

Rev. Frank Morrisey approached canon law with heart of a pastor

One of the greatest canon law scholars in Canadian history has died.

Rev. Frank Morrisey of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, canon law professor, consultant to bishops and religious orders around the world, died May 23 in Ottawa at the age of 84.

“It is hard to think of any canonist who has had more influence in the anglophone world, to say nothing of his contributions into the francophone world – Fr. Morrisey as an Oblate spoke French fluently – and the universal Church,” Rev. Alexander Laschuk, judicial vicar of the Toronto Regional Tribunal, said in an e-mail.

“His expertise and influence was so great that in all honesty some dioceses will have difficulties finding suitable assistance now that he is deceased.”

Father Morrisey was a regular speaker at gatherings of bishops, religious order superiors and at universities. He would frequently quote from Canon 1752, the last paragraph of the 1983 Code of Canon Law, “... keeping in mind the salvation of souls, which in the Church must always be the supreme law.”

Morrisey was one of the drafters of the 1983 reform of canon law mandated by the Second Vatican Council which examined the Church’s relationship with the modern world.

Though he was a canonist with encyclopedic knowledge of Church law, Morrisey always approached the law with the heart of a pastor, said his Saint Paul University colleague Msgr. Roch Pagé, judicial vicar of the Canadian Appeal Tribunal.

“I never heard him saying, ‘It’s because it’s the law,’ or ‘The law is the law.’ He never said that,” Pagé said.

He was profoundly influenced by the Second Vatican Council. In a 2019 video created to mark a lifetime achievement award from the Catholic Health Association of the United States, Morrisey said Vatican II taught him “that the promotion of the dignity of the human person is primordial.”

Father Morrisey’s people-first approach to the law caught Pope Francis’ eye. The Pope appointed Morrisey as the only North American to the Special Commission for the Study of the Reform of the Matrimonial Processes in Canon Law in 2014.

This required weekly trips from Ottawa to Rome to hammer out new norms that would put mercy first in dealing with failed marriages and irregular situations in places as diverse as rural Africa and the heart of Rome.

Morrisey was born in Charlottetown, P.E.I., on Feb. 13, 1936, the oldest of Col. E.J.H. Morrisey, OBE, and Lucy Rita Coady's five children. His family moved frequently as the army moved his father around. But the constant in his life was daily Mass with his mother. He entered the Oblate noviciate Aug. 14, 1955 in Richelieu, Que., and was ordained a priest in 1961 in Ottawa. In 1972 he was awarded two PhDs, one in philosophy at the University of Ottawa and the other in canon law at Saint Paul University, where he was already teaching the subject.

He was dean of the Saint Paul University faculty of canon law from 1972 to 1984, a founder of the Canadian Canon Law Society and an honorary life member of every canon law society in the English-speaking world. From 1985 to 2001 he advised the Vatican as a consultor to the Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts.

There isn't a bishop in Canada who has not sought Morrissey's expertise. As a religious, he became a leading expert in Church law governing religious orders. Catholic hospitals and universities drew up statutes and structured their boards of governors based on Morrisey's advice.

"He has influenced generations of canon lawyers from not only Canada but throughout the world," said Laschuk. "Indeed, several dozen of his previous students have been raised to the episcopacy."