

Remembering Rabbi Michael Signer

Richard McBrien | Feb. 9, 2009 Essays in Theology

Rabbi Michael Signer died on Jan. 10 at age 63. His name was, and remains, well known and widely respected in Jewish circles and among those active in the Jewish-Catholic dialogue, but he did not enjoy the same celebrity status as that of Cardinal Avery Dulles, another recently deceased theologian.

Essays in Theology by Fr. Richard McBrien

Michael Signer joined the Theology faculty at the University of Notre Dame in 1992 as the first Abrams Professor of Jewish Thought and Culture. It was one of my final achievements as chair of the department to have brought Michael to Notre Dame from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles, where he had served as Professor of Jewish History from 1974 to 1991.

Michael was kind enough always to remember that, and to thank me for giving him the opportunity to promote and advance the Jewish-Catholic dialogue in a Catholic environment and at an even higher level of engagement.

While in Los Angeles he had participated in the Priest-Rabbi dialogue and was one of the founders of the St. John's Major Seminary-Hebrew Union College academic exchange. He also organized a series of retreats for seminary faculty from Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant institutions in California.

At Notre Dame, he became a senior fellow of the Medieval Institute, a faculty fellow at the Nanovic Center for European Studies and the Center for Social Concerns, and director of the Notre Dame Holocaust Project that designs educational opportunities for students to engage in the study of the Shoah.

Rabbi Signer had taught both in Berlin and Augsburg, Germany, and organized seminars and conferences in Warsaw, Lublin, Wroclaw, and Poznan, Poland. In 2005 he was designated a "Person of Reconciliation" by the Polish Council of Christians and Jews.

He was one of four authors of the widely publicized document, *Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity*, released in 2000 and subsequently signed by more than 220 rabbis and intellectual leaders from all branches of Judaism.

Dabru Emet is derived from the Hebrew phrase, "speak the truth to one another," in Zechariah 8:16. My column, written on the occasion of the statement's release, was published during the week of Nov. 20, 2000, and is available on my Web site (www.richardmcbrien.com).

Michael Signer was the author and editor of more than 50 articles and of six books on topics ranging from medieval Latin biblical commentaries, including a critical edition of Andrew of St. Victor's commentary on Ezekiel (1986), to current Jewish-Christian relations.

His edited books include *Humanity at the Limit: The Impact of the Holocaust Experience on Jews and Christians*

(2000); *Memory and History in Judaism and Christianity* (2001); *Jews and Christians in Twelfth-Century Europe* (2001) and *Coming Together for the Sake of God: Contributions to Jewish-Christian Dialogue from Post-Holocaust Germany* (2007).

Throughout his ministry and academic career, Michael Signer followed what he once described as "the impulse to explore relationships between Catholics and Jews by encouraging students to investigate the darker moments of rivalry and even persecution that mark the pages of history" and also "those invigorating engagements between scholars of the two communities."

His eulogist and close friend, Rabbi David Ellenson, noted that, as much as his colleagues in Los Angeles were disappointed to see him leave for Notre Dame in 1992, they knew how important it was for him and for Jewish-Catholic relations.

At Notre Dame, Rabbi Ellenson pointed out, Michael Signer "not only educated undergraduate and graduate students and brought an unprecedented religious diversity and dialogue to that Catholic campus, but he also attained a position of international prominence and leadership in Jewish-Catholic interfaith dialogue."

Upon learning of Michael Singer's death, Prof. John Cavadini, the chair of Notre Dame's Department of Theology, underscored Signer's "dogged pursuit of Christian-Jewish dialogue, and his work in medieval biblical exegesis," insisting that both had "an explicit, and not just implicit, spiritual character and goal, and when students were included it was more pronounced than ever."

As his devoted wife and life-long partner, Betty, indicated in her e-mail to Michael's Notre Dame colleagues, "He didn't want anyone to be sad about his life since he told me he was so blessed to be part of a great adventure that he felt he had experienced."

A column by the *National Catholic Reporter's* John Allen appeared on-line less than a week after Rabbi Signer's death. In it Allen cited various historical forces that are currently reshaping the relationship between Catholics and Jews, "each destined to make it more complicated."

Michael Signer would have readily adapted to those changes and enhanced the dialogue in the process.

May his name be forever blessed.

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