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Yves Congar leaves rich legacy

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OBITUARY

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Cardinal Yves Marie-Joseph Congar, one of the greatest Roman Catholic ecclesiologists and ecumenists of this century, died June 22, at the Hospital of the Invalides in Paris, at the age of 91. Known as 'Christianus' (as he signed some of his writings of the 1920s) or most endearingly as Père Congar, this prolific writer of more than 1,600 books, articles and translations, was a major contributor to the documents of Vatican II.

Sections of the Vatican II documents are completely his own, including the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*, Nos. 9, 13, 16 and 17) as well Chapter 1 of The Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*). Thus, *Le Monde*, the Parisian daily, on the front page of its June 24 edition, headlined Congar's obituary: "The Death of the 'Father' of Vatican II."

The Vatican II glory was preceded for Congar by somber clouds of Vatican harassment. Not unlike today's Leonardo Boff, Charles Curran and Pedro Casaldaligas, Congar during the 1950s was silenced by the Vatican congregation then called the Holy Office, formerly the Office of the Inquisition. His writings were submitted to numerous Vatican censors. Congar personally told me that his *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Église* (*True and False Reform in the Church*) had been submitted to 16 censors, only to finally be censured after being published. Angelo Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII, then papal nuncio in France, acquired a copy of *Vraie et fausse réforme* and, becoming intrigued with it, annotated it. Roncalli apparently thought enough of Congar's work to give the theologian an important position at the Second Vatican Council some years later.

During the late 1940s and the 1950s, Congar's articles languished and were not published; his talks were suppressed; and his ecumenical activities were suspended. In order to remove him from Paris, church authorities ordered him to the École Biblique in Jerusalem, where he was prohibited from accepting the prestigious Chair of the Hautes-Études, which was offered to him. Then, for a period of four months, he was sent to Rome and, eventually, hustled to Cambridge, England, where he was assigned no ministerial work.

Dominican Thomas O'Meara, in a February 1994 issue of *America* magazine, noted that Congar wrote in his journal: "The Holy Office presides over the entire church and curbs everyone with its interventions: this supreme, inflexible Gestapo whose decisions cannot be questioned." He was quoted in a later article in the French press as saying, "I am not a man of the tragic, but it is painful to be the victim of stupidity."

However, Pope John XXIII restored Congar, naming him consultant to the preliminary sessions of Vatican II and expert (*peritus*) at the council.

Congar was born in Sedan in the Ardennes region of France, April 13, 1904. (In 1970, Congar was the guest in Boston of my doctoral adviser at Boston University, J. Robert Nelson, who related to me the following story. When asked by Nelson what he would like to visit in Boston, Congar answered, "The auto



Cardinal Yves Congar

show." So, Nelson took Congar to the auto show. When I interviewed Congar in Paris in 197: at Couvent Saint-Jacques, I asked him why, during his 1970 Boston visit, he was interested in visiting the auto show. He said he wanted to know whether there was a connection between his birthplace in France, Sedan, and the model of American car known as a *sedan*. At the show, he learned that there was. The interior fabric in the first American sedan cars was woven in Sedan, France.)

What is Congar's theology about? In part, it is about ecumenism as an authentic mark of the church, along with holiness, unity, catholicity and apostolicity. It is about the primacy of Tradition (the Trinitarian "handing over" of God's life to the church) over traditions (found in the church, but not contained formally in scriptures) such as the Roman primacy. It is about the primacy of worship as life over worship as ritual; the primacy of universal priesthood over the ordained priesthood; the primacy of church as community over church structures.

It is about Congar's most fundamental creed: "I believe the holy church is conditioned by the absolute: I believe in the Holy Spirit."

Congar was ordained a Dominican in 1930 and created cardinal by John Paul II in October 1994, which made him "happy as a child," according to Fr. Pierre Marie Gy of Couvent Saint-Jacques in Paris, where Congar lived before entering Les Invalides. Ironically, Congar had earlier written that the 11th century papal creation of the college of cardinals had all but destroyed episcopal collegiality in the Roman Church.

Congar is likely to be remembered for four legacies: his description of the hierarchy, written in the 1950s; of the structure of the church, 1970s; of the priesthood, also in the 1970s; and of what it means to be Catholic, 1939.

- On the hierarchy: "The bishops are completely boxed in by passivity and servility; if their devotion to Rome is sincere and filial, it is also childish, infantile."
- On the structure of the church,: "The decisive pair [that structure the church] is not 'priest/laity,' but 'ministries/[ecclesial] community.'" "The entire people of God is priestly. [Ordained] priests are 'priests' in a particular way because they are ordained to preside and guide the priestly ministry of the people of God."
- On priesthood: "There is no sacrament of the priesthood (except Baptism); there is a sacrament of Order. Some are ordained as followers of the apostles and ministers instituted by them to serve the Priesthood of Christ in the service of men, and primarily in the service of the Christian community."

- On what it means to be Catholic: "Christians who are truly Catholic are, first and foremost, those who — interiorly and with sufficient intensity — live in faith and charity, experience them-selves, by grace, to be members of God's family, and allow themselves to radiate God's image within them to the degree that they see themselves as partners — brothers, sisters, members — incorporated with all who also are of God's family and bear Christ's image. ... Christians who are truly Catholic are those who, more authentically, belong to God; and the more they are truly of God's family, the more they are also brothers and sisters of all. What they demonstrate in relational capacities is in proportion to what they live from within the depths of their life of faith and charity. St. Francis offers the model. He lived his life so perfectly as son of God that he was brother to all that is created. This was made possible for him through his literal acceptance of both gospel and creation. And for this, the liturgy [for his feast] gives him the magnificent title of Catholic." ■

Richard J. Beauchesne, professor of religious studies, Emmanuel College, Boston, wrote his doctoral dissertation on Congar, which included a preface written by Congar.