

MONSIGNOR MICHAEL J. WRENN
posthumous recipient of
a Special Award for Contributions to the Church
from the Society of Catholic Social Scientists

Msgr. George P. Graham

The Society of Catholic Scientists was honored to give a special award for contributions to the Church to the late Monsignor Michael J. Wrenn, the noted pastor, religious educator, author, and long-time member of the Society's Board of Advisors. Monsignor Wrenn was seventy-two years old at his death. He was ordained in 1961 for the Archdiocese of New York. As a young priest he was assigned to work in the Religious Education Office of the Archdiocese. I met Monsignor Wrenn when we were both members of a state committee to prepare material for the American Catechetical Directory. Monsignor Wrenn was assigned to establish the Archdiocesan Catechetical Institute in 1977 by Terence Cardinal Cooke. The name was later changed to the present name, The Institute of Religious Studies.

After ten years at the Institute, Monsignor Wrenn was appointed pastor of St. John the Evangelist Church, the church which is now located within the archdiocesan chancery building. In 2001, Monsignor Wrenn returned as a Dean to the Institute of Religious Studies, where he remained until his retirement in 2005.

The great commitment of Monsignor Wrenn's priestly life was teaching the Gospel, catechetics. Good catechetics normally requires a good catechism. This was the subject of vigorous debate at Vatican Council I (1869-1870). After this debate the fathers of Vatican Council I, by a majority of the Fathers (4/5) present and voting, approved the project of a Church-wide Catechism. However, because of the occupation of Rome by the Italian army, the Council was interrupted and never resumed, and the Schema for a Catechism was never voted upon and approved.

When Vatican Council II began in 1962, there were a number of suggestions that the Vatican I project be revived. Nothing came of these suggestions, however. After the Council, catechetics throughout the Church became a disaster area. This was the time in which catechisms were replaced by balloons and banners. In reaction to this failure of catechetics, the 1985 meeting of the Synod of Bishops requested a Catechism for the Universal Church. In 1986 Pope John Paul II, in response to the request of the Synod of Bishops, appointed a Commission of twelve Cardinals and Bishops, presided over by Cardinal

Joseph Ratzinger. Their task was to prepare a proposal for the Catechism asked for by the Fathers of the Synod. An additional Commission of seven diocesan Bishops, experts in theology and catechetics, assisted the Commission. The first edition of the text appeared in French on October 11, 1992. The job of translating it then was taken up by each Conference of Bishops. A first English translation was attempted, and it was not a good translation. As Msgr. Wrenn wrote at the time “If this translation had been successfully foisted off on the English speaking world as *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* in the form in which we have studied it and in which it went to the CDF for approval, we believe it would actually have brought discredit upon the whole enterprise, to the detriment of the Faith and the Church.”

As a result of the work of Monsignor Wrenn and Kenneth D. Whitehead, in their book *Flawed Expectations* (1990), the earlier translation into English was rejected, and a new translation was made which was published in 1994. The Latin edition, which became the official text, was published in 1997, and the second edition of the English translation, in conformity with the official Latin was also published in 1997.

After twelve years as Pastor of St. John the Evangelist Parish, Monsignor Wrenn returned as Dean to the Institute of Religious Studies. Monsignor Wrenn had long been interested in the French language, and he became fluent in it, both orally and in writing. He translated at least thirteen books on theology from the French. Because of his fluency in speaking French, Monsignor Wrenn was able to visit some of the leading theologians in France. This led to the publication in English of books by other translators, publications which Monsignor Wrenn had arranged.

In 1998, Monsignor Wrenn received the Cardinal Wright Award from the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars at their convention in Denver. The great work of Monsignor Wrenn’s life was his establishment and guidance of The Institute of Religious Studies at the Seminary of St. Joseph in Dunwoodie, New York. From this Institute, there have been more than five hundred and eighty graduates. In addition, some of the students have entered seminaries to become priests.

The Society of Catholic Social Scientists was proud to posthumously recognize Monsignor Michael J. Wrenn’s achievements and his many important contributions to Holy Mother Church.

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