From Austria

THE PRISON PASTORATE

by Karl Rahner

You, who are prison chaplains, have come together here for an hour's meditation as priests. The meaning of such an hour lies not in how the charge laid upon you is to be made fruitful and beneficial for those entrusted to your care, but rather lies in considering how such a pastor with such a charge is himself to find God. This does not mean that the task of caring selflessly for others, and Christian neighbourly love itself, are being changed into egotism. We are merely giving scope to the simple, fundamental insight that in our priestly lives we can only serve others insofar as we are ourselves filled with the grace of him to whom we are bearing witness, and whom we are there to mediate to men, in his word, his sacraments, and his grace. Nor is anything changed in this either by our objective official mission or by the power of the *opus operatum*. For both of these have got to be accepted by men if they are to be effective. But they will only be accepted if those who bring them are such as to make their objective mission and objective grace credible by the quality of their own Christian living. Nor can he simply say that selfless service is itself holy, and that the more a person forgets himself in it and dies to himself, the more he will be filled with the grace of God, and the more he will be apt to win his neighbour by the witness of the Spirit and of power. In its positive sense, this statement is true. But it would turn into a dangerous lie if we supposed that it could provide the one single all-embracing norm of our mission. There are maxims in the spiritual life capable of providing, on their own, a total formula covering the whole thing. There is no way of including everything in one exercise. For we are creatures who, even in this respect, have no abiding city, but must humbly, in our finitude, do many different things in order to reach the whole. So we have got to take pains over our nearness to God if we are to be able to serve our neighbour, and we draw near to God by serving our neighbour: each depends on the other, and yet they are not both the same thing. And that is why, in an hour of meditation such as this, it is our task and our office themselves which bid us to take to heart our concern over our own salvation in the midst of our task.

What we shall be considering during this short meditation can be summed up in two sentences. In the prisoners entrusted to our pastoral care we find Christ our Lord; and in these prisoners we find ourselves, what we see in them being the concealed truth of our own situation.

Christ in the Prisoners

We find Christ our Lord in the prisoners. We have got to find him there; he is really there to be found, and to be found in such a way that our encounter with him will also be for our salvation and our happiness.

There is no need for me to remind you of your own experience as prison chaplains. This experience, in all its bitterness and horrible realism, is more present to you than anything I could describe or suggest of it: the experience of shattered human existences; the mental and moral defectives; the unstable characters; the psychopaths; the vicious, the smooth, the cynical, the hypocrites and liars; the merely impulsive, the victims of circumstances, of addiction; the inevitable recidivists, the religiously impervious, the poor devils, the imbeciles. Even though this kind of experience is not the only one that you have in prisons, even though you also meet people there who strike you immediately as no different from anyone else — normal, decent men — yet it still remains true that you have often been struck with horror of the humanity you encounter there. You have so often been let down, shown up as stupid, rewarded with ingratitude; so often knocked in vain for admission to hearts that were locked and barred; so often provided help only to be rejected yourselves as representatives of the hated system. You have suffered the sense of futility and the hopelessness of all such efforts; you must often have had the impression that all your efforts, your concern, your love, your patience and your work are being dropped into a bottomless abyss from which no response ever comes. You are men who continually encounter evil in all its dreary, nerve-racking, hopeless, detestable reality. You know all that better than I do. And now let us read the words of Christ, his incredible, provocative, thrilling words: ‘Come 0 blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for ... I was in prison, and you came to see me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see thee ... in prison and visit thee?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’ (Mt. 25, 34-40).

I think that the first thing for you to do is simply to rejoice over these words. They apply to you without any kind of translation, just as they were spoken then. They do not need to be translated and adapted and transposed into a new set of circumstances. What you live is a primary, abiding form of life which Jesus saw clearly in its abiding pattern; he gives it expression in a statement which he then raises to the level of a concrete utterance of God's judgement, the judgement which brings world history to its fulfilment, treads out as in a winepress the ultimate meaning of that history, and transforms it into the wine of eternal joy. There are few vocations with such words to rejoice over, few that find themselves being addressed in so unchanged a fashion by the mouth of the Son of Man, with words at once realistically human and divinely heavenly.

But the next response to these words has to be one of terror: you are commanded to find our Lord in these people whom you visit in prison. What a terrifying and exacting task! Do not say that these words are not meant to be taken quite as seriously as that.

Do not say that all that is really wanted when you get right down to it is a little human compassion, a certain amount of reasonably allocated help; some of that sober realism which has no illusions but at the same time is not too ready to despair of humanity: which has the humanist optimism to believe in the good in every human being, stimulate it, and give it another chance to do better; and which, when that fails, consoles itself with the thought that after all there are psychopathic conditions which can be as incurable as other diseases and ought not to break one's heart any more than the others: the patients all die in the end anyway, but the human race doesn't let itself get excessively depressed over it. No, No — and again, no. More is asked of you than this.

You are to find our Lord in these prisoners. You yourselves are to encounter him there to your own saving benefit. Are we not under the temptation to ask our Lord, impatiently and (as we like to see it) unsentimentally, in the name of sober realism, reason, and our own experience, 'When did we see you in prison?' Are we not tempted to say: 'We were in the prisons but we didn't find you there? We found pitiful human beings, poor devils, and cynical criminals. But you? No, not you'?

Perhaps we shall say: 'we've nothing against it if you like to be so magnanimous and gracious as to use a sort of splendid heavenly fiction to count these services rendered, these visits to the prison, as if we had done

them to you. That's all right, that's fine, we have no objection to a fiction of that sort. But a fiction it remains. You are you and these people are these people. And we did not find you in the prisons. Not there, of all places.'

But Jesus says otherwise. Jesus rejects all our realism as unreal. He does not identify himself with these people by a legal fiction, but in such a way that we are, in very truth, encountering him in them. We have got to let his words stand as what they are ~ and believe them. We can think about how they can be true, but we have got to take them as true. We can be horrified at how little we must have grasped of the self-emptying love of God in Christ, the agape of God, if we have not understood that there really is a love in this world — the love of God, that is — which accepts when to us it seems that there is no longer anything there to be accepted; a love which is not a matter of gracious condescension, but truly, in all reality and effectiveness, identifies itself with these sinners; a love which strips itself, exposes itself, commits itself, spends itself utterly; in which the lover can no longer find himself except in and through the beloved. We can consider the truths that this love is creative and transforming; that it is genuine and radical even to death, the death of the Cross; that it has dared to descend into the uttermost emptiness of God-forsaken, death-stricken lovelessness. But he has been victorious and taken all things to itself; that it is a love which brought the Son of God to make himself a curse that he might really save what is really and inescapably lost — that which is, of itself, dead, without future and without hope; that which grimly locks and bars itself against all love; that which, with cold contempt and unambiguous cynicism, scorns love, purity, kindliness, and loyalty as utopian pretence. It is with such sinners that this love has, in strict reality, identified itself. For otherwise they would not be redeemed. Otherwise, only what is sound in itself would have been saved. No such thing exists, though it often seems to; so that we think that this thing, basically good in itself, has been accepted by God because it is good, instead of believing that what was truly lost has been accepted in order that it should be made good. We must think about the truth, accepting it in faith and against our own 'experience', that the Lord is in these lost individuals whom we meet in the prisons: that he is in them by his will to love, which calls nothingness and that which is lost by its name and creates it; in them by his patience, by the almighty power that sees, even in this bit of the wreckage of world history, a person, an eternity, a brother of the incarnate Word of God, a beloved,

someone to be taken seriously with divine seriousness: sees him as this, or, better, creates him as this, by looking on him with love. He is, in all truth, in them; because the primary mystery of that love which creates and makes one, which is God himself, is not understood, and hence the essence of Christianity is radically misunderstood, unless this improbable, paradoxical truth, with its radical reversal of all our short-sighted experience, is unconditionally accepted in faith.

But if we want to understand our Lord's words and find him in the prisoners, we must not only think, in faith and prayer, about the truth that he is in them; we must think even more about how we can find him in them. For this is the appalling thing, the deadly danger: that we can fail to recognise him, even though he is in these lost, unfortunate brothers of his, one with them. We are liable to pass him by; our eyes can be held, our hearts be dull and closed against him, so that we do not see him. In this time of faith and not of sight we shall indeed never find him except in a hidden fashion. When the last day comes, we shall still be amongst those who ask wonderingly, just as much as those who have not visited the Lord and not found him, 'When did we see thee in prison, and visit thee?'. (Mt 25: 39, 44). As far as experience goes it will always be like this. It will seem to us that it is not he, that it is not possible to find him in the prisoners. But this is precisely what Christianity is, finding when we think we have not found, this seeing when we seem to be gazing into darkness, this having when we think that we have lost. And so it is here. We have to seek and find him in the prisoners. And it is not easy. It is possible to ignore him and walk blindly past him, even when you are there in the prisons with your bodily presence and your 'carrying out of your duties', even when you have the reputation of being a good prison chaplain.

What does it mean to find Christ himself in his brothers in prison? First and foremost, it means a reverent humility in face of this other human being, who is a child of God and a brother of Jesus Christ, one who is called and beloved by God, one who is embraced by the power of divine love. We all know (and anyone who denied it would be at the very least a Jansenist heretic, doubting God's universal will to save) that every human being still on pilgrimage through this life is called to salvation, beloved of God, and embraced by the grace of Christ, even if he has not yet freely accepted it. We know that we cannot ultimately judge anybody, that we cannot say of anybody with absolute certainty that he is living in God's grace, and so equally cannot say of anybody that he has lost it. And so, as we must with

absolutely certain confidence in God hope in God's merciful grace for ourselves, we have the same duty of hope (since we must love our neighbour as our self) on behalf of each of our neighbours. And we know that in every human being there is an eternal destiny in the making, coming to maturity through all the trivialities of everyday life and commonplace humanity. We know all that. We have never disputed it. But we do not live it. This infinite dignity, this indestructible nobility, this fact, that every human being is infinitely more than a human being, remains to a large extent a sort of thin Sunday-ideology, something we do not dispute in theory because it does us no harm and does not prevent us from sticking to everyday norms and attitudes in the everyday world. But suppose that our sober everyday eyes should look at this neighbour of ours and see through all his physical degeneracy, through the screen of his instinctual life, his conditioning, his psychology insofar as it is physiologically determined. Suppose they should see even through all that this other person thinks about himself and desires for himself, through all his self-interpretation, which is never capable of saying the ultimate truth about a man; that they should see through all that fate has done in the course of such a life, in terms of heredity, upbringing, environment, latent sickness, psychopathology; and even through true and appalling guilt, since it too is not the ultimate thing, it too (as Paul says) is embraced and included within the greater and mightier mercy of God. Suppose that our eyes seeing through all this, should seek and find that which is most real and ultimate in this other person: God, with his love and his mercy, who has conferred an eternal dignity upon this person and offers himself to him, without repentance, in the incomprehensible prodigality of the divine foolishness of love. Suppose that we should see in this way not at some solemn, ceremonial moment but at the point where this man confronts us with his blank gaze, his lack of receptivity, his reek of poverty; at the point where he rises up before us, sullen and resentful, malicious, unteachable, stupidly cunning. Supposing we could indeed see in this way, then we should really come to meet this man with a reverent humility, in which we would realise that we cannot recognise any higher dignity or holier calling in ourselves than that which is present in him.

And if we did look at him like this, in reverent humility, then we would see Christ in him: the incarnate Word of the Father, who is everywhere, honoured and adored (whether this is realised of not) whenever one human being is taken absolutely seriously by another; whenever a person recognises that it

is impossible to have any experience with a fellow human being, however evil and appalling, which would involve looking through him into emptiness instead of into the mystery of God, in whom is hidden the eternal image of this man without which (as Angelus Silesuis says) God 'cannot for a moment live'. Man, in his nature and his determination towards grace, exists because God has willed the God-man: because he has willed himself as man; because henceforth there is no longer any truth of God which is not truth of man; because (this is so only out of free grace, but it really is so) God would not be, if man were not. And so, whenever the most wretched of human creatures, some mean, stupid scoundrel, is received reverently and humbly into our own hearts, it is Christ who is being received and discovered. And — may one dare to say? — there best of all. For where have we a better hope of finding God than in such a case? When the spell of man's own greatness and beauty, his own goodness and splendour, is cast upon us, this may indeed act as a door into the infinite greatness, beauty, goodness and splendour of God. It may, in itself. But we are so apt in such a case to stop short at the human greatness as such. This is something we cannot do with poor sinners, when we discover what is abiding and indestructible in them, when we honour what they perhaps take no account of in themselves, when we believe in God in them, though they do not find him in themselves.

And there is still another sense of finding God in our humiliated neighbour. When we go to meet this wretched neighbour in the way that we should, when we care about him without any supporting feeling of instinctive, physiologically conditioned sympathy, when we forgive even while feeling that we are being made fools of by doing so, when we really pour ourselves out without the reward of a feeling of satisfaction and without any return in gratitude, when our very encounter with our neighbour makes us unutterably lonely and all such love seems to be only an annihilating leap into an absolute void, then that is really God's hour in our life; that is when he is there. Assuming that we don't turn back; assuming that it doesn't get us down, that we don't find ourselves some sort of compensation elsewhere, that we don't complain, that we don't feel sorry for ourselves, that we keep quiet about it and really accept and commit ourselves to the absence of ground under our feet and the foolishness of such love. Then it is God's hour: then this seemingly sinister abyss in our existence, as it opens up in this hopeless experience of our neighbour, will be the abyss of God himself, communicating himself to us; it will be the beginning of the coming of his

infinity, where all roads disappear, and which feels like nothingness because it is infinity. When we have had such an encounter with our neighbour, an encounter in which we break through the instability of what is earthly in him and seem to fall into void; when we have to let go of ourselves in it and no longer belong to ourselves; when we have denied ourselves and no longer dispose of ourselves for purposes of power or self enjoyment; when everything in such an encounter, and ourselves too, seems to have fallen away from us into infinite remoteness, then we begin to find God. Then this lonely, silent void of the interior man, who seems to have been as it were destroyed, begins to be filled with God; then we find God, we find Christ, who fell into the hands of the Father when, as he was dying, he recognised his God-forsakenness. At the beginning, this may seem alien to us; this loss of ourselves may terrify us, and the temptation may come upon us to flee in our terror back to intimacy and gratitude and the sense of being loved. Indeed it will often be right and necessary for us to do so. But we should gradually learn to find life in this death, intimacy in this loneliness, God in this forsakenness. It is only when we can do this, when we can find and experience God himself in this disappointment of our love for our neighbour, that our love for our neighbour becomes mature, and an act of the Holy Spirit in us. It can then become really longsuffering and patient, without malice, never ceasing to hope, never disillusioned. It will always find God.

It is not to be thought that this means that our neighbour, especially when he is a disappointing neighbour, is simply a means by which we practise ascetical renunciation so as to create that void within us which God then freely and mercifully fills with the unutterable intimacy of his presence. For none of this happens unless we truly love the person in question, truly accepting him for what he is and not making this love into a means to anything. But if, without aiming at it, this God-loving love to our neighbour does find God while seeking our neighbour, then this lonely experience of God, taking place within the death of all self-seeking, becomes a final possibility for us, a final source of strength for loving our neighbour ‘to the last’. We really die of this love; to die without despair (and despair puts an end to love) can only be done if we die into the infinite life of God. So we must love and seek our neighbour, and not our own fulfilment and perfection, but this can only be done ‘to the last’ if we find God in it and if this true love of our neighbour is embraced and redeemed, preserved and liberated by happening within the love of God, as a finding of God in Christ. Anyone,

then, who exposes himself to this death-dealing adventure of an unconditional love of his neighbour, will find God; and whoever finds God can love his neighbour as himself. He will receive that clearness of vision which belongs to the faith which sees the reality of God even in the most abandoned of men, making him in all truth worthy of being loved with humble reverence.

We find Christ our Lord in the prisoners; we have got to find him there; he is really there to be found, and to be found in such a way that our encounter with him will also be for our salvation and our happiness.

Ourselves in the Prisoners

We find ourselves in the prisoners when we see in them the hidden truth of our own situation.

Every human being is continually running away from himself. Only those saints who have attained perfection could say that they no longer deceive themselves about themselves. Only the perfect have stopped repressing the truth of God within them. The truth that we are sinners; the truth that we are self-seekers; the truth that in a thousand different ways, crude or subtle, we are always trying to serve God and ourselves; the truth that we are cowardly, easy-going, lazy, refractory servants of God; the truth that we do not do what we ought to do: love God with our whole heart and all our strength. Together with the Scriptures and the teachings of the early Church, we can express the content of this repressed truth by acknowledging that we are unfree, prisoners, unless the Spirit of God, his grace, sets us free. We may be free in a bourgeois, legal sense: we may be responsible for our actions, not only in the sight of men but also in the sight of God and his most merciful and just judgement. But if we have not been set free by the Spirit of God into the freedom of Christ, then for all this earthly freedom and its corresponding responsibility in the sight of God, we are nevertheless helpless and hopeless prisoners in the prison of our guilt, our unsaved condition, our inability to perform any saving act.

And these people whom we visit are an image of this: an image of all those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, imprisoned in the dungeon of their own finitude, the dungeon of a freedom which has not yet been set free by Christ and is still enslaved to sin, the flesh and the power of the evil one. The prison in which your work goes on is an image of this prison of the world, not in an external, artificial sense, through some artificial analogy, but

an image in the sense of a manifestation, a trey and real type, the making visible of a hidden reality which makes itself manifest and tangible in this real symbol. For no matter what may be the immediate causes of prisons and of the plight of their inmates, the one ultimate cause is the guilt of mankind from its beginnings onwards; the guilt which propagates itself through all individual personal guilt; the same guilt which confronts us incarnate in poverty, sickness, and unhappiness; the guilt which is a power in our own lives too, so that what we call prisons and penitentiaries are, to a Christian understanding of things, simply individual cells of a perceptible king in that one great prison which Scripture calls 'the world', 'this age', 'the evil world', the domain of the prince of this world, the realm of the powers of darkness, death and evil. When you go from your own surroundings into a prison, you do not go out of a world of harmony, light and order into a world of guilt and unfreedom: you stay where you have been all the time. It is merely made clearer to your bodily senses what has been surrounding you all the time: the unfreedom of guilt, the imprisonment from which Christ's grace alone can set us free into the freedom of the children of God.

But (it might be objected) true though all this is, we ourselves are nevertheless those who have been redeemed, who have been liberated into this freedom, we are no longer in servitude to sin, the law, vanity and death! So it is with us, we hope it is; each day we strengthen our hearts anew in this hope, which may often, alas, seem like a hope against hope. We comfort our hearts anew each day with this hope, which faith alone, and no experience of pharisaic self-consciousness of ours, can give us. But equally, so long as we are pursuing our pilgrimage in hope, not in vision, and are redeemed in hope, so long as we are still marching and not yet at the goal, we are still as it were prisoners, whose prison door is opening at this very moment, who are suddenly being bidden, by an unlooked-for miracle of grace, to get up and go, like Peter being struck on the side by the angel: 'Get up quickly, dress yourself and follow me' (Acts 12, 7-8), while the chains fall from our hands. We are people who have entered into freedom and can be said to have attained it precisely insofar as we do not think of it as a possession that can be taken for granted; insofar as we are aware, in fear and trembling, of whence we come; insofar as we know that we can only receive this gift of the freedom of Christ with impunity, without its becoming our ultimate damnation, if we accept it simply and solely as our redemption from slavery by the grace of God.

And again, even if we are the redeemed; even if in those who are in Christ Jesus, those who believe in him and love him, there is no longer anything worthy of damnation; even if the ground of our being, its innermost centre, is graced and filled with the holy Pneuma of God; even if, then, what is in us can no longer make us, as indivisible subjects before God's judgement, worthy of damnation, yet the heritage of the past is still at the same time ultimately and indissolubly still in us. Or is concupiscence not still to be found in us? Is there not in us that which is in the world, the lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh and the pride of live? Are we not sick, compulsive, only too apt to deceive ourselves, egoists, slaves (if only in an attenuated form) to our cravings for this and that? Supposing someone came to us, supposing God came to us, and lit up the interior of our hearts not merely with the cold inexorability of a psychotherapist but with the incorruptibility of the ultimate truth of the Thrice-Holy One; supposing he were to analyse our motives, our attitudes, our behaviour patterns, our secret impulses, hidden even from ourselves; if he were to confront us with ourselves, stripped and naked, as we are, not as we like to appear to ourselves, should we not then have to fall down in terror before this judge of our hearts, crying 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, 0 Lord'? Would not his grace, by which we are made holy, then appear to us as something which we simply are not; would we not have to say, brokenly and with tears, 'That is you, that is your inconceivable love, the unreasonable prodigality, so to say, of your mercy: but I am not that; I am dull and cowardly and shut up within myself, I am a confused and tangled bundle of impulses and chances and external determinisms of which it is never possible to know at any moment what is genuinely my own, what is mere facade, what is real, whether shabbiness is the humility of the virtue that is in me or virtue is the disguise for the wretchedness in me'? Should we not have to pray with tears, 'If thou, 0 Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who shall endure it? Enter not into judgement with me, cleanse me from my secret sin!'?

Should we not then have to recognise and acknowledge that we are not so essentially different from those poor sinners whom we visit in the prisons? Should we not have to say that what distinguishes us from them is merely the fact that the *fomes peccati*, which is in us in the same way as it is in them, has not — because of circumstances which are no merit of ours but matters of situation, fate and chance — brought us into conflict, as it has them, with the external order of men and society? We can indeed be grateful

to God for these very circumstances: even extremely so. But does that differentiate us so much from them that, because we are the redeemed, we can no longer see ourselves in them, and must deny that our own image, stripped of its masks, looks out at us from them? The more so as we can never say that they are not in the grace of God, since everything that confronts us in them is just as liable to be sickness as guilt, or to be the guilt of society, in which we too may perhaps have our part, having drawn on it, and continuing to draw on it, for our revenue of comfort and bourgeois security and affluence. And the more so again, since we are not certain that we are in God's grace.

So, then, we meet ourselves when we meet prisoners in prison. They present our own image to us, that image which we must face continually, day after day, if we hope to find the grace of God for ourselves; for that grace is only given to those who acknowledge themselves as sinners and build their lives on one thing only, the incomprehensible grace of God who takes pity on the lost. We have no choice: either we are going to go through the prisons like Pharisees, saying 'Lord, I thank thee that I am not as one of these, robbers, swindlers adulterers', or like the publican in Luke's Gospel. He stood afar off, just as our unredeemed feelings find the prisons far off from God, beating his own breast and not someone else's (a thing we are apt to do when visiting in prison), and said 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' (Luke 18, 9-14). Only if our attitude in the prisons is that of the publican in the Temple will the prison become for us poor sinners, a Temple from which we can return justified to our own homes. Otherwise we shall be going into the true prison of our own blindness, hypocrisy, and pride, against which God sets his face, while those inside, perhaps, may be the ones who are justified and free in God's sight.

So, then, we find ourselves in the prisoners, seeing in them the hidden truth of our own situation.

In every life, and even in the holiest office a man can hold, there is one deadly enemy: habit and routine. Oh, we need habit and routine. We cannot live for long without them. They make many things easier for us which would otherwise soon be too much for our powers; they may often be a mild narcotic which God has mercifully supplied against the pain of living. But they are also the deadly enemy of our life and of the holy office we hold. They blunt us, they keep us going long after the real substance —

spirit and love — has faded out of our work. And thus they may give us, a 'good conscience' when what we ought to have is a bad one. They make us take credit for our good deeds instead of beating our breasts because there is in them so little love, so little heart, so little humility and reverence for men, even those who are outcasts from society. We must keep fighting this deadly thing, habit, as though it were a cunning and morally dangerous enemy. This applies to your job, too. It is a grace from God to have his providence sustaining you in this battle, not only through the grace of that holy joy you feel as pastors over someone whom you have been able to bring back to the love of God, but also through all the sharp disappointments and bitterness of the job, all its failures, all the indifference which it meets, all that it can do to torment you and wear you down. If these experiences, these hard and bitter ones, force you out of the mediocrity of habit and routine, confront you with the question of what you really are trying to do in a job like this, and compel you to think about the real meaning and grace of such a calling, then this too is God's grace. And again through the gentle and unobtrusive workings of grace in you, you should come to meet this grace, thinking and praying in the sight of God about what you are and what you are aiming at in this calling. And if, in the course of such a meditation, you also perhaps consider that, in the prisoners entrusted to our priestly care, we can truly and indeed find Christ for ourselves, and that, by encountering in them the reflection and likeness of our own situation, we may be recalled to that humility to which alone God's grace is promised, then such a meditation may well build up to greater fullness and completeness that unity between your calling and your life, your office and your own personal existence, which is, in the nature of things, made possible to an unsurpassed degree of splendour and grace in the calling of a priest.

This timeless address was delivered to prison chaplains in 1956. Karl Rahner was born in 1904 at Freibourg and died in 1984 in Innsbruck. It was translated by Cecily Hastings and reproduced with the kind permission of 'Continuum'.

Karl Rahner: A Brief Biography

by Robert Masson — Marquette University

Rahner's creative appropriation of diverse theological and philosophical sources (including Ignatian spirituality, Thomas Aquinas, Kant, Hegel,

Maréchal, Rousselot, and Heidegger) provided an innovative conceptual framework for retrieving Catholic doctrine and the neo-scholastic theology of the previous generation and established his reputation as one of the most influential systematic theologians in the Vatican II era. His probing essays responded to the broad range of topics most at issue for Catholics from the 1940's to 80's. The earliest of these helped prepare for the Council. The later ones provided rich resources for both academic and pastoral theology. He was influential in German-speaking countries through his teaching, lectures, editorial labours and membership in learned societies. His thought had broader impact because of his involvement in international publications like Concilium, his role as a peritus at the Second Vatican Council, the extensive dissemination of his work (1651 publications, 4744 counting reprints and translations), his impact on the foreign students who attended his classes and later became influential in their own countries, and the positive reception of his contributions by many Protestant thinkers. In the English speaking world, for example, George Lindbeck, a Lutheran, ranked him with Barth and Tillich; John Macquarie, an Anglican, added that of these Rahner's theology was the most helpful.

At the heart of Rahner's thought is a coherent vision of the world as the profoundly mysterious arena of God's self-communication in Jesus and the Spirit. Rahner, however, never elaborated this as a systematic theology worked out in progressive volumes. The philosophical underpinnings were presented in his first two books: Spirit in the World and Hearer of the Word. The details of the theological scheme emerged over the years in lectures, talks and articles, the most important of which were published in his Theological Investigations (23 vols.). Despite their erudition and nuance, these reflections were not primarily concerned with contributing to specialized theological scholarship, although many certainly did that. Most had a broadly pastoral concern to explore ways of recovering the meaning of Christian doctrine and Catholic teaching in an intellectually plausible and contemporary idiom. This was the case in early reflections which focused on the preoccupations of Catholic dogmatic teaching and piety, in later essays contributing to issues which were being raised at Vatican II regarding the nature of the Church and its relation to the modern world, and in the publications of his last years which wrestled with pluralism, the historicity of the Church and theology, ecumenism and the notion of a 'world church' no longer dominated by Western culture and peoples. Although Rahner's

'transcendental Thomism' provided the philosophical categories for fleshing out this understanding, his positions were deeply rooted in the Ignatian spirituality of seeking God in all things, sacramental piety, devotion to Jesus, and Catholic doctrine. He distilled essential elements of this vision in Foundations of Christian Faith, his attempt to offer a 'first level' account that would be accessible to readers without specialized theological training. Notwithstanding the pastoral thrust of these works, the style of writing and argument makes for notoriously demanding reading. Rahner was much more successful in articulating his theological vision without the difficult conceptual apparatus in his sermons, prayers, meditations and numerous interviews, particularly those which he gave towards the end of his career. The most important of these have been collected in: Prayers for a Lifetime, Karl Rahner in Dialogue, Faith in a Wintry Season, and I Remember.

As a doctoral candidate, Rahner worked out the basic lines of his philosophical perspective in a metaphysical reflection on the possibility of knowing God. This groundbreaking retrieval of Thomas Aquinas in light of modern philosophical currents (particularly, Kant and Heidegger) was rejected by his dissertation director but published in 1939 as Geist in Welt. Rahner argued that we can know of God by attending to the movement of our knowing itself towards its objects. Reflection on this reveals that our thinking always reaches beyond its immediate objects towards a further horizon. Hence, the movement of our knowing, and the ultimate goal towards which it reaches, can be grasped only indirectly (or 'transcendentally') as our thinking turns back on itself. Rahner identified the elusive and final 'term' of this dynamism with God and contended that the same movement towards God is entailed in freedom and love. By conceiving God, who always exceeds our reach, as the horizon presupposed in the movement of knowing, freedom and love, Rahner provided a way for talking and thinking about God as 'mysterious,' that is to say, as a reality who is known, but only reflexively and indirectly—and perhaps not even consciously—as the ever receding horizon of the human spirit. For Rahner, we are 'spirits' (oriented and able to know God) only through our being 'in the world.' Conversely, as humans, we are in the world in a spiritual way—in a way that either is moving towards and affirming God, or is denying and closing itself to God. Knowledge of God always has a distinctly analogical character and logic because it necessarily entails reference to God as mystery while at the same time this reference is mediated through an unavoidable 'turning' to objectifiable realities.

In Hearer of the Word, originally lectures given at Salzburg in the summer of 1937, Rahner developed his 'transcendental arguments' further to explain why God must be thought of as personal, even though not a finite person, and as one whose self could be revealed further in the human realm of history and language if God so chose. As the ones who either encounter or miss this possible selfrevelation, we are hearers of either God's 'word' or silence.

Subsequent reflections on the theology of symbol and the doctrine of the Incarnation, which drew creatively from sacramental, Trinitarian, Thomistic and Ignatian themes, provided Rahner with a way of explaining how we might conceive God speaking such a 'word.'A person's words of love do more than tell about a relationship to another. Genuine expressions of love, though in a certain sense distinct realities from the person who offers them, are nevertheless also truly self-communications to the beloved. Rahner's notion of Jesus as God's 'real symbol' proposed this sort of analogy for conceiving how Jesus' very humanity could be God's self-expression in history and how the Church and sacraments could mediate that event to subsequent generations. This paradigm also helped Rahner explain an essential feature of the symbolic like causality involved in God's relationship with the world. Selfexpressions between persons have a history. The communication of one to another in love begins before it is fully and explicitly expressed. Love causes the gestures towards the other, even though the love is not fully concretised until it is expressed in those words or deeds. Rahner suggests that in a similar way, God's selfcommunication (uncreated grace) is operative in human history from the moment of creation through the work of the Holy Spirit even though it is only in Jesus's life and death on the cross that the grounds for this possibility are definitively and explicitly concretised in history. Early in his career Rahner suggested that this dynamic could be thought of as giving a kind of supernatural possibility (or 'existential') to human existence; this would preserve the distinction between grace and nature while also accounting for humankind's openness for God. This emphasis on 'uncreated grace,' a revolutionary move in Catholic theology at the time, would also open groundbreaking possibilities for ecumenical dialogue with Lutherans and Orthodox Christians. Further refinements of this paradigm enabled Rahner to elaborate his seminal vision of humanity, and even of creation itself, as mediums of God's loving and absolutely free revelation and gift of self. This distinctly incarnational (and in later works more clearly pneumatological) centre of gravity guided his subtle

explorations of the dialectic at the heart of so many crucial theological issues and grounded his innovative and sometimes controversial proposals for understanding the relationships between: faith and reason, theology and anthropology, the immanent and economic Trinity, ascending and descending Christology, transcendental and historical revelation, love of neighbour and love of God, unchangeable and changeable truths of faith, and unity and pluralism in the Church.

God, so conceived in Rahner's theological investigations, is not one being among others, but the holy mystery and fullness of all that it is 'to be' who is revealed in Jesus and operative in history through the Holy Spirit. Given the interconnectedness of human history and God's participation in it through Jesus and the Spirit, something of God, this ineffable and Trinitarian fullness of Being-as-such, is anticipated whenever we know, choose or love a specific being, particularly our neighbour in need. Conversely, God is rejected to some extent in every refusal of truth, freedom and love. In these cases, since the affirmation or denial is of a particular being and not necessarily directly cognizant of God or Jesus, it is quite possible that the true nature of the 'fundamental option' implicitly taken toward God's self-communication (at the tacit or transcendental level) might be hidden or even denied (at the explicit or categorical level) by the person taking it. In either case, however, a stance towards God and Jesus is taken in the turning of a person's mind and heart towards realities of the world. Rahner suggested that a fundamentally affirmative option could be characterized as a kind of 'anonymous Christianity,' although he admitted that the phrase itself could be misunderstood. In later works he explored the notion of a 'searching Christology'—a Christology 'from below' which offered a more historically immanent explanation for the Catholic confession of God's universal salvific will.

There is an immense body of secondary literature either directly assessing Rahner's significance, responding to the more controversial proposals or constructively attempting to exploit his insights. The bibliography maintained at Professor Albert Raffelt's Freiburg web site numbered 2074 citations in July 1998.

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