



April 7, 2023

The Spirituality Committee of the
Catholic Bar Association presents
a Book Review of

DEATH ON A FRIDAY AFTERNOON
MEDITATIONS ON THE LAST WORDS
OF JESUS FROM THE CROSS

By Father Richard John Neuhaus

Reviewed by Ellen Dorn of the
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My Lenten reading this year was a modern classic: *Death on a Friday Afternoon*, first published in 2000. It is an extended personal reflection on the crucifixion by Fr. Richard John Neuhaus (1936-2009), the well-known American convert/priest and founder of the Institute on Religion and Public Life and its journal, *First Things*.

Reading this book is like drinking from a fire hydrant. Each of its seven chapters offers a 30-page meditation on one of the final words of Jesus from the cross. There is simply too much in each chapter for any reader to ponder in one setting. For that reason, it is a book that offers something fresh upon each re-reading. What I gleaned from the book is surely different from what you would glean from the book, and what struck me in 2023 is surely different from what would have resonated with me ten years ago, and what will speak to me in future years. Also, it is not solely a book for Lent; as Neuhaus says, "Every day of the year is a good day to think more deeply about Good Friday, for Good Friday is the drama of the love by which our every day is sustained." I recommend the book if you want a long and thoughtful meditation on *why* the crucifixion was necessary for our salvation.

On this Good Friday, I will share my take-away from Fr. Neuhaus' reflections on the Seventh Word from the cross: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

One might read these words as Jesus' tranquil, relieved exit from the horror of the crucifixion; perhaps Jesus was merely saying, *At last, it is over!* Yet we are told that it was uttered as a loud cry, which is not the mark of tranquility. Fr. Neuhaus offers a different interpretation: this final plea was an adamant, insistent prayer - even a demand - that God complete his purpose for becoming man, even as it appeared that his mission had ended in a shambles of betrayal and death. It was as if he was saying *Despite everything, God, I insist, I demand, that your will be done. If your will is not done in me and by me, and if I don't will your will, then the whole thing has been a lie. Everything is a stake.*

There is an element of unknowing here. Jesus, in his humanity, perhaps could not fully know how the Father's will could be fulfilled in the midst of the horror. And in that lack of such clarity, we see what faith truly is: the act of committing ourselves unequivocally to the truth of things that can be doubted. Faith does not require absence of doubt; faith does not require clarity. Faith requires entrusting oneself wholly to the will of God, *especially* when the plan is by no means clear and when the circumstance appears to contradict the promise.

May God through the sacrifice of his son, give us the grace to embrace such a faith, and in so doing, to surrender ourselves defiantly, passionately, to his will.

Death on a Friday Afternoon is widely available both in hardcover and as an e-book. It was originally published in 2000. It contains no imprimatur; as a spiritual reflection, it is my understanding that none was required.