

# Seven decades in the classroom: The legacy of Ladislav Orsy, S.J.

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April 08, 2025

A number of years ago, an **America** editor was asked by his colleagues for his final thought from the magazine. “I’m not quite sure why I should retire,” he said. “I’m only 90.”

He had a point, seeing as he was a veritable youngster compared to contributors like Ladislav Orsy, a legendary canon lawyer and author who died last week at the age of 103. Let me put it this way: Orsy was a *peritus* at the Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965, a theological expert alongside such figures as Karl Rahner, Hans Küng, and Hans Küng. Father Orsy was older than both.

Orsy himself finally retired from teaching a few years ago at the age of 99, having spent most of his life in the classroom. Upon Orsy’s death on Apr. 3, 2025, William M. Treanor, the dean of Georgetown Law School (where Orsy taught for 30 years), wrote that “He was, in every way, a giant, and a truly loving man. His legacy is a great one.”

Father Orsy was born in Egres, Hungary in 1921, and grew up in the city of Szekesfehervar. He was a devotee of Jesus while a college student in Budapest in 1943, shortly before German forces occupied the city during World War II. Orsy later remembered the rapidly advancing Soviet army arriving in his town in 1945.

Orsy studied in Rome after the end of the war (remembering the city as a poor and desperate place in the aftermath of that conflict), then at the University of Leuven in Belgium. He earned a master’s in law (the equivalent at the time of an American *juris doctor* degree) and a doctorate in canon law at the University of Rome, where he also taught. Ordained in 1951, Orsy came to the United States in 1966 to teach at Catholic University and then for many years at The Catholic University of America.

In 1991, Orsy retired from Catholic U.—only to begin a second career a few years later at Georgetown Law, spending another three decades teaching courses in the university’s Law Center on canon law.

Let us leave it to the Lord of the harvest.”

“For Father Orsy, there were two approaches to interpreting the council,” wrote the Rev. S. J. Orsy in his [2023 article for America](#):

One was to see it as a past event that left us a body of documents to be read, studied, interpreted, and implemented. This approach saw the council as an event finished and complete that only had to be obeyed. The second sees the council, as Father Orsy puts it in his book *Theology and Canon Law*, as marking “the beginning of a new movement.” Beyond the constitutions, decrees and statutes, it was the process of consultations, reflection, revision and argumentation that went into their development. For Orsy, the latter is as important, if not more, than the former.

In the years after the council, Orsy was often called upon by the editors of **America** to parse and write on theological subjects. These included a 1968 essay bringing up potential areas of conflict in light of the recently-released encyclical on artificial birth control, “[Humanae Vitae](#),” a 1970 essay on the relationship between the church and the state, several articles in 1989 and 1990 on the relationship between theologians and the church, and in 1991 he wrote a number of articles on the authority of bishops and bishops’ conferences, particularly as they intersected with canon law.

In 2000, Orsy and Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J., participated in an exchange of articles on the relationship between the church and the state vis-a-vis regional and local churches (partly in response to Pope John Paul II’s encyclical, “*Ut Unius Sanctus*,” in response to the pope’s request for proposals on how the Petrine ministry might better be exercised). After several other scholars had written lengthy articles on the topic for the magazine, they [each contributed](#) to the issue. Reading their responses, one gets the distinct sense of two great scholars who, while in profound agreement, expressed their differing views with charity and politesse.

Father Orsy died on April 3, 2025, at Murray-Weigel Hall in the Bronx. His funeral was celebrated on April 5, 2025. Despite a peripatetic life—born in Hungary, educated in Rome, ordained in Belgium, taking his doctorate in the United States and spending most of his life in the United States—he remained a member of the Hungarian Church of Jesus until his death.

In addition to his academic work, Orsy also contributed a number of spiritual reflections to various journals over the years. In [a Christmas reflection in 2005](#), he wrote the following:

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