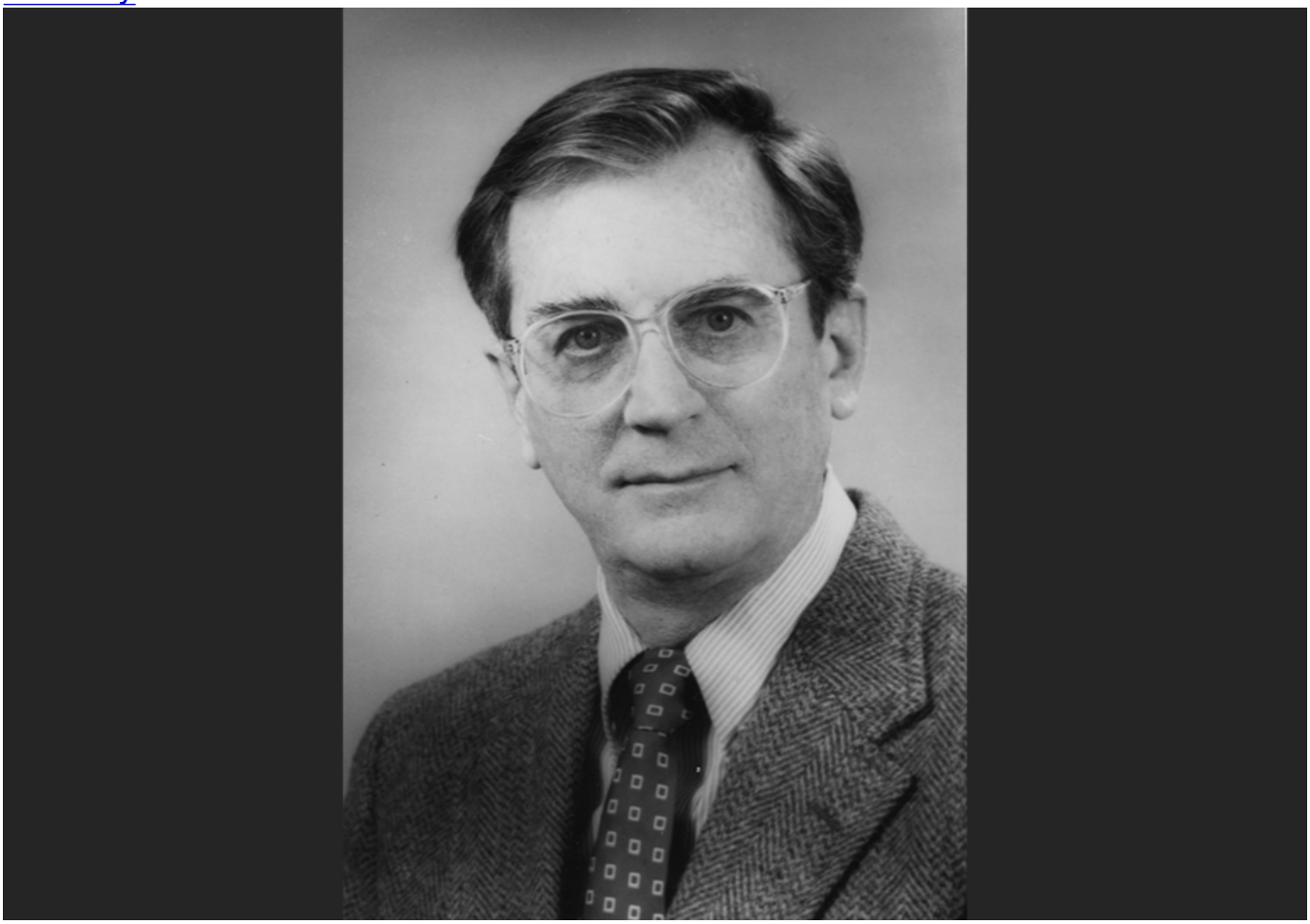
News
Obituary



Jesuit Fr. Roger Haight, circa 1999 (NCR file photo)



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Following the June 19 death of Jesuit theologian Fr. Roger Haight, 89, in New York, colleagues recalled Haight's unfailing resilience, generosity and humility.

Jesus Symbol of God, a major theological work by Haight, published by Orbis Press in 1999, had become the object of highly publicized and stunning criticism by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, or CDF, now called the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

"He was one of my favorite professors during grad school in theology at Weston Jesuit School of Theology," said Jesuit Fr. James Martin, editor at large for America magazine.

"One thing I will always remember was that no matter how strongly a student disagreed with Roger in class, he was always calm, respectful and judicious in his responses," Martin wrote on a Facebook post.

Martin told the National Catholic Reporter, "Because of that, he was one of the best teachers I ever had."

Martin, who lived with Haight for 20 years at America House Jesuit Community in New York City, said that even in his 80s, Haight was one of the regular dishwashers on weekends and holidays.

"He was always ready to pitch in to help in any way."



Jesuit Fr. James Martin delivers the homily during the closing Mass for the Outreach LGBTQ Catholic Ministry Conference at the Church of St. Paul the Apostle in New York City, on June 18, 2023. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Martin said that he "read some, but not all" of Haight's controversial book on Jesus. "I didn't agree with parts of it but I respected the seriousness with which he entered into discussion with theologians, past and present."

Daniel Minch, an Austrian and, at 39, a much younger colleague than most of Haight's peers, had similar recollections and praise to offer. He had collaborated with the Jesuit for a publication on Belgian theologian Edward Schillebeeckx.

"He was an excellent scholar who was always ready to help," Minch wrote in a special tribute for Haight published by the Catholic Theological Society of America. "I am very grateful for just having the chance to work with him. ... I hope that his work continues to inspire future scholars."

A few years after Haight's book on Jesus was published, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith told Haight in 2005 that he could no longer teach as a Catholic theologian. A later CDF order barred him against teaching and publishing on theological subjects.*

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According to a Catholic News Service story in 2009, the CDF had previously objected to Haight's assertion that Catholic theology must be "in dialogue" with the modern world, saying this orientation led him to downplay or deny central teachings of the church. Among these teachings: that the Word was made flesh in Jesus Christ; that Jesus was divine, that salvation is offered to all; that the Son and the Spirit are separate persons with the Trinity.

The CDF also criticized Haight's assertion that because of "pluralistic consciousness," one cannot continue to affirm that Christianity is a superior religion or that Christ is the centerpiece of God's plan for salvation.

In 2000, the book was named theological book of the year by the Catholic Press Association, which now goes by the name Catholic Media Association.

The Catholic Theological Society of America, or CTSA, which Haight had served as president from 1994-1995, expressed its "profound distress" over the Vatican's actions, although some members said that they also disagreed with some statements in Haight's book.

A statement about the book by the CTSA board said that it provided "a great service in framing crucial questions that need to be addressed today."

If Haight was filled with anger or grief about the Vatican's actions, his Jesuit community in New York did not see it.

"I think Roger only spoke once or twice about the Vatican's critique of his book, but not in a bitter or complaining way," Martin said. "That was Roger's style." When asked how Haight dealt with the sanctions imposed for years on his teaching and writing, Martin said without hesitation, "obediently."

Haight may have developed an unusually expansive and global spirit early in life. Friends say that he always had a clear recognition and understanding that — despite authoritative teaching — people will see and experience things differently.

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He was born in New Jersey but received his bachelor's and master's degrees from Berchmans College in the Philippines. He later received a degree in sacred theology, from Woodstock College in Maryland, and received his doctorate of divinity from the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. Throughout his life, he traveled extensively and taught at universities around the world.

Though some limitations on his freedom to teach theology were relaxed a bit during the papacy of Pope Francis, Haight was essentially told that he was no longer able to teach and write about Christology in Catholic universities. So, Haight pivoted. He began to teach at Union Theological Seminary, a non-denominational seminary in New York City, where he was an adjunct professor and then a scholar in residence until he recently retired.* Haight also began to write and teach about Ignatian spirituality. His book, *Christian Spirituality for Seekers: Reflections on the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola*, was published in 2012.

In a video-taped lecture at LeMoyne College in Syracuse, New York, about these spiritual exercises, Haight talked about being invited to talk about the Ignatian exercises at a Lutheran church in Brooklyn. He offered 60-minute classes on three consecutive Sundays and led participants through Ignatian meditations and prayer.

"Each Sunday, I explained a little bit more," he told his LeMoyne audience, "and soon they had a pretty good idea of how to use the New Testament and the exercises as a way to enter into mental prayer." Haight had used Ignatian spirituality and exercises to bridge sectarian divides and lead people into life-changing meditation and prayer.

Two years ago, Haight was presented with the Catholic Theological Society of America's highest honor: the John Courtney Murray Award for Distinguished Theological Achievement.

At the event in Milwaukee, then-CTSA president Jesuit Fr. Francis X. Clooney said Haight had contributed significantly for more than 50 years "to theology and to the life and well-being of the church and God's people."

"Well before 'public theology' became a watchword, our honoree set about rethinking the language of faith in the contemporary world," Clooney said. "With

typical understatement and modesty — yet equal resolve — he became a leader in the theological community and among us especially in the CTSA."

Haight's funeral Mass is scheduled to take place June 25 at St. Ignatius Loyola Church in New York City. He will be buried at the Jesuit Cemetery in Auriesville.

**This story has been updated to clarify Haight's time at Union Theological Seminary.*