

**IN MEMORIAM: FR. RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS
1936-2009**

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We can agree that the apostles did some great things after Our Lord's Ascension. Before that, their record was simply not very good. Their performance on Good Friday was perhaps the nadir; all but John abandoned Jesus at the Cross. But even before the Cross, we would have to say that the apostles did not acquit themselves well by their conduct. There was, for instance, that time when the apostles were caught discussing who was the greatest among them. (cf. Mk 9:34) Jesus had to explain to these men that greatness was not in having others serve them, but in their service to others. (cf. Mk 9:35)

Greatness is less subjective than beauty. It clearly has less to do with taste and more to do with talent. You don't have to be well-liked to be great. Talent, we note happily, usually has a way of rising above preference. Even the tendentious can recognize talent if they don't always admit to it publicly.

Fr. Richard Neuhaus, a man of prodigious talent, used it in service of the Gospel until he drew his last breath on January 8th of this year. While among us, he gave witness to a greatness to which we all should aspire even if we don't all excel as Fr. Neuhaus did.

In the pages of *First Things*, the journal which Fr. Neuhaus founded and edited, he had a habit of referring to Pope John Paul II, the Servant of God, as John Paul the Great. No doubt conscious of the infrequency with which the title has been applied to Peter's Successors, I suspect one of the reasons Fr. Neuhaus felt justified in applying the term to John Paul II was the long reach of this pontiff's influence.

Everywhere you looked for more than a quarter of a century, John Paul II was advancing against the infirmities of spirit so characteristic of our age. From inspiring young people at World Youth Days to placing Catholic-Jewish relations on their firmest footing ever, John Paul II did great things.

Fr. Neuhaus did great things, too. He became a Catholic in 1990, the same year *First Things* began publication. A year later, he was ordained a priest. He qualified, then, as a John Paul II priest. You see, this expression "John Paul II priest" has been applied to men who grew up admiring John Paul the Great and were moved by the Pope's example to dedicate themselves to God and the Church as priests. These were men who were born in the 1970s and 80s mainly. They belonged to the Me Generation, considered too self-centered for living sacrificially as

priests. Born in 1936, Fr. Neuhaus was obviously not part of the cohort I just cited. But at 55, neither was he beyond the age at which the Spirit can quicken the soul to set out and do great things.

For seventeen years, Fr. Neuhaus did what every other priest does—he preached, and often with great eloquence. He was never more eloquent than when he was preaching on the pro-life issue, which he saw as the great civil rights cause of our time even as elite opinion makers in society deny this. Where he won the most respect, though, was as a writer, the author of such important works as *The Naked Public Square* (1984) and *The Catholic Moment* (1987). Fr. Neuhaus delighted in the written word as much as he did the spoken word.

He referred to himself as “your scribe” in *First Things*. As you absorbed his wisdom and wit in the section entitled “While We’re At It,” you couldn’t help but think to yourself that he has said it all and said it well. There was about his graceful prose an air of the magisterial. Now, Fr. Neuhaus would have been the first to admit that he was mostly only sharing his opinion when he was commenting on the passing scene.

He shared his opinion, yes, but he also brought his judgment to bear on situations, ecclesial and otherwise. This was of no small significance to his younger readers, including, perhaps most especially, the John Paul II priests eager to wade right into the new evangelization championed by John Paul the Great. Younger John Paul II priests do not always find their older clerical brothers so frank in their assessments of what is happening around them. Although he could turn a phrase nimbly, Fr. Neuhaus never exchanged telling the truth for happy talk.

There is an urgent need in the Church today for saying things candidly, for recognizing pastoral realities and how they cut into a full-throated acceptance of the demands of the Gospel. I imagine the observations and analyses Fr. Neuhaus shared in *First Things* warmed the hearts of those readers who yearn for all the leaders of the Church—not just Popes—to speak more boldly and more unflinchingly about the contemporary duties of discipleship.

Even when it came to his own death, Fr. Neuhaus did not demur. As he lay dying, he wrote the following lines for the February issue of *First Things*:

I am contending with a cancer. . . . Be assured that I neither fear to die nor refuse to live. If it is to die, all that has been is but a slight intimation of what is to be. If it is to live, there is much that I hope to do in the interim. . . . This is not a farewell. Please God, we will be pondering together the follies and splendors of the Church and the world for years to come. But maybe not. . .

The entirety of our prayer is ‘Your will be done’ – not as a note of resignation but of desire beyond expression. To that end, I commend myself to your intercession, and that of all the saints and that of the angels who accompany us each step through time toward home.

These words bear the faith which produced them. They are, quite simply, great words. They are words by which we, the friends, associates, and admirers of Fr. Neuhaus, can live until we meet again, of course, in the fullness of God’s Kingdom where death has no more power.

Tue es sacerdos in aeternum. Requiescat in pacem.

