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The Coming Home Network International Membership Letter

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February 2003

Greetings Friends and Members of The Coming Home Network:

Before Marilyn and I began our journey to the Catholic Church, we knew of few Protestant ministers who had left their pastorates to become Catholic. We knew of the Hahns, whose witness eventually played a seminal role in our conversion, but really no one else.



Then as we found ourselves walking the journey, reading, praying, and discovering the truths that in time would become so irresistibly compelling, clergy converts began to appear everywhere: the Rylands, Woods, Parkers, Howards, and of course classic converts like Newman and Knox. One morning in 1991, for example, when I was sitting in on one of Scott Hahn's lectures, I glanced to my left and saw a man that looked too familiar. After class, we both rushed to each other, for he too had recognized me. It was Paul Key, a fellow Presbyterian pastor also on the journey—and neither one of us had a clue that the other was also leaning toward Rome.

Finally after Marilyn and I entered the Church in December, 1992, the flood of names of other clergy converts or inquirers became overwhelming, and it was out of this apparent movement of the Holy Spirit that the idea for a support group, for a "Network," and what would eventually be called *The Coming Home Network International* arose. I described it this way in our first newsletter:

For my part, the idea for this type of fellowship came about as the result of my own struggles along the faith journey from ordained Protestant ministry to the Catholic Church. I felt like I was making my way along a scarcely walked path, only to be pleasantly surprised to discover the great number of others also being called by God to make similar journeys. It is like driving a long distance to a meeting only to find upon arrival that dozens of others from your same town had also made the same journey, each driving alone, oblivious to the others. We could have car-pooled! We could have chartered a bus and fellowshipped along the way!

This was why the *CHNetwork* began, "...to serve as the charter bus, or at least the car pool, so that you and I don't have to face these challenges alone."

Recognizing the great efforts of Catholic evangelistic and apologetic apostolates, like Catholic Answers, we identified the specific charism of the *CHNetwork* as not so much evangelistic

but supportive. Our central efforts are not focused on converting Protestant clergy to the Church—though we believe this is the Call of the Church in her desire for full unity—but in standing beside those who contact us because the Holy Spirit has already opened their hearts to the Church. Through no direct effort of our own, the Spirit continues to draw hearts toward home: last year alone we were contacted by 120 new Protestant clergymen on the journey, and already in the first month of 2003, we have been contacted by several more!

As we begin this tenth year of our work, may I thank you for all you've done for our organization. Yes, it is trite but oh so true: without your belief in our work, your prayers, and of course your continual sacrificial support, the *CHNetwork* would not exist. As long as the Holy Spirit continues to bring Protestant clergy and laity to us, I pray that we can continue to provide whatever support they need.

I think the following quote from the Prologue of Fr. Ronald Knox' *A Spiritual*

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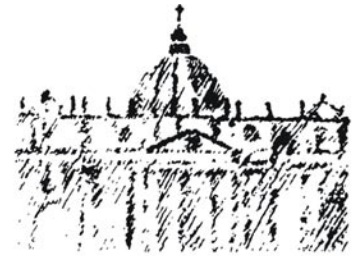
Aeneid confirms why we have called our work together the *Coming Home Network*:

I used once to define "home" as "a place where you can put your feet on the mantelpiece," and I am not sure it is a bad description. That is the sense in which, especially, I felt that I had "come home." Anglicanism (or some part of it) had, like a kind hostess, invited me to "make myself at home," it was "Liberty Hall" ... [but] it was not till I became a Catholic that I became conscious of my former

homelessness, my exile from the place that was my own... It was simply that I now found ease and naturalness, and stretched myself like a man who has been sitting in a cramped position.

May the Lord continue to guide and bless our work together—
"Helping 'em home."

Marcus C. Grodi
President,
The Coming Home Network



A CHN Discussion Group Member's Conversion From Buddhist to Catholic

For about five years I studied and learned much regarding Tibetan Buddhism. I avidly read Sogyal Rinpoche, along with other forms of Buddhist literature, and attended special "services" on occasion. The idea of being a "servant of peace" was what drew me to it in the first place. I practiced daily meditations, used my mala (a form of prayer beads), and practiced patience (as much as I could).

But I was raised Lutheran (Missouri Synod) and attended church every Sunday as a child. I was baptized and confirmed the same, was very active as a teen in the youth group in our church and generally had a good experiences as a child. Ah, but then I became a *teenager*. Things kind of went down hill from there in my late teens, and for many years after that. But after the birth of my second child in my mid-twenties, I fell head first into fundamentalism, and thought that this was the answer. I was "in love" with Jesus. I remember this very clearly. But again, something happened along the way. My marriage fell apart, and my husband used the church as a battering ram against me. (He was not "saved" in the fundamentalist sense, nor did he have any inclination to attend services or pray with me and the kids.) I even home schooled all of my three kids! Unfortunately, the church I was attending at the time did not help me deal with my concerns regarding my failing marriage, they only encouraged me to go to "Christian counseling", which I did...alone as my husband would not go with me! Anyway, for years after this, I was (and I realize this to my shame now) mad at God, the church, and all things religious. Fundamentalism lost its appeal, as I could never get a straight answer about anything. I "felt" empty and very alone in my soul, not really finding peace or joy. So I left the church

proper and went my own way for a very long time.

By the time I was 44, I started practicing Buddhism. Even though I considered myself a Buddhist, I could never get the idea of God or Jesus out of my mind. I tried to rationalize the idea that there is no God, that there is "no-thing". But this too was impossible. So, I never mentioned this to my Buddhist teacher/instructor. It was easy to hide, I just never brought it up!

This went on for five years. I then became uneasy with Buddhism. The thought kept coming into my heart that Jesus was alive, and very much a part of this universe. My mother (a staunch Christian who was raised Lutheran herself in Germany, but never preaches, per se) always told me that if God has his hand on you, he will bring you back, no matter what you do or where you go. I believe this is true in my case, but I never thought I would be "brought" to the Catholic church!!

A few months ago, I caught Mother Angelica on EWTN. I was truly amazed at the love she demonstrated for Jesus. That is what "peaked" my interest. I continued watching different programs on EWTN and was floored when I heard actual converts from Protestantism relating their experiences!! But their love of Jesus...WOW. Here is a living faith, a true expression of our love for God and his love for us. I cannot speak in words what I am trying to say. The fullness of it!! The majesty of it all!! The calling for individual sacrifice... the required obedience to the original teachings of the Church... so much more... I could go on and on.

So, I started reading a little here and there. I found a Catholic bookstore nearby and have to watch my

pocketbook so that I don't overspend.

I know where I belong, as the Lord is calling. But I never in a million years thought it would be to the Catholic Church. I was never taught that the Catholic Church was a cult, but being raised Lutheran, there were a couple of things I still have to struggle with. But it is not hard as I keep praying for guidance and the Lord always comes through, as does the Blessed Mother.

Yes, it is the love I have seen in other Catholics which drew me in like a beacon. My second husband was raised Catholic but was never a "practicing" Catholic. He knows what I am doing, though, and has never tried to prevent me from learning, or given me a hard time about it. I thank God for him every day. I think he appreciates my wanting to learn more.

I have not yet told my mother about my conversion. I am praying for all on the CHN discussion list who have expressed their pain and anguish dealing with Protestant relatives, including husbands and wives.

Well, that is my story. The love of Christ which is so apparent on this email list astounds me. Again, it is the love for our Lord seen in Catholics which has drawn me back to our Blessed Lord. You see? It works!! Keep loving patiently, each other and our Lord. This is how we bring lost souls to back to God. Others see our love, and they just might want this too!! I did not mean for this to get "yucky or syrupy", but so be it. Thanks to all for your prayers and answers to my questions. I am glad that you are there, glad we can share our innermost thoughts and deepest problems with each other to pray over.

In Christ, Margot

How I Became the Catholic I Was

Fr. Richard John Neuhaus

This is more a story than an argument. It is in some ways a very personal story, and yet not without broader implications. It is just possible that some may discern in the story suggestions of an argument, even an argument about the nature of Lutheranism, and of Protestantism more generally.

When in 1990 I was received by the late John Cardinal O'Connor into full communion with the Catholic Church—on September 8, the Nativity of Our Lady—I issued a short statement in response to the question *Why*. With Lutheran friends especially in mind, I said, “To those of you with whom I have traveled in the past, know that we travel together still. In the mystery of Christ and his Church nothing is lost, and the broken will be mended. If, as I am persuaded, my communion with Christ’s Church is now the fuller, then it follows that my unity with all who are in Christ is now the stronger. We travel together still.”

When Cardinal Newman was asked at a dinner party why he became a Catholic, he responded that it was not the kind of thing that can be properly explained between soup and the fish course. When asked the same question, and of course one is asked it with great frequency, I usually refer to Newman’s response. But then I add what I call the short answer, which is simply this: I became a Catholic in order to be more fully what I was and who I was as a Lutheran. The story that follows may shed some light on that short answer.

In the statement of September 8, 1990, I also said:

I cannot express adequately my gratitude for all the goodness I have



known in the Lutheran communion. There I was baptized, there I learned my prayers, there I was introduced to Scripture and creed, there I was nurtured by Christ on Christ, there I came to know the utterly gratuitous love of God by which we live astonished. For my theological formation, for friendships beyond numbering, for great battles fought, for mutual consolations in defeat, for companionship in ministry—for all this I give thanks. . . . As for my thirty years as a Lutheran pastor, there is nothing in that ministry that I would repudiate, except my many sins and shortcomings. My becoming a priest in the Roman Catholic Church will be the completion and

right ordering of what was begun all those years ago. Nothing that is good is rejected, all is fulfilled.

Begin at St. John’s Lutheran Church in the Ottawa Valley of Canada. To be brought up a Lutheran, at least a Missouri Synod Lutheran, at least there and at least then, was to know oneself as an ecclesial Christian. Of course I did not put it that way as a young boy, nor was it put that way to me, but I would later see what had happened. An ecclesial Christian is one who understands with mind and heart, and even feels with his fingertips, that Christ and his Church, head and body, are inseparable. For the ecclesial Christian, the act of faith in Christ and the act of faith in the Church are not two acts of faith but one. In the words of the third century St. Cyprian, martyr bishop of Carthage, “He who would have God as his Father must have the Church as his mother.” In an important sense, every Christian, even the most individualistic, is an ecclesial Christian, since no one knows the gospel except from the Church. *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*—no salvation outside the Church—applies to all. For some, that truth is incidental; for the ecclesial Christian it is constitutive, it is at the very core, of faith and life.

In my Missouri Synod childhood there were seemingly little things that made a big difference. Some would call them

“nontheological factors,” but I see now that they were fraught with theological significance. Across the street from the parsonage of St. John’s was an evangelical Protestant church. Also across the street lived my best friends, the Spooner brothers, who with their devoutly Catholic family attended St. Columkil’s Cathedral. I am sure it was unarticulated but self-evident to me by the time I was five years old that St. John’s and the cathedral had more in common than either had with the evangelical chapel. For one immeasurably momentous thing, our churches baptized babies. Then too, our being saved was something that God did through His Church; it was a given, a gift. It did not depend—as it did for Dougy Cahill, our evangelical friend—upon feelings or spiritual experience. It depended upon grace bestowed through things done.

Unlike the Spooner boys, I was in catechism class taught to speak of *sola gratia*, and was told that the truth in that phrase divided us from the Catholics, but, as best I can remember, I was much more impressed by the *gratia* and disinclined to pick a fight over the *sola*. We both knew that we were to keep the commandments and try to please God in all that we did. The distinction supposedly was that I, as a Lutheran, tried to be good in gratitude for being saved, while Catholics tried to be good in order to be saved. I don’t recall ever discussing this with the Spooner boys, but I expect we would have thought it a distinction without much of a difference. We knew we were baptized children of God for whom Christ died, and that it was a very bad thing to get on God’s wrong side. In catechism class I was told that they, as Catholics, were more afraid of God’s punishment than I, who was sure of forgiveness, but I never noticed that to be the case.

Don’t get me wrong. I was not theologically precocious at age five, or even ten. I was not even especially devout. I really didn’t like having to go to church. But I am looking back now, trying to understand the formation of an ecclesial Christian—a Christian of lower-case catholic sensibilities who would, step by step, be led to upper-case Catholic allegiance. There were other seemingly little things. St. John’s and the other Lutheran churches I knew had a high altar. As did the cathedral. With candles. Also important, there was not a bare cross but a crucifix. And a communion rail at which we knelt and received what we were taught was really and truly and without any equivocation

Then too, although in catechism class I heard about *sola scriptura*, we both knew we had a Magisterium, although I’m sure I never heard the term.

the Body and Blood of Christ. As were the Spooner boys taught, and as we both said we believed although we agreed that we sure couldn’t figure it out. And we had catechisms to memorize that were almost identical in format and questions, although not always in answers. And everybody knew that the way to tell the difference between Catholic and Lutheran churches and all the others is that Catholics and Lutherans put a cross on top of their steeples instead of a weather vane or nothing at all.

Then too, although in catechism class I heard about *sola scriptura*, we both knew we had a Magisterium, although I’m sure I never heard the term. When it came to settling a question in dispute, they had the pope—and we had the faculty of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. It was perfectly natural to ask the question, “What’s our position on this or that?” The “our” in the question self-evidently referred to the Missouri Synod, and the answer was commonly given by reference to an article in the synod’s

official publication, *The Lutheran Witness*, usually written, or so it seemed, by Dr. Theodore Graebner. Why the Spooners went to one church and we to another seemed obvious enough; they were Catholics and we were Lutherans. They were taught that they belonged to the “one true Church” and I was taught that I belonged to the Missouri Synod and all those who are in doctrinal agreement with the Missouri Synod, which community made up “the true visible Church on earth.” So, between their ecclesiological claim and ours, it seemed pretty much a toss-up. They were taught that, despite my not belonging to the one true Church, I could be saved by virtue of “invincible ignorance.” I was taught that, despite their not belonging to the true visible Church on earth, they could be saved by—in the delicious phrase of Francis Pieper, Missouri’s chief dogmatician—“felicitous inconsistency.”

I doubt if ever for a moment the Spooner boys thought that maybe they should be Lutheran. 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. Then too, I knew where all those good things we had came from. They came from the Church that had more. Much later I would hear the schism of the sixteenth century described as, in the fine phrase of Jaroslav Pelikan, a “tragic necessity.” I thought, then and now, that the tragedy was much more believable than the necessity. But in my boyhood, the division did not seem tragic. It was just the way things were. I do not recall anything that could aptly be described as anti-Catholicism. My father’s deer hunting buddy was a Catholic priest, and deer hunting, for my Dad, was something very close to *communicatio in*

sacris. In the Missouri Synod of those days, praying with Catholics—or anyone else with whom we were not in complete doctrinal agreement—was condemned as “unionism.” The rules didn’t say anything about the deep communion of deer hunting.

Of course, we kids went to different schools; they to the “separate” (meaning Catholic) school and we to the “public” (meaning Protestant) school. Sometimes they would walk home on one side of the street and shout, “Catholic, Catholic ring the bell / Protestant, Protestant go to hell.” To which we on the other side of the street reciprocated by reversing the jingle. It was all in good fun, much like a school cheer. I don’t think for a moment that either of us thought it had any reference to the other’s eternal destiny. It is just the way things were. There were other differences. Tommy and Eddie went to confession, and I was curious about that. At St. John’s Lutheran, on Saturday evenings before “communion Sunday,” people came to “announce” for communion, a pale ritual trace of what had once been confession, utterly devoid of any sense of sacramental mystery. It was a simple matter of writing down their names in the “communion book,” and, if my Dad wasn’t there to do it, it was done by my Mother or one of my older siblings.

And there was this: St. Columkil’s had a bishop, put there, it was said, by the pope in Rome. St. John’s had, well, my Dad, put there, as he told the story, by his seminary classmate who got him the call. To be sure it was, in Missouri parlance, a “divine call,” but I wonder now if as a child I intuited that there was, between Bishop Smith and my Dad, some qualitative difference of ecclesial authority. Not that I was 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 seminary was he called “Pope Neuhaus.” But this young boy sensed, although he could not say just how, that between the

Bishop of Pembroke and the pastor of St. John’s Lutheran Church in Pembroke, there was a qualitative difference of office.

It was not a matter of life-or-death urgency. Live and let live was the order of the day. Where we differed, we were right and they were wrong. In disagreeing with Catholics, everybody on our side—what was vaguely described as the Protestant side—was agreed. But then, we Lutherans disagreed with many Protestants and took the Catholic side when it came to, for instance, baptizing babies and knowing that Jesus is really and truly and without equivocation present in the Holy Communion. It was all very confusing, and didn’t bear too much thinking about. I would in time come to understand that the question is that of authority, and it must be thought



about very carefully indeed.

I will return to the question of authority, but for now I simply underscore the ways in which being brought up a Missouri Lutheran—at least then and at least there—produced an ecclesial Christian. One might also speak of a sacramental Christian or an incarnational Christian,

but, whatever the terminology, the deepest-down conviction, the most irrepressible sensibility, is that of the touchability, the visibility, the palpability of what we might call “the Christian thing.” To use the language of old eucharistic controversies, *finitum capax infiniti*—the finite is capable of the infinite. Put differently, there is no access to the infinite except through the finite. Or yet again, God’s investment in the finite can be trusted infinitely. Although Lutheran theology discarded the phrase, it is the *ex opere operato* conviction evident in Luther’s ultimate defiance of Satan’s every temptation by playing the trump card, “I am baptized!” *Ex opere operato* is the sacramental enactment of *sola gratia*. It is uncompromisingly objective. By its morbid introspection, the delusions of religious enthusiasm, and the endlessly clever postulations of the theological imagination are called to order by truth that is answerable to no higher truth; for it is Christ, who is the Truth, who speaks in the voice of his Church—“I baptize you . . . ,” “I forgive you your sins . . . ,” “This is my body”

Moving forward to my teenage years, I had in high school what our evangelical friends would call a born-again experience, and for a time viewed with contempt the ritual and sacramental formalities of what I thought to be a spiritually comatose Lutheranism. For a time, I suppose I might have been a good candidate for the Baptist ministry, but it did not last. Missouri’s traditional hostility toward “pietism”—an exaggerated emphasis on the affective dimension of Christian faith—struck me as hostility toward piety. But after a period of frequently anguished uncertainty about the possibility of sorting out subjective experience and egotistic assertiveness from the workings of grace, I came to a new appreciation of Luther’s warnings against religious enthusiasm. Several years later, at Concordia, St. Louis, I was to discover the possible synthesis of piety, clear reason, and ecclesial authority in the person and teaching of Professor Arthur Carl Piepkorn.

The students most closely gathered around him called him—behind his back, to be sure—“the Pieps,” and those who in American Lutheranism today describe themselves as “evangelical Catholics”—perhaps a fourth or more of the clergy—are aptly called the Piepkornians. 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 were, he insisted, the “symbols” of a distinctive communion within the communion of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. 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.

Piepkorn underscored the Church’s tradition prior to the Reformation, the tradition of which Lutheran ism was part. The accent was on continuity, not discontinuity. Perhaps the sixteenth century break was necessary—although that was never emphasized—but certainly the Lutheran Reformation, unlike other movements that claimed the Reformation heritage, had no delusions about being a new beginning, a so-called rediscovery of the gospel, by which the authentic and apostolic Church was reconstituted. 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”—but is, rather, the historically specifiable community of ordered discipleship through time, until the end of time. Piepkorn emphasized that we

are Christians first, catholic Christians second, and Lutheran Christians third. In this understanding, 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.

Some of my Lutheran friends say that, in entering into full communion with the Catholic Church, I acted precipitously, I jumped the gun.

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 it is manifest that we have guarded diligently against the introduction into our churches of any new and ungodly doctrines.

For us Piepkornians, everything was to be held accountable to that claim. In some streams of Lutheran orthodoxy, as well as in Protestant liberalism, a very different notion of normativity was proposed. In the language of the twentieth-century Paul Tillich, catholic substance was to be held in tension with Protestant principle, with Protestant principle having the corrective and final word. But a principle that is not part of the substance inevitably undermines the substance. And what is called the Protestant principle is, as we know from sad experience, so protean, so subject to variation, that it results either in the vitiation of doctrine itself or further schism in the defense of doctrinal novelty. Theology that is not in service to “the faith once delivered to the saints”

(Jude 3) turns against the faith once delivered to the saints. Ideas that are not held accountable to “the Church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of truth” (1 Timothy 3:15) will in time become the enemy of that truth. Such was our understanding of the normative claim of the Augustana to have received nothing contrary to Scripture or to the Catholic Church.

But the Lutheran chapter in the history of the Church did occasion schism, and

for that unhappy fact there was blame enough to share all around. 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. The Catholic Church, as Chesterton observed, is ever so much larger from the inside than from the outside. And especially is that the case, I would add, for those whose identity as Protestants depends upon their being outside. And so it was that for thirty years as a Lutheran pastor, thinker, and writer, as editor of *Una Sancta*, an ecumenical journal of theology, and, later, *Forum Letter*, an independent Lutheran publication, 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. Very hopeful was the reappropriation of the Lutheran tradition associated with the nineteenth-century “evangelical catholic,” Wilhelm Loehe, and the *ressourcement*—the going back to the sources—evident in the 1970s production and reception of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*. Then too, there were promising new levels of understanding and theological reconciliation achieved in the formal Lutheran-Roman Catholic theological dialogues. These hopeful signs, however, were not to last.

The last several decades have not been kind to Lutheranism. By the end of the 1980s it seemed evident to me that real, existent Lutheranism—as distinct from Lutheranism as an idea or school of thought—had, willy-nilly but decisively, turned against the fulfillment of its destiny as a reforming movement within the one Church of Christ. Lutheranism in all its parts, both in this country and elsewhere, had settled for being a permanently separated Protestant denomination; or, as the case may be, several Protestant denominations. Some of my Lutheran friends say that, in entering into full communion with the Catholic Church, I acted precipitously, I jumped the gun. To which I say that I hope they are right; and if, someday in some way that cannot now be foreseen, there is ecclesial reconciliation and a healing of the breach of the sixteenth century, I hope that my decision will have played at least a minuscule part in that happy outcome.

Mine was a decision mandated by conscience. I have never found it in his writings, but a St. Louis professor who had been his student told me that the great confessional Lutheran theologian Peter Brunner regularly said that a Lutheran who does not daily ask himself why he is not a Roman Catholic cannot know why he is a Lutheran. That impressed me very deeply. I was thirty years a Lutheran pastor, and after thirty years of asking myself why I was not a Roman Catholic I finally ran out of answers that were convincing either to me or to others. And so I discovered not so much that I had made the decision as that the decision was made, and I have never looked back, except to trace the marks of grace, of *sola gratia*, each step of the way.

My reception occasioned some little comment, including the observation that I and others who make this decision have a “felt need for authority.” This is usually said in a condescending manner by people who believe that they are able to live with ambiguities and tensions that

some of us cannot handle. Do I have a felt need for authority, for obedience, for submission? But of course. Obedience is the rightly ordered disposition toward truth, and submission is subordination of the self to that by which the self is claimed. 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.



It was sadly amusing to read that a Lutheran denomination in this country is undertaking a major study with a view toward revising its teaching on sexual morality, with particular reference to homosexuality. Especially striking was the assurance that the study would be conducted “without any prior assumptions.” Imagine that. The entire course of Christian fidelity is obedience to the received truth of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, and the Spirit’s guiding of the Church’s reflection on that truth. At some point this Lutheran body will arrive at its new teaching. Through a complicated process

of bureaucratic planning, interest group agitation, and a legitimating majority vote, it will eventually arrive at the point of saying “this we believe, teach, and confess.” Undoubtedly Scripture will be cited, but, as Luther said, biblical texts, like wax noses, can be twisted to fit. If, as seems probable, this body adopts a new teaching and one asks by what authority it teaches this new doctrine, the only honest answer will be, “Because we will it to be so.” “It is what was decided by the procedures adopted by our religious society,” they might say. “Ours is, after all, a voluntary association, so nobody else has any right to complain.” By the rules of that denomination, the Church through time and the contemporary Church universal, to which Christ promised the Spirit’s guidance, does not get a vote.

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. The teaching of the apostles and of the apostolic churches, securely grounded in the biblical Word of God, continues to this day, and will continue to the end of time. Catholics believe that, under certain carefully prescribed circumstances, the pope and the whole body of bishops are able to teach with infallibility. That 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. Infallibility, Avery Cardinal Dulles writes, “is simply another way of saying that 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, he adds, “the truth of revelation would not be preserved in recognizable form.” And, I would add, to obey the truth we must be able to recognize the truth.

The question of authority, the question of Who says so?, has been with the Church from the beginning. In Corinth some invoked Peter, some Paul, some Apollos, and some Christ. And so it was later with the Montanists, the Arians, the Nestorians, the Valentinians, the Donatists, and on and on. A sure mark of a heretical and schismatic community, said St. Augustine, is that it names itself by a man or an idea rather than by the simple title “Catholic.” Also centuries later, for example in the sixteenth century, those who had sense enough to know that the Church did not begin with their new theological insight tried to reconstruct Christian history to fit their views. Thus the Lutheran Matthias Illyricus Flacius compiled the *Magdeburg Centuries*; thus followers of John Knox claimed to have reestablished the polity of the New Testament Church; thus the “Landmarkist” historiography of American Baptists who trace the lineage of the one true Church through Cathari, Waldensians, Lollards, Albigenses, and all the way back to Jesus himself. All such efforts attempt to answer the question of authority. Some are less ludicrous than others, but none is plausible. As St. Augustine and all Catholic teachers have known, the teaching of the Church is lived forward, not reconstructed backward.

St. Augustine appealed to the *securus judicator orbis terrarum*—the secure judgment of the whole world, by which he meant the Catholic Church. Yes, but what do you do when that judgment is unclear or in heated dispute? Augustine’s answer is that 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. This argument is brilliantly advanced in his polemic against the Donatists, who appealed to St. Cyprian as precedent for refusing to recognize the sacraments of the *traditores*, those who had lapsed in time of persecution. Yes, answered Augustine, the holy Cyprian was confused, and admitted as much; but he awaited clarification by the *securus judicator orbis terrarum*. The one thing he would not do, unlike the Donatists, was



to break communion with the Catholic Church.

The Church is holy in practice and correct in doctrine, said the schismatic Donatists, and therefore it cannot exist in communion with the unholy and erring. It follows that the Donatists are the true Church. To which Augustine replied:

If, therefore, by such communion with the wicked the just cannot but perish, the Church had already perished in the time of Cyprian. Whence then sprang the origin of Donatus? Where was he taught, where was he baptized, where was he ordained, since [you claim that] the Church had been already destroyed by the contagion of

communion with the wicked? But if the Church still existed, the wicked could do no harm to the good in one communion with them. Wherefore did you separate yourselves?

“Wherefore did you separate yourselves?” Augustine’s question echoes down through the centuries, directed at all who have separated themselves from communion with the Catholic Church. Today the criticism is heard that the Catholic Church, for all its magisterial authority, will permit almost anything in teaching or practice so long as one does not formally break communion with the Church. There is truth in that, although I think it not a criticism but a compliment. While what Lutherans call the *publica doctrina*, the public teaching, of the Catholic Church is lucidly clear, it is true that the Church bends every effort, puts the best construction on every deviant opinion, in order to avoid what Augustine calls “the heinous and damnable sin of schism.” For instance, in the twenty-three years of the supposedly authoritarian pontificate of John Paul II, the number of theologians publicly censured can probably be counted on the fingers of one hand, and the only schism has been that of the integralist *Lefebvrist*s of France. Disagreement, confusion, and false teaching can do great evil, but the remedy for such evil is always to be found in communion with that body that is gifted with the charism of providing *securus judicator orbis terrarum*.

Councils can err, said the Reformers. No, says the Catholic Church, but the Church’s teaching lives forward, and no definition, including that of councils, is entirely adequate to the whole of the truth. The Catholic Church has always taught with St. Paul that now, as he says in 1 Corinthians 13, we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now we know in part; then we shall understand fully, even as we have been fully understood. Along the way to that 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. It is not everything that we might want, but it is enough; it is more than enough.

The Church's teaching lives forward; it is not reconstructed backward—whether from the fifth century or the sixteenth or the nineteenth or the twenty-first. But through all the changes of living forward, how do we know what is corruption and what is authentic development? Recall Cardinal Newman's reflection on the development of doctrine, a reflection that has been incorporated by magisterial teaching. He suggested seven marks of authentic development: authentic development preserves the Church's apostolic form; it reflects continuity of principles in testing the unknown by the known; it demonstrates the power to assimilate what is true, even in what is posited against it; it follows a logical sequence; it anticipates future developments; it conserves past developments; and, throughout, it claims and demonstrates the vigor of teaching authority. And thus it is, said St. Vincent of Lerins in the fifth century, that in authentic development of doctrine nothing presents itself in the Church's old age that was not latent in her youth. Such was the truth discovered by Augustine, a truth "ever ancient, ever new."

And so it is that this ecclesial Christian, this son of St. John's Lutheran Church in Pembroke, this former Lutheran pastor of St. John the Evangelist in Brooklyn, was led to September 8, 1990, to be received into full communion by John Cardinal O'Connor in his residence chapel of St. John the Evangelist, my patron saint. In every way, including my awareness of the intercession of St. John, the continuities are ever so much more striking than the discontinuities. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, my Protestant brothers and sisters are, by virtue of

baptism and faith in Christ, truly but imperfectly in communion with the Catholic Church. Which means also, of course, that I am truly but imperfectly in communion with them. Moreover, and according to the same Council, all the saving and sanctifying grace to be found outside the boundaries of the Catholic Church gravitates toward the perfection of that imperfect communion. Some view the Catholic Church as claiming to be self-sufficient, but that is not true. Her ecclesiology is such that, of all Christian communions, she knows herself to be most in need. Nowhere are the words *Ut unum sint*, "that they may all be one," prayed so fervently; nowhere is the wound of our broken communion felt so keenly; nowhere is the commitment to reconciliation so relentless or irrevocable.

It would take another essay to survey the current prospect for such reconciliation. Suffice it to say that, whether with respect to the Orthodox Church of the East or the separated communions of the West, these are hard times for ecumenism, hard times for the hope for Christian unity. But the Church has known many times that were harder, much harder; she has learned that the better part of fidelity is sometimes simply persistent waiting upon the movement of the Holy Spirit toward possibilities that she can neither anticipate nor control, but for which we must together pray.

As for now, I end where I began—as in my life's course I began where I have

ended—by saying again: "To those of you with whom I have traveled in the past, know that we travel together still. In the mystery of Christ and his Church nothing is lost, and the broken will be mended. If, as I am persuaded, my communion with Christ's Church is now the fuller, then it follows that my unity with all who are in Christ is now the stronger. We travel together still."



Richard John Neuhaus is Editor-in-Chief of *First Things*. This article is adapted from a presentation at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, a seminary of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.



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Please pray for Jeff and his wife, that they may be able to find a new teaching position after they are received into the Church.

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Pray for the safety of Father Rohen, who has been assigned for four years as an Army chaplain in Korea.



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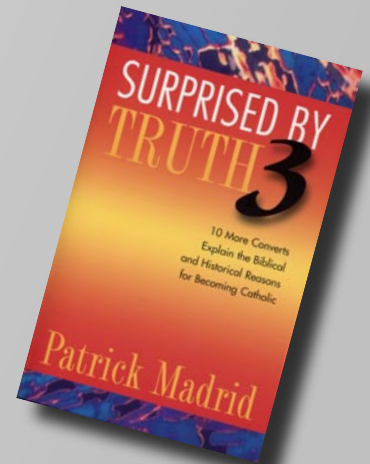
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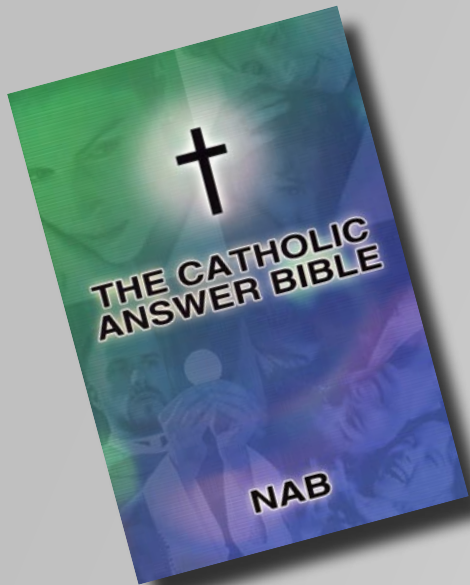
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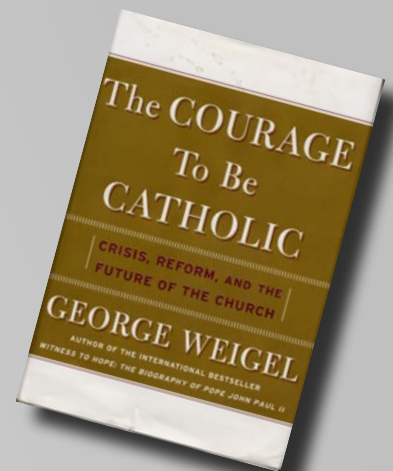
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