

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

---

## III. Some Reflections of Karl Rahner

Carlos H. Abesamis

*Philippine Studies* vol. 13, no. 3 (1965): 492–494

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

# Some Reflections on Karl Rahner

CARLOS H. ABESAMIS, S.J.

WHEN one reflects on Karl Rahner—the man and his work—one can say that his greatness most probably lies in being “the man with the questions”, “the man in search”. One sees that he is looking not merely for the truth (by itself, as it were), but for meaning and relevance—the meaning and relevance, of reality as it exists and especially of man and the condition-of-being-man, a meaning and relevance which is to be found in the context of God’s ever-active word and revelation.

Rahner’s contribution to the Church and the world of our time seems to consist less in that he has the answers to some of the burning questions of our day, as that it is he who poses these burning questions, and that sometimes, after a long dialectical engagement with a given question, he ends where he began: with a question mark. Even in those instances where he sounds dogmatic (as when he exhibits an ill-concealed impatience with textbook theology) and seems sure of having the ready answer, one has but to recall that he is reading one of the series of his *Quaestiones Disputatae* to realize that sometimes the tone of voice does not reflect the intent.

While Karl Rahner was teaching at the University of Innsbruck [he has since assumed the chair of Philosophy of Religion at the University of Munich], he used to hold a free *Kolloquium* on Friday evenings. This was a sort of question

and answer period where students—sometimes as many as four or five hundred—would gather in a large hall and would propose questions to Father Rahner.

We might describe a typical Kolloquium: Some question is asked, and Rahner will often preface his answer with the remark: "This is a very complicated and very obscure question." Then he will go to work on the problem in his deliberate and deeply reflective way, in a sort of droning, yet stimulating, "thinking-out-loud" monologue—until sometimes he has used up a full hour discussing one single question. As he walks up and down the length of the hall in measured paces, his thoughts come forth in equally measured and synchronized cadences—reflections and "mullings-over" thought out in his own personal phenomenological, biblical and existential manner. For his thought is often the painful quest of the mind for the half-discernible forms of reality, and often enough he ends up with the remark: "Yes, this is an obscure question, and we do not know the answer." This veneration for truth one finds inspiring—as inspiring as the fearless enunciation of it when he thinks he has found it.

In a similar way, his daily class lectures are not an orderly exposition of systematic theology (he provides the student mimeographed notes to meet that need), but rather peripatetic meditations over a certain point or a couple of points of the matter at hand. His writings seem to exhibit not only his thought, but the gestation and growth of that thought, a process of a great mind at labor on the questions which trouble and challenge the Christian mind and heart of our time, sifting its way through every nuance and shade of reality. This character of his thought, and the way he actively thinks, have affected his written style and even his vocabulary (rahnerisms). A sufficiently complicated Karl Rahner style has developed for the story to make the rounds that Hugo Rahner, his elder brother and also a great theologian, once remarked: "One day I will translate my brother's work into German!"

Another remark made by Hugo shortly after his brother Karl's birth is also often recounted. It seems that once, pointing to the infant Karl, the elder Hugo asked his mother: "And

what shall we do with *that* one?" Luckily, Mother Rahner did not share little Hugo's estimate of his own brother's expendability, and thus today in his sixtieth year we have Karl Rahner in our midst to teach us—not the quick and facile answers we can rattle off, but rather the questions we must ask, and how we are to look for the answers to them, painfully and patiently, how we are to have the courage to give the answer when there is one, and, where there is none, how to have the humility to see that the question mark is ever a testimony to both the littleness and the greatness of the human spirit.