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Fall, 2002

# THE REVIEW OF POLITICS

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# IN MEMORIAM ERNEST L. FORTIN, A.A.

Seriously handicapped since suffering a stroke in 1997, Father Fortin died in Framingham, Massachusetts on October 22<sup>nd</sup>. Word of his death reached the offices of The Review of Politics, as it did many of his friends throughout the world, on the next day. Those friends and his many students know best that this passing was that of a truly remarkable person. Anyone who might have encountered him or his writings could recognize in him an outstanding scholar set apart by breadth of significant interests, awesomely rich learning and a capacity for acute and profound analysis. He wore lightly his scholarly powers and distinctions. As Werner Dannhauser observed recently, his "puckish wit" and his "irrepressible" playfulness made his presence a delight. This, along with a similarly irrepressible care and concern for his friends and students, was very much in evidence when, less than two months before his death, I had the opportunity to talk with him in the nursing home where he spent his last years on earth. One sensed, as always with him, a somewhat detached amusement at the ironies and follies of the academic and political worlds; he appeared to view all matters with a confidence and joy in things unseen.

Father Fortin was a priest of the community of the Augustinians of the Assumption. He studied philosophy at Laval University where Charles De Konick stirred his interest. Theological Studies at the Angelicum in Rome then followed before his ordination in 1949. In 1955, he completed studies for the doctorate in letters at the Sorbonne; during the time he was writing his dissertation in Paris, he became friends with Allan Bloom who directed him toward the issues of "politics" and the work of Leo Strauss. While participating in Strauss seminars at the University of Chicago in the early 1960s, I met Ernest Fortin and found him then in our earliest contacts as throughout his subsequent life a friendly and very active source of encouragement and support of what might be most significant in my aspirations as teacher, scholar, and editor. Father Fortin taught at his undergraduate alma mater, Assumption College, from 1955 to 1970, and then from 1971 until his disabling stroke, he taught theology and political philosophy at Boston College. He lectured widely in Europe and America.

My predecessor as editor, Donald Kommers, invited Ernest Fortin to be one of the twelve scholars on the initial editorial advisory board of *The Review of Politics*. From that appointment in 1984, he served continuously and most helpfully in that capacity until his death. The prior editor, Frederick Crosson, oversaw Fortin's initial publication in *The Review*, his 1979 essay on "Augustine's *City of God* and the Modern Historical Consciousness," and his friendship with Father Fortin seemed to grow up,

from this point if not earlier, around their common interests in St. Augustine and in the character and impact of the work of Leo Strauss. Fortin's important essay, "The New Rights Theory and the Natural Law," appeared in The Review in 1982 in the wake of the appearance of John Finnis's Natural Law and Natural Rights. Then in 1994, Fortin provided extended comment when the Strauss-Voegelin correspondence appeared. In 1995, he addressed in this journal the modern charges about biblical Christianity's responsibility for abuse of the environment with his now often cited essay, "The Bible Made Me Do It: Christianity, Science, and the Environment." In 1979 and 1997 he took assignment to review important books by Fredrick Wilhelmsen and Jean Bethke Elshtain respectively. Nearly all of these publications and most of Fortin's writings appear in a three-volume collection of his work (Collected Essays, ed. J. Brian Benestad, [1996]) in which he wrote the Foreward to the initial volume. That collection, a truly impressive testimony to his scholarly excellence and energy, was reviewed in this journal by Glenn Tinder in 1998, "The Moral Amnesia of Modernity: The Scholarship of Ernest Fortin." A complete bibliography of Fortin's published work appeared within the past year in the festschrift edited by Michael P. Foley and Douglas Kries, Gladly to Learn and Gladly to Teach: Essays on Religion and Political Philosophy in Honor of Ernest L. Fortin (2002).

Father Fortin formally received the *festschrift* and was honored by Boston College for his curricular leadership just days before his death. Little more than a month earlier, an English translation of his 1981 book on Dante appeared under the title *Dissent and Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, trans. Marc A. LePain (2002). At the same time, at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, a session was held in his honor under the title, "Reason and Revelation: The Legacy of Ernest Fortin."

The notice that came to most of us of Father Fortin's death was sent by his friend Father Matthew Lamb, and it concluded with the most fitting words one might imagine from his deepest and longest-standing friend in philosophic Christianity.

I do love wisdom alone and for its own sake, and it is on account of wisdom that I want or fear to be without other things, such as life, tranquility, and my friends. What limit can there be to my love of that Beauty, in which I do not only not begrudge it to others, but I even look for many who will long for it with me, sigh for it with me, possess it with me, enjoy it with me; they will be all the dearer to me the more we share that beloved wisdom in common.

St. Augustine, Sililoquies I, 22

Walter Nicgorski Editor

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Correction: Takashi Shogimen, a former Research Fellow in the University of Cambridge, is an independent scholar in Toronto.

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