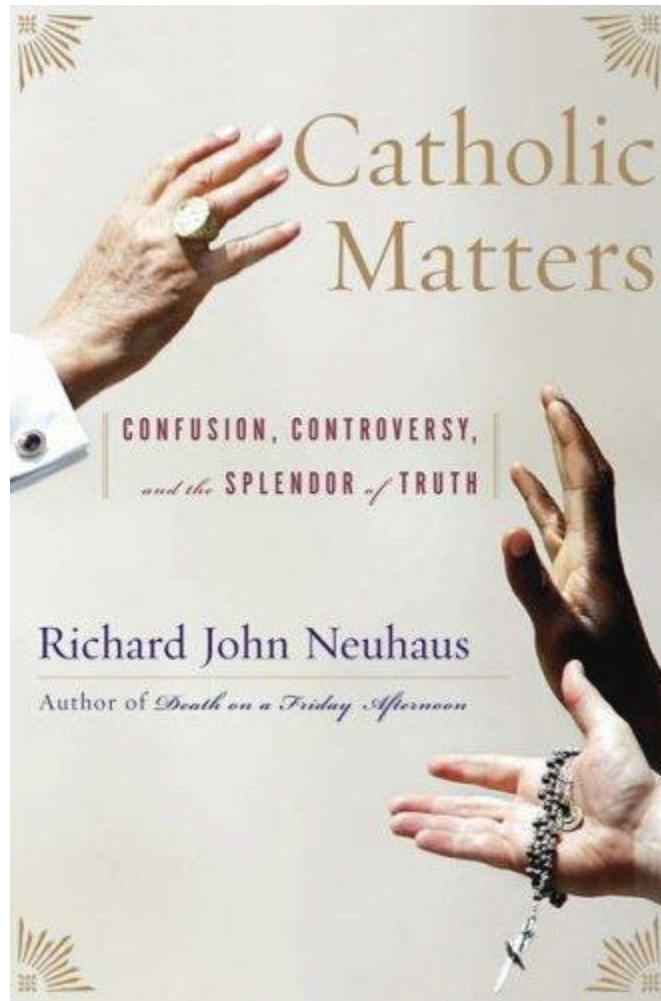


A Summary of Catholic Matters by Fr. Richard John Neuhaus



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Summary by Cara Whitaker, written exclusively for The Goldhead Group, Ltd.

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About the Author

A convert from Lutheranism, Father John Neuhaus is a priest of the Archdiocese of New York. He is the president and founder of the Institute on Religion and Public Life, and is the editor-in-chief of the popular Roman Catholic publication *First Things*. Father Neuhaus also launched ‘Evangelicals and Catholics Together,’ an initiative striving to realign religious and cultural dynamics in contemporary society. He is the author of many books, including *Freedom for Ministry*, *Death on a Friday Afternoon*, and *As I Lay Dying*. He is highly respected by Catholics and Protestants alike.

General Overview

Father Neuhaus begins his discussion of the Roman Catholic Church with the death of our former Holy Father, Pope John Paul II. From a discussion on the nature of the papacy he constructs a proper conception of the Church as he first discovered it, through the eyes of a Lutheran convert. The person that he most frequently quotes admirably is Cardinal John Newman. Although Newman was Anglican and not Lutheran, they both had similar backgrounds and conversions. Baptized as a Lutheran and attending services across the street from a Roman Catholic Cathedral, Father Neuhaus elaborates on the path he took in discovering the fullness of the Christian Faith. This is a fullness of faith that is only to be found in the Roman Catholic Church. What exactly constitutes this fullness of faith? Father Neuhaus examines the basics of the faith which has been handed down from the Apostles and he examines it in relation to modern society. Although the Church is counter-cultural, just as Christ promised, she will continue and she will prevail in her mission of sanctity.

Chapter One: The Church We Mean When We Say Church

Beginning with a look at the Body of John Paul II lying in state, Father Neuhaus moves from the Church in Rome to the Church in the United States. What constitutes the American Catholic differs greatly from what it means to be Catholic anywhere else. For the American, being Catholic, according to Father Neuhaus, “is more and more viewed as a choice, perhaps a personal preference, and not as something that really matters, and maybe matters ultimately.” Americans are church hoppers. America by nature prides itself in being a free-market society where consumer choice rules all, including religion. One’s religion, more in the United States than anywhere else, is a choice of a spirituality that meets one’s preconceived notion of needs. However, the Catholic Church, as remaining faithful to its Creed, has professed the same dogmas since the time of Christ.

When it comes to shopping around for a creed that is in line with one’s spiritual tastes, main-line Protestant denominations have been losing. According to Father, “their precipitous decline in numbers and influence is often attributed to the sharp left turn their leadership took on moral and political issues back in 1960s while another part is the challenge posed by the resurgence of evangelical Protestants in recent decades.” Beginning in the early twentieth century there was great battle between ‘modernists’ and ‘fundamentalists.’ Fundamentalists held steadfast against the whims of the mainline denominations to five basic Christian beliefs: the God-inspired inerrancy of the Bible; the Virgin birth and deity of Christ; the doctrine that He died on the cross in our place (substitution atonement); the bodily resurrection of Jesus; and his second coming to judge the living and the dead. After WWII fundamentalists reappeared under the term evangelical and it is under that name that they are formidably present in society.

Presently Christianity is divided into three parts: evangelical, mainline/orthodox, and Catholic. When one sees the mainline denominations in the news it is because their national leadership is permitting or supporting something that is intrinsically anti-Christian. However, at the local level, these denominations are very separated from their hierarchy. The leadership is almost entirely ignored, rightly so it seems, and the adhesion power of these denominations is almost non-existent. What is the adhesion power of a denomination? It is the faithfulness to a certain denomination. For example, when a Presbyterian family moves, they are more likely to join the friendly Lutheran church than the lifeless Presbyterian church. However, this mentality, although it is

more present in the United States than anywhere else, does not pervade the Catholic Church. Once a Catholic, unless one segregates oneself from the Church, always a Catholic.

What about Catholics who say they are Catholics, but by actions do not truly live in the ways prescribed by the Church? What exactly is this Church? According to Father Neuhaus those Catholics who do not live as if they are truly Catholic, yet do care about the Church when he says, “[They] certainly mean Her no real harm and, were She mortally threatened, they would come to Her defense. But in the process of growing up and thinking for themselves, they may themselves and others that dear old mother has become a little dotty and is altogether too demanding.”

What is this entity that we call the Church? The Church, as the bride of Christ, is the Church of Jesus Christ most fully and rightly ordered through time. It is to the Catholic Church and to the papacy that Christ said, “And you, when you are converted, strengthen your brethren.” The Catholic Church, throughout time, is composed of people who are in communion with a bishop who is in communion with Rome. It is in the Catholic Church that all other Churches subsist for “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus est* (outside the Church there is no salvation).” In regards to the Catholic Church one is to follow one’s conscience, the God-given capacity to discern the truth and act upon it. Conscience is a messenger of the truth for thinking with the Church (*sentire cum ecclesia*) begins with thinking. It is the discovery of the truth that will bring one to the fullness of truth found only in the Roman Catholic Church.

Chapter Two: Becoming the Catholic I Was

Father John Neuhaus in the second Chapter recounts the story of his conversion. Prior to his conversion to Catholicism he had been a Lutheran pastor, theologian, and writer. He was received into full communion with the Catholic Church on the Feast of Nativity of Mary – September 8, 1990 – by Cardinal John O’Connor. His sponsors were Father Avery Dulles and George Weigel. A statement that he issued in the *New York Times* explained what he was doing and why. It concluded, “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 that is good and true 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.”

John Neuhaus, as a Lutheran, had always known himself as an ecclesial Christian. What he means by an ecclesial Christian is, “someone 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.” This method of ecclesiastical thought enabled him to come to the Roman Catholic Church a little easier because the Catholic Church is ecclesial. In a similar manner to Anglicanism for Lutheranism, there has always been a ‘high church’ that emphasizes the similarities and not the differences between Lutherans and Catholics. Neuhaus then details some of the similarities between Catholicism and Anglicanism: confirmation, the catechism, a crucifix on the altar, a cross on the steeple, and a form of confession.

However, Lutheranism did schism from the Catholic Church and as such it does not contain the fullness of truth. An example of this is that according to them one is not able to grow in grace or sanctity. Neuhaus himself tried to insist that the Lutheran Church was more Catholic than it really is. He parallels himself to John Henry Newman on this, “There came a time in the life of John Henry Newman when he was forced to recognize that his insistence on the catholicity of the Church of England has resulted in his creation of ‘a paper Church.’ His Anglicanism as vibrantly alive in his own head, and he could write about it eloquently but it was not Anglicanism. He could cite document after document in support of his argument for what the Church of England should be, but wishing did not make it so.” For both Newman and Neuhaus their church was notional rather than real. According to what Luther quotes of Augustine the root of all sin is *incurvatus est* – we are turned in upon ourselves. However, Luther neglects Augustine when he elaborates further on this by saying

that rest comes with surrender, with being shaken out of the state of *incurvatus est*, in submission to the other. This other is embodied, in the body of Christ, the Church.

Chapter Three: The Authority in Question

To begin his chapter on the Church's authority, Father Neuhaus quotes Cardinal Newman, "She is a given, a primary substance within the economy of denominationalism. Thus one could rightly say that I became a Catholic by default, and that possibility is the simple gift I received from the Catholic Church. She needed neither reasons, nor theories, nor ideas from me." It is on the authority of the Catholic Church that all other denominations lay claim to Christianity. All Christians believe that God revealed himself in history through Israel. Christ is the culmination of the history of Israel. Christ then handed over His authority to His apostles and their successors. According to Father Neuhaus on authority, "The question is not about the felt need for authority but about where that authority is located and how it is exercised."

It was the successors of the Apostles that decided upon the Canon of Scripture. It was the tradition of the Church that was able to select texts. However, the authority of the Apostles did not end there. Christ's promise is still valid, "I will be with you always, until the end of time." Christ will remain with His bride, the Church. The author also gives the reader another definition of tradition: "the historical existence and life of the community of faith." A just reading of the New Testament, something given by tradition, demonstrates that Christ did intend to leave a community of believers and that Christ entrusted this community to His Apostles and their successors.

What does the virtue of faith have to do with Authority? One must put one's faith in the proper Authority, in this case the Roman Catholic Church. The Protestant concept of faith in relation to authority is much different from the Catholic conception. For the Protestant, there are two acts of faith: their act of faith is in an act of faith in Jesus Christ, and secondarily but not necessarily an act of faith in a vague conception that they have in the church. For the Catholic, however, there is only one act of faith. This act of faith is an act of faith in both Christ and His Church. The Catholic has faith and trust in the validity of the Church.

The authority of the Church is always constant, it never changes. For there is, "development of doctrine, clarification of doctrine, refinement of doctrine, and there will be until the end of time. But there is neither change nor contradiction of doctrine." The Church cannot teach anything that contradicts the core truth of revelation or that contradicts reason. The Church's authority teaches the same thing now that She taught at the time of the early Church Fathers. Man is a rational being, who is ordered to truth. Truth commands obedience. The Church as the authority of truth commands obedience in her eternal character.

One element that contains a dimension of magisterial authority that can sometimes be misinterpreted is known as the *sensus fidelium*. The *sensus fidelium* is translated as the sense of the faithful. Basically, it states that a faithful well-educated Catholic is able to think with the Church and anticipate her teaching in a particular area when it is unknown. The *sensus fidelium* has been misinterpreted in the area of sexual morality (homosexuality, pre-marital sex, and birth control) and woman's ordination. Proponents of those issues, however, did not truly think with the Church and therefore could not speak for the Church. For, "true tradition is not servility but fidelity."

Chapter Four: Where the Sweet Birds Sang

Father Neuhaus takes the title of this Chapter from Shakespeare:

That time of year thou may'st in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,

Bare ruin'd choirs where late the sweet birds sang.

It is here that Father Neuhaus looks at the Church in its present state; the Church today is what it has always been. The Church is perfect but she is composed of imperfect people. There is room for healthy dissent in the Church: dissent meaning to point out inadequacies that call for greater clarification or elaboration in exercise of teaching. However, with all of the improper dissent that has occurred recently in the Church, “the fun of shock theology is reduced somewhat because people who have not been catechized don’t know what is supposed to be shocking.” Conservatives often complain that dissidents should have the honesty to leave the Church, but where would they go? Who else would listen to them? No one. The Catholic Church however it may seem will always contain the one, true, good, and beautiful.

Chapter Five: Lest Catholics Be Different

The aesthetics of the Catholic Church used to have a great appeal, even for the non-Catholic. This is no longer true. Today, most contemporary music found in Churches can be summed up as “cheap demands on your sensibilities.” Instead of being attracted by the beauty of the Catholic Church’s sacred liturgy, one more commonly encounters people, for example high church Lutherans or Episcopalians, that convert to the true faith despite the, “aesthetic shambles of liturgy and music in many parishes.” However, what has been previously seen after Vatican II no longer remains. The recovery of tradition is a part of the reform of the reform that is taking place today and reestablishing beauty in the Church.

What exactly happened to the beauty that was once found in the liturgy? How did we lose it? It began with a relaxing of the rules that made Catholics distinctive. For example, it was no longer mandatory that Catholics abstain from meat on Fridays. Christ died on Friday, so abstaining from meat was a type of self-denial. It united Catholics in a communal practice of solidarity. After this constant reminder of sacrifice and self-denial was rescinded and made optional in conjunction with another sacrifice, Catholics during a time of change were left to wonder what next? For Father Neuhaus commenting on that and the other changes that were made ‘in the spirit of Vatican II’ says thus, “If in these pages the gimlet-eyed reader were to detect, here or there, a hint of polemic or suggestion that some Catholics need to rethink what it means to be Catholic, let it in no way detract from the truth that the Church is Here Comes Everybody.” The Church took a turn not for the best aesthetically in accordance with those who were not so Catholic but the Church is making a return to the beautiful just as she always does.

Chapter Six: Proposing the Story of the World

The last forty years of the history in the Catholic Church, after Vatican II, may be viewed as a rough spot but in its two-thousand year history there have been many rougher spots. The Church is and always will be the Church. It is the Church who through tradition has safeguarded the faith. Father Neuhaus quotes Jaroslav Pelikan on tradition: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead.” Tradition lives in conversation with the past, while remembering where we are and when we are and that it is we who have to decide.” In a proper concept of tradition one must not show disrespect for what has gone before or idealize and attempt to calcify what has gone before.

Some people have drawn the conclusion in regard to Vatican II: *post hoc ergo propter hoc* – after which on account of which. The conclusion being that everything that happened after Vatican II was because of Vatican II. What the liberals cling to as the Spirit of Vatican II was never in the documents of Vatican II. The documents of Vatican II coincide with what the Church in Her tradition has always taught. For John Paul II says thus about the constant teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, “The Church imposes nothing. She only proposes. What she proposes, however, is the truth, and the truth does impose itself.” There is a standard of truth. It is in Christ and His Church that the answers to Pilate’s question, “What is truth?” are found.

Because thinking with the Church begins with thinking theology can properly be described as faith seeking understanding. For according to St. Anselm, “God is that thing which nothing greater can be thought.” It is the Church who teaches man how to articulate statements about that which cannot be adequately thought or spoken.

When the Church proposes her teachings to the world she is today faced with controversy. The Church today is countercultural. The spirit of Catholicism is not countercultural by choice but by nature. The lives of the martyrs are examples of the faith as countercultural. The Church is only against the world for the world; “For God sent the son into the world not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him.” The Church can symbolically be seen as a sacrament to the world. The Church is a part of the world that strives to be reunited with Christ. For the Church, the world is not alien territory but a creation of love that has alienated itself from its Creator. The Church strives to show people a more excellent way to perfection. The world could never set any type of standard for the Church that would cause her to compromise herself.

Chapter Seven: The Center Holds

Father Neuhaus in this chapter demonstrates how the Church has held steadfast to her teaching during the time of attack, mainly from the left, after Vatican II. Virtue is the means between two extremes. The Church, neither being liberal or conservative, from her birth, has held onto her virtuous mean. Vatican II illustrates modern contingents within the Church that do not hold to the virtuous mean of the Catholic Church.

For forty years, since Vatican II, the leftist branch of the Church has been rehashing the same issues: sex, power, and license. However, the Church’s everlasting teaching on those topics will hold strong. Sex is for procreation in the context of marriage, you are powerful insofar as you have no attachment to sin, and license does not permit you to pursue the true good found only in God. It is only in freedom from worldly attachment that allows man to attain the perfect happiness found in God. Man will not find it in this world.

The aims and goals of the leftist contingent can be seen in Bishop Weakland. The unorthodox bishop of Milwaukee was unsuccessful in his attempt to build this modern Church: “As priests in the Church we have a golden opportunity to become involved at the heart of this reawakening, of being forerunners of the Church of tomorrow, of being molders and builders of new theological language and ecclesiastical structures which speak to our contemporary and which ensure a fresh hearing for the Christian message.” The tradition of heresy that he attempted to establish never took root. Those liberal Catholics, however, must remain part of the Church. Who would listen to them if they did not? No one. It is only amongst the ecclesiastical structure of the Church and those who report and comment on it that their dissent will find an audience.

Those liberals in the Church are no longer finding a voice. People today who are Catholic and truly choose to be Catholic are orthodox and strongly so. For Archbishop Edward O’Brien would always say, “young people will give their lives for a mystery but not a question mark.” No one, including the youth, wants to commit themselves to something that is always changing; there would be no commitment. The One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as inspired by the Holy Spirit will never essentially change. It possesses a living and breathing tradition that is able to accommodate changes in society, but it will never essentially change. Just as Christ promised us, He also promised His bride, the Church, “I will be with you always until the end of time.”

Chapter Eight: Rome Diary

Father Neuhaus concludes his discussion on the nature of the Catholic Church in a vision of hope for the future. After the death of the Holy Father, the late John Paul II, Father Neuhaus chronicles the election of the new Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI. He begins with his personal preference, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

On Wednesday, April 20, 2005, at about 5:30 the smoke appeared once again. Instead of the expected black or white it was gray. The waiting world was at a standstill for there was no answer. In addition to the white smoke, however, the bells would ring if there had been an election. That is exactly what happened. First the bells of St. Peter's began to ring followed by all the bells in the churches of Rome. A little more than half an hour later the appointed Cardinal appeared to declare, "*Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum; habemus Papam: Eminentissimum ac Reverendissimum Dominum, Dominum Josephum. . . Sanctae Romanae Ecclesiae Cardinalem Ratzinger qui sibi nomen imposuit Benedictum XVI.*" The crowds began to cheer. Catholics all around the world have a new shepherd. In hopefully anticipation of heaven the new pope would guide man here on earth.