Champion of religious liberty, human dignity, and personal freedom, John Courtney Murray, SJ, is considered the most noteworthy U.S. theologian of the twentieth century. Though feared by many as too liberal, and silenced by the Vatican for nearly a decade, Murray provided the theological backbone of the Second Vatican Council’s declaration on religious freedom, Dignitatis Humanae (1965).

Murray joined the Society of Jesus at age sixteen and was ordained a priest in 1933. He studied theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, where he concentrated on grace and the Trinity and completed a doctorate in sacred theology in 1937.

Murray joined the faculty of Woodstock College that same year, and in 1941, was named editor of Theological Studies. Murray retained both positions until his death. Concern for religious freedom in civil society led Murray to publish a series of articles in the mid-1940s that caught international attention. As Murray witnessed the deeper integration of Catholics in the United States into the political and economic fabric of the nation, he articulated the need for true religious freedom. “Men of all religions and of no religion,” Murray wrote, “must live together in conditions of justice, peace and civic friendship, under equitable laws that protect the whole range of human rights, notably including the right to religious freedom” (“On Religious Liberty,” America, November 30, 1963: 704).

Although in 1954 the Vatican told Murray to cease writing on religious freedom, his voice was not silenced. In fact, he was considered a valuable expert for several U.S. bishops, whom he encouraged to enter the arena of public debate. Murray believed that society would best function when parties of different beliefs engage in discussion to deepen core moral commitments. After John F. Kennedy’s election as the first Roman Catholic U.S. president, Murray’s contributions to the public forum were celebrated with a cover story in the December 12, 1960, issue of Time.

It was his book We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition, published in 1960, that “solidified Murray’s position as American Catholicism’s leading public intellectual, as the leading Catholic interpreter of the American democratic experiment and commentator on the state of American public life” (Kenneth L. Grasso, “Introduction,” The Catholic Social Science Review, 16 [2011], 68). Murray’s thesis called for the development of a “public philosophy” that would discipline the pluralistic discourse that undergirds the U.S. democratic experiment.

Murray’s crowning achievement began to unfold in 1963, at the second session of the Second Vatican Council. There he served as the primary draftsman of the third and fourth versions of Dignitatis Humanae. Though not a liturgist, Murray certainly delighted in the language of “rights and duties” found in Sacrosanctum Concilium, 14: “The Church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations called for by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people . . . is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.”

With humility, Murray downplayed the groundbreaking nature of Dignitatis Humanae, and thus his contribution to the Council, in the assessment: “Its achievement was simply to bring the Church abreast of the developments that have occurred in the secular world. The fact is the right to religious freedom has already been accepted and affirmed by the common consciousness of mankind” (Quote found in Joslyn Ogden, “Religious Liberty, Vatican II, and John Courtney Murray,” 14). Murray died on August 16, 1967. In Murray “an aristocracy of mind was wedded to a democracy of love,” lauded Walter Burghardt, SJ, in his eulogy for this pioneer of dignity and freedom.