

An ecumenical mind

By [David Heim](#)

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Jeffrey Gros, one of the liveliest and most penetrating ecumenical thinkers I ever encountered, [died earlier this month](#). A conversation with Jeff was always illuminating as well as a bit disorienting, for he had the many voices of global Christianity freshly cataloged in his brain.

Jeff, who belonged to the De La Salle Christian Brothers and began his career as a Catholic schoolteacher, served 14 years as associate director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. More striking, he spent ten years as director of [Faith and Order for the National Council of Churches](#), that mostly Protestant body of which the Roman Catholic Church is not even an official member. He was astute enough on all things Protestant to serve as president of the Society for Pentecostal Studies.

Jeff had an indefatigable appetite for the day-to-day work of ecumenism as well as for ingesting and editing ecumenical documents. He regularly sent the *Century* reviews of what were, to me, rather obscure volumes on ecumenical proceedings, in hopes that those conversations would be more widely known and appreciated.

A casually expressed opinion about some church figure or church body would usually elicit from Jeff a friendly but incisive correction: if you knew the internal debates within that church, you would understand that X had to say Y in order to let Z know that relations with church W were not being influenced by Q. You got a glimpse then of ecumenism as a fascinating dance of politics, tradition and theology—and of how much study and conversation were required to properly appreciate it.

I was with Jeff once when the conversation among some Protestants turned, complainingly, to the Roman Catholic policy of barring Protestants from communion. Jeff said he was struck by how many Protestants wanted to be in communion with the Holy Father. It was his gentle way of suggesting that we were approaching communion in a very individualistic, Protestant way—and might at least pause to consider the robust institutional dimension assumed by Catholics.

Point taken.

May Jeff's faithful labors for the universal church bear fruit in due season.