

IN MEMORIAM  
JOHN F. WIPPEL  
(21.VIII.1933–11.IX.2023)

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On September 11, 2023, the distinguished scholar of medieval philosophy Monsignor John F. Wippel died just outside of Washington, D.C., where he had spent most of his long life, first as a student and later as a faculty member of the School of Philosophy at The Catholic University of America. A dedicated priest, teacher, and scholar, he had earned an international reputation for his publications on medieval philosophy, in particular on medieval metaphysics, above all the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas. His two best known publications, and the two in which he took special satisfaction, are representative of his scholarly interests: *The Metaphysical Thought of Godfrey of Fontaines: A Study in Late Thirteenth-Century Philosophy* (1981) and *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (2000). The latter, which demonstrates his mastery both of the Thomistic corpus and of twentieth-century scholarly literature on Thomistic metaphysics, is his magnum opus, and it is complemented by three collections of his articles that he published: *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (1984), *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas II* (2007), and *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas III* (2021).

Born near Pomeroy, Ohio on August 21, 1933, Wippel was raised on his father's farm. After attending St. John Vianney Minor Seminary in Bloomingdale, Ohio for six years, he was admitted to the Theodore B. Basselin Scholars Program for seminarians in the School of Philosophy at The Catholic University of America, where he earned the B.A. (1955) and the M.A. (1956) in Philosophy. He went on to earn the Licentiate in Sacred Theology at Catholic University (1960), and on May

28, 1960, he was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Steubenville, Ohio. In 1960–1961, he returned to the School of Philosophy as an instructor.

The School of Philosophy granted him a leave during 1961–1963 to pursue doctoral study at the Catholic University of Louvain, which was the name by which he always thought of the institution. He originally planned to write a dissertation on some theme in the metaphysical thought of Aquinas, but the distinguished medievalist at Louvain who became his *Doktorvater*, Fernand Van Steenberghen, persuaded him to change his dissertation topic to the metaphysics of Godfrey of Fontaines. His fellow student at Louvain Robert Sokolowski remembers the day Wippel first went to see Van Steenberghen, with the intention of settling on a dissertation topic in Thomistic metaphysics. That evening, as Sokolowski relates, Wippel returned to their residence carrying an armful of folio-size books that Van Steenberghen had given him, and announced, « I'm going to write on Godfrey of Fontaines ». It was the beginning of Wippel's engagement with the thought of Godfrey, to whom he would often refer later as « my old friend Godfrey ». His study of Godfrey's metaphysics gave him a fresh perspective on the metaphysics of Aquinas, and enlarged his horizon as an emerging medievalist.

Wippel and Sokolowski had been Basselin Scholars together in Washington, but Sokolowski had preceded Wippel at Louvain, earning his Bachelor in Sacred Theology there in 1961. During 1961–1963 the two of them wrote doctoral dissertations at Louvain, Wippel on « Fundamental Metaphysical Themes in the *Quaestiones Quodlibetales* of Godfrey of Fontaines » and Sokolowski on « The Formation of Husserl's Concept of Constitution ». After defending their dissertations in 1963 (Wippel doing so *avec la plus grande distinction*), they both returned to the School of Philosophy, where they remained colleagues until Wippel's retirement in late 2021. The presence of and friendship between these two world-class scholars, Wippel the authority on Thomistic metaphysics and Sokolowski the phenomenologist, for nearly six decades contributed greatly to the distinctive character of the School of Philosophy during this period.

Wippel rose through the ranks at Catholic University to Assistant Professor in 1965, Associate Professor in 1967, and Ordinary or Full Professor in 1972. He was absent from the University for just one semester, as Visiting Associate Professor at the University of California, San Diego, in the Spring of 1969. In 2001, he was appointed the Theodore Basselin Professor of Philosophy; on his retirement at the end of 2021, he was appointed Professor Emeritus. He also served The Catholic University of America in a number of administrative capacities: as Acting Dean of the School of Philosophy in the Spring 1975 semester, as co-founder and Acting Director of the university's Medieval and Byzantine Studies Program, as Director of the university's Early Christian Studies Program, as Assistant Academic Vice-President in the Spring of 1989, and as Academic Vice-President (a position that was renamed Provost in 1995) during 1989–1997.

Wippel always insisted on maintaining, for both himself and others, the highest standards in scholarship, teaching, and administration, and he sometimes did so with an austerity of manner that could be intimidating to students and younger colleagues. On the other hand, his colleague Thérèse-Anne Druart, who often helped him with preparation of his work for publication, detected a subtle sense of humor in him that would sometimes appear in his examination of page proofs or new publications of his work. On one occasion, page proofs indicated that his remark that Aquinas had been sent to Naples to found a *studium* had been 'corrected' to have him sent there instead to found a 'stadium'. On the occasion of the publication of the anthology *Medieval Philosophy: From St. Augustine to Nicholas of Cusa* (1969, co-edited with Allan B. Wolter), he noted with amusement that the table of contents appeared to identify 'Agent Intellect' as the author of an early fourteenth-century treatise. He took great pleasure in discovering and pointing out such incongruities.

Beyond The Catholic University of America, Wippel served as a member of the Executive Council of the American Catholic Philosophical Association (1976–1979); as a member of the executive committee, Chairman of the Program Committee, Vice President (1980–1982) and President (1982–1984) of the Society for Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy; as Vice President (1985–1986) and President (1986–1987) of the American Catholic Philosophical Association; and as President of the Metaphysical Society of America (2005–2006). He also served for ten years as member of the Board of Directors of the *Journal of the History of Philosophy*.

His numerous academic awards and distinctions include the National Endowment for the Humanities Younger Humanist Fellowship (1970–1971); the degree of Maître-Agrégé de l'École Saint Thomas d'Aquin (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1981); the Cardinal Mercier Prize for *The Metaphysical Thought of Godfrey of Fontaines* as the « best book on a metaphysical theme in the previous two years » (Louvain, 1981); National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship for Independent Study and Research (1984–1985); Aquinas Medal, American Catholic Philosophical Association (1999); The Catholic University of America's Alumni Association Achievement Award for Research and Scholarship (2001); Fellow of the Pontifical Academy of Saint Thomas Aquinas (2003, Emeritus 2013); Doctorate of Letters in Mediaeval Studies *honoris causa* (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto, 2005); The Catholic University of America Provost Award for Life Time Excellence in Scholarship, Research, and Teaching (2006); and the Scholarly Excellence Award (American Maritain Society, 2012).

In his published work, Wippel considers in detail the classic distinctions of Aristotelian and Thomistic metaphysics: the distinctions between being and non-being, between the one and the many, between act and potency, between essence and existence, between form and matter, between substance and accident, and between God and creatures. He also makes clear his aim to disengage Aquinas's

purely metaphysical thought from the predominantly theological Thomistic corpus, and in this respect he is a faithful disciple of his teacher Van Steenberghe, who criticized Etienne Gilson for following the theological, not the philosophical, order in his presentation of what he called Aquinas's 'Christian philosophy'. Wippel periodically criticized Gilson also, as well as Gilson's student Joseph Owens, on this methodological point and on details of Aquinas's metaphysical thought. It is interesting to reflect on the configuration of these two pairs of teacher and student: Van Steenberghe (born in 1904) and Wippel (born in 1933) on the one hand, and Gilson (born in 1884) and Owens (born in 1908) on the other.

Among contemporary students of Aquinas's metaphysics, Owens was arguably Wippel's most important interlocutor, as is suggested by his prominence in both the bibliography and the index of names in Wippel's *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*. Wippel differed with Owens on a number of issues, including two issues of particular interest to students of Thomistic metaphysics, inasmuch as both issues have to do with the meaning of the crucial word *esse* ('to be') in Aquinas's work. One issue concerns Aquinas's argument in the fourth chapter of *De ente et essentia* that, in all things except God, *esse* is other than essence, quiddity, or nature. In a series of published exchanges that amounted to a sort of metaphysical *disputatio*, Owens affirmed and Wippel denied that it is only after the argument positively establishes the existence of God that this otherness can be known to be a 'real', not merely a 'conceptual', distinction. At one point Wippel suggested that Owens's philosophical reasoning in favor of this conclusion is in keeping with his Gilsonian views concerning 'Christian philosophy' and his Gilsonian presentation of Thomistic metaphysics according to 'the theological order'. The other issue concerns Cornelio Fabro's argument that there is implicit in Aquinas's work a distinction between two senses of the word *esse*, namely, '*esse* as act' and '*existence which is a fact of being*'. Owens flatly denied that there is any such distinction implicit in Aquinas's work. Wippel, with a footnote referencing Owens's denial, defended Fabro's position, although he, Wippel, preferred to describe the distinction as one between '*esse* as facticity' and '*esse* as intrinsic *actus essendi*'. Wippel's public expressions of his differences with Owens and others were models of courteous and erudite scholarly disagreement.

At an early age Wippel acquired a love of baseball that would remain with him throughout his life; before joining the Basselin Program in Washington, he even played on two minor-league baseball teams. It is not hard to see analogies between the game of baseball, in which circumspection, as well as precise and deliberate movement, are crucial, and the style of Wippel's rigorously circumspect, precise, and deliberate scholarly publications. On the many occasions in his publications in which he addresses a question concerning some metaphysical topic in the thought of Aquinas, he invariably provides both a thorough survey of the relevant scholarly literature and a minute analysis of the relevant texts of Aquinas,

arranged in chronological order, with a view to identifying possible developments in Aquinas's thinking on the topic. The reader concludes each article or chapter with a sense of having just witnessed something like a well-executed 'play', a definite move and an advance on the field of scholarship on the metaphysical thought of Aquinas.

A fitting tribute to Wippel's work has appeared in the form of a volume titled *Summa metaphysicae ad mentem Sancti Thomae: Essays in Honor of John F. Wippel* (The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, DC 2024), edited by two of Wippel's students who are now distinguished Thomistic scholars in their own right, Therese Scarpelli Cory and Gregory T. Doolan. The collection contains top-flight essays by Cory, Doolan, and ten other former students of Wippel or careful readers of his work, and it concludes with an account of a biographical interview with Wippel conducted in 2020. In addition to providing a sample of the best contemporary scholarship on Thomistic metaphysics, the volume gives assurance that the beneficial influence of Wippel's important work will continue for many years to come.