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ON KARL RAHNER:

The Ignatian Experience as Reflected in the Spiritual Theology of Karl Rahner

AVERY DULLES, S.J.

KARL RAHNER is famed primarily as a speculative theologian. On the assumption that doctrinal and spiritual theology are distinct disciplines, we might be inclined to think that his spirituality should be sought first of all in his popular devotional writings. A careful study of his volumes of sermons and prayers will surely repay the effort, but it would not be the best place to begin if one wished to grasp his conceptions of the spiritual life. For with Rahner theology and spirituality are not two separable quantities. He deliberately and on principle refuses to divide either from the other. "A theological statement," he maintains, "is a statement that carries one into mystery."¹ In all genuinely theological or dogmatic discourse the conceptual content must point beyond itself to the incomprehensible reality of God himself—of God whose self-communication is the tremendous reality we call grace. Neither God nor his self-communication can be adequately represented in conceptual thought and statements. If the theologian is not to misrepresent the content of his speech, he must somehow manage to "conjure up the gracious experience of the absolute mystery itself."² This experiential com-

¹ "Was ist eine dogmatische Aussage?", *Schriften zur Theologie* V (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1962), p. 72.

² *Ibid.*, p. 74.

ponent must be present not only in preaching but in the most academic study of theology. Even in the seminary, Rahner declares, the student must be made to see "that he will not have truly mastered his subject until his reflections become a genuine religious experience for him."³ For Rahner, therefore, theology is intimately bound up with religious experience and with the spiritual life.

To provide a framework for the precise questions which will concern us in this paper, it seems best to begin with some general features of Rahner's spiritual doctrine. Like his theology as a whole, it is multidimensional. It is integrally human, Christian, and Catholic—as vast and diversified, one might almost say, as the reality of God's encounter with man.

From one point of view Rahner's spirituality might be called theocentric, for it has its beginning and end in the ineffable God who dwells in light inaccessible, who is infinitely greater than all our words and ideas about him. At the same time it is Christocentric because Christ, in Rahner's view, is the one unrepeatable and unsurpassable realization of the deepest obediential potency by which human nature is defined—the potency to be raised to personal union with the godhead. All spiritual life is for Rahner a partial reenactment, on a lower plane, of what happened once and for all in Jesus as the Incarnate Word. All authentic piety is therefore an *imitatio Christi*: not in a mechanical or servile way but in a free and original way proportioned to one's authentic self and situation. The mysteries of the life of Christ—not simply (Rahner insists) his Cross and Resurrection but all the constitutive acts of his earthly existence—have inexhaustible value as exemplary and efficacious causes of our redemption.

The white light of Christ's redeeming activity is broken down for us and applied in various historical contexts in the lives of the saints. They serve to mediate to us something of the exemplary power of the Redemption, and point the way to new and creative realizations of Christian sanctity. The

³ "Ueber die theoretische Ausbildung künftiger Priester heute," *Stimmen der Zeit* 175 (1964-65) 192-93.

saint is one who follows faithfully and yet in a profoundly original way, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, the path marked out by Christ. What is here said of the saints in general applies most of all to the Blessed Mother, in whom Rahner sees "the most perfect instance of what it means to be a Christian," the "type or figure that manifests completely the meaning of the Church, and grace, and redemption, and God's salvation."⁴ Rahner's spirituality therefore has a strongly Marian ingredient.

On the basis of his anthropology, which emphasizes the corporeal, social, and historical aspects of human nature, we could assign still other labels to Rahner's spiritual theology. We could say that it is incarnational; for the grace of Christ, as Rahner sees it, never comes to us "*senkrecht von oben*," like a bolt from the blue; it is channeled to us through very concrete historical situations. There is also a strongly social or communitarian dimension. The Word became flesh, Rahner reminds us, in order to unite to himself a holy people. But this cannot be by a merely interior communion of souls invisibly linked together by grace. Granted the spatio-temporal quality of human life, the communion of saints must realize itself as a corporate, socially organized body. Grace always has an ecclesial as well as a Christic dimension. It comes to us through the people whom God has fashioned and tends to incorporate the recipient ever more deeply into that people.

For much the same reason, all grace is in some sense sacramental. "The seven sacraments are the seven basic embodiments of the occurrence and appropriation of grace."⁵ In them the Christian's encounter with God achieves its most perfect and tangible form. But the sacraments must never be separated from the rest of life. "The 'Mass of life' is a necessary condition for the 'Mass of the Church'";⁶ and our

⁴ *Mary, Mother of the Lord* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1962), p. 37.

⁵ "Personal and Sacramental Piety," *Theological Investigations II* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1963), p. 126.

⁶ *The Christian Commitment* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963), p. 148.

liturgical life positively demands that we should carry its fruits into our conduct in the world.

For all his esteem of Church, society, and sacraments, Rahner never neglects the value of freedom and spontaneity. The only central point of the spiritual life, he declares, is God; and that center is everywhere.⁷ If we are obliged to turn toward certain focal institutions, God's grace is not restricted by these. We must be on our guard against elevating any particular devotion—were it even the Sacred Heart, the Mass, or the Blessed Mother—into an absolute of the religious life. No one method can be imposed upon all. Each individual man or woman, Rahner observes, as a unique and unrepeatable term of God's creative love, must find his path to God in a way proper to himself. The saints were strikingly unsystematic people because they were aware of the overriding greatness of God. Countless are the ways in which God may call a man to serve him in the Church or in the world. Even the humblest layman in the Church has his own special gift to make, provided he responds to the particular gifts which the Holy Spirit confers on him.

In the vast dialectic of Rahnerian theology, all these orientations are dynamically conjoined—the uncreated and the created, the Christic and the Marian, the sacramental and the personal, the ecclesial and the individual, the sacred and the secular, the institutional and the charismatic. Unless we keep in mind the breadth of Rahner's perspectives, we shall be in danger of misunderstanding the import of his particular statements about specific problems.

In the following pages no effort will be made to present a full survey of Rahner's spiritual theology. We shall confine our attention to a problem of central interest in our times, that of religious experience. After some discussion of Rahner's general doctrine on this point, we shall examine more concretely the Ignatian quality of the Christian experience as Rahner portrays it.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

I. EXPERIENCE IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

As the opening paragraphs of this study have shown, Rahner avoids attaching primary importance to abstract concepts and propositional formulas. However valid and necessary these may be, they are, in Rahner's view, derivative and therefore secondary. They are signs which embody and to some extent communicate what has its origin in a preconceptual grasp of the real, which may in some sort be called experiential. Rahner's notion of experience is rich and involved, utterly removed from any shallow empiricism.⁸

In the primary act of consciousness, he maintains—that is to say, in the root experience (*Urerfahrung*) which occurs as often as one returns to the wellsprings of his mental life—man apprehends himself as such. He perceives himself as a being oriented to things and to the world, as the subject and ground of his own thinking and activity. Experience therefore includes more than what is directly presented to us as object. It transcends even the superficial consciousness of our own mental acts—that which we can clearly grasp by simple introspection. In its plenitude experience reaches also to the half-acknowledged depths of consciousness—to the indistinct, the implicit, the obscure.

On the basis of this wide notion of experience, Rahner does not hesitate to speak of an immediate experience of God. God is perceived before us or within us as an object, as a being alongside of others. He is not, strictly speaking, one of the data of experience. But in every act of knowledge God is always present as transcendent horizon, as underlying ground, as that which gives reality and intelligibility to all that is seen and known. "Conceptual statements about God, necessary as they are, live off the non-objective experience of transcendence as such".⁹ This marginal experience of God—Rahner calls it a *Grenzerfahrung* (boundary experience)—is

⁸ Cf. article "Erfahrung" in K. Rahner and H. Vorgrimler, *Kleines Theologisches Wörterbuch* (Freiburg i. B.: Herder, 1961), pp. 94-95.

⁹ "Ueber den Begriff des Geheimnisses," *Schriften IV* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1960), p. 70.

the point of departure and indispensable foundation of all religious experience in the strict sense.

But it is only a foundation. For genuinely religious experience Rahner requires something more than this tangential awareness of the infinite horizon against which all the objects of our knowledge are etched. God is experienced in a properly religious way when he draws near to man in grace—and this, not simply in the objective occurrences of salvation history, nor in the outward hearing of the Gospel or the material reception of the sacraments, but over and above all these, inwardly, in the recesses of the spirit. “Together with the word of revelation,” Rahner declares, there must come “the communication by grace of an inner, conscious, non-objective dynamism” toward the God who saves and beatifies.¹⁰ For man to read aright the signs of God’s presence in history or to accept the tidings of the Gospel, God must himself prepare our souls; he must by his inward touch elevate and divinize the absolute horizons of the human spirit. Man’s initial contact with God in grace, therefore, takes the form of an immediate but non-objective experience of which we are not distinctly aware.¹¹

To the question whether grace is experienced, Rahner answers with an unequivocal “yes”. The idea of a purely ontic or entitative elevation, which would leave no mark on a man’s conscious life, would be repugnant in Rahner’s theological system. Man, he maintains, is essentially spirit—albeit “spirit in the world” (*Geist in Welt*)—and spirit is defined in terms of conscious self-possession. Grace must affect man in his spiritual existence, and therefore any bestowal of grace implies a modification of man’s conscious life.

This principle Rahner boldly applies to his theology of justification and of spiritual progress. When the sinner is restored to grace, he must actively orient himself to God through repentance and charity. Sacramental justification should not be depicted as a cheaper and easier way— as a kind of shortcut

¹⁰ “Was ist eine dogmatische Aussage?”, *Schriften* V, p. 84.

¹¹ “Warum und wie können wir die Heiligen verehren?”, *Geist und Leben* 37 (1964) 335, 337.

which dispenses us from personal activity, or even diminishes its importance. Rather, sacraments are the visible gestures of Christ in his Church which elicit as their only appropriate response a more intense activity on our part. When a sacrament is properly received our own dispositions do change, and the inner intensity of our religious life is stepped up.

It would be a merely superficial empiricism to try to deny this statement by appealing to a contrary 'experience' on the occasion of a pious reception of the sacraments. One would in that case confound certain verifiable feelings of consolation, uplift, etc., which are accessible to direct internal experience, with more profound spiritual-supernatural acts which can become more interior, personal and 'existential' without this fact being necessarily verifiable by ordinary internal experience.¹²

As Rahner emphasizes in his essay on "priestly existence," this analysis holds also for sacraments which confer a permanent state. Ordination transforms a man and makes a total claim on his existence, imparting an inner dynamism to do priestly work.¹³

In a highly original discussion of the degrees of Christian perfection, Rahner applies this personal-existential norm to the question of spiritual progress. He refuses to admit that progress can be adequately measured in terms of habits acquired by repeated actions. Such tendencies to act in determinate patterns, he objects, can be produced or destroyed by purely mechanical means. And even the best habits have a certain ambivalence about them. They can deprive our religious actions of spontaneity and real commitment. If habits have a value, Rahner concludes, it is primarily because they liberate a man from lesser concerns so that he can devote his energies more fully to acts of greater moment.

By good habits we gradually overcome to some extent the drag of concupiscence, the moral sluggishness that ordinarily prevents us from putting our full selves into our deliberate actions. The highest perfection consists in acts of love of God

¹² "Personal and Sacramental Piety" (supra, note 5), p. 131.

¹³ "Priesterliche Existenz," *Schriften* III (4th ed., Einsiedeln, 1961), pp. 285-312.

and neighbor performed with the maximum degree of personal engagement. For more traditional delineations of the paths of spiritual progress—such as the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways—Rahner proposes to substitute what he calls “the law of the existential deepening of our acts”.¹⁴ Insofar as we perceive the intensity of our own acts, growth in perfection is, in some sense, a matter of experience. But the man who is truly progressing does not count his “merits”; he is totally taken up with the love of God and neighbor.¹⁵

All other virtuous activities are preparations for, or expressions of, love. And love, Rahner adds, is not just an obligation alongside of others, as if it were permissible or even possible to love simply because it is commanded. Personal love is man’s primary act, the fulfillment of his very being. In communion with his fellow men, who constitute this normal spiritual environment—and in no other way,—man can find both God and himself. Reversing Sartre’s famous dictum, “hell is other men,” Rahner proclaims: “heaven is the other as beloved.”¹⁶

In vain would one object: the love of God is higher than the love of neighbor. The two are inseparable. If a man *thinks* that he loves God and does not *really* love his neighbor, he deceives himself. And a committed love of the other as an absolutely accepted “thou” is already, inclusively, love of God. Traditional theology, Rahner reminds us, teaches that charity toward neighbor is itself a theological virtue—which which means that it has God as its *obiectum formale*. For this reason the Last Judgment can be described in Mt 25 as if rendered on the basis of “atheistic” norms.¹⁷ “As long as you did it for one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me.” To many seemingly pious Christians, Rahner would apparently wish to say: the godless humanitarians—“anonymous Christians”—go into heaven before you.

¹⁴ “Ueber das Problem des Stufenweges zur christlichen Vollendung,” *Schriften* III, p. 34.

¹⁵ “Trost der Zeit,” *Schriften* III, pp. 171-72.

¹⁶ “Heiligen” (supra, note 11), p. 333.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 335.

But must we not distinguish between natural and supernatural charity? Rahner of course does make this distinction, but he refuses to turn it into a separation. The actual world in which man lives is shot through with the supernatural. The concrete nature with which we are born is ordained by God to the beatific vision; it is a nature touched and radically sanctified by the Incarnation of the Word of God. God's universal salvific will surrounds us on every side and fills the very air we breathe. Elevating grace, then, as Rahner conceives it, is not just an occasional sally of God's saving power into the created order; rather it is a permanent offer—an "*Existential*"—always given and yet freely given. Because of this thesis regarding the constant presence of God's grace, Rahner inclines strongly to the opinion of Ripalda, that every naturally good act is in point of fact supernaturally elevated.

In our incessant dialogue with God as he comes to us through our human environment, we continually experience supernatural grace.

Life, as such, in the concrete, everyday life, has an inward openness towards God through that grace which is constantly being offered to it, grace which desires to become living and fruitful in the very concreteness of this life. Joy, seriousness, responsibility, daring, commitment to an unforeseeable future, love, birth, the burden of work and thousands of other aspects of life which everyone experiences have an undercurrent which comes from grace and leads into it, if they are rightly interpreted and really accepted in their true, undiluted being.¹⁸

But in the ordinary business of daily living the visitations of the Holy Spirit are bound up with natural and earthly values. We do not directly encounter God in his transcendence. Even in our restlessness toward God, which refuses to be appeased by any lesser good or any created reflection of him, we cannot clearly distinguish, by mere introspection, between that which is due to the limitless natural openness of the human spirit as such and that which is due to the gratuitously super-added call of God.

There are privileged moments, however, in which we find ourselves related directly to God, not simply as the crowning

¹⁸ *The Christian Commitment*, p. 104.

perfection of the world, but as a free, personal being, immeasurably above it. When we act out of pure generosity, obey out of pure submission to God's will, and sacrifice without any feeling of inner satisfaction, we begin to apprehend in all earnestness that the true meaning of life does not consist in anything this world can offer. Rahner writes eloquently of this privileged experience of the immediacy of divine grace:

...when we yield ourselves to this experience of the Spirit, when everything that can be grasped, named, or tasted fades away, when everything resounds with a deathly silence, when all things take on the taste of death and doom, or when everything vanishes, so to speak, into a nameless, white, colorless, and intangible blessedness, then we can be sure that not only the spirit, but the Holy Spirit, is at work in us. Then is the hour of grace. Then the apparently uncanny fathomlessness of our existence, which we experience, is really the unfathomableness of God, who is communicating himself to us; it is the first approach of his infinity, in which there are no paths to be found, and which tastes like nothing, because it is Infinity. When we have yielded ourselves and no longer hear our own voices, when we have denied ourselves and no longer control our own lives, when all things including our very being are torn from us and flung into the distance, then we begin to live in the world of God, the God of grace and of eternal life. At first this may seem strange and unfamiliar. Ever and again we shall be tempted to flee back into the accustomed and the near; indeed we shall be compelled and permitted to do so. But we must seek to acquire a taste for the pure wine of the Spirit, that which is charged with the Holy Spirit. Or at least we must come to the point of not putting the chalice away when His providence reaches it to us.

The chalice of the Holy Spirit in this life is identical with the chalice of Christ. He alone will drink it who has accustomed himself by degrees to find fullness in emptiness, success in failure, life in death, riches in renunciation. He who has learned this is capable of experiencing the Spirit, the pure Spirit, and in so doing experiences the Holy Spirit of grace. For such a spiritual liberation is not normally granted, at least in the long run, unless one accepts in faith the grace of Christ. And when a soul is liberated in this way, it is set free by supernatural grace to plunge into the very life of God.¹⁹

In summary, then, we may conclude that the experience of grace is for Rahner the beginning, middle and consummation of the spiritual life. Even though we can never apprehend divine grace as an object or verify it by inspection, the supernatural

¹⁹ "Ueber die Erfahrung der Gnade," *Schriften* III, pp. 108-109.

experience illumines all our paths. Ordinarily we find God in and through our dealings with other men in the world. The immediacy of God is normally mediated to us through the human persons we encounter and to whom we respond in love. But God who comes to us through the circumstances of life, through our fellow men, and especially through the humanity of Jesus, surpasses all the creatures through whom he manifests himself. And therefore we can still experience his presence at moments when all worldly supports and comforts fail. When our entire being is filled with unalloyed delight, with an unmixed joy such as no creature is capable of arousing, then we can be assured that it is God who communicates himself. But these moments are never at our command. When they are graciously vouchsafed to us, and especially then, we are made painfully aware of how unprepared we are to receive the purity of God's gift. We shrink in terror from his love, and learn as Elijah did, *grandis nobis restat via*. But since the way lies open before us, let us then come and taste the sweetness of the Lord: "*Venite et gustate, quam suavis sit Dominus.*"²⁰

II. THE IGNATIAN EXPERIENCE

It is difficult to draw a line between Rahner's own spiritual theology, of which we have been speaking, and his interpretation of the Ignatian experience, which it remains for us to describe. Rahner makes the ideas of St. Ignatius so completely his own, and interprets Ignatius so much according to his personal theology, that the two almost merge. He consciously makes use of the *Spiritual Exercises* as a theological source. He is convinced that the Holy Spirit has raised up in St. Ignatius an original, creative reinterpretation of the Christian life, which should enrich our understanding of revelation. For what follows I shall rely primarily on the articles in which Rahner is discussing such matters as: Ignatian mysticism, Ignatian piety, Jesuit obedience, and the logic of the Election in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

The mysticism of St. Ignatius, as Rahner analyzes it,²¹ is compounded of an absorbing preoccupation with God's utter transcendence and an astonishing ability to find him in the actual situations of life, in the here and now. How can this God, whom Ignatius knows to be immeasurably exalted above all finite things, be encountered in the busy market places of the world?

One answer might be: because the world is a mirror of its divine creator. This is, of course, true enough, but it does not suffice to ground any authentic worship, let alone a Christian and Ignatian mysticism. In the absence of revelation, Rahner maintains, man incessantly tends to reduce God to a kind of *anima mundi*, with the result that piety degenerates into a form of devotion to creatures. In such a system God is shoved into the position of an idle spectator, a horizon for the divinity of the world itself.

Ignatius is far removed from such idolatrous pantheism. He knows no such smiling harmony between the cosmos and its creator, between time and eternity. His ability to encounter God in the daily affairs of life rests on a very different principle. The God of St. Ignatius, dwelling in inscrutable mystery, is free with respect to all he has created. Since God, as master of all things, can show himself at any point in history, the world loses its autonomy. It cannot be the final norm and determinant of human actions. It is necessarily subject to God, who can call man to serve him as he chooses.

God's sovereignty over all creation provides the doctrinal foundation of the principle of indifference which Rahner calls "the primary characteristic of Ignatian piety."²² In its negative aspect this involves an acute sense of the provisional and expendable character of everything that is not God, and hence a certain "last reserve" toward all created things. Since nothing outside of God is to be sought except if, because and as long as God pleases, this negative indifference, unless balanced

²¹ "Die ignatianische Mystik der Weltfreudigkeit," *Schriften* III, pp. 329-48.

²² "Ignatianische Frömmigkeit und Herz-Jesu-Verehrung," *Sendung und Gnade* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia Verlag, 1959), p. 520.

by other principles, can lead to a cold, calculating and almost cynical relativism with regard to persons and institutions. But on the positive side indifference involves a readiness of service and a positive attachment to all that God loves and desires. Ignatian piety characteristically involves a deep loyalty to the humanity of Christ and to all that represents him in the world—to Church, hierarchy, and pope. In the devotion to the Sacred Heart Rahner finds a providential antitoxin for the hardness and functionalism which might otherwise invade the Jesuit spirit. In the broken heart of the Saviour, the source of that divine-human charity which animates the people of God, Rahner finds the symbol which can effectively lend warmth and generosity to the Ignatian form of service in the Church.

Indifference always looks to the future. It can never take for granted that what has been must continue to be. It respects the liberty of God and is ever ready to adapt to new situations and take up new causes as circumstances may indicate. Man lives in dialogue with God. Success in the spiritual life depends entirely on hearing his summons and responding promptly and generously. We must find ourselves and our calling in inspirations from above, and thereby find at the same time the love of the "ever greater God."²³

How does God manifest his will to the individual? The Ignatian theology of vocations (in the widest sense of that word) is treated at length in Rahner's article on the epistemology of the election.²⁴ A study of this essay is central to any understanding of the role of religious experience in Rahner's vision of the spiritual life.

Needless to say Ignatius, and Rahner with him, presuppose and explicitly declare that God's call can come to the

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 538.

²⁴ "The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola," in *The Dynamic Element in the Church*. Quaestiones Disputatae 12 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), pp. 84-170. This essay presupposes, and builds on, principles set forth in Rahner's "On the Question of a Formal Existential Ethics, *Theological Investigations* II, pp. 217-34. Cf. my review article, "Finding God's Will: Rahner's Interpretation of the Ignatian Election," *Woodstock Letters* 94/2 (Spring, 1965) pp. 139-52.

individual only within the framework of what is permitted by the natural law and by the commands of legitimate authority. This being granted, the individual is still faced by many choices of spiritual moment. In the absence of a private revelation—something obviously rare and not lightly to be admitted²⁵—a man may very well have to chart his course by the light of general moral principles, making a prudent assessment of the probable consequences of his acts. But there is still a third possibility: the type of choice Ignatius considers in his so-called “second-time” Election. In this case the choice is made according to what is seen to be suitable for a particular individual with his unique role to fulfill.

One of the major contributions which Ignatius, according to Rahner, made to the growth of spiritual theology was his keen awareness that the personal vocation of the individual is in part constituted by his positive individuality. He must choose that which is connatural to himself with his own particular spiritual capacities and endowments. This connaturality, moreover, is to be discerned by a concrete, affective logic which Ignatius discovered and applied in his own life. This is his famous calculus of consolations and desolations.

The cardinal principle of this process of discernment is what Rahner identifies as pure consolation. This occurs, Ignatius tells us, when the soul is “inflamed with love for its Creator and Lord, and as a consequence can love no creature on the face of the earth for its own sake, but only in the Creator of them all.”²⁶ In such privileged moments, Ignatius writes in another context, God “makes our soul wide open. . . He begins to speak to us without any sound of words.”²⁷ Rahner maintains that what Ignatius here describes is nothing other than what we have already shown to be Rahner’s own

²⁵ On the criteria of private revelations see Rahner’s *Visions and Prophecies*, reprinted in *Inquiries* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1964), pp. 88-188.

²⁶ *The Spiritual Exercises*, trans. by Louis J. Puhl, S.J. (Westminster: Newman Press, 1951), no. 316; cf. nos. 330, 336.

²⁷ *The Dynamic Element* (supra, note 24), p. 152. Cf. *Mon. Ign.* I, 105.

interpretation of the privileged, non-objective experience of grace.

But how is this related to the election? In the religiously correct choice, Rahner maintains, something of this pure and untarnished joy normally shines through. Since the state to which God is calling me must be one which harmonizes with my own religious make-up, including my own fundamental spiritual orientations, it will not interfere with, but rather intensify, the experience of union with God. The choice may then be made by a lengthy process of experimentation (one we find described not only in the book of the Exercises but in the letters and *Spiritual Diary* of Ignatius). Through a process of "play-acting" we imaginatively place ourselves in the situation we are on the point of choosing, attempting to measure whether it is translucent to pure consolation. Such inner joy is not the same as ease or comfort; it can survive in the midst of pain, bewilderment, difficulties, privations of all sorts. By this affective logic, Rahner maintains, Ignatius made a permanently valid contribution of vast significance for the future of spiritual theology. Thanks to this germinal insight, Ignatius is in step with the most advanced personalistic thinking of our times.

Closely related to this method of discernment through religious experience is the famous Ignatian formula of "finding God in all things," which Rahner calls a "fundamental formula of Ignatian spirituality."²⁸ In view of the divine sovereignty, all the situations in which the individual finds himself are pregnant with spiritual possibilities. They are occasions for discovering God as he draws near to us. The Lord of History has been pleased to come to us in Christ—and in the whole human race insofar as it is, in one way or another, in solidarity with Christ. Recognizing Christ in my neighbor, I can find God in all my dealings with others. More generally, the omnipresence of the saving God implies that his grace may be expected anywhere. As Rahner expresses it in prayer inspired by both Ignatius and Ruysbroek:

If You have given me no single place to which I can flee and be sure

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

of finding You, if anything I do can mean the loss of You, then I must be able to find You in every place, in each and every thing I do. Otherwise I couldn't find You at all, and this cannot be, since I can't possibly exist without You. Thus I must seek You in all things. If every day is "everyday," then every day is *Your* day, and every hour is the hour of Your grace.²⁹

Ignatius, with his profoundly positive evaluation of the contingencies of history, stands at the head of a new spiritual tradition. The Jesuit outlook has been characterized by what Rahner calls *Weltfreudigkeit*—an affirmation of the world and its values, a disposition to accept the achievements of culture, to esteem humanism, to adapt oneself to human progress and to the demands of varying situations.³⁰ Since God is at work in history and present in the world, there is no need to retire to the desert in order to find him. Ignatius boldly severed the essence of the religious life from the observance of strict monastic forms. He became, in Nadal's famous phrase *in actione contemplativus*. He may even be said to have laid the groundwork for a lay theology, in which Christian perfection is to be sought precisely through devotion to the world and its values. In his own writings on the lay state, Rahner boldly develops this facet of Ignatian piety. He stresses that the Christian should not hesitate to devote himself to worthy secular goals; to make himself almost "faceless" by doing what the pagans also do.³¹ In faithfulness to the Ignatian tradition, Rahner does not hesitate to approve a type of lay Christianity which bears definite resemblances to Teilhard de Chardin, if not even to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and J. A. T. Robinson.

But this is only one phase of the dialectic. For Ignatius, as Rahner interprets him, was never primarily concerned with this world and its values. We have seen already how the principle of indifference involves a certain ultimate reserve toward all created goods. This reserve becomes, through the so-called "third degree of humility", a higher love. Ignatius assimilated into his spiritual doctrine the ascetical tradition

²⁹ *Encounters with Silence* (Westminster: Newman Press, 1960), p. 50.

³⁰ "Die ignatianische Mystik," (supra note 21), pp. 344-45.

³¹ "Ueber die evangelische Rate," *Geist und Leben* 37 (1964) 37.

of the old religious orders. With his companions, he bound himself to God by vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. While remaining physically in the city, he practiced a genuine flight from the world; he lived spiritually in the desert. If Ignatius held that God can be encountered through creatures, he also saw quite clearly that God has no need of creaturely service. He is greater than all the means by which we think to serve him. His grace is never obtained by our efforts alone; it remains always his free gift.

The lesson of the Cross, to which Ignatius incessantly returns, is that where creatures fail, God's grace can still triumph. His power is made perfect in infirmity. The Cross is the annihilation of created goodness, the squandering of human resources, the foundering of human hopes, the ultimate in terms of suffering and dereliction. Christ in his nakedness is reduced to creaturely impotence. And it is here, precisely here, that man's Redemption is achieved.

Behind the apparent worldliness of Jesuit piety, there must always lurk a secret devotion to the Cross. In the Passion Ignatius finds the supreme victory of grace. His deepest longing is to be with Christ, to wear the garments in which he was clad, to suffer and be called a fool for his sake.³² A spirituality which spoke only of self-fulfillment, of efficiency and success, even in the apostolate, would be profoundly un-Ignatian.

Thus the piety of Ignatius, as Rahner depicts it, is in its deepest inspiration a *fuga saeculi*. No less than the desert monks, he wills to put on the dying of Jesus. He flees into the night of the senses and of the spirit in order to drink from the chalice of pure grace. The heart of the religious life consists in renunciation. The religious state is a sign of contradiction; like the Cross itself, it is a scandal and folly to the children of this world. The three vows are so many ways of placarding before the world the Christian's faith in the power of the Cross. By surrendering the goods of this world and the normal means by which God wills to be served, the

³² "Die ignatianische Mystik," pp. 335-36.

religious makes it clear that he is not seeking, titanically, to manipulate the gifts of God. By this empty gesture of an empty heart, says Rahner, he proclaims to the world that man's highest goal lies beyond this world. He opens up a void for God to fill by the outpouring of his love and his grace.³³

In pondering the Ignatian mystique of the Cross we are by no means abandoning our theme of Christian experience. The Cross is something we daily take up and daily experience. Baptism, the very doorstep of the Christian life, is already a plunging of self into the death of Jesus, sustained by the faith that it will lead to a share in the glory of his risen life. The religious may be described as one who, through devotion to the Cross, deliberately undertakes to become crucified to self and to the world. He wills to be without family, without possessions, and without the option to follow his own individual will. Any such renunciation of the normal means which God has provided for human development would be, ordinarily speaking, forbidden in a purely natural order. There is no strictly rational justification for the religious state. If it is even licit, this can only be because Christ has made the Cross a way of salvation, and because the Church has recognized that religious orders are "a true and practical expression of a divinely oriented existence."³⁴ And even so, no one can enter upon this path without an individual vocation from God—discovered, normally, through the discernment of spirits. But once all these conditions are verified, the life of the vows becomes a valid and fruitful expression of faith and love. "Perhaps the truly obedient man," writes Rahner, "is simply the lover, for whom the sacrifice of self-surrender is a sweet and blessed delight."³⁵

Rahner's theology of the Cross and of the religious life ultimately converge in his theology of death.³⁶ With no less

³³ "Zur Theologie der Entsagung" *Schriften* III, pp. 70-71.

³⁴ "Reflections on Obedience: A Basic Ignatian Concept," *Cross Currents* 10 (1960) 371.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 374.

³⁶ *On the Theology of Death. Quaestiones Disputatae* 2. New York: Herder & Herder, 1961.

right than Heidegger he can proclaim that man's life is "*zum Tode sein*" (being unto death). Each of us must die daily to himself, and with the advancing years the ratio of passivity, suffering, and renunciation may be expected to increase in our lives. As man's powers decline and his failures accumulate, the capacity to suffer becomes continually more important. As Christians we have no right to look upon privation as pure loss. Rather we should constantly tend toward it by discreet, but energetic, self-denial. Christian asceticism is an initiation into the Passion of Christ, to be practiced by each according to the measure of God's grace. It is an anticipation of the ultimate self-denial which will be required of each of us, when our very existence will be engulfed in the apparently total annihilation of death.

By holy dying the Christian can at length experience, in his last and finest act, the coming of the Lord. The dialectic of affirmation and denial is crowned by a total surrender in which the Christian, freely relinquishing all, is entitled to expect that the God who waits beyond death will give him all in return. God, who lacks every definable determination, comes in the form of nothingness because he is the reality of all that is. To die is to let the world pass away—Rahner quotes from the *Didache*—in order that grace may come.³⁷

Rahner's theology of the religious state takes on its full significance in the light of his theology of death. To live in religion is to remind the world that grace is not a product of worldly striving but a free gift of God, that all Christians, including those who labor to improve the world, are pilgrims; that the true center of our existence lies beyond this mortal life. Under one aspect the religious life is a prolonged rehearsal for the supreme moment which will come to all:

As for ultimate obedience, which demands and silently takes everything, it will be exacted by God alone. It is the command to die the death which overshadows every minute of our life, and more and more detaches us from ourselves. This command, to move on and leave all, to allow ourselves in faith to be absorbed in the great silence of God, no longer to resist the all-embracing nameless destiny which rules

³⁷ "Passion und Ascese," *Schriften* III, p. 97.

over us—this command comes to all men. The question whether man obediently accepts it, is decisive for time and for eternity.³⁸

Rahner's particular interpretation of the Ignatian experience, and the spiritual theology which he develops from it, stand out very clearly when we compare him with another great Jesuit spiritual thinker of the twentieth century, Teilhard de Chardin. Each of them looks on the Christian life in cosmic terms. Both are convinced that human existence, and the physical universe itself, have been radically transformed by the touch of the Redeeming God. For both of them God can and must be found in charity toward other men. Christianity is the religion of love, a pure human love which is by that very fact divine. Both of them have a deep devotion to the Church as the people which God is gathering to himself. They are alike sustained by the Ignatian synthesis of contemplation and action. And they perceive in the unfolding of history the stages by which God is leading mankind along paths as yet unexplored.

And yet I am not sure that the views of these two great spiritual thinkers coalesce into a single coherent synthesis. They differ radically by temperament, by training, experience, and preoccupation. The French paleontologist is thrilled by the spectacle of human progress. He is convinced that evolution must succeed; only if the phylum of love triumphs can the ultimate fulfillment come. Only the fully developed society will be capable of receiving Christ in his fullness, as he will appear at the *parousia*. Rahner, as I understand him, would not say this. He sees God as utterly free to intervene as he pleases in history or at the end of history. He can use or dispense with the service which we seek to render. Our task is to labor while it is day, for soon the night comes in which no man can labor.

To Christianity and the Church her Founder promised not only that they would endure until the end of time but, just as clearly, that his work would always be a sign of contradiction and persecution, of dire and (in secular terms) desperate combat; that love would grow cold; that he, in his disciples, would be persecuted in the name of God;

³⁸ "Reflections on Obedience," p. 374.

that the struggle would narrow down to an ever more critical point; that the victory of Christianity would not be the fruit of immanent development and widening and a steady, progressive leavening of the world but would come as the act of God coming in judgment to gather up world history into its wholly unpredictable and unexpected end.³⁹

If our efforts fail, if there are woes and defections, if we are thwarted in our obedient striving to spread the Gospel of Christ, our hearts need not be troubled. We neither have nor seek a lasting city here on earth. God is greater than either our success or our failures. He, the *Deus semper maior*, is our only lasting hope.

³⁹ *The Christian Commitment*, pp. 18-19.