that they believe in Christ's real presence in the Eucharist; I can assume that they revere the Virgin Mary and gladly pray to the saints. But I also know that they don't agree with the Catholic Church about the role of the Pope and that they often carry a strong suspicion of Catholics trying to 'westernize' them. Many Orthodox today are wary of joining in common prayer with Catholics or Protestants and they often take up a defensive posture against the dominant Western churches that surround them. All these things are a matter of this specific context, and if I am to interact with my Orthodox brothers and sisters fruitfully, it is crucial to adjust myself to this specific context for interaction and conversation.

If on the other hand I am in conversation with evangelical Baptists from the south, I recognize a different set of contextual realities. I can be confident that they have a deep love and regard for the Scriptures—and usually know the Scriptures very well; I know that they will be concerned with mission and bringing people to encounter the person of Jesus Christ. But I also know that many of them wonder whether Catholics are really Christians at all; they often assume that Catholics don't know the Scriptures (alas, in this they are often correct) and

that Catholics believe they are justified by what they do and so earn their way into heaven. My task is to meet my fellow believers 'where they are,' to clarify what we as Catholics believe, and seek to advance the cause of unity in whatever way I can. In addition, my goal is to show my Evangelical brothers and sisters that we have a common mission together; though we cannot do liturgical prayer in common, we can witness together to our common faith in Jesus. Pope Francis has given powerful expression to just this kind of unity in his many interactions with Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians.

ENGAGING IN ECUMENICAL CONVERSATIONS

It is impossible to 'script' an ecumenical conversation. Each one will have its own unique quality, and we do best when we engage in them with an adventurous spirit, trusting in the Spirit of God to help us at every stage. Still, I think it may be helpful to describe ways that I have found helpful to engage in these conversations, so that they can be fruitful for the kingdom of God.

The first ground rule for me is that I engage fellow Christians as believers in Jesus Christ with whom I share a real, but imperfect communion. This is the posture that the Church exhorts us to adopt. To underline this point: other baptized Christians are already part of my 'family' even if that family membership isn't full or complete. I begin by relating to them as 'family,' and this opens up the conversations in ways that cannot happen when I approach them as strangers and outsiders. This is not to minimize or deny real differences but to start with our common ground and move ahead from there. If we start with debating points—with what divides us—we are unlikely to get very far or make progress. In the Catholic-Evangelical Dialogue, we have learned by experience to begin with what we could say together—and then move on to identify what we do not yet share.

Let me expand on this. My first and immediate goal is not to persuade my discussion partner to adopt Catholic teaching on a given point, but to meet them in Christ, to engage them as fellow disciples, and to establish a common ground of faith. This follows from the reality of our common bond in Christ. We begin with what we have in common so that we can explore (and even debate) what we do not share. One aspect of this engagement is to show them—in a way that they can grasp—that I am a genuine Christian who believes in Christ and seeks to follow him as a disciple. The language I use to describe this will depend on the context, but it is important that my fellow believers receive from me a witness to my own faith. This in fact gives them confidence to do the same and puts the conversation on solid ground. Pope Francis had made this his primary means of ecumenical interaction. He expresses his faith—and the common faith he shares—with other Christians, and in the process he enables other Christians to recognize his lively and personal faith, and to engage with him and to welcome interaction with the Catholic Church.

Second, I try to adopt a posture of charity toward other Christians, wishing to know them well and to value what they cherish and believe. This entails that I take up a posture of listening, of asking questions to get to know them and what they believe. What is their experience of the faith? What are their concerns and issues? Though I may enter a conversation with certain expectations, I always leave room for the individual people to present and describe themselves and their convictions. To put this in other words, my aim is to engage them as they are and to encounter them as fellow Christians who deserve my respect.

From here, conversations will go in any number of directions. What are they interested in pursuing? Do they want to talk about or discuss matters of faith? Do they want to hear an account of my own testimony about how I came to be an adult disciple? Are they most interested in current events and how the life of faith impacts our engagement

with the world? In all this, I seek to be a servant in these conversations. I try to resist the temptation to show-off my knowledge (not always successfully). I am not there to please myself or ‘win’ a debate. The question I ask is: how can I serve Christ in this conversation? How can I increase the unity we share through this interaction? How can I clarify what Catholics actually believe—and clear away misrepresentations—so that they are engaging with the actual content of our belief? How can I help this person know Christ more fully and share about what I have experienced as a Catholic? How can I break down barriers and open doors between our two communities?

CONCLUSION: THE GOAL AND THE STEPS TO REACH THE GOAL

Pope Saint John Paul offers a helpful summary definition of ecumenism: “Ecumenism is directed precisely to making the partial communion existing between Christians grow towards full communion in truth and charity.” (Ut Unum Sint, 14) Our aim must align with Christ’s prayer, “that they may all be one ... so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (Jn 17:21) Acknowledging this ultimate goal of full unity in one Church, Pope Emeritus Benedict acknowledges that this full and complete unity is not going to be reached in our own times. And so he maintains that we need “realistic intermediate goals” that enable us to make progress on the road to that final goal. He identifies the various avenues to unity we have already named as the intermediate steps we can take now that increase the unity we share and unleash the power of our common witness to the world around us (“Luther and the Unity of the Churches,” *Communio*, 11, 1984, 225).

Whether planned or spontaneous, our ecumenical conversations—the conversations we have with other Christians—are occasions of grace where we can make our own small contribution - in charity and truth - to deepen the unity we share as Christians, to advance the Kingdom of God and to manifest the glory of God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Dr. Keating has come to appreciate the blessings and possibilities of ecumenism from his own life experience. What have been your experiences of inter-action with Christians of other backgrounds? Thank God for the specific friends and relatives who witness their faith to you over the years.

2. Do I think of Christians from backgrounds different than my own as being members of the one same family of faith? Am I able to follow Dr. Keating's advice and approach every ecumenical encounter with "humble confidence?" Do I believe that to grow in holiness I must also be all the more concerned about the gifts and blessings of all my fellow Christians?

3. Reflect on a recent conversation you have had with a person of another faith tradition (or none at all): how did you connect with them? Did you learn or grow from the encounter?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Daniel Keating is Professor of Theology at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit, Michigan, where he teaches on Scripture, the Church Fathers, Ecumenism, and the New Evangelization.

Dr. Keating has served as a theological consultant for the doctrine committee of the United States Catholic Bishop's Conference (USCCB), and is a Catholic participant in the national Catholic-Evangelical dialogue.

He is the author of *The Appropriation of Divine Life in Cyril of Alexandria* (Oxford: 2004), *Deification and Grace* (Sapientia: 2007), *First and Second Peter, Jude* (Baker: 2011), and co-author of *James, 1-3 John* (Baker: 2017) and *Athanasius and His Legacy* (Fortress: 2017).

Dr. Keating lives in Lansing, Michigan, where he is a member of the Servants of the Word, a lay brotherhood dedicated to the work of evangelization and Christian unity.