

11.12.2018

## **Professor Robert Spaemann, Philosopher and Advocate of the Traditional Mass, Dies at 91**



Robert Spaemann, 1927-2018

The distinguished German philosopher Robert Spaemann passed away on December 10th in his house in Stuttgart after a long illness. In Spaemann the Catholic intellectual world has lost one of its greatest lights, and an eloquent defender of the traditional Mass and traditional Catholic doctrine, as well as of the perennial philosophy.

Spaemann was born in 1927 in Berlin to the socialist writer Heinrich Spaemann and the avant-garde dancer Ruth Krämer. In 1930 Spaemann's parents converted to Catholicism, and the three-year old Spaemann was baptized. In 1936 Spaemann's mother died. His father then studied theology, and in 1942 was ordained to the priesthood by the bishop of Münster, Blessed Clemens August Graf von Galen.

Robert Spaemann studied philosophy, history, theology and romance languages at the universities of Münster, Munich, Fribourg, and Paris. He his doctorate in philosophy at the University of Münster, writing a dissertation on Louis-Gabriel-Ambroise de Bonald and the origins of sociology out of the spirit of restoration under Joachim Ritter. He then received his habilitation for a monograph on the controversy between Fénelon and Bossuet. After working as an assistant to Ritter in Münster, Spaemann was professor of philosophy at the universities of Stuttgart (till 1968), Heidelberg (till 1972), and Munich (till his retirement in 1992).

As a philosopher Spaemann was much concerned with defending the Aristotelian teleological understanding of nature, and the relevance of that understanding for philosophical anthropology, ethics, and politics. His landmark 1978 essay "Nature," argued that the abandonment of a teleological understanding of nature in early modernity was one of the roots of the crisis of civilization. The essay has been published in English translation by Oxford University Press in [A Robert Spaemann Reader](#). Another focus of his work was the recovery of the Aristotelian and Christian understanding of happiness as the foundation of ethics. His 1989 monograph [Happiness and Benevolence](#) recovered the classical understanding of happiness from modern misunderstandings. As an ethicist Spaemann was one of the most important European defenders of the lives of unborn children. As a political thinker, Spaemann was a sharp critic of Marxist utopianism, at a time when much of German academic philosophy was under Marxist influence. His 1977 *Critique of Political Utopia* has yet to be translated into English. Spaemann was also an accomplished metaphysician, writing much on philosophical proofs for the existence of God.

Spaemann was a profoundly faithful Catholic who used his brilliant intellect to defend the Faith, rather than to explain it away. He always had a deep respect for the simple faith of children. [In an interview posted by Rorate in 2016](#), he said the following:

I once assisted at a Corpus Christi procession in the diocese of Feldkirch in Austria, presided over by the bishop, who is a member of Opus Dei. At the station altars, the bishop turned his back on the monstrance while reciting the prayers. I said to myself that if a child saw that, he could no longer believe that the Lord is present in the Sacred Host, because the little one knows very well that when you are talking to someone, you don't turn your back on him. Things like that are very important. There is no point in the child studying his catechism if what he learns is contradicted before his eyes.

He was thus a sharp critic of the new Mass, and a defender of the traditional Mass. He took part in the 2001 Liturgical Conference at Fontgombault Abbey along with his friend, Cardinal Ratzinger, who was later, as Pope Benedict XVI, to realize one of the key ideas of that conference in *Summorum Pontificum*.

Spaemann was also a courageous defender of the Church's moral teaching, and spoke clearly and unambiguously about the crisis in that teaching brought about by the synods on the family and the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. In [another interview translated by Rorate](#) he said:

The tendency is strong to adapt to all trends, so that the people do not run away. But one always has to look into the Gospels. The masses ran after Jesus, but then he spoke about giving His Body to eat and His Blood to drink. He did not try to make it look attractively pleasant, and the people were shocked and ran away. Jesus asked the apostles: "Do you also want to run away?" But St. Peter answered: "No, Lord, even though we did not understand you, either, but you have words of eternal life, and where else should we go?" That should be the reaction of the people. Also in the question of divorce it should not be about following the great masses and strong tendencies, but to give witness about the fact that there are other and much more beautiful ways of life. One also should not only start with it at marriage-preparation courses, but rather much earlier. Already in school one has to be taught what the Christian manner of living is. Then also such a prohibition of divorce, as it has been very clearly and unambiguously taught by Christ, would become attractive.

In 1950 Spaemann married the poetess and translator Cordelia Steiner. They had three children. One of whom, Christian Spaemann, is a distinguished psychiatrist and critic of gender-theory. Mrs. Spaemann passed away in 2003.

We ask all our readers, of their charity, to pray for the repose of the soul of Robert Spaemann.