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Karl Rahner, SJ - IgnatianSpirituality.com

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One of the most important theologians of the 20th century, Karl Rahner was born in March 1904. He was the fourth of seven children, the son of a local college professor and a devout Christian mother. In 1922 Karl followed his older brother Hugo and entered the Jesuit community. As a Jesuit novice Rahner was formed in [the Spiritual Exercises](#) of St. Ignatius Loyola. This formation had a lasting influence on his spiritual and intellectual development.

But I think that the spirituality of Ignatius himself, which one learned through the practice of prayer and religious formation, was more significant to me than all the learned philosophy and theology inside and outside of the Order. (*Karl Rahner*, William Dych, NY: Continuum 2000, p. 7)

In his studies Rahner also became thoroughly conversant with the thinking of the Fathers of the Church, especially on topics such as grace, the sacraments, spirituality, and mysticism.

Karl Rahner's Academic Studies

In 1934 Rahner was sent to the University of Freiburg to study philosophy. In Freiburg Rahner studied with Martin Heidegger whose philosophical approach raised serious questions as to how the western philosophical tradition should be understood. Influenced by Heidegger, Rahner wrote his dissertation (later published as *Spirit in the World*), which taught that the human search for meaning was rooted in the unlimited horizon of God's own being experienced within the world.

Rahner's Catholic advisor, Martin Honecker, found his thesis unacceptable and refused to approve it. Rahner moved to the Jesuit University in Innsbruck where he completed a dissertation in theology in 1937.

A number of years later Rahner was asked by one of his students how disappointed was he when he received Honecker's rejection letter. Rahner replied,

"I was not disappointed at all." Had the dissertation been accepted he would have had to interrupt his theology studies, return to Freiburg, and spend months preparing for and taking his comprehensive examinations to finish the doctorate. "I was relieved to be delivered from that work," he said with a smile.

(Dych, p. 7)

Rahner taught at Innsbruck between 1937 and 1939—when the university was taken over by the Nazis. Rahner went to Vienna, Austria where he spent the war years teaching and as a pastor. After the war, Rahner returned to Innsbruck and later taught in Munich and Munster until his retirement in 1971.

In his "retirement" years Rahner lectured, wrote, and did pastoral

work in Innsbruck and Munich until his death in 1984.

Karl Rahner's Involvement in Vatican II

In 1962 Rahner was appointed as a *peritus* (expert advisor) by Pope John XXIII for the Second Vatican Council. Cardinal Koenig in Vienna selected Rahner as his private adviser on the Council documents. During the Council, Rahner worked with Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) to prepare an alternate text on the issue of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition that was accepted by the German bishops. (Later Rahner and Ratzinger would disagree on the direction of some of Rahner's writings.) Other topics discussed during Vatican II that showed Rahner's influence included the divine inspiration of the Bible, the relationship of the Church to the modern world, and the possibility of salvation outside the Church even for nonbelievers.

Publications by Karl Rahner

In an interview later in life, Rahner said he did not think people would find his life that interesting as it was basically concerned with studying and writing. The Church can be grateful for Rahner's attention to his studies when we consider the astonishingly productive works of scholarship that are the results of his efforts.

Rahner's publications include:

Twenty-three volumes of *Theological Investigations*, acting as coeditor of Herder's ten-volume *Lexicon fur Theologie und Kirche*; the six-volume *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*; *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum*

Mundi; and a 30-volume encyclopedia, *Christian Faith in Modern Society*. In all there are over 3,500 published works written or edited by Rahner.

Rahner's Pastoral Concerns

Rahner's academic interests were rooted in his pastoral concerns. Academic theology was never an end in itself, but always a way to serve the life and mission of the Church. Rahner's pastoral concerns are also revealed in the many retreats he conducted and the many prayers he wrote, gathered in *Prayers and Meditations: An Anthology of the Spiritual Writings by Karl Rahner*.

Rahner's students found him a simple and holy priest whose concern for them was expressed in many kind actions on their behalf. He was a close personal advisor and spiritual director. The students also speak of Rahner's continuing concern for those in need. They would spend hours with him finding money, food, clothing, and shelter for the needy. His outreach included missionaries working with the poor in foreign lands. At the academic convocation celebrating his 80th birthday Rahner made a public appeal for money to provide a motorcycle for a priest in the African missions.

To the end of his life, Rahner was ever more convinced that the meaning of life was bound up in the experiences, history, and sacramental life that are God's world of grace.

Throughout his spiritual writings and with greater vehemence in the latter part of his life, Rahner portrays God as inspiring the world to shape human destiny and to liberate people to see God

in all things, in order to know in that freedom that their search for meaning can only end in God. (*Karl Rahner: Theologian of the Graced Search for Meaning*, Geoffrey B. Kelly, ed., Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press 1993, p. 29.)

Rahner was active in his last years until illness and exhaustion took their toll. He died peacefully on March 30, 1984, in the University Medical Clinic of Innsbruck.

By Jim Campbell

Quotes by Karl Rahner

“So You haven’t really sent me away from You, after all. When You assigned me the task of going out among men, You were only repeating to me Your one and only commandment: to find my way home to You in love. All care of souls is ultimately possible only in union with You, only in the love that binds me to You and thus makes me Your companion in finding a path to the hearts of men.” (*Encounters with Silence*, Karl Rahner, translated and foreword by James M. Demske, SJ, South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press 1999, p. 67.)

“Thanks to Your mercy, O Infinite God, I know something about You not only through concepts and words, but through experience. I have actually known You through living contact; I have met You in joy and suffering. For You are the first and last experience of my life. Yes, really You Yourself, not just a concept of You, not just the name which we ourselves have given to You! You have descended upon me in water and the Spirit, in my baptism. And then there was no question of my convincing or

excogitating anything about You. Then my reason with its extravagant cleverness was still silent. Then, without asking me, You made Yourself my poor heart's destiny." (*Encounters with Silence*, p. 30.)

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By Philip Endean

Limited preview on Google Books includes all of Chapter 1, a significant portion of Chapter 2, "The Immediate Experience of God," and portions of Chapter 11, "Ignatius, Rahner, and Theology."

[Karl Rahner \(1904-1984\)](#)

Edited by Derek Michaud

An accessible and fairly comprehensive review of Rahner's thought, based primarily on *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*.