

# Karl Rahner's Theological Life

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Strengthened by the Church's sacrament and accompanied by the prayers of his Jesuit brothers, shortly after completing his eightieth year, Father Karl Rahner has gone home to God. He had loved the Church and his religious order and spent himself in their service." So read part of the official Jesuit announcement of the death of Father Karl Rahner, S.J., on March 30, 1984, whose twentieth anniversary we celebrate this month. And with his death, the Church lost one of her most loyal sons. Although well known for his often controversial reinterpretations of the Christian tradition and for his criticisms of much in the Church's practical life, Rahner always spoke from deep within the Church as one who had never lost sight of the total Christian vision.

Rahner was born the fourth of seven children of a Gymnasium teacher and a hard working mother in Freiburg, West Germany one hundred years ago, March fifth of this year. He was a Jesuit for sixty-two years, a priest for fifty-two, and led a "theological life" for almost forty-five. He had taught theology at Innsbruck, Munich, and Münster, and had lectured all over the world. Four thousand written works, paperback sales in excess of one million copies, backbreaking editorial work on theological encyclopedias and reference works, as well as several volumes of television, radio, and newspaper interviews, fill only part of his incredible résumé.

Not only had Rahner written on almost every significant theological topic, but he had also entered into dialogue with Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Marxist, atheistic, and scientific thinkers the world over. His unanswered questions have provided fresh points of

departure for a host of lesser thinkers. Add to this his significant impact upon the Second Vatican Council, his fourteen honorary doctoral degrees, and the large number of doctoral students he directed, and one can see how aptly he has been called “the quiet mover of the Roman Catholic Church” and “the Father of the Catholic Church in the twentieth century.” Yet Rahner referred to himself as someone who was “not particularly industrious,” who “went to bed early,” and was a “poor sinner.” “All I want to be, even in this work [of theology],” he said, “is a human being, a Christian, and, as well as I can, a priest of the Church.”<sup>1</sup>

Although Thomas Aquinas, Heidegger, Kant, Hegel, and Maréchal (both his philosophical and his mystical theology works) undoubtedly influenced his thinking, Rahner contended that the great Christian mystics and saints, as well as the Jesuit spirituality he prayed and lived, had a much greater significance for his theological work. For him the saints were theological sources. He saw clearly that the faith of the theologian as well as the living faith of the contemporary Church were both crucial to the theological enterprise. From him I learned that theology can be distinguished, but never separated from living faith, hope, and love. Theology must flow out of and then lead back into the prayer of silent surrender to the Mystery of God’s love for us in the crucified and risen Christ—and must do so without dissolving theology’s necessarily critical function. The theologian must have compassion for the human and worship God with his whole person, knowing when to “kneel his mind” before the incomprehensible God, whose love became manifestly irreversible in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.

Central to Rahner’s thinking is the notion that what is at the core of every person’s deepest experience, what haunts every human heart, is a God whose mystery, light, and love have embraced the total person. God works in every person’s life as the One to whom we say our inmost yes or no. We may deny this, ignore it, or repress it, but deep down we know that God is in love with us and we are all at least secretly in love with one another. Therefore, one of theology’s most important functions is “mystagogical.” It must lead persons into their

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<sup>1</sup>“Selbstporträt,” *Forscher und Gelehrte*, ed. W. Ernst Böhm (Stuttgart: Battenberg, 1966), 21.

own deepest mystery by awakening, deepening, and explicating what every person already lives. It must challenge persons to grasp the real meaning of their freedom as total response to or rejection of God's self offer to us which demands total human authenticity. And because God has conquered the human heart through the pierced and risen heart of Jesus Christ, Rahner stated the hope that all will be saved.

In fact, Rahner contended that the most important achievement of the Second Vatican Council was its optimistic attitude toward salvation, its implicit recognition of "anonymous Christianity." This means that even the agnostic or atheist who courageously accepts life has already accepted God. For anyone who really accepts himself accepts the One who has decided to fill this infinite emptiness (which is the mystery of the human person) with his own infinite fullness (which is the mystery of God).<sup>2</sup>

That he has been designated "Doctor Mysticus," the Doctor of twentieth-century Mystical Theology, is indeed fitting. Much of Rahner's theology can be called "mystical" because it takes seriously the experience, albeit often hidden or repressed, of God's self-communication. The experience of God forms the undertow, or the basal spiritual metabolism, of daily life. Because this is so, no one can escape being a theologian. So, Rahner chided academicians for ducking the key question of human existence: "Is life absurd?" Rahner addresses the question and answers it in the negative: because the infinitely loving God accepts the human person who believes, hopes, and loves life cannot be absurd. In view of this, much of Rahner's theology may be called "mystical" because it attempts to compress, to simplify, and to concentrate all Christian beliefs and practices by indicating how they evoke the experience of God's loving self-communication to us in the crucified and risen Christ. Even the agnostic or atheist who loves in courageous fidelity to the demands of everyday life lives the "mysticism of daily life."<sup>3</sup>

For Rahner, moreover, all life is a subject of theological reflection. Impelled by his "Ignatian mysticism of joy in the world" and of "finding

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<sup>2</sup> See, *Theological Investigations* (=TI) IV, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 119. See also, "Observations on the Problem of the 'Anonymous Christian,'" TI XIV, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 280-294.

<sup>3</sup> Harvey D. Egan, S.J., *Karl Rahner: Mystic of Everyday Life* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1998).

God in all things,” Rahner’s theology also contains a movement of “unfolding” the mystery of God’s suffering and victorious love for us in Christ into every dimension of human life. Has any other contemporary theologian written a “theology of everyday things”—a theology of work, of getting about, sitting down, seeing, laughing, eating, sleeping, and the like?<sup>4</sup> Nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see. And if his theology of mystical compression often involves anfractuious dialectics dealing with questions such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, the problem of evil, and so on, his theology of unfolding can be as lovely as advising an unwed mother in her darkest hour to look into the face of her newborn son for light.

Perhaps the secret of Rahner’s appeal is his synthesis of two elements: critical respect for the Christian tradition and unusual sensitivity to the questions and problems of contemporary life. He never overlooked how difficult Christian faith is for a twentieth-century person. But he could and did say to his contemporaries not only that he had been tempted by atheism but also that nothing was more self-evident to him than God’s existence. Therefore, Rahner would accept nothing less from theology than speaking about God—not just so-called God-talk—while breathing the air of unbelief.

Moreover, Rahner never doubted the ability of Christianity’s profound tradition to indicate what was necessary for authentic contemporary living. Because of his ability to discover the Tradition in the traditions, Rahner was able to revitalize even some of the oldest “fossils” of Christian creeds, dogmas, and beliefs into living realities. How do the old “keys” of faith fit the various contemporary “locks” to release human authenticity? Rahner also demanded that theology be a science of conversion, faith, and prayer that deepens the way people live their faith, hope, and love. He not only explained critically and precisely what the Christian faith is, not only gave reasons to believe it, he also sought to unite people with it.

In so many ways, therefore, Rahner’s theology is preeminently pastoral. Perhaps it was his pastoral work in war-ravaged Europe during and after the Second World War that gave him his spontaneous inclination toward the pastoral care of individuals and the concerns of a Church in “diaspora.” In fact, many of his writings are essays written

<sup>4</sup> *Belief Today*, trans. M. H. Heelan (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967), 13-43.

for particular occasions or in response to questions as they arose, not the overly systematic and encyclopedic approach considered typical of German theologians his age. One of the most absurd statements I ever read about Rahner's theology contended that there was nothing priestly, kerygmatic, or pastoral about it. It should be said of him that his theology is supremely pastoral and its major focus: "*Salus animarum suprema lex*" (The salvation of souls is the supreme law).

Prodded by the insights of Johann Baptist Metz, one of his former students, Rahner, moving in the direction of liberation and political theology, developed his well-known thesis that love of neighbor is love of God. If we really believe in the Gospel, how will we treat others and transform society? What is the Church, and what should it be doing in this regard? For Rahner, the social-political ramifications of the Gospel need particular emphasis today.

During an interview a few days before his eightieth birthday, a journalist asked Rahner his views on old age. Rahner replied that a person should never stop thinking, and that if God gives one strength to write in old age, one should receive it as a gift. Rahner saw old age as a chance to sum up one's entire life, to get oneself together before the final Mystery. And when the journalist asked him if he feared death, Rahner asserted his right as a man, a Christian, and a theologian to be afraid of this dark event, to be afraid but hoped to have the strength to surrender lovingly into the great Mystery of God's love which embraces death.<sup>5</sup>

I first met Father Rahner in 1969 when he graciously accepted the invitation to concelebrate my first Mass with me and to spend the day with my family and friends. During my four years of doctoral studies under his direction, I found him to be at once utterly brilliant, shockingly creative, traditional, original, provocative, balanced, and healing. A passion for hard work, detail, precision, and an impatience with mental laziness, "whoring after relevance," and bureaucratic incompetence stamped his personality. However, most impressive of all were his childlike curiosity and the simplicity, holiness, and priestliness of his Jesuit and theological life.

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<sup>5</sup> *Karl Rahner—I Remember*, trans. Harvey D. Egan, S.J. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1985), 105-106, 109-11.

Father Rahner had an uncanny ability when it came to finding money, food, clothing, and shelter for the needy and downtrodden who sought him out. He possessed the knack, too, of shanghaiing others into assisting him with his practical works of charity. One of the things I remember most vividly is how we two went grocery shopping in a large supermarket and drove two hours to take the food to a widow and to find her a place to live. One of Rahner's last public acts after the celebration of his eightieth birthday was to appeal for funds to purchase a motorbike for a missionary in Africa.

The countless ways in which he brought meaning, comfort, light, relief, and healing to so many persons prompted one distinguished German author to call Rahner a "most effective psychotherapist." For example, I know how priestly and generous with his time Rahner was to a young Jesuit friend who was leaving the priesthood. This same friend in a recent letter told me that when he began his doctoral studies, he was astonished to find that Rahner spoke and lectured the same way that he wrote. He was also surprised to find Rahner the spiritual director as a very holy, simple disciple of St. Ignatius. When he wrote to Rahner to apprise him of his decision to leave the Society of Jesus—a decision made in the context of the Ignatian thirty day retreat—Rahner wrote: "I want you to know that I have no wish to comment on a decision made during the time of the great exercises. Best wishes and blessings."

Students who understood very little of Rahner's lectures told me that they attended because they "felt better" about themselves in his presence. "This is a professor to whom I can confess," one said. Not many years before his death, Rahner often spent several hours of his intensely busy day helping a young German psychiatrist to recover some of the memory he had lost in a serious auto accident.

When Rahner died on March 5, 1984, I had no desire to attend the funeral and memorials because of work commitments. I also knew that these events would be very well attended. However, an ever-increasing desire to return to Germany and Austria began to haunt me. Even my dreams became filled with Rahner episodes. It soon became apparent that a Rahner pilgrimage was necessary for my own peace of mind. So in the summer of 1984 I went to Germany and Austria with the great desire to talk with people who were with Rahner when he was dying, to visit some of his old haunts and his family in Freiburg, to reestablish contact with various Rahner scholars, to use his archives at Innsbruck,

and to pray at his crypt in the Jesuit church in Innsbruck. All those with whom I spoke attested repeatedly to one thing about Rahner: the awesome way in which his spirit shone forth in faith, courage, and intelligence right up to the very evening he died.

Since 1960 I have been reading and rereading Rahner's entire corpus. I have likewise been giving courses and seminars on his thought since 1973 to the present. It continues to impress me just how apposite his theology is even in this seeming age of post post-modernity. Some of my students have said that Rahner makes even the most obscure Christian dogma meaningful, that he brings to intelligible articulation the living catechism of the heart of so many contemporary people—and not only of Christians. And I fully agree, for I have long contended that theology cannot be separated from the theologian, that theology is ultimately the person who theologizes. Hence, I always ask myself whenever I read theology: "What kind of person wrote this?"

When asked on his eightieth birthday what he wished to bequeath as his last will and testament, Rahner pointed unhesitatingly to the essay "Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit."<sup>6</sup> In this spiritual gem, Rahner put himself in Ignatius' place to speak to contemporary Jesuits. Not only did he call this masterpiece his last will and testament, but he also considered it a résumé of his theology in general and of how he tried to live it. He wrote: "You know that I wanted 'to help souls' ...therefore to say something about God, his grace, and about Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen one, so that their freedom would be redeemed in God's freedom...I [am] convinced that...I experienced God directly and I wish to communicate this experience to others, as well as I can...I mean only that I experienced God, the ineffable and unfathomable one, the silent yet near one, in his trinitarian bestowal upon me. I experienced God also and especially beyond all images--who when he thus approaches in his grace cannot be confused in any way with anything else...I have experienced God himself, not human words about him...This experience is truly grace, but for that reason it is nonetheless essentially refused to no one...One thing remains certain: a person can experience God's very own self..."

<sup>6</sup> "Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit," *Ignatius of Loyola*, historical introduction by Paul Imhof, S.J., trans. Rosaleen Ockenden (Cleveland: Collins, 1978). Unfortunately, the translation cannot be trusted. The following quotations come from pp. 11-15 & 19-21. Translation emended.

“But now I must speak about Jesus. Did what I say before sound as if I had forgotten Jesus and his blessed Name? I have not forgotten him. He was intimately present in everything I said before, even if the words I addressed to you...could not say everything at once. I say Jesus...

“I never had a problem—or at most the one of loving and being a true disciple—finding in a unique way God in Jesus and Jesus in God. And I mean Jesus as he really and truly is in flesh and blood, such that love alone—not hairsplitting reason—can say in what way he should be imitated if one is his disciple. It is from being able to narrate Jesus’ story that one has then narrated the history of the eternal, incomprehensible God, without dissolving this history into theory...

“Since my conversion I knew Jesus to be God’s unconditional loving condescension to the world and to me, the love in which the incomprehensibility of pure mystery is totally present and through which a person attains his or her perfection. Jesus’ singularity, the necessity of seeking him in a limited treasury of events and words with the intention of finding in this limited reality the infinite and ineffable mystery—this never bothered me...

“There is no Christianity which can bypass Jesus to find the incomprehensible God. God has willed that legions find Him because they seek Jesus—even though they do not know Jesus’ Name, and even though they plunge into death sharing with Jesus the experience of abandonment by God without benefit of knowing how to name this fate or how to name the One with whom they share it. God has permitted this darkness of finitude and guilt in the world only because God has made it His own in Jesus.

“This Jesus I thought about, loved, and desired to follow. And this was the way in which I found the real, living God without having made Him a figment of my own unbridled speculation. A person gets beyond such speculation only by dying a real death throughout life. But this death is real only if the person, resigned with Jesus, accepts in it the abandonment by God. This is the ultimate ‘wayless’ mysticism. In so speaking I know that I have not clarified the mystery of the unity of history and God. But it is in Jesus who surrendered to God in his crucifixion and received God in his resurrection that this unity is definitively present. It is in Jesus that this unity can be accepted in faith, hope, and love.” Thus spoke the father of my theological life and of my heart.



Finally, I have often emphasized that Rahner's theology begins and ends in prayer. That Rahner began his writing career, for all practical purposes, with a book on prayer, *Encounters with Silence*<sup>7</sup>, and ended it with *Prayers for a Lifetime*<sup>8</sup> emphasizes this point. In fact, explicit prayers and penetrating reflection on prayer punctuated his entire theological life. Even many essays in his meaty *Theological Investigations* often end by shading into prayer. Thus, Rahner stands in a long line of great Christian theologians who were likewise great teachers of prayer. In view of everything above, and especially this final point, I wish to conclude by calling Rahner the Teacher of Prayer for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. So, is it any wonder that often, since his death, I have found myself praying not only for Rahner but to Rahner?

“Father of my theological life and of my heart, may you be plunged more deeply into the Mystery of God, be enlightened by His crucified and risen Son, and burn with the love of the Holy Spirit. Help us to live in daily humdrum love with courage, to look upon the Crucified, and to be ready to die into the holy Incomprehensibility of God when it is our time. Meet with us daily in the Eucharist. Amen.”

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<sup>7</sup> Trans. James M. Damske, S.J. (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1966).

<sup>8</sup> Albert Raffelt, ed., no translator given (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1984).

