

Richard John Neuhaus, A Mystery No More

Colleagues,

Richard John Neuhaus [hereafter RJN] has been a conundrum—especially so to many of his fellow Lutherans in North America when he “swam the Tiber” twelve years ago and became a Roman Catholic. But he has unscrambled the puzzle for the perplexed in the lead article of “his” journal FIRST THINGS, April 2002 [also available at its website, www.firstthings.com]. Its title: “How I Became the Catholic I Was.”

Growing up in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod [LCMS] he already was an “ecclesial Christian,” he says. And what does that mean? “For the ecclesial Christian, faith in Christ and faith in the Church are not two acts of faith but one.” Already in the LCMS, as he now looks back, he sees “a Christian of lower-case catholic sensibilities being led, step by step, to upper-case Catholic allegiance.” So in retrospect his move to Rome was no quantum leap. From the riverbank on which he stood the Tiber was not very wide. His article makes that perfectly clear.

But his article reveals even more than what he seeks to clarify, I suspect. Namely, aspects of the before and after that he himself may not yet have noticed. My thesis is: RJN grew up in a LCMS that was itself “Roman” catholic, but not “Augsburg” catholic, namely, grounded in the catholicism of the Augsburg Confession. I know, for I grew up in the same LCMS that RJN did.

Here’s one clue: word count. In his essay we find “truth” (23 times), “authority” (15), “gospel” (2), “promise” (5). Central to his growing up in Missouri and his move to Rome are truth and

authority. Though the LCMS then and now shakes a scolding finger at Rome, Missouri is “Roman” in its agenda. It’s all about truth and the authority to back up that truth. Gospel and promise are, of course, part of the truth, but the BIG question is “the whole of truth,” RJN’s favored phrase, and finding an infallible authority to back it up. Swimming the Tiber for RJN was a short swim. He only had to paddle from an inadequate “papal” authority to a bigger one that finally covered all the bases.

Granted, word counts are not compelling arguments. But they are pointers. Especially so when you see how the words are used—which terms are overarching, which subordinate. The words that I hoped to find overarching of the four listed above—as you readers can guess—are gospel and promise. But they are scarce. Yet just because they are scarce in RJN’s rhetoric wouldn’t mean they are not valued. Yet note how they are valued. Here are the two Gospel references: “No one knows the Gospel except from the church” and “certainly the Lutheran Reformation . . . had no delusions about being a new beginning, a so-called rediscovery of the gospel.” That’s all we get about Gospel in becoming the Catholic I was.

The first reference subordinates gospel to church, to the church’s authority for what the gospel is. The authority-holder is superior, gospel beneath it. The second is a historical judgment about the Reformation, even “certainly” [RJN is seldom short onchutzpah]. It might be correct, yet it contradicts Luther’s own words. “When I discovered the distinction that the law is one thing, and the Gospel something else—that was my break-through.” [Tabletalk #5518] You wonder whom to believe.

More important is that we never learn from RJN what this gospel is. Clearly not in these two mentionings of the term, and not elsewhere in what he says. Apparently in “becoming the catholic I always was,” there was no Gospel “Aha!” ever along the way.

For those of us who also grew up in the LCMS—and did have such an “aha” about the Gospel somewhere along the way—that seems strange. But if his move out of Missouri into Rome—with a few stopping points in between—was itself a seamless robe, as he says, we’ll have to believe him. And it makes sense. If the Christian truth is seen as what to believe, how to behave, how to pray—all of them “ought” items—then the question is inescapable: Says who? The authority issue is an ultimate concern. So we were taught in the LCMS where RJN (and I too) grew up. So says Rome today. The move from the LCMS’s Bible authority (interpreted correctly by “the St. Louis Seminary faculty,” as RJN often says) to the Roman magisterium (all bases covered and connection to Peter as validation) is a short swim. No Olympic gold for such a feat.

And the key Reformation term “promise” gets brought in under authority too. In the rhetoric of the Lutheran Reformers gospel and promise are synonyms. What makes gospel “good” and “new” is that it is God’s promise of mercy in the crucified & risen Jesus. The promising Christ fulfills God’s ancient promise to the Hebrews and offers an ongoing promise for the upbeat futures of those who trust it. So say the Reformers, claiming that the scriptures say nothing else than that.

RJN’s five references to promise never touch such “good and new” substance. Here are the instances:

1. “The goal [for Lutheran Christians is] 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.” Is that about authority or what? And the real “promise” central to the Lutheran Reformation gets bypassed.
2. “[T]he Church through time and the contemporary Church

universal, to which Christ PROMISED the Spirit's guidance," can be trusted to proclaim the truth.

3. "Infallibility . . . is a word that frightens many, but I don't think it should. It means that the Church is indefectible, that we have God's PROMISE that He will never allow the Church to definitively defect from the truth, to fall into apostasy. . . . The Holy Spirit will preserve the Church against using its full authority to require its members to assent to what is false. Without that assurance, the truth of revelation would not be preserved in recognizable form. . . . To obey the truth we must be able to recognize the truth."
4. When there is dispute within the church "you wait, in firm communion with the Catholic Church and in firm confidence that the Holy Spirit will, as PROMISED, clarify the matter in due course. The point is that apostolic doctrine cannot be maintained over time without apostolic ministry, meaning ministry that is both apostolic in its origins and apostolic in its governing authority."
5. "Along the way to [the church's] eschatological fullness—which is a frequently jagged, confusing, and conflicted way—it is PROMISED to the Church that she will not, she will not irretrievably, lose the way."

Comment: never does "promise" point to the Good News of a crucified and risen Messiah. The final four references are to Christ's assurance that he will not desert his church. Yes, that's genuine NT theology But note what RJN does with that good-news word: Christ will never desert the Church of Rome. Therefore (a BIG therefore) you can trust the ROMAN Church never to "use its full authority to require its members to assent to what is false." Instead the Church of Rome has "full authority" to "recognize the truth" and to call us "to obey the truth."

As logic that's a patent non sequitur. Yet even more chilling is

the complete absence of any Gospel-grounding (the non-negotiable of Augsburg catholicism) for what the truth is and also for what constitutes the church's authority. But that is so not only in the Roman Catholicism to which RJN moved, it was the stage setting of the LCMS where he grew up. And where I grew up too. The issue is believing the truth. So we were taught. That is the center of faith. Faith is "assent" to the truth. Yes, trust is also in the mix. But specifically trusting the crucified and risen Messiah as God's promise to us was not central to what faith was all about. Nor is it central in the LCMS childhood RJN describes in considerable detail. Salvation comes by faith, i.e., by believing the truth. Those who believe the full truth (which we in Missouri knew we had) were assured of salvation. Those who did not (i.e., all other denominations—and folks from other religions for sure) were not saved. Our authority was the Bible, which told us all the truths to be believed. Our synodical catechism showed us what these truths were. We believed them—or tried as hard as we could to believe them—and could be (almost) confident of heaven.

The work of Christ was one of the truths to be believed—surely the most important one—but one among many even if it were *primum inter pares*.

Has RJN really left Missouri? I don't think so. How I became the Catholic I Was = How I found a bigger and better LCMS. Or less snippy: How I became the ROMAN Catholic I already was, but never an AUGSBURG Catholic.

[Next time, d.v., I want to pursue this thesis in RJN's own review of his LCMS childhood, his student years at Concordia Seminary (St. Louis) in the late 1950s, his pastorates in Missouri and the ELCA, and his present assessment of the Roman church. I hear some of you asking: Why continue this probe? One reason for doing so is that RJN's ecclesial history is the

ecclesial history of many of us—at least up to the shores of the Tiber. I want to argue that it's not wise to plunge into that water once you have had an "Augsburg Aha!" That seems not to have happened to RJN. Nor does he seem to notice that the Augsburg Aha is what got the original Augsburg Confessors exiled beyond the Tiber—not by their choice, but by the anathema of the "indefectible" church of Rome. Once you've had the Aha, swimming back across the Tiber has little attraction. But if you've never had the Aha, the siren call from the other side can mesmerize. More next time.]

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder