

The John Courtney Murray Award for Distinguished Theological Achievement

The theologian we honor this year with the John Courtney Murray Award was born in Detroit, Michigan. Our honoree attended Holy Ghost elementary school and secondary school in that city and earned her B.A. in English from Madonna College, now University. She received the Ph.D. in systematic theology from Boston College, writing her dissertation on Bernard Lonergan's idea of the human good, a foundation that has continued to inform her scholarship. Our awardee's professional journey has taken her from St. Norbert College, to Yale Divinity School, to Marquette University and finally to Boston College where she is now professor of systematic theology. She also served as adjunct faculty for many years at The Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University of Louisiana.

Our honoree is a prolific, profound and pioneering scholar whose work places suffering humanity at its center, particularly those suffering from the persistent racism, sexism and heterosexism pervasive in our church and society. For our honoree this experience of suffering leads to the cross of Jesus of Nazareth which is at the heart of her theology. In her lecture "The Trace of the Cross: Theology and Social Suffering," delivered when receiving the Marianist Award from the University of Dayton, our award recipient recounts the story of her grandmother tracing the sign of the cross over her as she was taken home from the hospital after her birth. That trace of the cross of Jesus of Nazareth has marked our honoree's theology deeply. A second early vignette recalls her sixth grade teacher's comments about theology and theologians that suggested to her that theology might be a way to respond to suffering and oppression. The vocation of a theologian was born.

The theologian we honor tonight has made contributions in a number of intersecting areas of theology; theological anthropology, the African American Catholic experience, political theology and thematizing an African American Catholic theology. A ground-breaking pioneer in Black Catholic theology this scholar is the author or editor of numerous books and over 125 articles dealing with suffering, embodiment, discipleship and the cross of Jesus, political theology, and white supremacy and anti-blackness in American Catholicism, to mention but a few of the themes she takes up. As a political, or praxis theologian she explores the religious, cultural and social issues that prevent or promote human persons' attempt to realize their full humanity. Her work, *Enfleshing Freedom*, proposes a revisioned theological anthropology that decenters the abstract Enlightenment understanding of the human subject as white heterosexual male and identifies the used and abused bodies of "the victims of history," especially "exploited, despised, poor women of color" as the new anthropological subject. Informed by her passion for justice, her scholarship demands to be put into action.

Our honoree is not only an extraordinarily productive scholar but has contributed generously to the academy, to the pastoral life of the church and to the community. She was the first African American President of our Society and has served on CTSA committees too numerous to mention. In addition, she is a regular contributor to the convention's topic sessions and to the Black Catholic Theology Consultation. A recipient of the Ann O'Hara Graff Award of the Women's Consultation in Constructive Theology, our awardee is an important mentor to many newer theologians in the Society and beyond. She is a former convener of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium, an interdisciplinary learned association of Black Catholic Scholars, and is an active member of the American Academy of Religion holding leadership roles on numerous committees. As well as serving on numerous editorial boards, such as *Horizons*, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, *The Ecumenist* and *Concilium*, she has served on many national and international committees furthering the work of the academy, for example, on the Executive Committee of the Association of Theological Schools and on its committee on underrepresented minorities. She is an elected member of the Society for the Study of Black Religion and the Society for Values in Higher Education.

Our award recipient has also generously made her scholarship available to the wider church and community. She has served on parish boards, archdiocesan committees, USCCB committees and as a member of a Catholic college Board of Trustees. The list of her presentations to religious communities, dioceses, parishes and conferences throughout the United States and beyond is truly daunting.

Our honoree is the recipient of six honorary degrees and numerous awards for her theological scholarship, the most recent, the Marianist Award that recognizes "a Catholic scholar, author, and theologian who has made an outstanding contribution to the intellectual life."

In recognition of her pioneering and prophetic scholarship that confronts us with the uncomfortable truth of the cost of discipleship, the Catholic Theological Society of America confers its highest honor, the John Courtney Murray Award for Distinguished Theological Achievement, on Professor M. Shawn Copeland.