

John Courtney Murray Award Citation 2015

The theologian whom we honor this evening is a native of New York, the fifth of twelve children. He serves the family as a serious family historian and genealogist. He grew up as a hard-core Brooklyn Dodgers fan and is now a hard-core Red Sox fan, but his unrelenting animosity towards the Yankees has remained constant. His ten sisters have given him a deep appreciation for and sensitivity to the role of women in the life of the Church. He served for many years as a chaplain to the Ursulines at the College of New Rochelle.

Our recipient belongs to an extraordinary generation of priest-scholars-intellectuals who came of age in the Archdiocese of New York's seminary system in the mid-50s to the mid-60s. In 1960 he was sent to study at the North American College in Rome and was ordained in 1963 for the Archdiocese of New York. He completed his licentiate studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University where he encountered two of the most important foundational inspirations of this theological career. The first was Bernard Lonergan, S.J. who taught him courses on Christology, the Trinity, and theological method and graciously suffered the questions that David Tracy and our recipient would privately pester him with. The second gift was the opportunity to watch at close hand the two years of preparation for the Second Vatican Council and the unfolding of the first two sessions. As a seminarian he joined an entourage around a bishop and got past the Swiss Guard on the opening day of Vatican II. He made it all the way to the front door of St. Peter's where he saw all of the bishops and John XXIII enter the Basilica. Perhaps this was an omen that he was fated to become the leading English-language scholar of Vatican II.

Late in the summer of 1967 our recipient was informed that instead of returning to Rome for doctoral studies as he had requested, he was to teach Dogmatic Theology at the major seminary, Dunwoodie. While at Dunwoodie, he pursued doctoral studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he defended his doctoral dissertation on John Henry Newman's discovery of the visible Church in 1976.

In figuring out what needed to be done in the area of ecclesiology in the early years after Vatican II, our recipient became convinced that an understanding of the Church could be greatly helped by insights gained from social theories, which provided him with heuristic orientations and which taught him how to bring much of the post-conciliar emphasis on spiritual and theological dimensions of the Church down to earth in the self-constitution of the Church as the *congregatio fidelium*, the assembly of believers. Eventually this would inspire and inform areas of ecclesiology that he focused on such as the relationship between the so-called universal Church and local Churches and the dialectic of authority in the Church.

In the fall of 1977 he began teaching in the Department of Religion and Religious Education at The Catholic University of America, where he remained for the next thirty-two years. He was greatly appreciated by students as a teacher and director of dissertations, one of whom was Cardinal Tagle of Manila. At CUA, in addition to ecclesiology, he added the history and theology of Vatican II to his teaching. In 1980 his participation in an international symposium on the reception of the Council led to his membership on the international team directed by Giuseppe Alberigo that was to produce the five-volume *History of Vatican II*, to which he contributed two long chapters and a large number of essays on Vatican II and its reception into the life of the church.

While on research leave at Boston College in 1990, a chance discovery launched our recipient on years of research on the thought and fate of John Courtney Murray, on whom he had once thought of doing his dissertation. This resulted in several major essays based in good part on archival research not undertaken by other scholars. Our recipient has published well over 150 articles in various volumes and in journals, both scholarly and popular, and now also regularly contributes to a blog in *Commonweal*.

Our recipient's service to the Church includes service as a theological consultant to three committees of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops: the Committee on Doctrine, the Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, and the Committee on the Permanent Diaconate. For the last, he was a principal author and consultant in the preparation of its revised national guidelines. He also served on the Vatican-sponsored Roman Catholic-Baptist International Dialogue (1984-88) and has for several years been a member of the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation.

In 2009 our recipient retired from Catholic University and became Professor Emeritus. He returned to the archdiocese of New York where he pursues his research, writing, and lecturing in addition to raising chickens and collecting eggs on the tiny farm on which he and his brother live in upstate New York.

In recognition of his extraordinary gifts, his record of theological accomplishment, and his dedicated service to the Church and the theological profession, the Catholic Theological Society of America presents its highest honor, the John Courtney Murray Award for Distinguished Achievement in Theology, to Rev. Joseph Komonchak.