

Review of
Timothy Drake, ed., There We Stood, Here We Stand:
Eleven Lutherans Rediscover their Catholic Roots
(1stBooks Library, 2001)

By Darel E. Paul

INTRODUCTION

Richard John Neuhaus, one of the most celebrated (or lamented, depending on your view) recent converts from the Evangelical Lutheran Church to Rome, writes in the Foreword to this little book of testimonials that the reason he became Roman Catholic was “To be more fully who I was as a Lutheran.” Despite the proselytizing intent of this collection of short essays, this phrase of Neuhaus has much to commend itself from a Lutheran perspective. Neuhaus recognizes that both Lutherans and Roman Catholics stake competing claims to the same inheritance the history and apostolic doctrine of the Church catholic in the West – and thus capably frames the fundamental debate of this book. Is Roman Catholicism “more fully” the Church catholic than is Lutheranism as known from its Confessions? Or has Rome so overfilled the Church with addition, innovation and nonsense that it is in fact the Evangelical Lutheran Church which embraces the fulness of the gospel?

Timothy Drake, the editor of this collection, is correct when he says “there are real and substantive differences between Lutheranism and [Roman] Catholicism – differences so profound, that once realized, they can provoke a conversion of the heart.” While these testimonials hope to provoke conversion to Rome, this review suggests a more careful study of these differences is more likely to bring one to the joy of justification by grace through faith in Christ Jesus.

As a final introductory note, there are many ‘reasons’ advanced either implicitly or explicitly in this book these eleven Lutherans “rediscovered their [Roman] Catholic roots”. Most of the testimonials offered rest ultimately in subjective emotions such as “feeling at home” in the Roman church or the fact of having a Roman Catholic spouse while they were still Lutherans (including one Lutheran pastor!). This review is not about feelings or personal relationships, but about theology, and thus the only topics I will broach are those theological issues which supposedly convinced eleven Lutherans to ‘swim the Tiber’.

“WHERE DOES AUTHORITY RESIDE?”

In the Introduction to the book (p. ix), the editor trots out of the most well-travelled and well-worn ‘statistics’ used by Roman Catholics apologists: “to ignore the differences is to ignore the actions of Martin Luther nearly 500 years ago, and the more than 20,000 Protestant denominations that have arisen since the original split.” This figure of “20,000 Protestant denominations” shows up time and again in discussions with Roman Catholics, who move on quickly to claim that Rome alone is capable

of cutting through such doctrinal chaos and speak with singular authority – because apparently she is One and ‘we’ are so many.

Leaving aside for the sake of argument the fact that [Lutherans are not Protestants](#), this figure of “20,000 Protestant denominations” is misleading and clearly overstated. Take Lutheranism for example. All the members of the International Lutheran Council (of which the LCMS is one) are in full communion with one another. While there are some 30 independent church bodies in the ILC, in effect they are one church. Simply because the LCMS, the Lutheran Church-Canada and the Selbständige Evangelische Lutherische Kirche (for example) are autonomous organizations does not mean they are three churches. They are (parts of) one Evangelical Lutheran Church just as the various national and ethnic Orthodox church bodies are not many but one Orthodox Church.

Some chapters lament the multiplicity of churches claiming the title ‘Lutheran’ – in just the United States there is the ELCA, the LCMS and the WELS, not to mention several very small Lutheran denominations such as the AFLC, ELS, CLC, TALC, etc. Others lament the divisions within even a single Lutheran church body. While this is indeed unfortunate, it is result of human sin which can never be eliminated this side of this veil of tears. And Lutherans are hardly the only ones committing and suffering from these sins. There are a multitude of churches claiming the title ‘Catholic’ – Roman Catholic, Old Catholic, Polish National Catholic, Liberal Catholic, etc. etc. There are political movements within Roman Catholicism, too – Opus Dei, Communion and Liberation, Call to Action USA, Catholics for a Free Choice, etc., etc. Every monastic order is simultaneously a faction pressing its own doctrinal agenda (recall the heated debate in the Middle Ages between the Franciscans and Dominicans over the immaculate conception). To point out the divisions among Lutherans without mentioning the same among ‘Catholics’ is disingenuous.

Another highly misleading statement lurks in this passage. When Bl. Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the church door in 1517, he indeed signalled the beginning of the Reformation in the Western Church. This was hardly an “original split,” however. Rome and Constantinople split from one another in 1054 when the Pope and the Ecumenical Patriarch excommunicated one another. In the East, many Christian churches who rejected the Council of Chalcedon of 451 A.D. continue in existence to this day. When Roman Catholics suggest it is the Lutherans who provoked “the original split” in the Church, they are either bad historians or intentional liars.

Moreover, those followers of Bl. Martin Luther did not “split” the Church. So many of these writers talk of Luther who “left the Church” but can’t seem to recall that Luther as early as 1518 positively begged the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope to call a council of the Church which could fairly arbitrate between the parties. They also can’t seem to recall that it was not Luther who left the Roman Catholic Church, but it was Pope Leo X who excommunicated Luther. Moreover, those national churches in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Finland, Estonia, Latvia and parts of Germany which embraced Luther’s reforms of the Church did not “split” from the Church catholic – Rome split from them and formalized its split both from the evangelical reform movement and from itself in the Council of Trent.

Indeed, we must ask and ultimately answer the question, “Where does authority lie?” What is Rome’s answer? In the words of the editor (p. x), “authority resides in Christ and the Church which He established.” Orthodox Lutherans could not agree more! Of course, the real question then is ‘where is the Church which Christ established?’ Is it the Roman church? Or is it the Evangelical Lutheran Church?

A [favorite tactic](#) of Roman Catholics is to ask the baiting question, ‘How old is your church?’ Rome tries to answer for we Lutherans, ‘Martin Luther in 1517’ and for themselves ‘Jesus Christ in 33 A.D.’. Two can play this game! Lutherans would answer for themselves ‘Jesus Christ in 33 A.D.’ and for Rome, ‘the Council of Trent in 1545-63’. Of course, these answers are all far too simple and fail to seriously engage the fundamental task of identifying Christ’s Church. But for those who like to play simple games, the tables – as we see – can be easily turned.

Many of the writers rejoice in the clarity of the lines of authority in the Roman church. Indeed, one authority figure makes it easy to ease the anxiety of those who need stark clarity in this issue. However, there are many Roman Catholics, particularly in the United States, who find the purported authority of the Pope a cause for lament rather than celebration. There are millions of Roman Catholics, for example, who reject the authority of the Pope in matters of birth control. Simply because the Pope claims authority does not mean that even Roman Catholics respect or recognize it!

Two chapters (“The Grass is Greener” and “Real Churches Don’t Kill Babies”) go so far as to claim there is no authority at all outside Rome. Specifically, only Rome has the authority to ordain, and all Lutheran pastors are therefore illegitimate! This argument is not only distasteful but both doctrinally wrong and blatantly evil. All Christians have the authority to call their pastors. Indeed, the example of St. Ambrose is a strong one indicating the past ability of Christians in communion with Rome to select their own clergy. The Roman belief in an ‘indelible character’ which marks ordained priests and is passed down only through bishops in apostolic succession and in communion with the Pope is a medieval innovation foreign to all Christians – foreign to the Orthodox as well – save Romans. The truth of ordination depends on the truth of the doctrine confessed by the church body which ordains, not on the permission of the Pope or a magic baton passed from bishop to bishop throughout history. What Roman Catholics do in this kind of argument is deny Lutherans the Body and Blood of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This is why I feel compelled to call this claim “evil”, for it tries to rob us of Christ.

So where does authority reside? For the writers in this book, it resides with the Pope who has been declared ‘infallible.’ For Lutherans it resides in Holy Scripture and the Church catholic. The popes have crowned themselves as the Vicars of Christ – a position which is an innovation in the Church – and claim the authority to make anything true simply because they say it is. Take the example of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, declared by Pope Pius XII in 1950. There is no testimony of this event in Holy Scripture nor in the first three centuries of the Church catholic. While many have believed it throughout history – including many Lutherans – no one was brazen enough to demand something so peripheral to the gospel as a central doctrine of the apostolic faith which cannot be rejected without threats to one’s salvation. What an abomination!

The unfortunate truth is that most of the authors of this testimonials had an inordinate need for a singular visible and contemporary source of authority, and they found it in the Papacy. Why they didn't find it in the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints [sic], who claims to be God's one living prophet on earth, is beyond my ability to answer.

Lutherans confess that “The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.” We are in agreement with the Church catholic from the beginning on the content of the gospel and the Holy Sacraments, what Lutherans call the ‘[marks of the Church](#)’. This is why we argue that it is the Evangelical Lutheran Church which is the best manifestation of the Body of Christ in the world today.

THE SACRAMENTS

Among the saddest chapters is that written by Father Larry Blake. Ordained a Lutheran pastor in 1978, Blake was received into communion with the Pope in 1993. The primary issue motivating his conversion was the place of the Holy Supper in the Evangelical Lutheran Church against its place in the Roman Catholic Church. But this can be found among Lutherans; there is no need to go over to Rome to find the Supper.

Lutherans confess the Real Presece of Christ, “under the bread and wine” of the Holy Supper. In a Lutheran Church, when you partake of the Eucharist you eat the Lord's Body and drink His Blood. Thus it is incomprehensible when Blake claims (p. 7) Luther taught “no change occurs” in the elements. How could a former Lutheran pastor say such a thing?? Did he never read Luther's Large Catechism which confesses “It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ”?? Simply because Lutherans – as do the Orthodox – reject the concept of ‘transubstantiation’ as over-sophisticated scholastic philosophizing concerning the Sacrament does not mean we are Calvinists who claim that we eat and drink ‘spiritually’ in the Supper. Blake should know better than this.

Blake also laments that Lutherans do not believe the Eucharist is the “focus of Sunday morning”. This is partially true, but only partially so. Blake is quite wrong when he claims that among Lutherans “preaching [is] the chief experience of Sunday morning”. Fr. Wilhelm Löhe teaches quite correctly that among Lutherans the liturgy has two peaks – the proclamation of the gospel in the sermon (which comes from the Latin *sermo* translating the Greek *logos*) and the celebration of the Holy Supper, with the second peak higher than the first. It is true that many Lutheran congregations do not celebrate the Supper every Sunday, but this is due to historical, not doctrinal, reasons – and it is changing. Both the ELCA and the LCMS urge their congregations toward a weekly celebration of the Eucharist, and the most orthodox Lutherans do so now as they have always done.

Many of the writers stress the celebration of the Holy Supper as among their key reasons for leaving the Lutheran Confessions behind, and the teaching of ‘transubstantiation’ as somehow more ‘real’ than the Lutheran belief that the bread and wine remain with Our Lord's Body and Blood. For a

confessional Lutheran, leaving the Evangelical Lutheran Church – or as is more the case, never giving her a fair chance – over the Supper is a bizarre choice, for among Western Christians the Evangelical Lutheran Church is the only other body which confesses the Real Presence of Christ's Body and Blood at the Lord's Table.

The sacrament of Holy Confession and Absolution is also mentioned in several chapters. Let it be known that Confession is indeed a sacrament among Lutherans – although sadly a rarely used one. The differences between Rome and Wittenburg on this sacrament is that for Roman Catholics confession is a law whereas among Lutherans it is a gift. Unfortunately few Lutherans avail themselves of this gift of hearing that their own personal sins are forgiven, but there are Lutheran pastors and Lutheran congregations which offer regular sessions for Confession and Absolution. Bl. Martin Luther in fact highly praises Confession and included it for special attention in his Small Catechism. No one needs to go to Rome to enjoy this gift of grace.

One writer goes so far as to claim that “Lutheran worship is a shadow or imitation of Roman Catholic worship” (p. 76). Only someone who knows very little history could make this claim. Lutherans are catholic Christians and our liturgy is that of the Western Church. Lutherans do not ‘imitate’ Roman Catholics. We imitate our predecessors in the Church and look to the same sources as does Rome. The similarity comes from both looking backwards to the same liturgical practices – not one (Lutherans) looking to the other (Romans) for guidance.

It is sad but true that many Lutherans know very little of the catholic heritage and identity. So many think they are Protestants! If these former Lutherans had come into contact with Lutherans who love the liturgy, celebrate the sacraments and embrace the catholic faith rather than rub elbows with Lutherans who are more Methodists than Melancthons or Church of Christ than Chemnitz, they might have stayed.

THE PERSONAL FAILINGS OF MARTIN LUTHER

Only a short comment is needed on a frequent cheap shot which recurs throughout this book of pointing out the moral failings of Martin Luther and then to use them as a reasons to reject the Evangelical Lutheran Church and her Confessions. It is true that Luther was an anti-Semite and that he personally approved of the bigamy of a political ally. But do Roman Catholics want to pit the Borgia and Medici popes (the real name of Pope Leo X who excommunicated Luther was Giovanni de’ Medici) up against Luther? I think not.

While it is true that our Church is named after Martin Luther and many of his writings make up the Book of Concord, Bl. Martin Luther was only a man who had real human failings – and his personal opinions do not make up the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

LIBERALISM AND SECULARISM

Many of the chapters lament the liberalism and secularism found in some Lutheran churches, particularly the ELCA and its most liberal predecessor church, the LCA. The chapter by Audrey Zech is among the most bizarre in this respect. Zech is a former ELCA pastor, and during the ‘crisis’ of the LCMS in the 1970s Zech was a sympathizer of the liberal Seminex (i.e. Concordia St. Louis SEMINary-in-EXile). She became a leader in the AELC, a small liberal off-shoot of the LCMS created as a direct result of the 1970s crisis which merged in 1990 with the ALC and LCA to form the ELCA. Yet over time she felt she could no longer remain in the ELCA precisely because of its increasingly weak teachings regarding the Holy Supper and its liberal drift – a drift she helped create!

Interestingly, of the five chapters in the book written by women, four (by Zech, Nelson, Ferrara and Ireland) are by former ELCA pastors. This is an important point, for their experiences and testimonials are borne of a unique event in Lutheranism – the ordination of women by the LCA and the ALC in 1970. Prior to this Lutherans had, along with the Church catholic of all ages, rejected womens’ ordination as against the will of God as revealed in Holy Scripture. Thus when another writer condemns this “radical break with tradition, made on other than theological grounds” (p. 58), an orthodox Lutheran can only say, ‘Amen!’ Not all Lutherans – even in the United States – ordain women. In fact, of the three main Lutheran bodies in the US, only one – the ELCA – does so. Strangely, none of the writers in this book who began to be troubled by a liberal shift in the LCA or the ELCA looked within Lutheranism to solve their problems, and none of these four women truly admit their own participation in schism by pursuing and receiving ordination. It is indeed unfortunate that some Lutherans have chosen schism and ordained women (just as some Old Catholics ordain women). Not all Lutherans do so, however.

Much the same response to women's ordination can be given to many of the writers’ problems with the ELCA’s positions on abortion and homosexuality. Indeed these are to be condemned, but they are not part of authentic confessional Lutheranism. Several chapters (especially “Are you a religious person?”) address contraceptive birth control, claiming only Rome succeeds where even conservative Lutherans such as the LCMS are “morally compromised” because they do not formally condemn the practice. However, Lutherans (and the Orthodox) find no Scriptural condemnation of contraception regardless of what Rome – which has been as influenced by Aristotle as by Augustine on this subject – says. A few of the writers briefly mention divorce and Rome’s supposed “beautiful, steadfast position on the indissolubility of marriage” (p. 95). While I do not mean to be disrespectful, we all know that annulment is simply the peculiar Roman Catholic version of divorce. Despite the claims of one writer in this book that annulment is hard to come by, [statistics show](#) some 20% of all Roman Catholic marriages in the US are annulled and some 90% of Roman Catholics in the US who request an annulment get one. The tawdry tale of the 1997 annulment of the marriage of US Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy II and Sheila Rauch Kennedy (described in Rauch Kennedy’s book Shattered Faith) is proof that the Roman Catholic Church is hardly a tower of fidelity in matters of marriage and divorce.

THE 'DEPTH' AND 'FULLNESS' OF ROMAN CATHOLICISM

Many chapters praise the “fullness” of Roman Catholic doctrine, in the process making a terribly misleading claim that, in the words of one writer (p. 18), “every single part of [Roman] Catholic doctrine . . . is like a piece of a vast puzzle, with its own specific place in which only that piece will fit, each interlocking with the next, to make one inclusive and beautiful picture.” Another (p. 134) argues “that the teachings have to be considered as a whole. Picking and choosing does not work because individual Church teachings depend on one another.” While the metaphor of a fully integrated puzzle producing a single coherent picture at the end is a beautiful one, its implications are far from beautiful. It suggests – no, declares! – that only Rome has all the pieces, and all the pieces must be there for the “beautiful picture” to be known in all its depth and fullness. One writer testifies (p. 22) that “the doctrines which drew [her] most strongly to the [Roman] Catholic Church” were precisely those doctrines which are peculiar to Rome. Well, one cannot argue with the syllogism that 1=1! The accusation is that Lutherans are ‘pickers and choosers,’ taking the things we like and rejecting those we don’t. Thus one ‘needs’ the doctrines of purgatory, the immaculate conception, the papacy and other peculiarly Roman teachings (which even the Orthodox reject). If one doesn’t have them, one lacks ‘depth’ and ‘fullness’.

The role of the Blessed Virgin in the doctrine of the Church is a common topic in this volume. Indeed it is true that Lutherans for the most part give too little attention to the Mother of God. This is certainly an area where contemporary Lutherans could use to devote more attention. There are many Lutherans, particularly prior to the 20th century, who have been happy to confess that Mary remained a virgin all her life as did Bl. Martin Luther himself. Lutherans pray the Magnificat in Evening Prayer and celebrate the Mother of God’s feast on August 15. At the same time, Lutherans cannot condone the Marian excesses which are all too prevalent in the Roman Catholic Church, especially those concerning Marian apparitions and excessive devotion to the Mother in stead of the Son.

Some claims are blatantly untrue, such as that “As a Lutheran, there was no room for the single life as a calling of the Holy Spirit, but only as an aberration from the norm.” (p. 52) False! Indeed chastity is unusual among Lutheran clergy, but the practice is recognized by the Lutheran Confessions themselves as a gift from God (Apology XXIII, 38), hardly the deformity this writer claims.

I will give Rome the nod as far as retaining a ‘numinous’ view of the universe. As Lutherans have become increasingly Protestant, many have adopted an essentially Calvinist view of the relationship between heaven and earth in which one single thread – the Bible – is the connection. Roman Catholics, on the other hand, have the departed saints, supernatural miracles, the Holy Sacraments and all the rest. In this sense I agree that the Roman Catholic universe is ‘full’ whereas the Lutheran one is too often stark and Calvinist. The solution, of course, is not to become Roman, but to become more fully who we are – Lutherans!

THE BATTLE IS WON

The penultimate chapter in the collection is an odd one, standing out for arguing not the differences between Lutheran and Roman Catholic doctrine but their similarities. In particular, the author (von Kampen) claims we are so close today that it is time for Lutherans to ‘come home’ to Rome. This argument is especially based on the Joint Declaration on Justification, signed by the Lutheran World Federation (of which the ELCA is a member but not the LCMS) and Rome in 1999.

Lutherans have always believed since the 16th century that the controversy over justification is about “the main doctrine of Christianity” (Apology IV, 1). Has Rome now finally confessed this doctrine clearly, revealed the glory and blessings of Christ and restored to pious consciences the consolation offered them in Christ (Apology IV, 3)? While I wish very much to agree with von Kampen and believe that our reform of the Church catholic has finally been successful some 500 years after it was begun, the continued existence of the peculiar Roman doctrines of infused grace, purgatory, indulgences, supererogation and the papacy speak louder than the Joint Declaration. Infused grace muddies rather than clarifies the important distinction between justification and sanctification. Purgatory and especially its associated teachings regarding indulgences and supererogation fly in the face of 1 Cor. 3: 8, “each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.” Finally, the papacy is more a stumbling block than a blessing and is moreover an innovation in the Church which also must be superseded if all Christ’s members are to be gathered into one visible Church.

CONCLUSION

There are surely many Lutherans who long for a Church which is not racked by conflict and suffering from pockets of heresy, for a Church which celebrates the Sacraments and preaches the Gospel rightly and clearly, for a Church which embraces the catholic faith of all ages, for a Church which lives its faith and celebrates the piety of its members. Many such Lutherans may There We Stood, Here We Stand and think they can find all these things in communion with Rome. Unfortunately, they cannot. My prayer is that these very Lutherans will stay in their congregations and their church bodies and struggle for all these worthy goals within the Evangelical Lutheran Church! How great is the message that Lutherans are catholic Christians and the inheritors of the Church of Peter and Paul, Polycarp and Irenaeus, Augustine and Athanasius, Ildefonsus and Julian, Bernard and Peter Lombard. By the grace of God, all Lutherans will come to see this is true.

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