CUA Memoriam for Monsignor John F. Wippel

Monsignor John F. Wippel, Theodore Basselin Professor of Philosophy at The Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington, D.C., died on Monday, Sept. 11, 2023, at age 90.

Monsignor John F. Wippel was born in Pomeroy, Ohio on Aug. 21, 1933 to Joseph Edward and Mary Josephine (Andrews) Wippel. As a Basselin Scholar and seminarian at Theological College, he earned his Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts degrees in Philosophy from The Catholic University of America in 1955 and 1956, respectively. He subsequently earned a Licentiate in Sacred Theology from the University in 1960. He was ordained a priest of the Diocese of Steubenville, Ohio, on May 28, 1960.

After spending the 1960-1961 academic year as an Instructor in the School of Philosophy, Monsignor Wippel was awarded the Penfield Scholarship and granted a two-year leave of absence to pursue doctoral studies in philosophy at the Catholic University of Louvain (Belgium) under the direction of Fernand Van Steenberghen. He defended his dissertation summa cum laude in April 1963 and had the Ph.D. degree conferred on Jan. 6, 1965 after publishing an article based upon his dissertation.

Monsignor Wippel resumed teaching in the School of Philosophy in the fall of 1963, later serving as an assistant (1965-1967) and associate professor (1967-1972) before being named an ordinary (full) professor in 1972. He was later named Theodore Basselin Professor of Philosophy in 2001. He also served The Catholic University of America as assistant academic vice president for graduate studies (January to May 1989) and academic vice president, a position whose title was later changed to provost, from June 1989 to August 1997.

Monsignor Wippel’s academic focus was metaphysics, and specifically, metaphysical reflection in the 13th century. His interpretations of the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas and Godfrey of Fontaines must be reckoned with by any scholar working in the field, but he also published important work on other topics and figures. His book-length publications include Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas (1984), Boethius of Dacia: On the Supreme Good, On the Eternity of the World, On Dreams (1987), Medieval Reactions to the Encounter between Faith and Reason (1995), The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being (2000), Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas II (2007), and most recently, Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas III (2021).

He edited, coauthored, or coedited several other books and numerous articles and book chapters. He also served as president of the Society for Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy (1983-1984) and as president of the Metaphysical Society of America (2006).

Monsignor Wippel received the Cardinal Mercier Prize from the Catholic University of Louvain in 1981 for his The Metaphysical Thought of Godfrey of Fontaines, published that same year. Louvain also accorded him the rare honor of a postdoctoral degree in Philosophy, the Maître-Agrégé de l'Ecole Saint Thomas. In 2005, the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies in Toronto bestowed on him an honorary Doctorate of Letters.

Among his other awards and distinctions were his service as a visiting associate professor at the University of California, San Diego in the spring 1969 semester, a Younger Humanist Fellowship (1970-1971) and a Humanities Fellowship for Independent Study and Research (1984-1985) from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Aquinas Medal in 1999 from the American Catholic Philosophical Association, The Catholic University of America's Alumni Association Achievement Award for Research and Scholarship in October 2001, the John Findlay Award from the Metaphysical Society of America in 2002, an appointment as Professor Ordinarius at the Pontifical Academy of Saint Thomas Aquinas on Feb. 8, 2003, The Catholic University of America Provost Award for Lifetime Excellence in Scholarship, Research and Teaching in May 2006, and the Scholarly Excellence Award from the American Maritain Association in 2012.

Monsignor Wippel was a generous and patient teacher who influenced generations of other scholars and teachers in the field of mediaeval philosophy. He was a humble servant of the text as exegete and expositor.  At the same time, he could be fierce in his pursuit of a text's meaning and significance. His *Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*--a systematic and encyclopaedic statement of Thomas's philosophy--is a landmark achievement both as a study of Thomas's thought and as work of metaphysics in its own right. Monsignor Wippel claimed that he did no more than present Thomas's thought, but the systematization of that thought was all his own, a unique and astonishing contribution to philosophy.