

Richard John Neuhaus, A Mystery No More [Part 2]

[Just as I was getting ready to post ThTh 204, this came through from the Crossings office in St. Louis: "Will Herzfeld. Went to Africa. Shortly after return to USA was found unconscious. Diagnosed with cerebral malaria. Next 24 hours critical. Ask for prayer." We're doing so and ask you to do so too.]

Colleagues, In the April 2002 issue of FIRST THINGS Editor-in-Chief Richard John Neuhaus gives us what the ancients called an "apologia pro vita sua." Roughly translated: "what I did with my life and why I did it." RJN's own title for the article is: "How I Became the Catholic I Was." In last week's Thursday Theology (#203) I sought to interpret his words.

One of you readers, claiming to be a RJN shirt-tail relative, told me: "Don't be too hard on RJN. Remember, after childhood in Canada, he grew up in Texas!" I don't intend to be "hard" on RJN at all. This is not an expose'. ThTh 203 and this 204 portray my own Aha! after reading his apologia, namely, the congruence between the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod's brand of "catholicism" he grew up in (also my own) and the Roman Catholicism where he's now landed. Seems to me that the "catholicism" in both the LCMS and RC of RJN's biography has a common qualitative element. The difference between the two is quantitative. "More" and "fuller" are RJN's own terms for where he now is. The quality of each brand of catholicism was the same.

So what is that quality, that common substance of generic "catholicism," when you take away the adjectives Missouri or Roman? My proposal: It is a specific model of authority and of truth, and then of obedience to that authority and truth.

Authority is top-down. Its first concern is to specify “the whole of truth” for Christian faith and life and then to call for obedience to that truth and authority. The “whole of truth” is the laundry list of truths (plural), and in the catholic blueprint–Missouri or Roman–these truths are linked to oughts: what you ought to believe, how you ought to behave, ought to worship–possibly a few more. That’s the Missouri catholicism I grew up in. That’s today’s Roman version as RJN portrays it.

For ThTh 204 I want to pursue this thesis in RJN’s own review of his life from growing up in the LCMS to joining the Roman church. For some of us who also grew up Missouri, but didn’t swim the Tiber, it was the “Augsburg Aha!” that made the difference, that gave us a third option between those two catholicisms. That Aha! for some of us survivors of Missouri is expressed in Luther’s words: “When I discovered the difference, that God’s law is one thing, and God’s Gospel something else—that was my break-through.” [Tabletalk #5518] There is no reference to any such dramatic break with Missouri (or any qualitative break at all) in RJN’s apologia.

1. Growing up “Missouri.” Even though he was born in Canada, RJN grew up “Missouri.” His father was pastor of the LCMS church in Pembroke, Ontario. From his father he learned the faith. “I was not inclined to doubt what my Dad taught. After all, he had the Bible, Martin Luther, and the St. Louis faculty on his side. And he was indisputably authoritative in manner. Not for nothing during his days at the seminary was he called ‘Pope Neuhaus.’” In his early years RJN was a happy Missourian. He tells of those years in remembered conversation with Roman Catholic playmates across the street, “my best friends . . . the Spooner brothers.” There was agreement on “grace” and RJN thought the “grace ALONE” in his Lutheran catechism was not worth arguing about. “We both

knew we had a Magisterium" [=official authority for deciding the truth]—for the Spooner boys the Pope, for RJN the St. Louis Seminary faculty. Then comes this telling line: "We both knew that we were to keep the commandments and try to please God in all we did."

I too grew up thinking that was the essence of the faith. Only later did I get "saved" from that legalism to faith in the Gospel. Nowhere in the rest of his article does RJN register any later Aha! about the false gospel in that common commitment he shared with his RC pals.

When it came to "where we differed, we were right and they were wrong." Although some of those differences were "very confusing, they didn't bear too much thinking about." He concludes his childhood retrospective with this: "I would in time come to understand that the question is that of authority, and it must be thought about very carefully indeed."

Some comments about the "Augsburg Aha!" and authority.

Another of you readers urged me not to be so hard on "authority," RJN's central concern. You told me: "I've had a few ahas in my life. One of them centered on authority. I resented it and almost always reacted negatively to it. Then one day I recognized that authority has its origin in author and I liked authors. From there I moved to the question, 'Who authors me? Who writes my story? To whom do I belong?' The answer is, 'He who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man, etc.'

I write because I value the words gospel and promise. I also value authority. It's a good word. And it's a word

that makes it possible frequently to get to the cutting issues of life. It makes the gospel a saving authority. It rescues us from ourselves and sets us into the kingdom and under the King."

Sounds good. But that's only half of it. There is authority A and authority B. So says Jesus, most frequently in the Gospel of Matthew: Herodian authority and Davidic authority. Authority "over," and authority "under." These are not two different ways of exercising the same sort of authority—one overt and oppressive, the other nice-guy and subtle. But all of the Herodian types are authority "over"—even if I'm "nice guy"—where I'm in charge and you're there to obey me.

Christ's kind is "authority under," spelled out in the classic Matt. 20 text. He stands in the underling position—slave and servant of all—and puts us in the "over" location so that he serves us, upholds us, finally "giving his life a ransom" for us all. Yes, he's in charge, but not from on top. It's a different sort of authority from Herod's; the colleague cited above was talking about this different one. Yet Herodian authority exists—even as God-authorized and thus valid in the old creation. But it also invades the church, Christ's new creation, despite his caveat: "Not so among you." Recall the LCMS war in the 1970s, a battle about which authority was valid in the church.

All the authority references in RJN's apologia sound like "authority over" items. In his words: "Truth commands, and authority has to do with the authorship, the origins, of commanding truth. By what authority? By whose authority? There are no more important questions for the right ordering of our lives and ministries. Otherwise, in

our preaching, teaching, and entire ministry we are just making it up as we go along, and, by acting in God's name, taking His name in vain."

For RJN the only alternative to "command authority" is "making up as we go along," and subsequently taking God's name in vain. He seems not to know the Gospel's "authority under" as another option. "Command" authority calls for command-obedience: "here's what to believe, how to live, how to worship; now go and do so." In Melanchthon's language at Augsburg the key verb of command authority is "require." By contrast the key verb of suffering servant authority is "offer," as in "to give his life a ransom, etc." The sort of "obedience" fitting for an offer is not "do what you were told to do," since an "offer" is no command at all. "Obedience" to a gift, to an offer, is to trust the giver and hang on to what's offered. Very different authority, very different obedience.

In my LCMS childhood I learned church authority to be what Matthew designates as the Herodian kind. So-and-so is in charge, and here's what you're supposed to do, believe, practice, think. RJN too grew up under that sort of authority in his LCMS years. In moving to Rome he did not escape the model. Instead he opted for a bigger and better authority, more and fuller—but still the Herodian kind.

Bigger and better Herodian authority does not lead to Davidic "authority under," the Gospel's upside-down authority, the authority invoked by those who cry: "Son of David, have mercy on me." What makes Jesus authoritative is not his clout, nor his credentials—all the way back to Moses, to Abraham, to Adam—but the

concrete Davidic-mercy he offers. If you still desire credentials for this, then they are his cross and resurrection—given to and for us.

Again RJN: “From my boyhood intuitions as an ecclesial Christian, it seemed self-evident that, if God intended to reveal any definite truths for the benefit of humankind, and if Jesus intended a continuing community of discipleship, then some reliable means would be provided for the preservation and transmission of such truths through the centuries. Catholics believe that God did provide such reliable means by giving the apostles and their successors, the bishops, authority to teach in His name and by promising to be with them forever.”

Summa: no extrinsic “authority over,” even if it were credentialed all the way back to Peter, can verify, can “authorize,” the Gospel. No Pope, nor any St. Louis seminary faculty either. Either the Gospel, when offered, convinces you of its validity “for you” on its own authority, the “under” authority of the suffering servant, or nothing will. No command authority can make it more credible. Jesus jolts us with those words in Matthew about command authority: “It shall not be so among you.” Command authority is contra gospel. So said the original Augsburg confessors. The church’s authority is a consequence of the Gospel’s “authority under.” It is not vice versa. RJN seems not to have seen or heard this in his study of the Lutheran Confessions.

2. Which Brings us to RJN’s memories of his seminary days. After a born-again experience in his high school years [was that in Texas?] and subsequent “anguished uncertainty” in following that path, he returned to his Lutheran home base and found what he longed for when he

entered Concordia Seminary, St. Louis: "the synthesis of piety, clear reason and ecclesial authority in the person and teaching of Professor Arthur Carl Piepkorn."

He continues: "Piepkorn was a man of disciplined prayer and profound erudition, and was deeply engaged in the liturgical renewal and the beginnings of Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue. At St. Louis he taught the Lutheran confessional writings of the sixteenth century, which he insistently called 'the symbolical books of the Church of the Augsburg Confession.' . . . They represented a way of being catholic as the heirs of a Reformation that was intended to be a movement of reform within and for the one Church of Christ.

". . . The accent was on continuity, not discontinuity. Perhaps the sixteenth century break was necessary—although that was never emphasized—but certainly the Lutheran Reformation. . . had no delusions about being a new beginning, a so-called rediscovery of the gospel. . . . Lutheranism was not a new beginning but another chapter in the history of the one Church. The Church is not a theological school of thought, or a society formed by allegiance to theological formulas—not even formulas such as 'justification by faith'. . . . The goal was to fulfill the promise of the Lutheran Reformation by bringing its gifts into full communion with the Great Tradition that is most fully and rightly ordered through time in the Roman Catholic Church.

"In this understanding, the conclusion of the Augsburg Confession of 1530 was taken to be normative. There the signers declare: 'Only those things have been recounted which it seemed necessary to say in order that it may be understood that nothing has been received among us, in doctrine or in ceremonies, that is contrary to Scripture

or to the church catholic.'

"For us Piepkornians, everything was to be held accountable to that claim . . . of the Augsburg Confession to have received nothing contrary to Scripture or to the Catholic Church."

So much for RJN's take on the Augsburg Confession. If he had any Augsburg Aha!, it was this: The AC and the RC are simpatico. Justification by faith, a "formula," was no Aha! for him. Possibly it was a truth to be believed, but nothing that called for his "allegiance." [Footnote. Some years long ago I mentored a Roman priest who had crossed the Tiber in the other direction. On his way to a Lutheran pastorate he joined me with a few others to study the Lutheran confessions. When we got to the "faith alone" of justification, he was near ecstasy—talk about an Augsburg Aha!—and he could not comprehend why the "old" Lutherans in the class signalled no such euphoria.] Was there any Aha! about "faith alone" for RJN in the AC? Seems not. On the contrary, he says it is a "delusion" to see the AC as affirming a "rediscovery of the gospel."

I too had Piepkorn at the sem for the Lutheran Confessions. I graduated from the St. Louis seminary the year before RJN entered. Regardless of Piepkorn's personal opinion about the claim, he made it perfectly clear to our class that the Augsburg Confessors were indeed affirming an Aha! about the Gospel that they had not known when they were good Roman Catholics. But Piepkorn had his own angle on the Luth. Confessions. When 20 years later I became his colleague in the Department of Systematic Theology at St. Louis, I soon learned that there were three ways that the Lutheran confessions were taught at Concordia Seminary in the early 1970s. Some

taught the Luth. Conf. using 17th century Lutheran Orthodoxy as their set of lenses. Some used Luther's law-gospel "breakthrough" as their hermeneutic for the confessions. Piepkorn did neither. He read the confessions canonically. They were the canon for what was Lutheran and what was not. More than once in staff meetings he would tweak us law/gospel colleagues by saying that our hermeneutic was "one" option, but not the only one, for confessional Lutherans.

RJN: "But the Lutheran chapter in the history of the Church did occasion schism.... In my judgment, the division was tragic but not necessary. There was and is no truth that requires division from the pillar and bulwark of truth."

Here's RJN's other key word, truth. Notice the notion of truth here. There are many individual truths that make up "the whole of truth" for Christian faith. No "one" of the many—even justification by faith alone—ever "requires division from the pillar and bulwark of truth," viz., the authoritative church of Rome. Truth is a collection of truths. The better the guarantor, the better access we have to "the whole of truth." If the church should ever propose a truth that is actually false, as the Augsburgers said about scholastic teaching on salvation, RJN counsels: just wait. You may not be able to trust the "false" truth, but you can trust the "pillar and bulwark of truth" to eventually get it right. Not so, said the Augsburgers: You can't tell a dying man to wait until the church decides if semi-pelagianism or faith-in-Christ alone is what he may hang his heart on.

When the Reformers talk about "the truth of the Gospel," this isn't one truth among many. It's not a "true

statement" at all. It's the divine offer, a promise to be trusted: God being faithful to his promise in the crucified and risen Christ, and saying "It's for you." "The whole of truth" IS the Gospel. The Augsburg Confessors found this made perfectly clear already in the prologue of the Gospel of St. John (RJN's patron saint, he says!). "The law [what to believe, how to behave, how to worship] was given through Moses; grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." John himself spells out the life-and-death difference between Moses and Christ throughout his Gospel. And at the end when Pilate asks Jesus: What is truth? he's asking a Moses-question. He doesn't have a clue about the "truth of the Gospel," the Good News standing right in front of him.

Standing behind these understandings of truth and authority in RJN's apologia is his value judgment that the unity of the church, namely, the unity of the Roman church, takes precedence over the truth of the Gospel. The Augsburgers also wrestled with this and finally confessed the opposite: The unity of the church is subordinate to the truth of the Gospel. The Gospel is the guarantor for the church's unity, not vice versa. Just plain false is RJN's portraying the Reformers as the ones who split from the church. Who excommunicated whom? Just who are the sectarians? Jaroslav Pelikan—whom RJN likes to quote—taught us "back at the sem" in the fifties—that with the 19th century decree on papal infallibility (which RJN also likes) "the Roman church became a sect. For there was no longer any structural possibility within the church for calling the Bishop of Rome to account, for putting the pontiff under the Gospel's own discipline."

3. As for the days since the seminary 40 years ago—"And so it was that for thirty years as a Lutheran pastor [LCMS,

AELC (I think) and finally ELCA], thinker, and writer..., I worked for what I incessantly called 'the healing of the breach of the sixteenth century between Rome and the Reformation.' For a long time there seemed to be believable, albeit painfully slow, movement toward that goal." Now and then there were hopeful signs, but "these hopeful signs . . . were not to last." So in 1990 he swam the Tiber.

But he himself says it was a short swim. In his move from "St. John's Lutheran Church in Pembroke, Ontario . . . to be received into full communion by John Cardinal O'Connor in his residence chapel of St. John the Evangelist, . . . the continuities are ever so much more striking than the discontinuities." No bridge-burning event, just greater fullness. "My communion with Christ's Church is now the fuller." "I became a Catholic in order to be more fully what I was and who I was as a Lutheran." In a flashback to childhood he says; "I am sure that I as a boy thought – not very seriously, certainly not obsessively – but I thought about being a Catholic. It seemed that, of all the good things we had, they had more. Catholicism was more." In O'Connor's chapel his "boyhood intuitions" were finally "full"filled. He received the "more" he'd been longing for.

"How I Became the Catholic I Was" = how I moved from LCMS catholicism to the "more" of Roman catholicism. Common at both ends of RJN's journey is a notion of truth, authority and obedience, none of them, so far as I can detect, grounded in THE Gospel. For RJN the Augsburg Aha! was not on his itinerary–neither at the beginning, nor in the middle, nor at the end.

Seems to me that the same generic catholicism–concerning truth,

authority and obedience—is regnant, not only officially in Rome, but also de facto in many Christian denominations today, all across the spectrum from conservative to liberal, USA Lutheranism (LCMS and ELCA) included. One thing's needful, an Augsburg Aha! via whatever means the Spirit might offer it to us.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder