

Father Don MacDonald honoured by Anglicans for ecumenism efforts

Rev. Don MacDonald, a longtime professor at Newman Theological College, got a wonderful surprise during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity this year.

He received the title of ecumenical Honorary Canon of the Anglican Diocese of Edmonton in recognition of his work on ecumenism.

“As you step down from your role in the Edmonton Anglican-Roman Catholic ecumenical dialogue, I send my love and prayers. Your work and ministry have been exemplary in showing how as followers of Jesus Christ we are all called to be one,” Anglican Bishop Jane Alexander wrote in her letter conferring the honour on Father MacDonald.

The title carries no formal or official duties or standing within their diocesan clergy. Instead, it’s a testament to Father MacDonald who has been part of an ecumenical dialogue with Anglican community in one way or another since the 1960s up until his retirement in June.

“I think it’s important just to bring out the value and the necessity of ecumenical dialogue,” Father MacDonald said on his honorary title. “The world that we’re living in isn’t just running towards Christianity, whether it’s ourselves – the Catholics – or the Anglicans. If you’ve got people who really aren’t interested in religion, and they look towards Christianity, they’re going to say ‘Well you know they can’t get along with themselves, why should I bother joining?’.”

Father MacDonald was a professor at the Newman Theological College, primarily teaching Christology, for more than 50 years. And many Anglican clergy, including Bishop Alexander in the late 1990s, were his students.

“It may come as a surprise to you to know how influential you were in our formation, and that everyone one of us still talks about you with great affection,” Bishop Alexander wrote.

“I pray for your continued health and well-being and I give thanks for your extraordinary witness to Christ. You have stirred God’s people to action, and I believe you have been a true force for good and an icon of Christ.”

For his part, Father MacDonald remembers Bishop Alexander very well and she was an “excellent student.”

Although he’s retired now, Father MacDonald said the need for ecumenical dialogue not only among Anglicans and Catholics, but all Christians, continues.

"You just have to keep going. If you can't advance in any other way, in terms of agreement about differences, at least that spiritual aspect is worthwhile and it's important," Father MacDonald said. "There's an emphasis now in ecumenism that even if we can't come to full unity, there are things that others do that we can learn from and they can learn from us."

"I think it's wonderful," added Rev. Bob Mokry, Father MacDonald's superior with his religious order, the Franciscans. "I'm very pleased for him and all the work that he has done that brought us to a point of recognition that need for implementing more than ever Vatican II's call for ecumenical dialogue."

Father Mokry said the honour given to Father MacDonald is emblematic of the journey towards Christian unity initiated by the Second Vatican Council.

The title of ecumenical Honorary Canon was conferred during the Jan. 18-25 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which Father MacDonald noted is the eventual goal of ecumenism.

"It has to be. It has to be. That's what Christ wanted. Christ didn't want His followers divided up."

It is rare, but not unprecedented, for a church of one communion to confer an honorific title upon a minister of another communion. In 2008, Archbishop Donald Bolen of Regina was installed as an Ecumenical Canon of Norwich (Anglican) Cathedral in England for his contributions to Anglican-Catholic relations at the international level. He is believed to be one of the few Canadians given this honour.

Father Mokry said the honour is also a testament to Father MacDonald's primary teaching, Christology.

"What makes Don such a good teacher? He saw the centrality of Christ. He was convinced that this is the only thing that makes sense," Father Mokry said. "He loved his students. He was able to relate to them personally. He certainly challenged them, there's no doubt about that, but in that challenging it just brought them to greater growth."