In Memoriam: William E. May (1928–2014)
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The Church in the U.S. has suffered a grievous loss in the passing of Dr. William E. May, a noted Catholic scholar who distinguished himself as one of the most prominent and trenchant defenders of Humanae Vitae and Catholic moral teachings. He was a long-time member of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars (FCS) and the Society of Catholic Social Scientists (SCSS). In 1986–1987, he was a member of the Vatican’s International Theological Commission, and taught at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome. His many books and articles in scholarly journals on sexual ethics manifest his profound knowledge of, and fidelity to, Magisterial teachings which from the late 1950s would undergo intense and relentless criticism by dissenters denying the existence of natural law as well as the moral doctrines set forth by the Roman Pontiffs and the 2nd Vatican Council regarding chastity, marriage, and family life.

As an associate professor of moral theology at The Catholic University of America, and later Michael J. McGivney Professor of Moral Theology at the Pope John Paul II Institute on Marriage and Family in Washington, D.C., Dr. May devoted himself throughout his scholarly career to set forth as clearly and cogently as possible the principles of Catholic moral life. He staunchly defended the teachings of the Church’s Magisterium, and firmly rejected the view that there can be legitimate dissent on questions of the moral life settled by the Magisterium. There was no question in his mind that dissenters with their erroneous speculations were seriously distorting and misinterpreting Catholic teachings and doing great harm to the faith of the people of God. When many theologians and bishops were cowed by prestigious academics undermining Magisterial teaching on contraception, abortion, and homosexuality, Dr. May was fearless. In books and scholarly journals, he exposed the sophisms emitted by such dissenters as Charles E. Curran, Richard McCormick, S.J., Timothy E. O’Connell, John T. Noonan, Jr., Lawrence Porter, O.P., John Wright, S.J., Joseph Fuchs, S.J., John F. Dedek, Rosemary Ruether, Bernard Haring, Louis Janssens, Michael Valente, Philip Keane, S.S., Daniel Maguire, John McNeil, S.J., Dennis Doherty, and others. With Fr. John F. Harvey, he took the lead to eviscerate the notorious volume Human Sexuality: New Dimensions in American Catholic Thought published by Paulist Press and edited by dissenter Fr. Anthony Kosnik with the collaboration of William Carroll, Agnes Cunningham, Ronald Modras, and James Schulte. The volume starkly
unraveled the entire corpus of Catholic moral teaching, and if its views had been adopted, the result would have been the “sexual suicide” of the Catholic Church. It is not too much to say that future scholars can easily trace the deplorable history of dissent from the Magisterium by “progressive” intellectuals in American Catholicism by carefully examining Dr. William E. May’s rich and objective scholarship.

It is ironic that Dr. May began his teaching career as a dissenter, having signed the infamous 1968 statement of dissent from Humanae Vitae. As he himself would later explain in noting the grace of God: “In 1968 I signed the statement of dissent from Humanae Vitae. For doing this, I was congratulated by some for my ‘courage’ and ‘intelligence.’ I sincerely repented of that act. . . . I soon began to realize that the moral theory invented to justify contraception could be used to justify any kind of a deed. I saw that it was a consequentialist, utilitarian kind of argument, that it was a theory which repudiated the notion of intrinsically evil acts. I began to realize how truly prophetic the Pope had been . . . but by 1972 I realized that I could not keep silence on the evil of contraception in teaching anyone. I was truly repentant of the deed I had done in 1968. In the past several years I have done what I have been able in order to make up for that deed, and for my public cowardice. I am sure that the strength of my wife, her faith, her true love, and her goodness helped bring me to my senses, finally.”

Dr. William E. May was a devoted servant of Christ, a true intellectual hero of the Faith who used his talents to defend Christ’s truth in a period of spiritual darkness. He is survived by his loving wife of fifty-six years, Patricia Ann Keck, their seven children, and sixteen grandchildren. R.I.P.