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Reading Karl Rahner: Twenty-five years after his death, Rahner's works still illuminate.

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On Ash Wednesday 1984, the day after the city of Innsbruck had celebrated the 80th birthday of Karl Rahner, S.J., I drove him on a tour that was to be the last we made together. In the neighboring town of Schwaz, we visited the Church of the Assumption, which interested him especially because of its two naves, one for the upper classes and one for the workers. At a restored Franciscan cloister he corrected me quickly when I observed a scene of “the resurrection of the dead.” “No, no,” he objected, “the resurrection of the body!” Over dinner it was clear that he paid little attention to the body’s nutritional needs, ordering only an elaborate local dessert of apple pancakes. Weeks later, back home in the United States, I grieved upon learning of his death on March 30.

Important publications, especially from a new generation of German scholars, continue to research the roots of Rahner’s thought. Successive volumes of a landmark new edition of his *Sämtliche Werke* (“Complete Edition”) have been appearing regularly, with 23 volumes now available out of the planned 32. The English translation of an important book of essays by German-speaking colleagues and friends, *Encounters With Karl Rahner*, is forthcoming.

Reading Rahner can be a lifetime’s occupation or, better, a resource for a lifetime. For wayfaring Christians perhaps more than for academic theologians, pages in even his most difficult essays still illuminate in startling ways. Rahner writes like a poet whose creativity has been constrained in order to serve the community’s shared questions—or

like a mystic willing, though always discreetly, to share profound intimations of divine presence.

How might we in a new century read this legendary figure? I offer five guiding questions.

1. How did Karl Rahner understand human reason and its capacity for truth? Well, quite differently from both 18th- and 19th-century science and from the First Vatican Council, which too easily defended reason on terms it accepted from that science. Like other great humanist thinkers of his time—Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, for example—Rahner warned repeatedly against reducing reason and the language through which it expresses itself to technical and instrumental uses. He admired the advances of science and was grateful for them (fast cars and escalators fascinated him, and he knew the value of an occasional sleeping pill), but he repeatedly insisted that the mind's deepest need is communion in what can never be ultimately defined—in love, fidelity and trust. "What if it is essential and constitutive of true knowledge," he asked in a famous essay of 1959, "of [knowledge in its deepest, fullest sense], of its growth, self-awareness and lucidity, to know by knowing also that it does not know, to know itself oriented from the start to the incomprehensible and inexpressible, to recognize more and more that only in this way can it truly be itself and not [just] come to a halt at some regrettable limit?"

He was speaking as a believer in search of understanding, as someone who felt himself addressed, welcomed and embraced by a holy mystery for whom the word "God" is a necessary, perhaps, but terribly faltering term. The more reasonable we are, the more we realize that only the horizon and term of our mind's endless, questioning dynamism can satisfy the hunger of human hearts. The insight had roots in Augustine and Aquinas, but also, by contrast, in the self-confidence of modernity—of which Rahner was one of the most trenchant and profound critics. (This against the often-advanced view that he adopted a philosophical starting point and sought God and the incarnate Word of God from that point.)

2. In Rahner's thought, what is the relationship between knowing and loving? Do they stand next to each other, does one follow upon the other, is one primary (as in the tradition of heaven as beatific vision)? Or are they more intrinsically and dynamically

related, neither being really itself without the other? His answer came as early as his famous lectures on the philosophy of religion, *Hearers of the Word* (1941), in which he understands knowledge as ordained to fulfillment in love. Refusing to choose between intellectualism and voluntarism, he draws on Bonaventure's notion of ecstatic reason and sees knowledge and love as mutually related, as indwelling each other: "In the heart of knowledge stands love, from which knowledge itself lives." Here the commonplace misunderstanding that we can choose only what we first understand yields to the experientially more accurate sense that inquiry is always motivated, that it is the inquiry of subjects who have concerns, commitments and convictions. Rahner writes: "Thus will and knowledge can only be understood in a relationship of reciprocal priority with one another, not one of linear sequence."

Rahner restates this view often. In his essay on the Trinity, for example, he speaks of truth as "first the truth that we do, the deed in which we firmly posit our self for our self and for others, the deed which waits to see how it will be received." We are the truth of lives that only love can guarantee. Thus, knowledge is only momentarily an end in itself; it must always be guided by love, just as, in strictly Trinitarian terms, Christian believers can accept God's Word only if they are guided by the Spirit of God (see I Cor 12:3; Jn 14:26, 16:12).

3. Of whom is Rahner really speaking? Often his theme is taken to be the relation between the individual human subject and the God who redeems us in Christ. But this interpretation does an injustice to his thought. Rather than considering individuality a primordial anthropological given ("first the 'I'"), Rahner actually had a profoundly, even mystically, social conception of humanity and of all created reality. As early as *Hearers of the Word*, he wrote: "We are human beings only within humanity." In contrast to the extrinsicist, objectivistic and a-historical neoscholasticism in which he was educated, he became steadily more emphatic that our social character as human beings must be grounded, not merely psychologically, sociologically or ethically but through a religiously motivated ontology, that is to say, through a view of reality informed by faith. It is in our historical journey as human subjects toward what we religiously call the "holy mystery of God" that we become increasingly aware of ourselves as responsible subjects.

In a crucial essay in 1971, Rahner wrote:

In the unity of the experience of God and the experience of one's self, on the one hand, and in the unity of the experience of the self and encounter with the neighbor, on the other hand, we see that these three experiences are fundamentally one experience [in the sense not of a temporal moment but rather of an ongoing life] with three aspects which mutually condition each other [God, self, community]. But that means, reciprocally, that the unity of the love of God and neighbor is only conceivable if we presuppose the unity of the experience of God and of the self. [It is in being drawn to God that we become truly aware of ourselves.] What first appears as a purely philosophically formulated and indirectly grounded unity of the experience of the self and of God is also an implication of the fundamental Christian statement on the unity of the love of neighbor and of God.

Neither an intellectualist nor an individualist, Rahner was also not primarily a theoretical thinker. That brings us to our fourth question.

4. What was the role of practice in Rahner's thought? In his early meditations *Encounters With Silence* (1938), he spoke of the true wisdom of experienced love. Rahner's work under Karl Rudolph at the Pastoral Institute in Vienna during the war years had a lasting influence on his thought. And his practical bent became most obvious in the five-volume *Handbook of Pastoral Theology*, for which he served as co-editor (and frequent contributor) from 1964 to 1972. In an interview for his 70th birthday he said, "Behind everything I did stood a very immediate, pastoral and spiritual interest." Church teaching, he thought, should be subordinated to church praxis, and theology should be conceived not primarily as a theoretical but rather as a practical discipline.

Why? Most fundamentally because Rahner believed that in our shared and fallible freedom we are called to participate in the justice and generosity of God's own freedom. From the very beginning, he understood Christian faith not simply as knowledge about God, but as trust in the saving grace of God. Revelation is not information about God but is God's own self-disclosure to us. Jesus is not a messenger with unexpected news but a mediator of all-encompassing, divine grace. The Spirit is not a universal instinct

but a transforming power. And the church is not meant to be a self-sufficient institution but a sacrament, an effective sign of salvation for all of us poor, wayward human beings.

Rahner held that our knowledge is truest in action, not in prior speculation. “Theology is directed toward living out hope and love, in which there is a moment of knowledge which is not possible without them,” he wrote. “Orthodoxy [thinking rightly] and orthopraxis [acting rightly] mutually condition each other in a primordial nameless unity, which is known, if at all, only through praxis [emphasis added]. And this is because all [religious] knowledge is valid only in saving action, when it has fulfilled itself in love and thus remains as theory.”

In suggesting each of these four questions on the place of knowledge, love, community and practice in Rahner’s thought, I have emphasized the dynamic interaction of the elements involved, a mutual conditioning that charges life and history forward, even when it falters. That brings us to the last question.

5. What might have most originally inspired this sense of dialectic, of interaction that promises or at least offers progress?

From Klaus Fischer’s groundbreaking study of Rahner’s anthropology through fine studies by Harvey Egan, S.J., and Philip Endean, S.J., the spirituality of St. Ignatius Loyola and his Spiritual Exercises have been suggested as the deepest source of Rahner’s worldview. He himself said as much, implying it most memorably in the essay that he often called his last will and testament, “St. Ignatius Speaks to a Jesuit of Today” (1978). Less noted, however, is that the Exercises are a school of freedom—freedom from the false self that imprisons us and freedom for the call of Christ to serve beneath the banner of his cross—and a freedom that undergoes transformation.

The journey of the “Four Weeks” of the Exercises does not unfold all on the same terrain. It moves from a recognition of graced life and repentance for how we distort it toward a readiness to hear the call of Christ, which leads then to assimilation to his way of life, humbled wonder at the depth of suffering love shown in his self-emptying death, and then to rejoicing with his Easter joy and hoping in his Spirit. Each moment in the journey raises a question whose answer carries us to the next stage and a new

question (“To what is Christ calling me?”), which then carries us toward another answer and another question (“What will it cost?”) and further still to a prayer that wagers all we are can be surrendered into the immense and infinite love of God (the “Contemplation for Attaining God’s Way of Loving”). The hope of the Fourth Week is present as goal in the meditations of the First Week, but only passage through each of the “weeks,” or stages, can allow that real hope to be born. The prayer of the Exercises, then, might best be described as dialectical. And so too at its root is Karl Rahner’s theology.

But see for yourselves: take and read, and pray, certainly. Above all, hope to find nourishment for life. Having a few good questions to ask at the beginning may help you to understand what your faith calls you to do. Good questions bring light for understanding. I remember Karl Rahner, on entering the church in Schwaz, going first to a statue of the Virgin and lighting a candle there. When I started to do the same, he held me back. “No, one light is enough.”

“Indeed it is,” I thought, “if it is yours.”

Leo J. ODonovan remembers Karl Rahner on our podcast.

This article also appeared in print, under the headline “Reading Karl Rahner,” in the March 30, 2009 issue.

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