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# John Courtney Murray award citation

Thomas C. Fox | Jun. 12, 2011

**John Courtney Murray Citation for James A. Coriden**

Our honoree this evening was born on November 27, 1932 in Hammond, IN. Significantly, he points out that November 27th was also the date in which the 1983 Code of Canon Law officially went into effect, an occasion he celebrates along with his birthday. The youngest of four sons, our award recipient attended Catholic grade and high school in Hammond.

He spent his first two college years at Our Lady of the Lake Seminary run by the Crozier Fathers in Syracuse, IN since the Fort Wayne, IN diocese did not have its own seminary. He completed his B.A. in philosophy at St. Meinrad?s where, as he tells it, ?the monks taught me how to pray and how to think.? The diocese then sent him to Rome to the North American College for theological studies at the Gregorian University.

In 1957 he was ordained to the presbyterate of the new Diocese of Gary, Indiana. When the Gary diocese was split off from the Diocese of Ft. Wayne, the bishop told the rector of the North American College that as long as he was over there, to have him study canon law. So, after receiving the Licentiate in Sacred Theology in 1958, our honoree went on to receive his J.C.D. from the Gregorian in 1961, writing a dissertation on the indissolubility of marriage under the direction of Peter Huizing. And thus began a ministry which has lasted fifty years.t

tReturning to Gary, our honoree was named co-chancellor of the Diocese at the age of 29. He assisted in parishes and worked in the marriage tribunal until 1968 when he moved to Washington, D.C. to take up an appointment in the Theology Department at The Catholic University of America. He taught at CUA from 1968 ? 1975, serving as Chair of the Department during his last two years. During this time our awardee earned a civil law degree from Columbus School of Law at CUA and was admitted to the Bar of the State of Indiana and the District of Columbia in 1972.

When the newly established Washington Theological Union was in need of an Academic Dean in 1975 our honoree was selected. He held this position for twenty years from 1975-1995 and remains today at WTU as Professor of Church Law and Dean Emeritus.

During his twenty year term as Dean our award recipient encouraged his faculty to publish in refereed journals and raised the bar regarding the professional status of this former coalition of seminary professors. He received high praise from his colleagues with whom I spoke, who noted the encouragement he gave to women and younger faculty to become serious about scholarship, supporting their giving papers at conferences and suggesting their names as speakers or members of ecumenical consultations. An excellent administrator, our honoree receives outstanding marks for his consultative approach to decision-making and for treating people fairly.

An unsung hero in many ways, our awardee was responsible during the Post-Vatican II heyday for organizing the ?Law for Liberty? symposia. This was a time when canonists were the ?practical ecclesiologists? in the

Church and stood in the forefront of renewal. For ten years, between 1966 and 1976 seven seminars brought together canon lawyers, biblical scholars, historians, liturgists and theologians, both Catholic and Protestant, to reflect on important ecclesial issues. Participants included such luminaries as James Gustafson, Barnabas Mary Ahern, CP, Eugene Burke, CSP, Ladislas Orsy, SJ, Hamilton Hess, and Bernard Lonergan, SJ?all of whom came together at the behest of our honoree who not only organized and chaired the symposia but saw to their eventual publication.

Despite his heavy administrative responsibilities, which included leadership positions in the Society of Canon Law, the Association of Theological Schools, the Executive Committee of the Washington Theological Consortium and coordinating the English translation of the 1983 Revised Code of Canon Law, our honoree?s own scholarly production is nothing short of amazing. He is the author, editor or co-editor of ten books, including his widely-used and award-winning An Introduction to Canon Law (rev. ed. Paulist Press, 2004), the award-winning reference book, the New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law (with John Beal and Thomas Green) which includes his own important commentary on the teaching function of the church, and The Rights of Catholics in the Church (Paulist Press, 2007).

He has contributed nineteen chapters to books dealing with what one might call the ?three R?s? in canon law: rights, reception and reconciliation and authored no fewer than 67 refereed articles. One notes a trajectory in his publications that give rise to a conclusion that some might at first consider an oxymoron, namely that the ministry of canon law (and our recipient regards the vocation of the canonist as a ministry in the church) can serve a prophetic function. From ?Primacy of the Person in the Church,? (1967) to ?The Once and Future Church: A Communion of Freedom? (1971); Sexism and Church Law: Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action?; (1977) ?Human Rights in the Church: A Matter of Credibility and Authenticity? (1979); ?The Reception of Ecumenical Accords in a World Church? (1989); ?Lay Persons and the Power of Governance? (1999); ?The Right of Catholics to Hold Meetings On Church Property: Canonical and Pastoral Issues? (2002); ?The Synod of Bishops: Episcopal Collegiality Still Seeks Adequate Expression?; (2004); to the timely (given the business of this convention) ?The Teaching Ministry of the Diocesan Bishop and Its Collaborative Exercise.? (2008) and finally, ?Holy Spirit and Church Governance? (2009).t
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On this Pentecost Eve one cannot help but notice how often the words ?Holy Spirit? appear in his publications?words that one does not immediately associate with ?law.? Indeed, our honoree has lamented the canonical silence about the Spirit and that canon law is one of the places in the life of the church where an adequate pneumatology has yet to be expressed. He thus has continued to advocate that the inclusion of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit must be given space and voice in the Church?s rules of governance?the reason being that ?they are essential realities in the life of the church, the very source and dynamic force of its life. Canon law, like any other legal system has a formative functon as well as a regulatory one. Laws serve to remind the community of its own ways and values.
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Our awardee is known for championing the underdog and being the ?go-to? person when parishes are threatened with closure, when parish councils are unfairly abolished, for priests who have been sanctioned by bishops and countless pastoral cases dealing with marriage and divorce issues. Much more than an academic who is intellectually engaged in his discipline, he has continually been concerned with how one can make institutions more responsive to people?s rights. That is his primary understanding of the law: a pastoral tool for insuring people?s rights. The law is a means of protecting people. As one of his former colleagues told me, ?he is a classic liberal, always taking the underdog?s side.? When I relayed this comment to our awardee, he responded, ?unfortunately, I never got anybody out of jail.? Of course, taking on cases of due process does not always earned one high marks with some ecclesiastical authorities.

It has been a dozen years since the Society has given the John Courtney Murray award to a scholar whose discipline is canon law. The kairos of this present moment in the Church urges us to recognize once again a

loyal CTSA member who, as disciple of Jesus and a canonist, is an interpreter of the Church?s traditional discipline and simultaneously an advocate for a renewed discipline.

For his distinguished scholarship and tireless service to the academy and the Church, the Catholic Theological Society of America bestows the 2011 John Courtney Murray Award for Excellence in Theology upon James A. Coriden.

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