Heralded the “most distinguished ecclesiologist” of the twentieth century by Richard McBrien (Theology Digest, vol. 32 [1985], 203), and labeled a man filled with “pastoral compassion, ecumenical love, and a passion for the truth” by Paul Philibert (U.S. Catholic Historian, vol. 17 [1999], 120), Yves Congar, OP, labored in love for the renewal of the Church.

Congar’s academic vocation began in the 1930s with a personal dedication to the study of the Church, and more precisely, to the project of bettering the life of the Church. At a time when Church identity was synonymous with the hierarchy, he wrote: “[W]e are the face of the church: we are the ones who make it visible; my God, for the sake of your church, make in us a truly living face!” (Quote found in U.S. Catholic Historian, 17 [1999], 68). Thus, one of Congar’s major contributions was the affirmation of an ecclesiology rooted solidly in the understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ.

Critical in Congar’s life was the dilemma of forced confinement. When France declared war on Germany in 1939, he was called into military service. As a prisoner of war from 1940 to 1945, he lamented that he was losing his best years for research and teaching. Simultaneously, he experienced another kind of captivity, namely, that of suspicion and persecution on the part of ecclesial authorities wary of French theological advances. By 1942, one of Congar’s books was placed on the Index, and his Dominican friend and mentor, Marie-Dominique Chenu was removed from his post at Le Saulchoir. Congar’s worldview would continue to be formed by the shackles of physical exile, the condemnation of his writing, and the silencing of his voice.

For Congar, ecclesial renewal was ecumenical in nature. This meant more than a return of those communities estranged from Roman Catholicism; it called for frank dialogue among Christians. Congar envisioned ecumenism as “a theological work done by a theologian to assist the Catholic Church in moving from a vision of the church that was too juridical to a vision of the people of God proceeding under the active inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was published from 1979 to 1980, and his The Word and the Spirit was published in 1984. Here, he clearly articulated what he called a “pneumatological ecclesiology.” He argued that the Church exists as a perpetual epiclesis—a petition for the working of grace: “Every action performed by the ministry calls for an epiclesis” (Congar, I Believe in the Holy Spirit, vol. 3, 271).

Perhaps no other task meant more to Congar than participating in the Second Vatican Council as a peritus. Congar tirelessly served on the Preparatory Theological Commission for the Council, attended its four sessions, and played an indispensable role in the drafting of Lumen Gentium, Dei Verbum, and Gaudium et Spes, as well as several declarations and decrees.

Yves Congar was ninety years old when named a cardinal in 1994. “His elevation to the College of Cardinals,” writes Paul Philibert, “not only recognized his long life of scholarship and his immense contributions to the Church’s theological patrimony and contemporary renewal, but his steadfast loyalty to a Church that had treated him unjustly” (120). Congar died on June 22, 1995, in Paris, prophetic in his enduring hope.