KARL RAHNER ON UNITY THAT DIFFERENTIATES

PROPOSAL FOR THE KARL RAHNER GROUP AT THE CTSA

By Leo J. O’Donovan, S.J.

At the core of Karl Rahner’s theology, though seldom explicitly noticed by his interpreters, is a principle at once formal and dynamic. In his doctrine of God, Christology, pneumatology, anthropology, ecclesiology, ethical reflections and aesthetics alike, Rahner consistently seeks to disclose the unity behind the multiplicity of experience and of doctrine as well, emphasizing at the same time the singularity and uniqueness embedded in the evolutionary process of a graced creation. It is a dynamic dialectic of unity in process that recalls Teilhard de Chardin’s central and inherently mystical intuition that “l’union différencie.”

With respect to the doctrine of God, Rahner’s mid-career, foundational essay on the theology of symbol meditates on the central, revealed truth that being is not simply one but multiple. Another well-known essay from the same period argues that Christian theology has basically to do not with many, hitherto unknown “mysteries” but rather with the one, all-embracing mystery of God’s self-communication in the two modes of incarnation and grace. From his christology, as Anne Carr pointed out many years ago, the guiding insight that humanity and divinity are unconfusedly but inseparably united in Jesus Christ unfolds into the rest of his theology again and again. His doctrine of the Spirit proclaims the gift of God’s one Spirit to all humanity, in view of God’s universal salvific will, while equally emphasizing the unique, special gifts (charismata) of the Spirit to the church through time.

Similarly, Rahner’s anthropology understands the human condition as a graced search for unity among mutually related agents who are each spiritually singular. His ecclesiology, recalling repeatedly the church’s essential structure as both institutional and charismatic, appeals often as well to Vatican II’s affirmation that the church is the sacrament of the unity of humanity living in the tension of community and individuality. His ethical reflections are grounded in the unity of the love of God and the neighbor which must be realized in ever disparate, individual, moral situations. Aesthetically, in a dimension of his thought that has only recently received deserved attention, he urges contemporary Christians to learn again to see, hear and feel how the depths of life in all their pluriform possibilities call us beyond ourselves towards the fullness of reality.

The paper for the Group will present textual documentation for the summary claims mentioned above. It will also seek to demonstrate that attending to the principle of differentiating union highlights the practical character of Rahner’s thought, not simply in his spirituality but in his repeated assertion that human knowledge can only be fully true when it is transformed into love and, further, that love, which is known truly only in practice, is expressed through image as well as word. A further consequence of the principle is its support for Rahner’s repeated insistence that doctrine today should seek a new simplicity, emphasizing the central, unifying mystery of God’s drawing near to us through Christ and in the Spirit. This suggests a significant reordering of pastoral practice, closely related to Rahner’s interpretation of the style of Vatican II and what is meant by a “pastoral constitution.” It recognizes the deep pluralism of contemporary experience without surrendering the hope for reconciliation and community. It seems also closely to resemble the pastoral style of Pope Francis. Finally, time permitting, the principle may be shown to offer promising possibilities for ecumenical dialogue and the theology of religions.