



## Literary Priests

# A Quartet of Converts: Neuhaus, Rutler, Chesterton, and Dulles

By Donald DeMarco

In his tribute to the late Fr. Richard John Neuhaus (1936–2009), Rev. George William Rutler said that he “didn’t hide his lamp under a bushel, and he did not wait passively for lamp stands to appear.” How right he was! Fr. Neuhaus was not immodest, but he did have a clear and confident sense of his vocation.

His principle “lamp stand” was *First Things*, which he founded and nurtured to its current paid circulation of 36,000. He poured out an average of 12,000 words a week. In “The Public Square” feature of *First Things*, he commented with insight and humor on a cornucopia of nonsense that was going on in high and influential places. In his public appearances, his voice and manner were always kind and affable, and he sought, often heroically, to try luring people out of their secular complacencies by gently applying reason to facts.

He once told Fr. Rutler, who came into the Catholic Church from Anglicanism, that he preferred the notion of *embracing* Catholicism to *converting* to it. Rutler thought of his own journey as a conversion. Later, on that same occasion, he chided his good friend for advertizing to a heating system in a nearby building “converting” to gas. Should you not have said, “embracing gas”, Rutler suggested. The question did not injure their relationship. Neuhaus practiced the twin arts of making and retaining friendships.

Another celebrated convert, G. K. Chesterton, stated in his *The Catholic Church and Conversion* that the third and final stage of conversion is quite terrible. It

is the point where a person comes “too near to the truth, and has forgotten that truth is a magnet, with the powers of attraction and repulsion.” Chesterton would have been a delightful third party in the gentle dispute between Messieurs Neuhaus and Rutler. Conversion is far too generic a term to do justice to coming into the Church. Logical propositions “convert”, as does a heating system going from oil to gas. “Embrace” is more to the point. Chesterton would have reminded his disputants that there are two

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reasons why we embrace anything: 1) because we cherish it; 2) because we don’t want it to slip away. The truth is a dynamic thing. Like a magnet, its polarity is both positive and negative. It attracts us, but its awesome responsibilities can also repel us. Is this not why the Church is both loved and hated for the same reason?

As a journalist, Fr. Neuhaus may be compared with Chesterton. He quoted him often and felt a special kinship with him. In citing the following words of Gilbert Keith, he no doubt recalled his own adolescent confusions, when, after being expelled from High School, he found himself pumping gas in Cisco, Texas: “I did, like all other

solemn little boys, try to be in advance of the age. Like them, I tried to be some ten minutes in advance of the truth. And I found that I was eighteen hundred years behind it. . . . I am the man who with utmost daring discovered what had been discovered before.”

His stance concerning pro-life attitudes was Chestertonian to the core. How does one cope with the realization that every day in the United States some 4,000 abortions take place? How does one summon an intensity of response that matches the enormity of the evil? Can any of us set the world straight? Here, Neuhaus would cite Chesterton who advised that Christian devotion should not be driven, discipleship should not dessicate. Even in the face of great horror, we are still invited to live in splendour, to enjoy *veritatis splendor*. It is a great sin, for Chesterton, to call a green leaf gray. Neuhaus adopted the “robust” and “adventurous” spirit of his favorite British essayist. He was also fond of quoting T. S. Eliot’s words from “East Coker” to beleaguered pro-life troops: “For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.” Nonetheless, Fr. Neuhaus cannot be faulted for not trying his best and urging others to do so as well. At the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast in Washington DC in 2007, he called the “contest between the culture of Life and the culture of Death” the “greatest, moral, political, cultural contest of our time.”

If Chesterton had an eye for the paradox, Fr. Neuhaus had a gift for seeing irony. He was adept at pointing out how certain

groups, usually calling themselves “liberal”, were actually hostile to those who carried out their principles. In the final issue of *First Things* that went to press under his careful monitoring, he made this observation about the pro-life movement: “Whatever else it is, the pro-life movement of the last thirty-plus years is one of the most massive and sustained expressions of citizen participation in the history of the United States.”

The irony lies in the fact that pro-life people are routinely vilified by the very “liberals” who have passionately encouraged the remoralizing of politics and increased citizen participation in the democratic process. By carrying out this liberal mandate, pro-lifers are nonetheless virtually excluded from the public square. It is also ironic, though in a different sense, that Fr.

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Fr. Richard John Neuhaus passed from this world on January 8, 2009. In his last public appearance (December 18, 2008), he was a concelebrant in the funeral Mass for his long-time and dear friend, Avery Cardinal Dulles. It was Fr. Dulles who was his sponsor when Neuhaus entered the Church and exactly one year later vested him in his ordination ceremony. Dulles beautifully recounts his own conversion in his 1946 book, *A Testimonial to Grace*. He was an agnostic during his student days at Harvard in the late thirties. But on a gray February day in 1939, he tells us, strolling along the Charles River in Cambridge, he saw a tree in bud and experienced a profound moment. “The thought came to me suddenly, with all the strength and novelty

of a revelation, that these little buds in their innocence and meekness followed a rule, a law of which I as yet knew nothing”, he wrote. “That night, for the first time in years, I prayed.” Chesterton himself could not have been happier.

Dulles entered the Catholic Church in 1940, the year he graduated from Harvard. It shocked his family and friends, he said, but he called it the best and most important decision of his life. He joined the Jesuits and went on to a career as a major Catholic thinker that spanned five decades. He remains the only American theologian ever appointed to the College of Cardinals. “Christianity”, he once said, “would dissolve itself if it allowed its revealed content, handed down in tradition, to be replaced by contemporary theories.” To that, Fr. Neuhaus would give a hearty: “Amen.”

R. J. N., G. W. R., G. K. C., A. C. D. all came into the Catholic Church from different backgrounds. Each has his own testimonial to grace. Yet, they all champion the cause of cheerful orthodoxy. In addition, their lives are mysteriously intertwined. They are all men who find this world miraculous and adventurous, but, like St. Thomas More, never lose sight of what constitutes the “first things”.

In his 1984 book, *The Naked Public Square*, Fr. Neuhaus lamented the attempt to secularize every aspect of social life. The book expressed a grave concern that America was in danger of losing the religious dynamism that had fuelled everything from the speeches of Abraham Lincoln to the protests of Martin Luther King. Though born in Pembroke, Ontario, Neuhaus found the American climate better suited to his temperament. He felt that America still had some fight left, while Canada, more eager to dialogue than stand up for truth, would continue “to muddle on”. Canada has decided to “disestablish Christianity”, even “banish” it, he wrote, trading Christianity in for the life of the “unencumbered self”.

Fr. Neuhaus wrote with charity and grace. He was not shy about taking on the empire of political correctness. Concerning

the term “homophobia”, for example, he wrote: “In addition to being insensitive and unfeeling toward non-homosexuals who are coping with sexuality and its discontents, the activist literature is typically cruel and slanderous in its explanation of why most people have negative views of homosexuality. Anything other than the ‘correct’ view of homosexuality is attributed to ‘homophobia,’ which is consistently described as the result of bigotry, ignorance, and the fear of one’s own sexuality.”

Again, the irony is most evident. A group that condemns reducing any other group to a pathology because of its sexual orientation, itself condemns certain non-homosexuals for being pathological. Having decried others for being “insensitive and unfeeling”, it exemplifies these very attributes in its denunciation of others.

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Like Chesterton, Fr. Neuhaus chose journalism as his major link with the world. And, like his illustrious predecessor, he wrote at a time when burlesque journalism was being written in a decaying culture. Both G. K. and R. J. were committed to helping people to see what was actually transpiring before their eyes.

God leased Richard John Neuhaus to the world for 72 years. His books, editorials, and columns will be read, re-read, studied, and commented upon. Like Chesterton, he will survive his time. He will be honoured as Canada’s gift, America’s treasure, and the Church’s glory. *Sic transit gloria mundi*.

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