

## **Homily for the Funeral Mass for Reverend Monsignor John F. Wippel**

**Bishop Michael F. Olson**

**September 20, 2023**

Basilica Shrine of the Immaculate Conception

Washington, D.C.

**Daniel** 12:1-3

**Psalms** 119:9, 10, 11, 12, 13

**2nd Timothy** 4:1-8

**John** 1:1-18

Each of us grieves the death of Monsignor John F. Wippel differently as each of us knew him differently: family member, friend, or colleague; priest, scholar, or teacher. So many of us knew him as Monsignor Wippel or Professor Wippel; but his family and very close friends knew him as “Father John.” Our prayers for consolation are especially offered on behalf of his sister-in-law, Mary Wippel; his nephew Fran and his wife Karen; his nieces Kathie Wippel and Rita Schmidt with her husband Gary; his cousin John Andrews and his wife Jill; as well as his dear friends Jim and Ann McCrery and their children. Many of Monsignor’s family have traveled a great distance to honor and to pray for “Father John” and to seek solace from their faith. Thus, God summons us here today in His compassion as the family of Monsignor John F. Wippel, as the family of the School of Philosophy of the Catholic University of America, as the family of the Diocese of Steubenville here present in its ordinary, Bishop Monforton, and as the family of God, the Church, that we might offer the Sacrifice of the Eucharist for his repose and for our solace at his passing, that our human grief might be transformed through the effects of the Funeral Liturgy into holy mourning filled with hope in Christ’s Resurrection.

In His gathering us together at this Eucharist, God unites us not simply through human empathy but through His Divine Mercy and Redemptive suffering given to us through His Son’s Passion, Death, and Resurrection. For it is by the gift of faith that we know with confidence what we have heard the prophet Daniel proclaim, that “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, others to reproach and everlasting disgrace, but those with insight shall shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament.”

John Francis Wippel was a priest. He was first a priest before he was a scholar and before he was a teacher. In fact, it is fair to say that both his scholarship and his teaching were imbued with his priestly vocation. He first heard the Lord call him to follow Him as a priest while he was a young boy, the son of Joseph and Mary Wippel, the younger brother of Patrick, working on the family farm outside of Pomeroy, Ohio. He heard the call of the Lord to follow Him through the example and love of his father and mother, the support of his brother, and that of his uncles and their families along with the religious sisters who taught him at Sacred Heart Catholic School in a small two-room school building next to the parish church. Blest with insight and trust in the Lord’s call, John Francis Wippel humbly said “yes” to his vocation and entered the minor seminary at the age of fourteen.

We have just listened to the Prologue of John's Gospel which speaks of two different things: the eternal preexistence of the Word and the Incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ for the fulfillment of the mission entrusted to Him by the Father for the salvation of the world and of every human being throughout time from the power of sin and death. The redemptive mission of Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate, can be seen and understood both as a Divine and human accomplishment because of the horizon of the Son's preexistence to the earthly life and mission of Jesus Christ.

The vocation of a priest, including a man's ordination and configuration to Christ, carries with it sacramentally this twofold character of the pre-existence and the Incarnation of the Word. The priest enters the mystery of the Word Incarnate by lending his human voice and hands to the Divine work of the Eternal Sacrifice of the Mass, then the priest extends the sanctifying effects of the Mass through his ministry and care for the People of God to whom he has been entrusted by Christ in accord with his promise of obedience to his bishop. As a priest, Monsignor Wippel was one with the Word, and made that Word audible, visible, and effective in his priestly, sacramental, and pastoral ministry.

From there it would not be surprising that someone with Monsignor Wippel's gifts, would want to immerse himself in the Word: beginning with prayer, moving to study, and quite naturally yet with grace move to teaching the Word. Because Monsignor Wippel knew the Word, he loved the Word; and because he loved the Word, he loved the Truth. He loved the Truth so well that he was willing to submit himself to the severe disciplines necessary to know, to speak, and to teach the truth with clarity, accuracy, and precision; and he taught his students to do the same.

In his book entitled *The Intellectual Life*, the Dominican priest and scholar Antonin-Gilbert Sertillanges refers to study as a type of prayer for the truth. He writes, "As prayer can last all the time, because it is desire and the desire is constant, why should not study last all the time, seeing that it also is desire and an invocation of the true? If the majority of men remain absorbed in more earthly longing, it is the thinker's special characteristic to be obsessed by the desire for knowledge: why not keep this desire at work, constantly at work like a stream beneath which turbines have been installed?"

These words beautifully manifest what the late Monsignor John K. Ryan, Dean of the School of Philosophy, must have seen in the young Basselin scholar and seminarian, John Wippel, to request that his bishop release him for further philosophical studies for service to the Catholic University of America as a priest, scholar, and teacher. This was a time in the history of the Church when Monsignor Wippel's vocation as a scholarly diocesan priest would have been taken for granted as good, praiseworthy, and necessary for the flourishing of the Church as guided by the Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes*, "to carry forward the work of Christ under the lead of the befriending Spirit, to give witness to the truth, to rescue and not to sit in judgment, to serve and not to be served...and (to scrutinize) the signs of the times to interpret them in the light of the Gospel."

Yet, as history has shown, that common appreciation of the priest-scholar soon dissipated into an embroiled and unfocused activism within society and the Church as too many people began not to "tolerate sound

doctrine but followed their own desires” shortly after Monsignor Wippel began teaching at the Catholic University of America.

Monsignor Wippel did not permit the temperament of those times to intimidate him or cause him to doubt or even despair, as sadly too many others did. Monsignor Wippel instead “remained persistent, whether convenient or inconvenient,” to his vocation as a priest and scholar “to convince, reprimand, encourage, through all patience and teaching.” He gave his faithful love and priestly service to the Church and to the Catholic University of America for over sixty years as both a professor and as Academic Vice President. It was a generous act on his part to accept the responsibilities of Academic Vice President and Provost and to sacrifice time and energy that otherwise would have been spent on research and scholarship. The University benefited because of this generosity. His dedication and fidelity to his vocation have been vindicated through the lasting influence he has exerted upon his students and colleagues, that we might remain persistent in fidelity to the Word even as many in our own times have preferred to accumulate teachers and have “stopped listening to the Truth and have become devoted to myths.”

Monsignor Wippel’s priesthood and scholarship blossomed forth in teaching. He understood his mission to preserve and hand on the core and substance of Metaphysics as a science to his students, especially the metaphysics of Saint Thomas Aquinas, that this understanding might go forth and flourish into the future. Towards that end he introduced his students to the writing and thought of authors who otherwise would have been unappreciated and overlooked by contemporary scholars: Siger of Brabant, Boethius of Dacia, Henry of Ghent, and, of course, Monsignor Wippel’s “old friend” Godfrey of Fontaines. Monsignor Wippel argued fiercely with “self-possession in all circumstances” for metaphysics as a science in accord with its own ends and first principles.

He clearly presented especially to those of us in seminary formation that philosophy is a science with its own integrity and not simply an ideological handmaiden to theology. He taught with clarity and precision that metaphysics is not a theology but is first philosophy and as “first philosophy” studies God as far as He is the first principle of being.

This zeal transferred readily into his classroom pedagogy. To be late for class or unprepared was an irreverence for the truth, which was both a gift and an achievement, so that his classroom almost took on a liturgical character, for in that context there was a response to the Divine initiative of the Truth. Just as our Lord had no patience for the lukewarm, Father Wippel had no patience for the academic dilettante. Only those who had given their best, and in so doing did what was required in worthy service of the truth, could command his respect. It was truly a privilege to learn from him. We, his students, were shown by his example that we had an obligation to the truth to prepare for class and to give our best. If any of us were to dare to offer to the truth the sacrifice of Cain instead of Abel, by offering slapdash work, a reprimand and correction were meted out justly in due proportion. Monsignor Wippel made clear to us, especially as fellow Basselin scholars, his students, that in receiving the Basselin scholarship we had been given so much, and in being given so much, so much more was to be expected of us. For that gift, I am ever more thankful than when I was a college junior in honors metaphysics in 1986.

We are not here to worship Aristotle's god as the self-thinking thought. We are not here to worship God merely as the first principle of being. We are here to thank the true and Triune God, revealed fully by Jesus Christ, for the gift of the life and the priestly, scholarly, and teaching ministry of Monsignor John F. Wippel. We are here to worship God in the manner that Christ has revealed that the Triune God desires to be worshipped through the Eternal Sacrifice of the Mass. Because we have been blessed with authentic hope born of faith, and desirous of charity, we pray for the repose of the soul of Monsignor John F. Wippel so that he who was blest with wisdom and insight might shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament and finally behold the paradoxical union of both the familiarity and newness of the Beatific Vision.

We believe and hope that everything upon which Monsignor Wippel's eyes, heart, and mind ever set in this life has been confirmed by God as true, but so much richer, deeper, clearer, and more beautiful than anything he had encountered, grasped, or understood in this earthly life. This in itself will require our prayers because there is the healing and yet painful recognition that the love and knowledge in which he delighted in this life were imperfect compared to all that he now beholds with perfect and beatific clarity in the very essence and life of God, Whom he has always loved, the true God who loved him first and has always loved him, and the true God who called him into being.