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Karl Rahner and His Theology

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Introduction

Karl Rahner was born in 1904 into a middle class traditional German Catholic family. He joined the Society of Jesus at the age of 18 years old. Rahner went through a normal process of Jesuit formation which included two years of spiritual and religious formation in the novitiate, followed by the studies of humanities, philosophy, and theology. After his ordination to the priesthood, Rahner pursued a doctorate in philosophy. His dissertation was rejected by the dissertation director, Martin Honecker, a somewhat more traditional reader of Thomas Aquinas. However, the dissertation was published in 1939

as *Spirit in the World*.¹ Rahner also completed a doctorate in theology. His second book, *Hearer of the Word*, was published in 1941. The book comprised of a series of lectures in theology Rahner gave in 1937 and was considered a companion piece to *Spirit in the World*.² Subsequently, Rahner spent most of his life teaching at several schools of theology in Germany and Austria, doing research, writing, and giving lectures. He is considered one of the most influential Catholic theologians of the twentieth century. Rahner passed away in Innsbruck, Austria in 1984 at the age of 80 years old.

This essay will highlight Rahner's principal contributions to the development of Catholic theology in the twentieth century and beyond. The first section will present the central idea in Emmanuel Kant's (1724 – 1804) transcendental philosophy which impacted Rahner's theological development and argued that while Rahner employed Kant's transcendental method in developing his theological method, he was more influenced by Joseph Maréchal (1878 – 1944), the neo-thomist whose thoughts guided Rahner in the direction faithful to the traditional theology of Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274). The second section will present and discuss the main development in Rahner's understanding of grace and nature and their relationship, to underscore that grace and nature are

¹ Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner: A Brief Introduction* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1997), 100.

² Karen, Kilby, *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 49.

not opposing to each other. Rather, grace builds on nature, elevates it, and enables it to be united with God. The last section will explore the influence of Saint Ignatius of Loyola (1491 – 1556), the founder of the Society of Jesus, on Rahner, in particular, how Saint Ignatius impacted Rahner’s religious and spiritual formation as a Jesuit priest and theologian.

1. Rahner’s Transcendental and Anthropological Method

While Rahner’s thoughts evolved and developed over his lifetime, scholars have agreed that his first two books, *Spirit in the World*, and *Hearer of the Word*, mentioned above, established the central tenets of Rahner’s theological foundations on which he reinterpreted the traditional theology of Thomas Aquinas for contemporary Catholic Christians. In doing so, Rahner invented a new way of doing theology effectively adapting to the context of the twentieth century, in particular in the light of the Second Vatican Council’s document, *Gaudium et Spes*, on the Church in the Modern World. Professor Kilby observes, “Much of Rahner’s work, particularly his work before the 1960s and the Second Vatican Council, can be understood as an effort to open up the neo-scholasticism. This means that he neither accepted the state of Roman Catholic thought as it was, nor simply turned his back on it, but tried to show that everything was not so neatly tied up as it seemed in this system, that there was scope for new ideas, and need for new thinking, and room for engagement

with the modern world.”³ In other words, Rahner believed that Catholic theologians in the twentieth century could find in Aquinas many of the questions and issues that had already been raised by Immanuel Kant, and thus could reinterpret Thomas Aquinas in the light of modern philosophy.

Rahner is often recognized among Catholic scholars as a *Transcendental Thomist* because he employed the transcendental philosophy of the German philosopher, Emmanuel Kant, through the lens of the Belgium Jesuit, Joseph Maréchal, to reinterpret the thoughts of Thomas Aquinas.

According to Kant, human knowledge occupies, not so much the objects of knowledge themselves, but with the mode of knowledge made possible by the *transcendental* ground, which the knower *experiences*. The two key terms here are *transcendental* and *experience*. The term *transcendental* signifies that human knowledge transcends mere sensory impressions, and the term *experience* indicates that human knowledge must be grounded in sensory evidence. This means that human knowledge is restricted to the sensible realm. However, because of its transcendental characteristic, knowledge is universal. In other words, human knowledge is always about the particular, but that which is known in the particular is known by its universal characteristic. In Kant’s view, our faculty of sense and intellection enable us to have knowledge of the world as they appear to us and

³ Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner: A Brief Introduction*, xvii.

we understand them, known as the *phenomenal* world, but we cannot gain knowledge of the supersensible world, of things-in-themselves, known as the *noumenal* world.⁴ In asserting the distinction between the *phenomenal* and the *noumenal*, Kant affirms the existence of the noumenal, of things-in-themselves. However, at the same time, he denies the possibility of metaphysical knowledge on the ground that we cannot make any claims beyond the sensible world. Thus, in Kant's transcendental philosophy, there exists a tendency toward dualism in that the *phenomenal* and *noumenal* worlds are irreconcilable. Ultimately, Kant remains an empiricist even though his transcendental method aims to construct a theory of knowledge that goes beyond sensory impressions.

However, being a deeply religious man, Kant posits the possibility of the existence of God. In Kant's view, faith in God is necessary for a practical reason but not for a theoretical reason, for we cannot make any metaphysical claims about God. Kant insists that God must exist and function as the transcendental unity of our knowledge; otherwise, we do not have any knowledge at all but mere unrelated sensory impressions of things. In this way, "Kant asserts that theoretical reason is subordinate to practical reason, since all interest is ultimately practical and even that of speculative reason is conditional, and it is only in the practical enjoyment of reason

⁴ Anthony M. Matteo, *Quest for the Absolute: The Philosophical Vision of Joseph Maréchal* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University, 1992), 66.

that it is complete.”⁵ In other words, while Kant admits that we can say nothing positive about the supersensible world and God, he in fact, conceives the existence of that world and of God as a necessary condition for our knowledge of the sensible world in which we know and live.

Maréchal’s critique of Kant begins where Kant left off, namely, the denial of metaphysics. Rooted in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, Maréchal maintains that sense and intellect are both necessary for knowledge. But unlike Kant, Maréchal does not rule out the need to construct an intelligible metaphysics. For Maréchal, human knowing is a fundamentally *dynamic* process by which we come to know, not mere appearances of things, but things-in-themselves. In other words, contrary to Kant who has eliminated the knowledge of the noumenal world, Maréchal affirms knowledge of the noumenal world as the necessary condition for the knowledge of the *real* world, whereby “real” world refers to the world in which we know and live. As Matteo observes: “[According to Maréchal] knowledge of the *real* world, and not mere appearances, is gained by a patient, persistent, intelligent, and rational appropriation of what is given to the senses.”⁶ Unlike Kant who stops at affirming the noumenal world and positing the possibility of the existence of God as the transcendental

⁵ Matteo, *Quest for the Absolute*, 70.

⁶ Anthony M. Matteo, “Maréchal’s Dialogue with Kant: The Roots of Transcendental Thomism and the Search for Ultimate Reality and Meaning,” *Journal of the University of Toronto*, 22, no. 4 (December 1999): 269.

unity of human knowledge, Maréchal perceives the human quest for the absolute as one that presuppose God as the transcendental being who is the object of human search for the absolute beyond the phenomenal world. The reason is that, being the absolute being, God's existence is not only possible but necessary. The term "absolute" in reference to God entails the impossibility of the existence of God. We cannot affirm the possibility of the existence of the absolute being while denying the actual existence of that being at the same time.

The key development in Maréchal, in contrast to Kant, can be seen in the way Maréchal distinguishes between the *content of thought* and the *activity of thinking* in cognitive process. According to Maréchal, if our cognitive process is limited to the content of our thought, then our quest for truth is limited to the empirical data from which we try to comprehend. But the activity of our thinking will not be satisfied with such a comprehension and ceases to search for truth. Rather, the activity of our thinking continues to search for the absolute object of truth that has given rise to the human desire to search for meaning in the first place. In other words, "If we reflect on the activity of thinking, we will realize that it is driven by a primal yearning or pure desire to know."⁷ Like Thomas Aquinas, Maréchal teaches that all intellectual knowledge is inspired and directed toward God and find satisfaction in divine union or *visio beatifica*. In Maréchal's

⁷ Matteo, *Quest for the Absolute*, 103.

view, while we cannot reach the divine union in this finite world, the divine union (or *visio beatifica*) itself inspires all our intellectual operations and grounds our unlimited desire to know.”⁸ In other words, while Maréchal shares with Kant that human knowledge occupies, not so much the objects of knowledge themselves, but with the mode of knowledge made possible by the *transcendental* ground, which the knower *experiences*, he disagrees with Kant that knowledge is limited to the sensible world.

Karl Rahner’s theological method synthesizes Kant’s *transcendental philosophy* and Maréchal’s *critical realist* approach. Like Kant’s, Rahner’s transcendental and anthropological method takes the starting point from human experience, that is, with sensory impressions. But rooted in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition articulated by Maréchal, Rahner posits that human knowledge transcends the sensory data found in experience. The reason is that upon reflection on the experience which has arisen from the concrete reality, we human beings are asking questions and finding the answers about the experience. But these questions and their answers concern, not so much the experience itself, but the meaning and significance for the human life in light of the experience. In this vein of thought, Rahner distinguishes between positive *factual knowledge* and *existential significance* that comes as the result of personal reflection on the experience, and he

⁸ Matteo, “Maréchal’s Dialogue with Kant,” 270.

insists on the importance of the latter.⁹ Speaking concretely about the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, we can say that we have been faced with two types of question: one type concerns the scientific understanding of the cause and effect of the virus and the human effort to discover vaccination for the prevention of the spread of the virus. The other type of question concerns the quality of the human life in light of the stark reality of the pandemic that has caused anxiety, death, economic downturn, and uncertainty about the future. This latter type of question does not deal so much with the medical science regarding the virus itself, but with the broader picture of life-meaning. It is the type of question concerning personal, national and international relationship; it wakens us to the reality of the basic necessity of life such food, shelter and personal hygiene; it directs our intentionality and activity toward others whose needs must depend on us and we on them; and it teaches us how to be more compassionate, hopeful, and responsible in the midst of the uncertainty caused by the pandemic. In Rahner's view, not only this second type of question is inescapable to human life, but it is essential for the progress of humanity. Unlike questions concerning *scientific and factual knowledge* which can provide us with an understanding of a phenomenon but often do not inspire us to become the kind of people we want to be, *existential questions* presuppose God as the transcendent being and our

⁹ Karl-Heinz, Weger: *Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1980), 20.

innate capability for self-transcendence in God, which in turn, enables us to advance in our spiritual progress.

Rahner's theological method correlates the transcendental and the anthropological realities on the one hand, and sense and intellect on the other. Like Kant, Rahner conceives human knowledge as one occupies, not so much the objects of knowledge themselves, but with the mode of knowledge made possible by the transcendental ground. But unlike Kant who ruled out the possibility for metaphysics and posited the possibility of the existence of God on the ground of practical reason rather than a theoretical one, Rahner shares the view of Maréchal who affirmed the necessity of God as the ground of human self-transcendence. For Rahner, God exists as the Mystery of our lives. The term "Mystery" in reference to God does not imply that God can be studied as an object of our thought, or examined under the microscope like an object of scientific experimentation, or clarified and explained with the use of human language. Rather, the Mystery of God attracts, invites, and inspires us to encounter God when we are confronting the reality of our life with *existential questions* and attempting to find the answers to them.

Rahner's concept of *a priori*, the term he borrows from Kant, sheds light on his Transcendental and Anthropological Method. When Rahner employs this term in his theological writings, he means something which we cannot acquire simply as a result of our association with the world of experience.

Rather, he is pointing to the fact that we would not have any knowledge of the sensory world at all if we did not possess this *a priori* element in our intellectual endowment.¹⁰ In other words, the *a priori* is the innate capacity to know. Rahner often insists on the importance of paying attention to the activity of the *a priori* in our experience. He uses an analogy of the sand on the seashore and the vastness of the sea to illustrate the point. As Weger observes, “The aim of this [Rahner’s] method is to show that man’s task in life is not primarily to be busy with the grains of sand that he finds on the beach, but to live on the beach of the infinite sea of mystery...”. The aim is to demonstrate that knowledge, experience, and activity would simply not be possible for man if all that he had in his hands were the grains of sand that he found in his everyday life on the beach.”¹¹ Similar to Maréchal, Rahner believes that *human knowledge is fundamentally dynamic* precisely because knowledge is gained by the activity of thinking which is not limited to sensory impressions. Rather, knowledge is already attained, or at least may have already been present in the *a priori*, as the conditions for the possibility to know, even though the person may not be aware of it. This does not mean that one should not try to articulate his/her experience and put it into concepts. However, it does mean that the articulation ought to be seen as derivative of the experience itself. Thus Rahner insists on being attentive to one’s experience itself and

¹⁰ Weger, *Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Theology*, 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

to return to it as often as possible in one's analysis, because it is in the pre-conceptualized, unthematic state of mind, given in the *a priori*, that one is most in touch with God whose existence transcends one's desire to know in the first place. Our transcendent experience of our self depends on our awareness of God and our knowledge of God depends on our knowledge of our self. As Rahner asserts, "The personal development of experience of the self constitutes the personal development of the experience of God and vice versa."¹² In other words, our search for the Mystery (God) is the search for our own self transcendence, and our search for self-transcendence is the search for God. But the Mystery (God) draws and inspires our desire to know and makes possible our transcendental knowledge beyond the sensory world. In this sense, Rahner's method correlates the transcendental and the anthropological realities and establishes the foundation for his development of the theology of grace to which we now turn.

2. Grace: The Heart of Rahner's Theology

Rahner's theology of grace is based on a longstanding Christian tradition which teaches that *to be human is to be created in the image and likeness of God*. This means that human beings are made capable for divine union. But the mode of union with the divine is achieved by divine

¹² Karl Rahner, "Experience of Self and Experience of God," *Theological Investigations*, 13, trans. David Burke (New York: Crossroad, 1975), 126.

grace, though not without human response. The distinctive development in Rahner can be seen in the way he insists that grace cannot be something foreign to human beings. Rather, grace is a *constitutive* element of the human person. For if grace exists as the necessary condition for divine union, then grace also exists as the ground of human transcendence into the likeness of God. Indeed, Rahner would say that *grace is a constitutive principle of what it means to be a human person*.¹³ To use Aristotelian terminology, we could say that the relation between God's grace and human nature is not a relation in terms of a mere efficient cause. Rather, it is a relation in terms of a quasi-formal cause; that is, grace not only elevates human to the supernatural end, but grace also constitutes human nature. Rahner underscores the truth that by nature, human beings possess a real potential for grace.¹⁴ Viewed from this perspective, grace is not something first offered in Jesus Christ as a consequence of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection. Rather, grace is always present at the center of human existence in the mode of an offer.¹⁵ However, in Christ, we see the full manifestation of grace, and so Christ is the Redeemer of humanity because in

¹³ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 116.

¹⁴ Karl Rahner, "The Relationship between Nature and Grace: The Supernatural Existential," in *A Rahner Reader*, edited by Gerald McCool (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 187.

¹⁵ Weger, *Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Theology*, 87.

him God's communication to humanity has reached the peak of God's being *gracious* to us.¹⁶

Central to Rahner's theology of grace are three features: 1) grace is, most fundamentally, God's self-communication to us; 2) this communication occurs in and through our transcendental experience; and 3) grace is offered universally, that is, God's offer of grace is to everyone and all the time. These three features deserve some explanation.

First, grace is God's self-communication to us. As we have seen, Rahner's Transcendental and Anthropological Method aims to correlate human experience and divine experience in such a way that we must conceive divine experience as the foundation of human experience. This means that grace (God) and nature (human beings) are distinct, but they are neither distant from nor opposing to each other. Rather, God's grace elevates human nature and enables it to reach its own potential as *created in the image and likeness of God*. Human nature, therefore, does not exist as a "pure nature," that is, our human nature cannot be conceived as mere material substance. We do not exist as mere physical and biological beings. Rather, our nature is a *graced nature* because God's spirit is present at the core of our being and operative in our cognitive process to elevate us to a supernatural end. Rahner's theology of grace, as discussed, enables us to perceive grace not as something different from God, but as

¹⁶ Kilby, *Karl Rahner: A Brief Introduction*, 21.

God's own self-communication to us. In doing so, Rahner is able to bridge the gap between grace and nature developed in neo-scholastic theology whereby grace was characterized into two kinds: *created grace* and *uncreated grace*. But in the neo-scholastic view, *created grace* transforms us and enables us to participate in God's life (*uncreated grace*). This means that uncreated grace follows created grace and is perceived as a reward for the transformation which created grace brought about. Rahner reverses the order of grace in neo-scholastic's conception. As Kilby observes, "Rahner maintains that created grace flows from uncreated grace. The spirit of God dwells in us, and as a result, 'as a consequence and a manifestation' of this divine self-communication, we are transformed concretely and in particular ways. God transforms us by giving himself to us, rather than giving himself to us *because* he has transformed us."¹⁷

Second, God's self-communication to us occurs in and through our transcendental experience. As we have seen, Rahner employs Kant's Transcendental Method to assert that human knowledge depends on sensory impressions (i.e., all knowledge is based on the data received in the experience of a given phenomenon), but in the search for universal truth, the human cognitive process goes beyond the sensory world (i.e., the human intellect transcends sensory impressions and attains the universal knowledge of an observable phenomenon).

¹⁷ Kilby, *Karl Rahner: A Brief Introduction*, 22.

In this line of thought, Rahner asserts that human experience of grace is unlike an experience of any finite things in that we do not experience God as one thing among other things, because as the absolute being, God exists as pure spirit who inspires and transforms the human intellect and enables it to grasp the true essence of finite things in God. This means that while God must be experienced in and through finite things, God cannot be perceived as one thing among finite things but only as the transcendental basis of our experience of finite things. The experience of God, therefore, is never direct but always in the background of our experience of other things. Rahner coined the term *mediated immediacy* to describe the human experience of God. For Rahner, our experience of God is best described as a *mediated immediacy*. This description of divine experience, however, does not imply that the experience itself is unmediated. Rather, the term “immediacy” is used to indicate that God’s presence is “direct” as opposed to being drawn from dogmatic statement, or derived from logical reasoning. Our experience of God’s presence is a “direct” experience, for God desires to communicate to us and God does so directly in and through grace which is God’s own self.¹⁸ In other words, it is our transcendental experience which exists as the background of our cognitive operation that enables us to understand finite things anew in spirit. In this sense, we do not experience God first, and then as a result, we

¹⁸ Karl Rahner, “*Experience of Self and Experience of God*,” 83.

experience other things in God. Rather, we experience God in other things because God's grace exists and is operative in our transcendental experience of other things. The question can be raised, thus: How do we become aware of our transcendental experience? The answer can be found in the way Rahner insists, again and again, that we must be attentive to the *existential questions* that arise in our cognitive process. As Weger observes, [in Rahner's view] "Every man makes that [transcendental] experience in accordance with the particular historical and individual situation of his specific life. Every man! But he has, so to speak, to dig it out from under the rubbish of everyday experience, and must not run away from it where it begins to become legible, as though it were only an undermining and disturbance of self-evidence of his everyday life and his scientific assurance."¹⁹

Third, and most important, Rahner insists on the universal character of grace; that is, grace is offered to everyone and all the time. This means that God's grace is present, not only in those who accept God's grace and thus live in holiness, but also in sinners, those who reject God's grace. Endowed with intellectual will, human beings possess the freedom to either accept God's grace or reject it. But in Rahner's view, to reject God's grace means to reject the very core of what it means to be human, and thus, to end up in self-contradiction. As Kilby observes, "We have a fundamental freedom either

¹⁹ Weger, *Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Theology*, 93.

to accept God's self-communication or to reject it. If we reject it, however, we do not make it go away, but instead live in permanent contradiction with it.²⁰

It is because Rahner conceives grace as universally available to everyone and all the time that the question of salvation of non-Christians becomes not only a possibility but also a logical necessity. Rahner's argument for the salvation of non-Christians can be delineated as follows: God's self-communication has reached its peak in Jesus Christ in an irrevocable and irreversible way. Thus, Christianity is the one true religion manifesting the fullness of God's salvation to humanity. However, it is true that there are people who have neither heard of the Gospel of Christ nor the teaching of the Church. Since God desires to save all, including those who have not heard of the Gospel of Christ, God's communication to non-Christians must somehow be appropriated in and through their own particular cultural and religious traditions. This means that those who accept the offer of God's grace can rightly be called "anonymous Christians" even though they are not explicitly aware of Christ.²¹

Rahner's theory of anonymous Christians has received criticisms, most notably from Hans Urs von Balthasar and

²⁰ Kilby, *Karl Rahner: A Brief Introduction*, 26.

²¹ Martin Albl, *Reason, Faith, and Tradition: Explorations in Catholic Theology*, second edition (Winona, Minnesota: Anselm Academic, 2015), 348-349.

Henry de Lubac. In his book, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, Balthasar criticizes Rahner on the ground that Rahner's theory of anonymous Christians leads to the loss of the distinctiveness of Christianity which entails the loss of commitment. In Balthasar's view, if one can be a Christian anonymously, why does he/she bother to profess his/her faith at all, and what is the point of witnessing to the Christian faith to others?²² Henry de Lubac tackles the issue from a different concern than that of Balthasar. In his book, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, de Lubac points out that Rahner's theory of anonymous Christians "misses the deeply transformative character of the gospel, the genuine conversion which Christianity involves."²³

Those who have defended Rahner's theory of anonymous Christians suggest that Rahner's critics misunderstand Rahner's intention. They argue that Rahner neither intends to level down Christianity as one equal among other religions (de Lubac's critique), nor does he overlook the importance of the Christian witness of the Gospel of Christ to non-Christians (Balthasar's critique). The central issue in Rahner's theory of anonymous Christians lies in his consistent attempt to reconcile nature and grace whereby grace builds on nature and elevates nature to the supernatural end. This means that every human experience when transformed by God's grace

²² Kilby, *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy*, 116.

²³ *Ibid.*, 118.

implies the experience of Christ whose grace continues to manifest in their lives. In positing the possibility of salvation of non-Christians in Christ, Rahner does not intend to present a theory for interreligious dialogue. Rather, he aims to open up the individual Christian's own horizon to the Mystery of God who is constantly at work to transform every human being into the divine likeness, be they Christians or not. When a Christian rightly appropriates this horizon, he/she will more likely accept God's grace in his/her life while remains open to the Mystery of God's working in other people's lives.

3. The Influence of Ignatius of Loyola on Karl Rahner

Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), the founder of the Society of Jesus, and Karl Rahner lived in two very different historical, cultural, and religious contexts. Ignatius was from the Basque country in northern Spain. He was influenced by late Medieval and Renaissance's religious and cultural milieu of Europe. Rahner was a German who lived through World War I and World War II and their aftermaths. The world was moving from the colonial period into a more global age. If Ignatius was aware of the fact that he must synthesize the spirit of the Late Medieval period with that of the Renaissance and to embrace the best of both worldviews in his religious development, so did Rahner in his own time and place. As we have seen, Rahner attempted to make use of modern and contemporary philosophical developments to

construct a new way of doing theology more appropriate to the new world's context.

Different from each other as they might have been, nonetheless, there is no doubt that Ignatius must have influenced Karl Rahner's theological outlook and development. It would be more beneficial to conclude this study by highlighting the main impact Ignatius had on Rahner. Rahner himself acknowledged that he was deeply influenced by the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius. We know this from Rahner's own words: "The spirituality of Ignatius himself, which one learned through the practice of prayer and religious formation, was more significant for me than all learned philosophy and theology inside and outside the order."²⁴

Rahner's article "Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit," is considered the most profound spiritual testament to Ignatius's experience of God. Central to that testament are two points. First, an experience of God is unlike that of any finite thing. Rather, it is beyond concrete imaginings. It is an experience of a nameless, silent, yet very near presence of God. In Rahner's own words: "All I say is I knew God, nameless and unfathomable, silent and yet near, bestowing himself upon me in his Trinity; I knew God beyond all concrete imaginings. I knew Him clearly in such nearness and

²⁴ Hubert Biallowons & Paul Imhof, ed. *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews*, 1965-1982, trans. Harvey Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 191.

grace as is impossible to confound or mistake.”²⁵ Secondly, an experience of God is distinct from a concept of God. Rahner continues, “I knew God himself, not simply human words describing him.”²⁶

Rahner’s spiritual testament echoes Ignatius of Loyola’s conviction that God communicates directly to the human soul, as it can be seen in the following directive from Ignatius regarding the role of a spiritual director in guiding a retreatant: “During these *Spiritual Exercises* when a person is seeking God’s will, it is more appropriate and far better that the Creator and Lord himself should communicate himself to the devout soul, embracing it in love and praise, and disposing it for the way which will enable the soul to serve him better in the future. Accordingly, the one giving the *Exercises* ought not to lean or incline in either direction but rather, while standing by like the pointer of a scale in equilibrium, *to allow the Creator to deal immediately with the creature* and the creature with its Creator and Lord.”²⁷

Perhaps Ignatius himself had learned from his own experience of God at the Cardoner River in Manresa how God communicated directly to his soul in a series of visions best construed as *divine illuminations*. Thirty years after the

²⁵ Karl Rahner, “Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit” in *Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Rosaleen Ockenden (London: Collins, 1979), 11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁷ George E. Ganss, trans. *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius, SpEx 15* (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), 25-26. Emphasis added.

experience of God at the Cardoner River, Ignatius realized the effect of the experience and how it nurtured in him a profound confirmation of faith in God, so much so that he would resolve to die for what he had seen in the visions even if there were no teachings from Scripture about them.²⁸ He also said that this experience left him with the understanding enlightened in so great a way that it seemed to him as if he were a different person with a mind different from that which he had before.²⁹

Rahner interprets Ignatius's experience to be a direct experience of God which occurred in Ignatius without his knowledge of how it happened. Ignatius himself described this kind of direct experience of God as *a consolation without previous cause*: "By 'without [a preceding] cause' I mean without any previous perception or understanding of some object by means of which the consolation just mentioned might have been stimulated, through the intermediate activity of the person's acts of understanding and willing."³⁰

Rahner interprets the Ignatian *consolation*, whether "with cause" or "without a previous cause," as something which has its origin ultimately in God. Thus there is a significance of the term "previous" in the expression *consolation without*

²⁸ Divarkar R. Parmananda, trans. *A Pilgrim's Testament: The Memoirs of St. Ignatius of Loyola* (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995), no. 29, p. 42.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 30, p. 43.

³⁰ Ganss, *SpEx* 330, p. 126.

previous cause. Rahner insists that all of our experience of the transcendent God is mediated by a finite object or by our reflection on it in some way. With the concept of *consolation without previous cause*, Ignatius is pointing to an experience he believes to come directly from God and not as the result of any finite object of one's immediate contemplation or as the result of the intellectual operation that brings about one's understanding and desire. God alone intervenes and works directly with the soul (or consciousness), to draw the person into God's divine nature. It is an experience of the love of God that occurs without the intellect's having any share in it.³¹ In Rahner's analysis, the divine love alone is the content and the cause of a *consolation without previous cause*. The person who feels the divine presence in this case is not able to understand the cause and content of the feeling, and yet cannot but accept it as true. Rahner calls this kind of divine experience *transcendent* in that it goes beyond concrete imaginings and reason. For this reason he describes the experience itself as a "nameless and unfathomable, silent and yet near" experience of God.³²

If the Ignatian *consolation without previous cause*, as discussed, occurs without our conceptual knowledge, then how do we anticipate it and/or prepare ourselves for such

³¹ Karl Rahner, *The Dynamic Element in the Church*, trans. W.J. O'Hara (New York: Herder & Herder, 1964), 134.

³² Karl Rahner, "Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit" in *Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Rosaleen Ockenden, 11.

an experience? To answer this question, Rahner relates to the Ignatian concept of “indifference” to suggest a mode of spiritual disposition appropriate and ready to receive God’s grace. The *Ignatian indifference* does not mean “carelessness” or “neutrality” in regard to life circumstances, states of life, and material possessions, as the English word “indifference” often connotes. Rather, *Ignatian indifference* is best construed as the state of spiritual disposition, a sense of openness to divine inspiration wherever it may be found. In theological language, this means that one should live in the state of grace, whereby grace is always available at least as an offer. Here we see how the *Ignatian indifference* is closely associated with the Ignatian concept of *finding God in all things*. In fact, to be *indifferent* to created things, in the sense we have discussed, enables us to find God in all created things, because God exists as the condition of the possibility for our transcendental experience of all created things, and thus, through our transcendental experience, we are able to perceive the essence of created things as coming from God. And so, we do not possess them as our own, but we receive them as God’s gifts. In this way, not only do we avoid being frustrated by created things, but we are able to enjoy created things and make use of them to glorify God and to find fulfillment in our lives.

Conclusion

This essay is intended to be a small contribution to the celebration of the Ignatian Year (2021 – 2022). In it I presented and discussed three key features in Rahner's theology: 1) His transcendental and anthropological method, 2) his understanding of the relationship between grace and nature, and 3) the impacts of Saint Ignatius of Loyola on Karl Rahner's theology. In retrospect, I have realized that I could have rearranged the topics in a reversed order, namely, to present Ignatius's influence on Rahner first, followed by the presentation on Rahner's theology of grace, and conclude with Rahner's theological method. But I decided to keep the order of topics the way they are to underscore one important aspect in our Jesuit life: We Jesuits are all influenced by the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius. These *Exercises* help inform our intellectual endeavor and ministerial effort. Rahner was no exception. He was the genius of the twentieth century who possessed a tremendous capacity to synthesize the various contemporary philosophical and theological ideas into a coherent whole and to make them relevant to our context. His effort and the fruits he produced must have been inspired by Ignatius of Loyola's conviction that God communicates directly to the human soul and that the human being is capable of receiving God's grace and be transformed by it.

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