

John Francis Wippel, 1933-2023

Msgr. John Francis Wippel was born on August 21, 1933, the second of two sons born to Joseph E. (1901-1972) and Mary J. (Andrews) Wippel (1908-1994). The farm on which he and his brother Patrick were raised lies about six miles distant from Pomeroy, a small town perched on the banks of the Ohio River. At that time, Pomeroy numbered some 3,500 residents. The population is now less than half of that. What signs of prosperity there once were in Pomeroy, the Seat of Meigs County, derived principally from the region's coal and salt mines, which were in decline even before the onset of the Great Depression, and not agriculture. Certainly, life in Appalachian Ohio would not have been easy, from a financial point of view, for the Wippel family in those years.

Even so, Msgr. Wippel would later recall his childhood with fondness. His family was very close knit. His father's farm was one of three properties that had first been cultivated by his grandfather, such that the two adjacent farms were owned and operated by his paternal uncles; extended family on his mother's side also lived close by. Like farmers everywhere, the Wippels knew how to work hard. They figured out what needed figuring, got done what needed doing, and made do with whatever was at hand or whatever hand could fashion. Above all else, they were a family committed to putting first things first. That same focus animated most everything he would ever do.

John Wippel's first years of schooling took place in Pomeroy's Sacred Heart Parish School. The school's staff consisted of two teachers, each a Sister of Providence who had emigrated from France before the First World War. The two shared the school's two classrooms and all eight years' worth of its primary school students. In the young Wippel they found an extraordinarily avid reader. If he had not yet discovered what would be the center of his scholarly gravity, he had almost certainly begun to form in those years what would be an abiding interest in Civil War history, which is fitting enough, considering that the only other celebrated writer to hail from Meigs County was the civil war soldier, poet and short-story writer Ambrose Bierce, who was born in a log cabin five miles to the east of the Wippel homestead.

On graduating, John followed his older brother to St. John Vianney Minor Seminary, newly founded by the Diocese of Steubenville in Bloomingdale, Ohio, and situated some 150 miles northeast of Pomeroy. There he completed four years of high school and the first two years of college seminary formation. Given his relatively modest physical stature and his pronounced scholarly demeanor, those who came to know him only later might find it hard to credit the fact, but his summer employment during those years included work on a highway crew, as a brakeman in the local rail yard, on a Jeep assembly line, and in a West Virginia steel mill. During this same period, he somehow also found time to play on two minor-league baseball teams, both in the outfield and on the pitcher's mound. After he moved to Washington, D.C., in 1953, manual labor ceased to play a notable role in his life, but he never lost his love of baseball.

In the fall of 1953, he was admitted as a "Basselin Scholar" to The Catholic University of America and its national seminary, Theological College. For the next three years, he would be part of a select group of diocesan seminarians from around the nation to receive a philosophical formation through the university's School of Philosophy. After earning a B.A. in Philosophy in 1955, and an M.A. the following year, he remained at the university for an additional four years in order to complete a Licentiate in Sacred Theology.

The way was now clear for his ordination as Roman Catholic priest for the Diocese of Steubenville, which took place on May 28, 1960.

Owing to his early academic promise, the now Father Wippel was invited to rejoin the School of Philosophy for the 1960-1961 academic year, with an appointment at the rank of instructor. The year thereafter, he was granted a leave, with his bishop's approval and with funding from the university, to pursue doctoral studies in

philosophy at the Catholic University of Louvain. There he joined Father Robert Sokolowski, a fellow Basselin from the archdiocese of Hartford, who had also been tasked with securing the requisite credentials for a long-term appointment on the School's faculty. Notwithstanding their obvious abilities, no one could possibly have foreseen the magnitude of the contribution each would go on to make in his chosen field. Nor could either man then imagine the more than six decades of friendship that lay ahead of them.

Father Wippel had arrived in Louvain with the idea of undertaking a dissertation project on some topic in the metaphysics of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Canon Fernand Van Steenberghen, the famed medievalist and his eventual *Doktorvater*, had something else in mind. So it came to be that the young Steubenville priest defended, *avec la plus grande distinction*, a dissertation on the metaphysics of Godfrey of Fontaines in April 1963. Though not his first choice as the subject of his dissertation, he would henceforth to Godfrey as "my old friend." In keeping with the rule at Louvain, his doctorate would not be awarded until the publication, in January 1965, of his first journal article.

After spending some months in Munich to perfect his German and to acquaint himself better with the work of German medievalists, Fr. Wippel returned to the School of Philosophy in the fall of 1963. He rose quickly through the academic ranks. On receiving his doctorate, he was appointed Assistant Professor. Two years thereafter, in 1967, he was promoted to Associate Professor, and in 1972 he was named Ordinary (Full) Professor. In recognition of his truly signal contribution to the university's academic and ecclesial mission, he, along with Fr. Sokolowski and Fr. Robert Trisco, a Church historian from the Archdiocese of Chicago, was named "an Honorary Prelate" with the title of Monsignor. Catholic University appointed him the Theodore Basselin Professor of Philosophy in 2001. Following his retirement at the end of the fall 2021 semester, he was named Professor Emeritus.

Msgr. Wippel's academic focus was metaphysics, specifically, metaphysical reflection in the 13th century, and his interpretations of the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas and Godfrey of Fontaines must be reckoned with by any scholar working in the field. Yet he also published important work on an impressive number of related topics and figures. His distinguished record of publication—as author, editor, or co-editor of over a dozen books and monographs, and nearly 100 scholarly articles and book chapters—earned him acclaim as one of the world's foremost students of medieval thought.

For his ground-breaking *The Metaphysical Thought of Godfrey of Fontaines*, Louvain-la-Neuve awarded him its Cardinal Mercier Prize in 1981. Largely on the basis of that same work, Louvain-la-Neuve also conferred on him its most advanced degree, the "Maître-Agrégé de l'École Saint Thomas d'Aquin." Wippel's reputation as a leading expositor of Thomistic metaphysics was advanced considerably by his publication, in 1984, of a collection of his essays under the title *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas*. It was with the appearance of *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (2000), however, that he secured his place as perhaps the most important Thomistic scholar of his generation. Also to be mentioned in this context is a short monograph entitled *Thomas Aquinas on the Divine Ideas*, which appeared in 1993, as well as his 1995 Marquette Aquinas Lecture, *Medieval Reactions to the Encounter between Faith and Reason*, a second volume of essays concerned with "metaphysical themes" in Aquinas, published in 2007, and a third such volume issued in 2021.

In addition to the books he alone authored or edited and translated, Msgr. Wippel also served as co-editor, with Allan B. Wolter, of *Medieval Philosophy: From St. Augustine to Nicholas of Cusa* (1969), as editor and co-translator of Van Steenberghen's *St. Thomas Aquinas and Radical Aristotelianism* (1980), as co-editor, with B.C. Bazán, G. Fransen, and D. Jacquart, of *Les questions disputées et les questions quodlibétiques dans les facultés de théologie, de droit et de médecine* (1985), as editor and translator of *Boethius of Dacia: 'On the Supreme Good,' 'On the Eternity of the World,' 'On Dreams'* (1987) and as editor of two collections of essays by various scholars, *Studies in Medieval Philosophy* (1987) and *The Ultimate Why Question: Why is There Anything at All Rather than Nothing Whatsoever* (2011).

His scholarly standing enabled the Meigs County medievalist to contribute to the wider academic community not only through his own publications but also as a reader of other scholarly writing. He consulted in an editorial capacity for numerous academic journals and university presses. Of such offices, suffice it here to mention his 10-year membership on the Board of Directors of the *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, the leading journal in the field. In the same exactingly collaborative spirit he also served as President of three scholarly organizations: The Society for Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy (1982-1984), The American Catholic Philosophical Association (1986-1987), and The Metaphysical Society of America (2005-2006).

His scholarship was recognized in a variety of ways besides those already mentioned. In the Spring 1969 semester, he served as Visiting Associate Professor at the University of California, San Diego. (Never before that appointment, and never since, did his students bring surfboards to class, although the fact that he shared an office with Professor Herbert Marcuse was surely a still more incongruous feature of his western sojourn.) He was twice awarded a year-long Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the first for the 1970-1971 academic year, and the second in 1984-1985. In 1999, the American Catholic Philosophical Association bestowed on him its Aquinas Medal, its highest honor. Two years later, he received The Catholic University of America's Alumni Association Achievement Award for Research and Scholarship. In 2002, he received the John Findlay Award from the Metaphysical Society of America. The year thereafter, he was named Professor Ordinarius of the Pontifical Academy of Saint Thomas Aquinas. The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies awarded him a Doctorate of Letters in Mediaeval Studies *honoris causa* in 2005. In 2006 Catholic University bestowed on him its Provost Award for Lifetime Excellence in Scholarship, Research and Teaching. And in 2012, the American Maritain Association honored him with its Scholarly Excellence Award.

That so prominent an exegete of high medieval philosophical texts should also have spent several years of his life in academic administration makes his many scholarly achievements all the more admirable. His first tour of administrative duty was in the spring of 1975, when he accepted a stint as Acting Dean of the School of Philosophy. Having cofounded Catholic University's Medieval and Byzantine Studies Program, he then agreed in the next semester to be its Acting Director. From 1978-1980, he served as Director of the university's Early Christian Studies Program. In January 1989, he agreed to serve as Assistant Academic Vice President for Graduate Studies. So effectively did he carry out that office that he was asked in June of the same year to take over as Academic Vice-President, a position he held for the next eight years, the last of which with the title of University Provost.

Apart from the periods of his research and sabbatical leaves and his eight-years before the mast of full-time academic administration, Msgr. Wippel naturally brought his commanding knowledge of the medieval philosophical tradition to bear in the classroom, and in ways that made him a legend among several generations of students. His work as a teacher bore particular fruit in the scores of M.A. theses and more than a dozen Ph.D. dissertations he directed, but also in the impact he had upon countless seminarians, a great many of whom have gone on to holy orders. His matter-of-fact insistence on holding students to high standards could be intimidating to some; but most quickly came to accept the premise of his teaching, namely, that in order to be a student one must be studious; and many are those who earnestly sought his assistance in some matter, whether academic, professional or personal, and who can attest to his kindness and generosity.

In the letter he submitted to Provost Aaron Domínguez in November 2021 communicating his decision to retire, Msgr. Wippel wrote, "I have greatly enjoyed my time at the University and have often thanked almighty God for the privilege of combining my priestly vocation with my scholarly interests." A few days after his nineteenth birthday, joyfully celebrated in the company of several family members and friends, he was hospitalized for respiratory failure. He died on September 11, 2023. A week or so before his death, he told a fellow priest from his hometown of Pomeroy that he was "ready." The Mass of Christian Burial for him took place on September 20 in the Crypt Church of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. The principal celebrant was the Most Reverend Jeffrey Marc Monforton, Bishop of Steubenville;

the Most Reverend Michael Olson, Bishop of Fort Worth and, during his time as a Basselin seminarian, also a student of Msgr. Wippel, preached the homily. His mortal remains were interred in Gate of Heaven Cemetery, in Silver Spring, Maryland.

John F. Wippel's brother Patrick preceded him in death in 2021, as did a nephew, Joseph Wippel, in 2018. He is survived by Patrick's widow, Mary, a nephew, Francis (Karen) Wippel, two nieces, Rita (Gary) Schmidt and Kathie Wippel, and several grand-nieces and grand-nephews. He is also mourned in a special way by Jim and Ann McCrery, their five children, and their grandchildren, who have been like family to him over the course of the last several decades.

John Francis Wippel, *requiescat in pace*.