

On Friday, March 26, Boston College hosted a roundtable discussion on the impact of the thought of Fr. Ernest Fortin, A.A., (1923-2002) longtime professor both at B.C. and at his alma mater, Assumption College. The roundtable, sponsored by the Bradley and the Fortin Foundations, featured two main speakers, Dr. Fred Lawrence, professor of Theology at Boston College, and Dr. Thomas Hibbs, director of the great books program at Baylor University. After dinner the discussion continued with former colleagues and students posing questions to the speakers.

In their presentations, Lawrence and Hibbs focused on Ernest's education, both that which he himself received and that which he has handed on to others. The education he received began with his parents, and continued in the Catholic school he attended in Woonsocket and later, of course, in the learning he acquired from the old French Assumptionists at the Prep and the College. It was the kind of solid, classical formation in the Catholic intellectual tradition that, for so many centuries, gave life, direction and dynamism to the Church and the West.

Ernest's education was not concerned only with the past, however, but it was shaped as well by his educator's instinct for the guidance of students who would bear the tradition into the following generations. It was this instinct especially that was roused in the course of Ernest's later studies in Paris where, through his friendship with Allan Bloom, he encountered the thought of Leo Strauss. It was by way of Strauss' thinking that Ernest learned the central importance of political philosophy for understanding the human condition generally, and more specifically for discerning the place of the Gospel and of "the City of God" in their living and actual relation to "the City of Man." Strauss' work and Bloom's conversation, though the two of them were thoroughgoing agnostics, enabled Ernest to see the teachings of Augustine, which he had already studied seriously, with new clarity and with a new urgency fitting his own situation and that of his students here in the 20th and 21st centuries. Ernest was given new eyes for spying out the crisis of the Church in the modern world.

Assumptionists in the audience could see that Strauss and Bloom had, in effect, enabled Ernest to realize in his own life the powerful charism of Fr. Emmanuel d'Alzon boldly addressing the crisis of the Church, examining "the Great Causes of God and Man," in order to "penetrate the world with a Christian idea." It was this charismatic power of mind and vision

that made Ernest himself such a great teacher of his students and such an extraordinary colleague. The speakers, in the evident love and admiration they had for Ernest, were themselves living proof of this collegial and teaching gift of his, as were the large number students, and students of students, and now, already, yet another generation of students who have been awakened by the example of Ernest's untrammeled, unconventional and probing love of truth.

The piercing and sometimes deeply disturbing questions he rouses in our minds draws us beyond smaller and more conventional concerns to look outward, toward the far horizons of human action, upward toward the transcendent beauty and goodness of creation and the Creator, and inward to our own souls, to our call to live well as human beings, as members of the People of God…and as men and women humble enough to recognize their limits and so who know, as Ernest did so well, how to laugh!

The whole evening was a refreshing reminder of what it can mean to be an Assumptionist!

Reported by Barry Bercier, A.A.