

Graduation Speech
By Rhonda Newby-Torres

It is my pleasure to represent the graduating class of 2021 in Albuquerque, NM. Thank you for joining us on this special occasion.

The Pirkei Avot is a compilation of ethical teachings from the Rabbinic Jewish tradition. Within this compilation, Avot 5:26 teaches us that there are 70 faces to the scripture. The avot encourages us to “turn scripture around and around like a gem, for it has everything in it.” Our Jewish ancestors allowed for and expected several levels of meaning of scripture to exist simultaneously. Listening, learning, dialogue and debate are all common themes in Jewish theology. When held in tension together, these different meanings of scripture were referred to as the “orchard” or the “garden”- in reference to the Garden of Eden.

When I think of my experience here at St. Norbert College and the Ecumenical Institute for Ministry, these are the images that come to my mind- an ever-rotating gem where the Truth is always present, but our perspective, our truth depends on the angle we are looking at and experiencing the gem. The rotating gem illuminates a kaleidoscope of different perspectives that all contribute to the larger truth.

The strength of our theological program at St. Norbert is the wealth of wisdom that it holds up to the light in approaching theology from an ecumenical perspective. We’re blessed to be educated around a wide range of Catholic theology, Protestant theology, and a wider lens of global and interfaith theologies. Furthermore, our courses are designed to allow us to learn from each other as well as our professors. I learned so much from my colleagues and their lived and world experiences that further contributed to the wealth of wisdom in our program.

St. Norbert’s ecumenical approach continues to influence my work every day. As the Director of a campus ministry, I am asked tough theological questions daily and on the spot. I adore the fact that I don’t have a pat answer to give to a student that I learned at my *own denomination’s seminary*. I have a direction to point toward. A library of perspectives and experiences to offer. At the university, we explore these sources to discern, to theologize, and to dream about faith, many times sitting around the campfire in our front yard.

Students there have told me they have never been allowed to question the church before, they had no idea there were a multitude of Christian theologies out in the world! Simply taking an ecumenical approach and allowing them to dialogue about theological issues and doctrine has liberated many of them from the stronghold of a single perspective and opened an entire new world of faith, love, hope and community to them.

That's what St. Norbert College taught me- how to hold, respect, and offer a multitude of perspectives in tension with each other to learn, grow, and nurture this Garden of Eden, this paradise of wisdom. The liberation that I experienced here at St. Norbert, and that my students now feel, is not limited to us as individuals however. Ecumenical theology and practices are liberative for the church and the world. St. Norbert's ecumenical approach is throwing open the windows and doors of the church, letting in the fresh air and sunshine. This approach, this program is the future of the universal Catholic church, tearing down the barriers between the church and the garden, cultivating wisdom, and restoring paradise in our world.