

Lessons in Synodality for Theologians

The September 1968 Correspondence between Balthasar, Ratzinger and Rahner

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I. THE SYNODAL MINISTRY OF THEOLOGIANs

On 4 September 1968, Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote a brief letter on a postcard to Karl Rahner, inviting him to a meeting of eminent theologians in Würzburg on Sunday 13 October. This was the first communication between the two old friends since Balthasar had published his biting critique of Rahner's theology in his 1966 book, *Cordula oder der Ernstfall*¹. Manfred Lochbrunner discovered the letter in a file of correspondence between Balthasar and Rahner in the Karl Rahner Archive (KRA) and published it in his 2009 book *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologenkollegen*². Lochbrunner states that at the time, he was unable to find any evidence that Rahner had ever responded to Balthasar's communication.

While conducting my own research in the Karl Rahner Archive in October 2023, I discovered that Rahner had indeed sent a reply the day after he received Balthasar's letter – but to Joseph Ratzinger, not to Balthasar. This was because, on the very same day that Balthasar wrote to Rahner, Ratzinger also wrote to Rahner with the same invitation. Both Ratzinger's original letter and a copy of Rahner's reply are contained in the KRA file of correspondence between Rahner and Ratzinger³.

* All translations in this article from previously untranslated German sources are by the author. I also take this opportunity to acknowledge the kind assistance I received in my research for this article from the Karl Rahner Archive in Munich.

1. H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Cordula oder der Ernstfall*, Einsiedeln, Johannes Verlag, 1966, published in English as H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, trans. R. BECKLEY, Glen Rock, NJ, Newman Press, 1969.

2. See M. LOCHBRUNNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologenkollegen: Sechs Beziehungsgeschichten*, Würzburg, Echter, 2009, pp. 213-214. Lochbrunner identifies the file as "KRA II, A, Balthasar". The text was published again in 2020 in M. LOCHBRUNNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar, 1905-1988: Die Biographie eines Jahrhunderttheologen*, Würzburg, Echter, 2020, p. 423.

3. Ratzinger's 4 September 1968 letter and Rahner's 7 September 1968 reply are both in the file "Abt. 47-1010 Nr. 2418" in the Karl Rahner Archive.

While this personal correspondence will be of particular interest to historians focusing on the increasing plurality of theology in the postconciliar Catholic academe, it is also relevant as we consider the virtues of collegiality and communion necessary for the exercise of a “ministry of theologians” in a synodal Church today. The 2018 International Theological Commission (ITC) document “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church” contains a single paragraph on the role of theologians in a synodal Church. In §75, the ITC declares that “the ministry of theologians, as well as being personal, is also both communal and collegial”. “Synodal” theologians are therefore not only to be occupied in “listening to the word of God”, “discerning the signs of the times”, and “being in dialogue with society and cultures”, but they are also called “to listen to each other”, “to dialogue”, and “to discern” with one another, in order “to harmonise their many and varied approaches and contributions”⁴. The ITC therefore recognises that theologians do not work in cerebral isolation. They are human beings with their own struggles and passions who do theology in the context of an intricate web of collaborative relationships. While the ITC does not envisage a situation in which Catholic theologians will all speak with one voice, it does propose a vision in which conflict between a plurality of theological approaches may be alleviated through personal collegiality and communion.

The present article examines the September 1968 correspondence between Balthasar, Ratzinger, and Rahner in light of this vision of synodal theology. The letters give us a unique and privileged glimpse into the role that personal factors played in the relationships between these three truly eminent theologians at a crucial point in the history of twentieth-century Catholic theology. We will see how they attempted – but ultimately failed – to engage with one another in a communal and collegial way for the sake of what we today might call a “synodal” ministry of theologians in the Church.

II. THE *KLARSTELLUNGEN* PROJECT 1967-1969

During the final months of the Second Vatican Council, an international theological journal was founded with the intention of prolonging the extraordinarily productive moment of personal cooperation between Catholic theologians that had taken place during the Council sessions. *Concilium* was established under the leadership of Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx with the full support of Karl Rahner, in the belief that the work of the Council could “only be brought to its full growth by

4. INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2018, p. 75 [cited 29 July 2024]. Online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

theologians meeting and working together (*concilium, con-kalium, con-calare*), as a service of believers to believers and to the world episcopate”⁵. Five years later, in the corridors of the *Concilium* World Theological Congress in Brussels in 1970, there was “gossip” about “a new periodical said to be coming out soon to challenge *Concilium*, under the names of H.U. von Balthasar, Ratzinger and Le Guillou”⁶. The rumour was true. Despite the original intention of *Concilium*, by the time of the 1970 Congress it was clear that the intense experience of communion between the conciliar *periti* had irretrievably broken down⁷. During the first meeting of the ITC in 1969, Balthasar, Lubac, and Ratzinger had met with others to discuss the need for an alternative international journal of Catholic theology. This alternative journal eventually became *Communio*, first published in 1972⁸.

But the group that first conceived *Communio* in Rome in 1969 had all been involved in a previous project, and it was *that* project which was the central topic of the recently discovered correspondence between Balthasar, Ratzinger, and Rahner. Writing in 1992, Ratzinger recalled that by 1967, Balthasar had become troubled that

theology was no longer being measured according to its content but rather according to the purely formal categories of conservative and progressive. ... Balthasar went about seeking allies. He planned a common project, “Elucidations” (*Klarstellungen*), a book of no more than one hundred fifty pages. The

5. CONCILIUM FOUNDATION, *Concilium in Faith with the Council: 1985 and After*, in P. BRAND – E. SCHILLEBEECKX – A. WEILER (eds.), *Twenty Years of Concilium – Retrospect and Prospect* (Concilium, 170), Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1983, 90-92, p. 90.

6. C. ERNST, *The Concilium World Congress: Impressions and Reflections*, in *New Blackfriars* 51/607 (1970) 555-560, p. 556.

7. Not that it was ever fully unified. On 19 October 1963, Congar recorded in his journal that “Fr Daniélou is resolutely and actively AGAINST *Concilium*”. See Y. CONGAR, *My Journal of the Council*, Adelaide, ATF Theology, 2012, p. 385 and also 530. Lubac withdrew soon after, and Ratzinger ceased involvement after publishing just one article in the first edition of *Concilium*. Balthasar, not having been at the Council, was never included.

8. In his biography of Balthasar, Lochbrunner points to a reference in H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Unser Auftrag: Bericht und Entwurf*, Einsiedeln, Johannes Verlag, 1984, p. 79, in which Balthasar says that it was “one evening in a tavern near the Via Aurelia in Rome” that he, Lubac, Ratzinger, and Marie-Joseph Le Guillou “decided to establish the International Journal *Communio*”. See LOCHBRUNNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar, 1905-1988* (n. 2), pp. 432-433. Others involved at this early stage were Louis Bouyer and Jorge Medina Estevez. All six were members of the “First Quinquennium” of the International Theological Commission (see *International Theological Commission: First Quinquennium*, n.d. [cited 25 August 2024]. Online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_index-members_en.html#First_Quinquennium). Ratzinger notes that “Le Guillou for all practical purposes dropped out because of illness”. See J. RATZINGER, *Communio: A Program*, trans. P. CASARELLA, in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 19 (1992) 436-449, p. 439. It is interesting to note that Le Guillou is still listed among the members of the Editorial Board of *Concilium* in the issue H. KÜNG – W. KASPER (eds.), *Polarization in the Church* (Concilium, new ser., v. 8, no. 9 [88], Ecumenism), New York, Herder and Herder, 1973.

book was supposed to include brief summaries, by the best specialists of the individual disciplines, of whatever was essential for the foundations of the faith⁹.

Some idea of what Balthasar was planning in 1967 can be gained from the two books he eventually published with the title “*Klarstellungen*” in 1971 and 1979 under his own authorship, but these should not be confused with the project Ratzinger is writing about¹⁰. According to Ratzinger, the original *Klarstellungen* project was to be an anthology of short essays rather than a single text or declaration. He says that it “never really got off the ground”; nevertheless, it sowed the seed that eventually germinated in the idea for *Communio*¹¹.

In light of this information, it is something of a surprise to discover that the letter Balthasar wrote to Rahner on 4 September 1968 was precisely an invitation for Rahner – a key member of the *Concilium* circle – to attend a planning meeting for the *Klarstellungen* project when this was the very initiative which would later result in the founding of *Communio*. From this fact alone, we can draw a conclusion regarding the postconciliar theological landscape: whatever and whoever it was that Balthasar and Ratzinger and their companions were concerned about in 1968, at that time they both judged Rahner to have sufficient commonality with their own cause to invite him to be a part of it. Additionally, Rahner’s reply reveals that he regarded Ratzinger’s involvement as a measure of the good faith of Balthasar’s proposition and that his failure to join the project had at least as much (if not more) to do with the contingencies of his personal relationship with Balthasar as with any potential theological conflict between them.

9. RATZINGER, *Communio: A Program* (n. 8), p. 438.

10. See H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Klarstellungen: Zur Prüfung der Geister* (Herderbücherei, 393), Freiburg i.Br., Herder, 1971 and ID., *Neue Klarstellungen* (Kriterien, 49), Einsiedeln, Johannes Verlag, 1979. These were published in English as H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Elucidations*, San Francisco, CA, Ignatius Press, 1998 and ID., *New Elucidations*, San Francisco, CA, Ignatius Press, 1986.

11. “So kam es zum Gedanken einer Zeitschrift, der im Zusammenhang mit der ersten Sitzung der Internationalen Theologenkommission (1969) Gestalt gewann” (J. RATZINGER, *Communio – ein Programm*, in G.L. MÜLLER [ed.], *Gesammelte Schriften*. Band 7/2: *Zur Lehre des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils: Formulierung – Vermittlung – Deutung*, Freiburg i.Br., Herder, 2012, 1106-1119, p. 1108). Lochbrunner also notes that the *Klarstellungen* project had been definitively abandoned “im Sommer 1969”. So, there appears to be a reasonably seamless continuity between the *Klarstellungen* project and the idea of establishing *Communio*. See LOCHBRUNNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar, 1905-1988* (n. 2), p. 433. Again, the timing is right for Ernst’s report of the “gossip” about the new journal in Brussels in 1970, even though the first issue did not appear for another two years.

III. BALTHASAR'S LETTER TO RAHNER

Balthasar had been a member of the Society of Jesus along with Rahner, although, due to entering the order at different times, they never lived in the same house together¹². Nevertheless, they were very aware of each other, and they spent time together in 1939 planning out a schema for a joint dogmatics¹³.

Lochbrunner offers two pieces of evidence for Rahner's goodwill toward Balthasar. Firstly, he was one of Balthasar's few colleagues who supported him in his attempt to seek incardination as a secular priest when he left the Jesuits in 1950¹⁴. Secondly, it was Rahner who initiated the process that led to Balthasar receiving an honorary doctorate in theology from Münster in 1965¹⁵. In addition, Rahner had written a generous *laudatio* for Balthasar to mark his 60th birthday in 1965¹⁶. So, when Balthasar published *Cordula oder der Ernstfall* in 1966, with its stinging critique of Rahner's theology – especially in the parody dialogue between “the Christian” and “the Commissar” – it came as a bitter shock to Rahner. While the book's main argument concerns martyrdom as a response to the love of Christ, the “occasional *casus belli* of the work” was Rahner's theology of the “anonymous Christian”¹⁷. As Philip Endean has noted, Rahner “never replied in public to von Balthasar's strictures on his theology”; however, it also seems that after the publication of *Cordula*, all personal communication between the two theologians had ceased¹⁸. Their

12. Balthasar entered the Society of Jesus in 1929, seven years after Rahner, and left in 1950.

13. The proposed co-authored dogmatics, although it never materialised, is a significant part of the early collaboration between Rahner and Balthasar. Rahner eventually published the schema as the first item in the first volume of his *Schriften zur Theologie* series in 1955 (later translated into English and widely read in the first volume of *Theological Investigations*). Lochbrunner underscores the importance of this collaboration in the relationship between Rahner and Balthasar in LOCHBRUNNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologenkollegen* (n. 2), pp. 150-163.

14. See LOCHBRUNNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologenkollegen* (n. 2), pp. 177-181.

15. LOCHBRUNNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar, 1905-1988* (n. 2), pp. 388-390. Lochbrunner's investigations reveal that J.B. Metz and Walter Kasper were also involved in this process, but Ratzinger, who was Dean of the Faculty of Theology in Münster at the time, apparently did not involve himself.

16. K. RAHNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, in A. RAFFELT (ed.), *Sämtliche Werke. Band 22/2: Dogmatik nach dem Konzil*, Freiburg i.Br., Herder, 2008, 674-678.

17. P. PROSPERI, *The Witness of the Martyrs in the Early Church*, in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 41 (Spring 2014) 8-39, pp. 8-9. Lochbrunner observes that even today, *Cordula* is primarily remembered for its critique of Rahner, “overlooking its actual concern”, which is the theology of martyrdom (LOCHBRUNNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologenkollegen* [n. 2], p. 201).

18. See P. ENDEAN, *Von Balthasar, Rahner, and the Commissar*, in *New Blackfriars* 79/923 (1998) 33-38, p. 35 [cited 25 August 2024]. Online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43250081>. Lochbrunner found nothing in the KRA file of Rahner and Balthasar's

relationship never fully recovered. In terms of context, it is also important to note that when Balthasar wrote to Rahner in September 1968, *Cordula* had just been released in a third edition.

On the first side of his 4 September 1968 postcard to Rahner, Balthasar gives a convoluted explanation for why Rahner had not yet been invited to participate in the *Klarstellungen* project. Having heard that “my ‘Cordula’ truly hurt you”, Balthasar admits that he thought Rahner might have been more open to an invitation from Ratzinger than himself. Although he had delegated the task of inviting Rahner to Ratzinger, Ratzinger had “apparently forgotten” to carry out this responsibility, surmising that his reason was “holidays?”¹⁹. So far, Balthasar’s candour is commendable. However, he continues less virtuously in the same candid manner to say that he cannot retract the critique in *Cordula*, which had caused Rahner so much pain, and that Heinrich Schlier (who was also involved in the *Klarstellungen* project) had encouraged him to maintain his position²⁰. Balthasar even points Rahner to the new edition of *Cordula*, in which he says that he had “placed Lubac as a referee between us”²¹. He adds that even though Rahner’s theses on Christology might be “justified” in themselves, they are “shamefully misused by a thousand dumb simplifiers [*Simplifikatoren*]”²².

correspondence between the publication of *Cordula* and the 4 September 1968 letter. The contents of Balthasar’s letter also indicate that it was the first time that the issue of the *Cordula* offence had been personally raised between them.

19. It might be surmised that Ratzinger was already distracted by a possible future in Regensburg, but according to his own memoirs, he had turned down the offer of a chair in 1967 in favour of his former colleague Johann Auer and was not offered a position at Regensburg again until “late 1968 or early 1969”. See J. RATZINGER, *Milestones: Memoirs, 1927-1977*, San Francisco, CA, Ignatius Press, 1998, p. 140.

20. Schlier was a New Testament scholar (a student and critic of Bultmann) who had converted from Protestantism and was a professor at Bonn with Ratzinger. He had been a pastor of the Confessing Church during the War.

21. “Du wirst aber vielleicht das Nachwort zur 3. Auflage gesehen haben, in dem ich Lubac als Schiedsrichter zwischen uns aufstelle”. See LOCHBRUNNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar, 1905-1988* (n. 2), p. 423.

22. The use of the word “Simplifikatoren” in this letter is interesting, given the cartoon drawing which was sent anonymously to Rahner many years later. Rahner described this in an interview: “RAHNER: As you see, at the top of the cartoon is a theological atomic physicist [*Atomphysiker*] who’s supposed to be me. What it means is that I speak about things that no one understands. Beneath me sit the so-called multipliers [*Multiplikatoren*]. They are the ones who are expected to hand on what I say. Beneath them sit the popularizers [*Simplifikatoren*] who spend their time putting what the multipliers say into simple language. Below them, in the pulpit, is an individual popularizer who preaches to the Christian people what needs to be said there. Nearby sits Jesus Christ who listens to what is being translated from what I’ve concocted, and he says: ‘I don’t understand’. That’s just the way it is when you’re a theology teacher”. See K. RAHNER – M. KRAUSS, *I Remember: An Autobiographical Interview with Meinold Krauss*, New York, Crossroad, 1985, pp. 18-19. That Balthasar should have used this term in 1968 in the very same sense as the cartoon might indicate some connection.

Balthasar continues his letter on the other side of the card, describing the *Würzburger Plan* and his purpose in writing:

My idea was also to write a small book of “theses” (“clarifications”) that the most eminent [*namhafteste*] theologians would draw up – and which would neither be encumbered by the [Church’s teaching] office [*durchs Amt belastet*] nor misused by the extremists [*die Ultras*]. Ratzinger, Schlier, and Lubac straightaway found this good and necessary, and with Ratzinger, we cooked up a little committee: Schlier, Schnackenburg, you [*Du*], Ratzinger, and Pieper (Ratzinger put Kasper’s name forward as a “youngster”, but he carefully slipped his head out of the noose.) I was to put together a basic text, which we wanted to discuss on Sunday, 13 October, in Würzburg (Schnackenburg will look after accommodation). It seems to me that you would be very necessary, [since] you have a hundred times the technical skills for such things (which I – as a nonconciliar hermit – have none of). I will sketch out a map with many blank spots into which you globetrotters with local knowledge can then add in more²³.

Balthasar is clearly affecting a chatty, familiar style here, using the familiar “Du” with his old friend. He may be overcompensating for the awkward situation he knows his *Cordula* critique has placed him in with Rahner.

Even though Lochbrunner found no evidence of a reply from Rahner to Balthasar in the Karl Rahner Archives, he was later able to confirm that the meeting in Würzburg on Sunday 13 October had gone ahead and that Rahner was not a participant²⁴. In Lochbrunner’s judgement, Rahner’s failure to join the initiative (which Balthasar had described as “very necessary”) was the critical factor that led to the eventual shelving of the *Klarstellungen* project²⁵.

23. LOCHBRUNNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologenkollegen* (n. 2), p. 214.

24. When Lochbrunner published Balthasar’s letter of 4 September 1968 in 2009, he stated that the file did not contain a response from Rahner (LOCHBRUNNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologenkollegen* [n. 2], p. 214). Lochbrunner also stated in 2009 that the meeting at Würzburg did not take place as planned. However, in his 2020 biography of Balthasar, he changes that judgement based on a note from Lubac to Balthasar on 29 October 1968, which refers to decisions made in Würzburg. See LOCHBRUNNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar, 1905-1988* (n. 2), p. 424. Nevertheless, he notes that Rahner was not in attendance at this meeting.

25. LOCHBRUNNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologenkollegen* (n. 2), p. 214. Possibly another reason for giving up on the plan was that another book came out at the end of 1968: K. RAHNER *et al.*, *Die Antwort der Theologen: Rahner, Metz, Schoonenberg, Congar, Daniélou, Schillebeeckx zu Hauptproblemen der gegenwärtigen Kirche*, Düsseldorf, Patmos, 1968. As can be seen from the list of contributors, this book was of a slightly different nature to the *Klarstellungen* project; nevertheless, it was also aimed at addressing the main problems of the Church in the present (see LOCHBRUNNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologenkollegen* [n. 2], p. 215). Since Rahner wrote the forward for this book and collaborated with Metz in its production, he was probably well aware that Balthasar’s

IV. RATZINGER'S LETTER TO RAHNER

Since Ratzinger's 4 September 1968 letter has been preserved in the same file as the copy of Rahner's reply, it is now possible to read all three letters together for the first time²⁶. From a comparison of Balthasar's and Ratzinger's separate invitations, it is immediately evident that they did not coordinate their correspondence with Rahner and that they each adopted very different tactics to persuade him to join their project. There is nothing yet, at this stage, that would indicate a "parting of ways" between Ratzinger and Rahner following their close cooperation at the Council²⁷. Nevertheless, in comparison to Balthasar's familiar and breezy tone, Ratzinger's letter is entirely devoid of any evidence of a personal relationship, despite their ten-year acquaintance and the fact that Rahner now held Ratzinger's previous chair in Münster²⁸. In contrast to Balthasar's letter (which begins "Lieber Karl"), Ratzinger opens with the standard "Lieber Herr Kollege". Without any introduction, the letter immediately proceeds to the purpose of the communication. First, Ratzinger explains that Balthasar has "developed a plan" arising out of discussions with Heinrich Schlier, to address "the current crisis". He describes this crisis in terms of a lack of effectiveness of the magisterial pronouncements of the pope and bishops, and, with Balthasar, suggests that a "well-founded declaration [*Erklärung*]" from certain "eminent [*namhafter*] theologians" could "assume a corresponding function". They would need to define the "essential starting points" for theology, the direction in which its tasks are to be developed, and the legitimate limits or boundaries beyond which it cannot go in order to exclude not only a "false Modernism" but also a "false teaching practice [*Lehramtspraxis*]". Ratzinger stresses that the project aims not to condemn but to clarify. To the extent that criticism is necessary, it should be addressed to "both sides". It is worth noting that this language of "sides" (which is reflected in Rahner's reply) suggests that Ratzinger and Balthasar viewed the prevailing plurality among Catholic theologians as a polarised spectrum.

plan was cutting into the same territory. Note that all but one of the authors of *Die Antwort der Theologen* were closely tied with the *Concilium* journal (Daniélou is the odd one out).

26. The texts of both Ratzinger's and Rahner's letters are included at the end of this article.

27. See RATZINGER, *Milestones* (n. 19), p. 129. It is doubtful that Balthasar would have delegated Ratzinger to issue the invitation if he did not believe that Ratzinger's approach would be more acceptable to Rahner than his own.

28. The style could be compared to another letter in the KRA file "Abt. 47-1010 Nr. 2418" in which Rahner writes to Ratzinger asking for practical advice about the Münster chair with regard to assistants, secretaries, taking over doctoral supervisions, etc. Dated 29 January 1967, Rahner adopts a casual collegial tone. Although it uses the formal "Sie", Rahner addresses Ratzinger brightly as "Lieber Herr Kollege Ratzinger!" – with an exclamation mark – and inquires after Ratzinger's recovery from a recent illness.

Stating his agreement with this plan, Ratzinger outlines a procedure to develop a text and solicit signatures, which is slightly at odds with Balthasar's description²⁹. He states that the plan going forward is for Balthasar to draft the initial text, which would then be critiqued and edited by a select group of theologians who would meet in Würzburg on the weekend of 12-13 October 1968. Besides Schlier, Balthasar, and Ratzinger, it was "foreseen" that Rudolf Schnackenburg would attend the Würzburg meeting (although there are some scheduling difficulties around his attendance). Ratzinger says that both Josef Pieper and Walter Kasper would have liked to have been there but were already committed. This comment about Kasper is another point of difference between Balthasar's letter and Ratzinger's. Balthasar had made it clear in his letter that it was Ratzinger who wanted Kasper to be included as a representative of the "younger" generation³⁰, but he had also let slip to Rahner that Kasper was actually glad to have a reason not to be associated with the project. As we will see, Rahner is quick to pick up on this difference in his reply.

In fact, of all the theologians named in this correspondence, Walter Kasper is the only one who might still be able to offer recollections about the circumstances of the *Klarstellungen* correspondence today³¹. Balthasar appears to have thought that Kasper was unwilling to be involved in a project that would impact his relationship with fellow theologians. This fits with what we know of Kasper's theological relationships at the time. After serving as Hans Küng's assistant in Tübingen, he became a professor of dogmatic theology on the Münster faculty in 1964. There, he had been a colleague of Ratzinger but also of Metz and later (at the time of the 1968 correspondence) of Rahner. Among the Münster faculty members it was Kasper and Anton Antweiler, who had formally proposed Balthasar for his honorary theological doctorate in 1965³². When Ratzinger moved to Regensburg in 1969, Küng invited Kasper back to Tübingen to fill the vacant chair³³. According to Küng, Kasper was the one who first informed him in 1970 that Rahner was preparing a "polemic" against his book on the infallibility of the pope, yet he was disappointed that Kasper did not come out more forthrightly in his defence during the ensuing

29. It also differs from how Ratzinger describes the project in the 1992 *Communio* article. In the latter, he implies that the *Klarstellungen* was to be an "anthology" of short essays, but here, it seems more like a statement of principles that eminent theologians would be invited to sign in order publicly to demonstrate their agreement. Balthasar's letter to Rahner could be open to either interpretation.

30. Ratzinger was only six years Kasper's senior, but Ratzinger seems to be counted as part of the older generation. In his 7 September letter, Rahner states that Ratzinger should ensure he is not the youngest signatory.

31. Cardinal Kasper has recently offered some reminiscences on his theological debates with Ratzinger in *Communio*, which will be treated briefly below.

32. See LOCHBRUNNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar, 1905-1988* (n. 2), pp. 388-389.

33. See H. KÜNG, *Disputed Truth: Memoirs*, trans. J. BOWDEN, New York, Continuum, 2008, p. 153.

debate³⁴. In 1969, Kasper published a critical review of Ratzinger's highly successful 1968 book *Einführung in das Christentum*³⁵. Kasper remained a friend to Rahner, and both he and (the then Archbishop) Ratzinger gave official speeches at Rahner's 70th birthday celebrations in Munich in 1979³⁶. Finally, it is worth observing that Kasper held positions on the editorial boards of both *Concilium* (1972-1977) and *Communio* (from 1983)³⁷.

After his mention of Kasper and Pieper, Ratzinger finally comes to the point of his letter to Rahner, writing that "we would like to request your collaboration". Immediately, Ratzinger indicates that he knows the problem with this request:

Herr von Balthasar does not dare to write to you directly and has therefore asked me to invite you; however, he would be *very* pleased if you could accept. Thus, I ask you in his name and mine to come if it is possible for you. Lubac wants to join the cause and has also already promised a number of French signatures.

Ratzinger thus indicates to Rahner that he is fully aware of the tension between him and Balthasar and of Balthasar's role in it³⁸. Nevertheless, among the "eminent" German-speaking theologians, Rahner is the most eminent and has good connections with "both sides" in the current theological divisions. His involvement is, therefore, crucial to convey the balance and *gravitas* necessary for the success of the *Klarstellungen* project. The request "in seinem und meinem Namen" seems sincere and heartfelt – thus representing the only vaguely personal note in the entire letter. Yet again, Ratzinger returns to his strategy of persuasion by adding the possibility of Henri de Lubac's involvement. Lubac, of course, was both an eminent theologian in his own right and a colleague whom Balthasar,

34. See *ibid.*, pp. 154, 158.

35. This important debate will be treated further below, but here we note that in his reply Ratzinger wrote that he could "only explain Kasper's position by assuming that he wants to be both fully 'critical' (in the sense of the 'kritischen Katholiken') and fully with the official Church, in the sense of Denzinger. However, this is too much to ask, as humanly noble as this intention of mediation and breadth may be and as sympathetically as it touches us for this reason" (see J. RATZINGER, *Glaube, Geschichte und Philosophie: Zum Echo auf meine "Einführung in das Christentum"*, in G.L. MÜLLER [ed.], *Joseph Ratzinger: Gesammelte Schriften. Band 4: Einführung in das Christentum*, Freiburg i.Br., Herder, 2014, 323-339, p. 330).

36. See K. RAHNER, *Ein ganz normaler Theologe und Christ*, in A. RAFFELT (ed.), *Sämtliche Werke. Band 31: Im Gespräch über Kirche und Gesellschaft: Interviews und Stellungnahmen*, Freiburg i.Br., Herder, 2007, 484-485, p. 484.

37. See I. PROFT *et al.*, *Bibliographie Kardinal Walter Kasper*, Kardinal Walter Kasper Stiftung, May 1, 2020, p. 69, Kasper Walter, OneDrive Library [cited 26 August 2024]. Online: www.kardinal-kasper-stiftung.de/media/bibliographie181120_000.pdf.

38. The emphasis on the word "very" in the original should be noted. The word *sehr* is typed in the typical German manner of emphasis as "s e h r".

Ratzinger and Rahner all held in the highest regard. As we have seen, Balthasar seems to have had some hope (misplaced, as it turns out) that Lubac could have been a reconciling influence in the matter of *Cordula*. After indicating, as Balthasar had also, that the publication of the declaration had been arranged with Heinrich Wild, the director of Kösel, Ratzinger signs off in the hope of seeing Rahner in Würzburg.

V. RAHNER'S LETTER TO RATZINGER

Rahner's reply to Ratzinger, dated 7 September 1968, is the longest of the three letters³⁹. In his reply, Rahner names various Catholic theologians and assesses their possible reaction to the proposed project. He also lays bare his "bitter feelings" over the *Cordula* affair with Balthasar. For Rahner, both topics intertwine as he considers the invitation to be involved in the *Klarstellungen* plan, but here they need to be treated distinctly.

After the standard address ("Lieber Herr Kollege") and using the formal *Sie*, Rahner writes: "Yesterday I received a brief letter from Balthasar; today one from you. Both are about the same business. I need to think about this a bit more". Rahner immediately states he cannot attend the 13 October meeting in Würzburg because he has another engagement. He remains equivocal about whether he would attend even if things were to change. In this respect, Rahner seems to place himself in the same position as Kasper. He notes that while Balthasar had implied that Kasper had "carefully extricated himself", this "sounds different from what you [Ratzinger] write, as if it were only a matter of scheduling difficulties for him". The differences in the account of the project given by his two correspondents had not escaped Rahner's attention.

After giving his apologies, Rahner goes on to discuss the merits and difficulties of the *Klarstellungen* project as such. He states his general approval of the plan for some kind of "manifesto" (this is how he has understood Balthasar's proposition). It is not only "possible" and "sensible" but becoming "gradually more necessary" as time goes on. His mention of a conversation "a few days ago ... with Schillebeeckx in Nijmegen" about "the same idea" seems to point toward the publication that he and Schillebeeckx were preparing at that very time with Metz and Schoonenberg and others, namely, the anthology *Die Antwort der Theologen*⁴⁰.

39. A copy (or possibly a draft) of this letter is filed directly after Ratzinger's letter in the file "Abt. 47-1010 Nr. 2418" in the KRA.

40. This project must have been quite well developed at this stage, as Rahner wrote the introduction to it on 20 October 1968. Balthasar received a copy of *Die Antwort der Theologen* from the publisher in December of the same year. In a letter to Walter Warnach dated 27 December 1968, Balthasar described the book as "mehr circenses als panem" (more circuses than bread) (see LOCHBRUNNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologenkollegen* [n. 2], p. 215).

In his letter to Ratzinger, Rahner states the principal challenge for any such project. If the declaration is issued by a group already (“from the outset”) identified with one side or another, it cannot possibly succeed in its objective. For this reason, while it is not necessary that “every” or “just any” theologian participate in it, it is necessary that “many” do so. Rahner endorses Ratzinger’s emphasis on speaking to “both sides”. Ratzinger had mentioned a “false Modernism”; Rahner balances this by noting the equivalent danger of a new “Orthodoxy”, under which he also claims to have suffered⁴¹. He writes that “it is certainly better if a small group conceives the text and not a council of theologians; but once it is drafted, then one should try to win over as large a group of theologians as possible”⁴². Rahner believes the signatories must include “Metz, Kasper, and similar people”. Interestingly, in the light of a later paradigm in which the theologians associated with *Concilium* and *Communio* are routinely read in stark opposition to one another, Rahner states that Edward Schillebeeckx could be approached “with hope of success” and even thinks that Hans Küng might be able to understand the need for such a statement⁴³. Nevertheless, Rahner doubts if some theologians – for example, “ein Schoonenberg” – would ever be persuaded to join⁴⁴. But if the project is to succeed, Rahner writes, any such declaration “must not simply be inspired by a mentality as exhibited by Balthasar and Schlier”, who “consider me a heretic”.

Your name and Schnackenburg’s give me hope that the declaration will not be a new edition of the Cordula, but I am not sure that you, Schnackenburg, etc., will prevail. It must surely be possible to distinguish oneself from the rampant heresies in the Church today and to win a large number of

41. The use of capital letters seems appropriate here, although it cannot be inferred simply from the use of “Modernismus” and “Orthodoxie” in Rahner’s text. Rahner puts both labels in (what we today would call) “scare quotes”.

42. The term “council of theologians” may have originated with Congar. In September 1962, Küng was working on a statement with Rahner, and Congar warned him of “the danger, and the undesirability, of creating the impression of a para-council of theologians...” (CONGAR, *My Journal of the Council* [n. 7], p. 82).

43. For a discussion of the *Concilium* versus *Communio* paradigm, see P.D. MURRAY, *The Reception of Vatican II in Systematic Theology*, in C.E. CLIFFORD – M. FAGGIOLI (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023, 396-417, pp. 399-401 [cited 13 June 2024]. Online: <https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/45497/chapter/392450087>.

44. Rahner’s fellow Jesuit Piet Schoonenberg was an early enthusiast for *ressourcement* in the Netherlands. Together with Dominican Edward Schillebeeckx, he was one of the lead authors of *De nieuwe katechismus*, known as the “Dutch Catechism”, which caused a good deal of controversy when it was published in 1966. It is uncertain why Rahner judged Schoonenberg’s involvement less likely than Schillebeeckx’s. As Rahner indicates in this letter, he had only recently returned from Nijmegen at the time of this correspondence. He says explicitly that he had spoken with Schillebeeckx there, but since Schoonenberg was professor of dogmatic theology in Nijmegen and also involved in Rahner’s *Die Antwort der Theologen* project, it is likely that Rahner was meeting with both theologians.

“eminent” [“*namhafte*”] theologians without producing a pronouncement of a particular clique. This should still be possible in the Church today.

This plaintive statement of hope (“it should still be possible”) simultaneously expresses serious doubts (“I am not yet sure”).

At the time, no other division between theologians was as notorious as that between Balthasar and Rahner over *Cordula* (although only a few years later, a permanent rift arose between Hans Küng and his colleagues Rahner and Ratzinger over a similar offence during the *Infallibility* controversy)⁴⁵. In contrast to Ratzinger’s somewhat reserved letter, Rahner risks openly baring his soul about his relationship with Balthasar to Ratzinger in the hope that the latter might properly understand the inner turmoil that the two letters of invitation have caused Rahner:

I want to confess to you that I have been seized by bitter feelings now that I am suddenly good enough for Balthasar to participate [in his plan]. I never attacked him in public but remained silent. However, he repeatedly portrays me as the great father of all modern heresies, not to mention that his polemic against (e.g.) Metz is neither factual nor dignified. And when B. says in his letter that he stated in the 3rd edition of “Cordula” that “my barely-defensible (Christology) theses” (according to the letter) are so shamefully misused by “the thousand simplifiers”, and he has appointed Lubac as a mediator between himself and me, he simultaneously writes that he cannot retract what was said in *Cordula* itself. I know Lubac very well and like him dearly (even if he gradually sees only the devil at work today). But what is the purpose of his role as a mediator? I am (by God) not of the opinion that B. must find everything I write to be good and correct. But whether my theses are “almost defensible” (they are not even that in *Cordula*), he should leave that to others to judge (I mean to the Church). In any case, there is no need for him to demonise me as he has done (and e.g. in the matter of “anonymous Christianity”, although he exactly says the same thing in other places without seeming to notice).

As can be seen from this passage and the particulars it mentions, Rahner is substantially responding to Balthasar’s letter rather than to Ratzinger’s. Thus, the letter is a rare witness to the personal hurt Rahner experienced reading Balthasar’s *Cordula* critique.

As for Rahner’s involvement in the *Klarstellungen* project, he deals with this at the very end of the letter.

45. Rahner’s publication of an article and then editing an anthology critiquing Hans Küng’s *Unfehlbar?* was experienced by Küng as a “tremendous disappointment” and led to a breakdown of their relationship. By Küng’s own account, he was also surprised to see his one-time colleague Joseph Ratzinger among his “attackers” in the anthology. See H. KÜNG, *Unfehlbar? Eine Anfrage*, Zürich, Benziger, 1970; K. RAHNER (ed.), *Zum Problem Unfehlbarkeit: Antworten auf die Anfrage von Hans Küng* (Quaestiones Disputatae, 54), Freiburg i.Br., Herder, 1971; and KÜNG, *Disputed Truth* (n. 29), pp. 157-164.

I say all this just to make clear to you that I still wonder what I should do in a circle where people like B. (and Schlier, whom B. also refers to in this letter) consider me a heretic, thus counting me among those they set out to fight against. You will understand if I examine the text from B. very carefully before I sign it.

If the problem besetting the Church is that Catholic theologians have divided into two “sides”, then Rahner can only interpret Balthasar’s refusal to apologise for his judgement on Rahner’s theology in *Cordula* as proof that he regards Rahner as someone on the *other* “side” of the theological polarisation. If this is the case, how can Rahner have any confidence that a statement drawn up by Balthasar will not again include some condemnation of his own theology?

VI. LESSONS IN SYNODALITY

The September 1968 correspondence between Balthasar, Ratzinger, and Rahner over the *Klarstellungen* project will clearly be of interest to historians of postconciliar Catholic theology. At the same time, it is equally instructive for contemporary Catholic theologians as they face the challenge of exercising their ministry in a synodal Church in a way that is (as ITC suggests) personal, collegial, and ultimately communal. Two later pieces written by Rahner and Balthasar draw the necessary connections.

Just six weeks after his 7 September 1968 letter to Ratzinger, Rahner wrote the introduction to *Die Antwort der Theologen*. In that piece, he upheld both the duty of each Catholic theologian to remain within the boundary of the Church’s binding doctrine and the right of theologians to call one another out when that boundary is breached. Nevertheless, given that everything a theologian says or writes today ends up being published, he warns that such criticism should not be done in a way that makes “the spoken or printed word” of another theologian “impossible from the outset”. He concludes:

Critical thinking together is thus not only allowed but required if that dialogue of theologians among themselves (as well as of theologians and non-theologians) which was so much talked about during and after the council (and without which theology cannot exist in the future) is to succeed⁴⁶.

Similarly, in 1972, when Balthasar wrote the lead article for the first edition of *Communio*, he concluded by proposing that each theologian within the Church must be ready to allow themselves “to be called in question” by “the greater truth of the community which is present and real

46. RAHNER *et al.*, *Die Antwort der Theologen* (n. 25), p. 8.

even now”. Balthasar posited that this readiness to be open to the “greater truth” of *communio* is “precisely what it is to be catholic”⁴⁷.

Not to speak with reservations, on the basis of a capitalistic ownership of “truths of faith”. We have already said that this truth we believe in strips us bare. Like lambs among wolves. It is not a matter of bravado, but of Christian courage, to expose oneself to risk. People begin to commune with one another when they are not afraid of one another and are not ashamed of opening their hearts to one another⁴⁸.

These passages demonstrate that both Balthasar and Rahner were acutely aware that (what the ITC called) the “ministry of theologians” requires virtues that we would recognise today as “synodal”: the ability and willingness to listen, to dialogue, and to discern the truth together in collegial communion, even (and especially) when significant disagreement arises. Balthasar, Ratzinger, and Rahner all demonstrated these virtues in their September 1968 correspondence – to an admirable extent, given the circumstances. Yet, we see that each, in their own way, also failed to muster the necessary courage to risk fully opening their hearts to one another for the sake of the future of theology.

At the same time, we ought not to be too quick to pass judgment on them for their failure. Within the context of an ever-increasing plurality of theological methods and approaches, it is questionable whether the *Klarstellungen* project had any realistic chance of success. While Balthasar and Ratzinger understood that they needed Rahner’s participation in the project for it to succeed, Rahner himself saw more clearly than the other two that an attempt to establish a group of Catholic theologians around a theologically “central” position would inevitably fail. In order to have a genuinely unifying effect, it would need to involve the very theologians against whom the manifesto was being addressed – possibly himself included. Considered historically and in the light of these letters, we know the plurality that threatened the harmony of Catholic theology in 1968 was evident not only on the peripheries of the community (“*die Ultras*”, as Balthasar had called them) but existed precisely among the group of “eminent” theologians who were being proposed as authors of the text. Thus, Rahner’s letter demonstrates that Balthasar’s *Klarstellungen* project was always destined to founder on the rock of the very problem it sought to address.

47. H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Communio – A Program*, in *Communio: International Catholic Review* (Spring 2006) 153-169, p. 168 [cited 12 April 2024]. Online: <https://www.communio-icr.com/articles/view/communio-a-program>. Originally published as H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Communio – Ein Programm*, in *Communio: Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift* 1/1 (1972) 4-17 [cited 12 April 2024]. Online: <https://ikaz-communio.de/ojs/index.php/ikaz/article/view/3302>.

48. BALTHASAR, *Communio – A Program* (n. 47), p. 169.

Balthasar's use of the somewhat aristocratic term “*namhaftig*” (eminent) to describe the kind of theologians he wished to gather at the table in Würzburg was itself a problematic assumption evident in the correspondence. Both Ratzinger and Rahner repeated Balthasar's use of this concept, although Rahner at least placed quotation marks around the term. The notion that within the theological *collegium*, there could be (or even *should* be) some whose very names should exercise a special authority among or even over their colleagues does not belong to the model of synodality. Equally, an authentic synodal model for the “ministry of theologians” should invalidate any model that envisages theological collegiality as a “council of theologians” (to use Rahner's term), that is, as a political pursuit in which parties are formed to bring pressure upon or to outvote the “other side”⁴⁹. In contrast to both the aristocratic and democratic models of the “ministry of theologians”, the round-table discussions at both the Australian Plenary Council and the Vatican's Synod on Synodality visibly expressed the virtues of listening, dialogue, and discernment that are emerging as the particular hallmarks of synodality.

The way that Balthasar originally envisaged the crisis of Catholic theology after the Council was also problematic in theological terms. While he was critical of the fact that theology was coming to be judged by “the purely formal categories of conservative and progressive”, the correspondence suggests that he himself was unable to think of the emerging plurality outside such a spectrum between two polarities. Thinking in terms of “left” and “right” led him to believe that there must be a fundamental “centre” that could hold these two extremes of theological diversity in harmony. Balthasar's vision for the *Klarstellungen* project as he outlines it in his letter to Rahner did not take into account the full breadth and often legitimate plurality of theological opinion that was rapidly emerging as his fellow theologians were assimilating the experience and documents of the Second Vatican Council⁵⁰.

49. A good example of the “council of theologians” dynamic at work can be found in ERNST, *The Concilium World Congress* (n. 6). Also from 1970, see J. RATZINGER, *Demokratisierung der Kirche?*, in G.L. MÜLLER (ed.), *Gesammelte Schriften*. Band 12: *Künder des Wortes und Diener eurer Freude: Theologie und Spiritualität des Weihesakramentes*, Freiburg i.Br., Herder, 2010, 159-186. Ratzinger would later use the phrase to describe the board of *Concilium*: “... [T]hey wanted to be, as it were, a permanent council of theologians that would increasingly realize the promise of this beginning in a constant exchange with all the vital forces present” (J. RATZINGER, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, San Francisco, CA, Ignatius Press, 1987, p. 383).

50. It is to be remembered that, whereas both Rahner and Ratzinger contributed to the *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement* of the Council debates, Balthasar did not share that experience. It is evident that he felt this alienation from the other “eminent” theologians: he refers to himself in his letter to Rahner as a “nichtkonziliarer Einsiedler” (a nonconciliar hermit) in comparison to the other “Globetrotter” theologians. See LOCHBRUNNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar, 1905-1988* (n. 2), p. 423.

That such theological plurality was a serious issue during the postconciliar period is evidenced by the fact that it was one of the first topics considered by the International Theological Commission during its first quinquennium⁵¹. However, this should not be taken to suggest that plurality as such was an entirely new phenomenon in Catholic theology after the Council⁵². Already more than 130 years earlier, Johann Adam Möhler understood that

the defining nature of Catholic unity, of Catholic truth, and hence of the role of Catholic theology is to be a living communion of valid corrective contrasts and distinctions (*Gegensätze*/antitheses) which, although inevitably standing in some dialectical tension with each other, require to be held together rather than separating into opposed contradictions (*Widersprüche*)⁵³.

Nevertheless, during the 1960s, Karl Rahner was reflecting deeply on what he saw as the “completely new spiritual-intellectual situation of the people of today ... a pluralism in the spiritual-intellectual world of today, which can no longer be overcome by a positive and direct integration of all knowledge and problems into a unified, uniformly structured world picture”⁵⁴. Rahner speaks of this as a *geistig* phenomenon, that is, more than a purely intellectual matter. Forty years later, Charles Taylor identified this exponentially increasing plurality as “a spiritual super-nova”⁵⁵. At the end of the Council in 1965, Rahner was still thinking of this new

51. INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Unity of the Faith and Theological Pluralism* (1972), n.d. [cited 26 August 2024]. Online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1972_fede-pluralismo_en.html.

52. For example, as implied by D.M. DOYLE, *Communion Ecclesiology: Beyond Left-Right Dichotomies?*, in *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 6/1 (1997) 7-12, pp. 7-8 [cited 13 June 2024]. Online: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/106385129700600102>.

53. MURRAY, *The Reception of Vatican II* (n. 35), pp. 400-401. Romano Guardini, a strong influence on all three theologians involved in the September 1968 correspondence, took up the theme of the distinction between *Gegensätze* and *Widersprüche* in his 1914 work *Gegensatz und Gegensätze*, which he expanded in 1925 with *Der Gegensatz*. See R. GUARDINI, *Der Gegensatz: Versuche zu einer Philosophie des lebendig Konkreten*, Mainz, Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1955.

54. K. RAHNER, *Kleine Frage zum heutigen Pluralismus in der geistigen Situation der Katholiken und der Kirche*, in H.-D. MUTSCHLER (ed.), *Sämtliche Werke*. Band 15: *Verantwortung der Theologie: Im Dialog mit Naturwissenschaften und Gesellschaftstheorie*, Freiburg i.Br., Herder, 2002, 345-353, p. 349.

55. Note however that, whereas Taylor believes the change arose from “a generalized culture of ‘authenticity’, or expressive individualism” resulting in “a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane” (C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, Kindle edition, Cambridge, MA, Belknap, 2007, p. 300), Rahner ascribed the increasing plurality to an expanding breadth of philosophical and scientific knowing (hence “unter einem gnoseologischen Pluralismus”: see his 1971 speech K. RAHNER, *Zum heutigen Verhältnis von Philosophie und Theologie*, in A. RAFFELT [ed.], *Sämtliche Werke*. Band 22/1a: *Dogmatik nach dem Konzil. Erster Teilband: Grundlegung der Theologie, Gotteslehre und Christologie. Teil A*, Freiburg i.Br., Herder, 2008, 189-202, p. 195).

plurality mainly as a challenge for theologians engaging with secular and religious world views outside the community of Church⁵⁶, but in his 1969 lecture “*Der Pluralismus in der Theologie und die Einheit des Bekenntnisses in der Kirche*” (composed following the September 1968 correspondence), we see that the question of unmanageable theological pluralism *within* the Church has become his overriding concern. In this lecture, he stated that

to those who bear office and believers in the Church alike pluralism in theology ... poses the question of how a true unity of confession can be maintained in the face of this pluralism, what this unity actually is, and how it can be delineated and conserved in the context of both a plural interpretation of this confession and a legitimate pluralism in theology⁵⁷.

Stated in this way, Rahner admits, “the problem is new”⁵⁸. While he does not claim to have a direct solution to this genuinely new problem, he reminds theologians that a more fundamental (if indirect) method remains by which the Church can and must face the challenge:

In the plurality of theologies therefore the conservation of the unity of confession and the assurance of it also (but not only!) depend upon community and unity being enacted in ways which do not lie simply in the dimension of conceptual words as such. If we want to achieve the unity of confession and assure ourselves of this unity ..., then we must together *speak* the one Creed, bodily celebrate the death of the Lord together, bodily perform the sacraments, and serve the world together in action. Through all this, the community of the Creed then takes place amid all the plurality of theologies⁵⁹.

56. See, for instance, K. RAHNER, *Über den Dialog in der pluralistischen Gesellschaft*, in MUTSCHLER (ed.), *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 15 (n. 54), 354-363.

57. K. RAHNER, *Der Pluralismus in der Theologie und die Einheit des Bekenntnisses in der Kirche*, in RAFFELT (ed.), *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 22/1a (n. 55), 339-354, p. 339 (my translation). J. Matthew Ashley comments that, by 1969, there is, “if anything, an even deeper awareness on Rahner’s part of the challenges that modern pluralism and the ‘knowledge explosion’ present to theology and the church” (see J.M. ASHLEY, *Karl Rahner: Commentary*, in C. CORNILLE [ed.], *The Enduring Theological Wisdom of the Founders of Concilium: Congar, Rahner, Metz, Schillebeeckx and Küng* (Concilium, 2022 Founders Memorial Issue), London, SCM Press, 2022, 92-98, p. 96 [cited 28 January 2024]. Online: <https://concilium.hymnsam.co.uk/media/1127/founders-issue-final.pdf>). Rahner first coins the term “gnoseologisch Konkupiscente” in 1967 to describe the new phenomenon of plurality (see K. RAHNER, *Philosophie und Philosophieren in der Theologie*, in RAFFELT [ed.], *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 22/1a [n. 55], 172-188, p. 178). In 1969 he explains that the analogy of concupiscence to this “gnoseological pluralism” arises because it is a “nicht zu bewältigenden Pluralismus”, that is (as with moral concupiscence) an unmanageable or uncontrollable plurality where one should find unity (see RAFFELT [ed.], *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 22/1a [n. 55], 301-335, p. 304).

58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 353-354 (my translation). Two English translations of this essay exist: K. RAHNER, *Pluralism in Theology and the Unity of the Creed in the Church*, in ID., *Theological Investigations*. Volume XI: *Confrontations I*, trans. D. BOURKE, London, Darton,

By reminding Catholic theologians that communal unity based on the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church precedes every conceptual-rational basis for confessional unity, Rahner's advice for facing the challenge of theological pluralism harmonises with Balthasar's reminder of "the greater truth of the community which is present and real even now".

VII. TO HARMONISE MANY AND VARIED APPROACHES

The Council brought many members of the Catholic theological community together in a prolonged, intense, and – to that point – unique face-to-face encounter that formed the basis of future developments and inter-relationships after the Council. While it would be anachronistic to describe their experience as "synodal", the conciliar *periti* experienced it as an instance of communality and collegiality. According to Yves Congar (writing in 1983), it "was an experience of – mutually fruitful – cooperation between pastors and theologians"⁶⁰. As previously noted, the creators of the *Concilium* journal "wished to prolong and to serve" this

experience of renewal for the Church through ... an openness to "others". ... We wanted a very "catholic" collaboration. No one was to be excluded. ... However, several names which appeared at the beginning later disappeared, for example, Ratzinger, Von Balthasar, Le Guillou. There has been a sort of parting of the ways⁶¹.

Nevertheless, as Congar goes on to say, "affairs in Holland and the Küng affair" also "cast their shadow over the magazine"⁶². As the September 1968 correspondence between Ratzinger and Rahner shows, the old preconciliar labels such as "Modernism" and "Orthodoxy" had rapidly – just three years after the Council – been reprimed and reapplied to completely new factions among Catholic theologians. This is all the more surprising when it is remembered that all the "eminent" theologians mentioned in this correspondence had been proponents of *ressourcement*

Longman & Todd, 1974, 3-23; and K. RAHNER, *Pluralism in Theology and the Oneness of the Church's Profession of Faith*, in CORNILLE (ed.), *The Enduring Theological Wisdom of the Founders of Concilium* (n. 57), 75-91 [cited 28 January 2024]. Online: <https://concilium.hymnsam.co.uk/media/1127/founders-issue-final.pdf>.

60. Y. CONGAR, *Where Are We in the Expression of the Faith?*, in BRAND *et al.* (eds.), *Twenty Years of Concilium* (n. 5), 85-87, p. 85.

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.* "The Küng affair" arose in the decade following Küng's publication of *KÜNG, Unfehlbar? Eine Anfrage* (n. 45), but "affairs in Holland" – beginning with the controversy over the Dutch Catechism – were already a factor at the time of the September 1968 correspondence, and likely influencing Rahner's judgement in regard to Schoonenberg and Schillebeeckx.

before the Council⁶³. Back then, the “orthodox” opponents of the new movement had dubbed it “*nouvelle théologie*” or “New Modernism”⁶⁴. The intent was to link theologians such as Congar, Lubac, and Chenu with the original “Modernism” of the early twentieth century, which Pope Pius XII had described as “the collection of all heresies”⁶⁵. The repeated resurrection of these labels in application to quite different theological trends after the Council perpetuated an expectation that Catholic theologians will always inevitably be divided into static, bifurcated parties of progressives and conservatives.

And so it was that, just as the *Klarstellungen* project failed to find a “centre” around which theological unity could coalesce, *Concilium* also failed to achieve its own original vision of unity. While this is perhaps unsurprising – for all the historical and theological reasons outlined above – it can still be seen as a failure of collegiality and communion on the part of the theologians involved. (At the same time, Balthasar’s solution – the founding of another journal precisely called *Communio* – arguably entrenched the disunity even more.) For this, the “eminent” theologians had some share of responsibility. Balthasar clearly betrayed his own principles of charity and *communio* in the way he treated Rahner in his *Cor-dula*. Such behaviour was not limited to a particular “side” in theology. Similar situations arose later in the relationships between Rahner and Ratzinger with Küng and Metz and Rahner with Ratzinger⁶⁶.

63. It is sometimes said that the (ultimately triumphant) opponents of neoscholasticism at the Council were “a somewhat loose alliance between two sub-groups” corresponding to “a precconciliar methodological division between Thomist and Augustinian proponents of the so-called *nouvelle théologie*” (see B. PETERSON, *Critical Voices: The Reactions of Rahner and Ratzinger to “Schema XIII”* (Gaudium et Spes), in *Modern Theology* 31/1 [2015] 1-26, pp. 1-2 [cited 26 August 2024]. Online: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/moth.12109>). This may be a reading back of postconciliar divisions onto the pre-1965 situation. For instance, Sarah Shortall offers an alternative reading that may have more substance in the historical context, pointing to the “significant fault lines between the Dominican and Jesuit branches of the *nouvelle théologie*” (see S. SHORTALL, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: Catholic Theology and Twentieth-Century French Politics*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2021, p. 11).

64. See G. LOUGHLIN, *Nouvelle Théologie: A Return to Modernism?*, in G. FLYNN – P.D. MURRAY (eds.), *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, 36-50.

65. See J. METTEPENNINGEN, *Nouvelle Théologie – New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II*, London – New York, T&T Clark, 2010, p. 4 and ID., *Yves Congar and the “Monster” of Nouvelle Théologie*, in *Horizons* 37 (2010) 52-71, p. 57 [cited 26 August 2024]. Online: https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/S0360966900006848/type/journal_article.

66. References for the former case have already been given above. For the latter case, see K. RAHNER, *Ich protestiere: Offener Brief an Kultusminister Hans Maier und Kardinal Joseph Ratzinger. Eine Wortmeldung zur Ablehnung von Johann Baptist Metz*, in *Publik-Forum* 8/23 (1979) 15-19; and J. RATZINGER, *Antwort auf öffentliche Vorhaltungen von Prof. Dr. Karl Rahner SJ wegen der Nichtberufung von Prof. Dr. Johann Baptist Metz auf*

Nevertheless, even in the period under consideration, there were theological disagreements between theologians involved in the September 1968 correspondence which did not end in division and alienation. For instance, J.B. Metz maintained his friendship with his teacher Rahner despite being famously critical of fundamental directions in Rahner's methodology. It has recently been observed that Rahner and Metz "do not have to be understood in competition with each other" but rather "open each other's thinking to deeper understanding and more extensive relevance"⁶⁷.

Another example is the well-known dispute between Kasper and Ratzinger that followed Kasper's critical review of Ratzinger's popular *Einführung in das Christentum* in 1969⁶⁸. In this review, Kasper claimed that Ratzinger's book was ultimately founded on his "Platonising starting point"⁶⁹ and that this "Platonic dialectic of the visible/invisible that forms the foundation of Ratzinger's design" failed to sufficiently take account of "the concrete entanglement of human beings in nature, society, culture, and history"⁷⁰. After Ratzinger had published a response to various authors who had reviewed his *Einführung* in the *Hochland* journal, including Kasper⁷¹, Kasper further responded⁷². At the end of this article, *Hochland* also gave Ratzinger the opportunity of a short *Schlusswort* (closing word), in which Ratzinger observed that although "the famous 'complete agreement'" had not been reached, yet "the differences [*Gegensätze*] have been reduced in a way I would not have thought possible after the [initial]

den Lehrstuhl für Fundamentaltheologie an der Universität München, in *Ordinariats-Korrespondenz* (München) 37 (1979), no. 13.12.1979.

67. K. RAHNER – J.B. METZ, *Finding God in a World Come of Age: Karl Rahner and Johann Baptist Metz*, ed. R. HAIGHT – A. PACH – A.A. KAMINSKI (Past Light on Present Life: Theology, Ethics, and Spirituality), New York, Fordham University Press, 2024, p. 104.

68. Kasper's initial review was W. KASPER, *Das Wesen des Christlichen: Ein Fundamental-Theologe und ein Dogmatiker zu dem Buch von Joseph Ratzinger, Einführung in das Christentum*, in *Theologische Revue* 65 (1969) 179-188.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

70. *Ibid.*, pp. 185-186. Significantly, the issues were similar in Kasper's other famous dispute with Ratzinger, over the priority of the universal or local church in 2000-2001. See W. KASPER, *On the Church*, in *America: A Jesuit Magazine* 184/14 (2001) 8-14 [cited 31 August 2024]. Online: <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2001/04/23/kasper-church-ratzinger-145624> and J. RATZINGER, *The Local Church and the Universal Church: A Response to Walter Kasper*, in *America: A Jesuit Magazine* 185/16 (2001) 7-11 [cited 31 August 2024]. Online: <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2014/01/06/ratzinger-benedict-local-universal-church-kasper-157678>.

71. Initially published as J. RATZINGER, *Glaube, Geschichte und Philosophie: Zum Echo auf meine 'Einführung in das Christentum'*, in *Hochland* 61 (1969) 533-543, and republished in 2014 (see n. 35).

72. W. KASPER, *Theorie und Praxis innerhalb einer theologia crucis: Antwort auf J. Ratzingers "Glaube, Geschichte und Philosophie"*, in *Hochland* 62 (March/April 1970) 152-159.

review”⁷³. Very recently, Kasper has offered his own recollections of this exchange, noting that “almost all the problems that are controversially discussed in the Church today were already on the table back then”⁷⁴. In his reflections, Kasper is adamant that the disputes that he conducted with Ratzinger were of the sort that “are a part of any legitimate theology. Anyone who derives alienation or even enmity from this has understood little or nothing about theology”⁷⁵. While Kasper states that “the fundamental questions” in his dispute with Ratzinger in 1969-1970 were the same issues that “we would grapple with in ever-new variations in the coming years”⁷⁶, nevertheless,

what was crucial is that we stood on the ground of shared faith convictions and had in principle the same understanding of theology, according to which theology’s task is to make the message of Jesus Christ (as transmitted in the apostolic witness) present in each particular context today, i.e., to make it intellectually comprehensible and, beyond that, to bring it to speech as a liberating and encouraging joyful message to live out the truth. ... With this clarification, the differences [*Unterschiede*] between Joseph Ratzinger and me are not simply resolved or harmonised; rather, they are placed within a common theological framework, which allows them to be better understood⁷⁷.

The newly discovered *Klarstellungen* correspondence shows us that the divisions experienced in Catholic theology over the past fifty years (and still today) might have been (and, indeed, still could be) otherwise. In September 1968, a door opened up momentarily for an authentic exercise of a “ministry of theologians” within the Church. Such doors of invitation – to listen, to dialogue, to discern, and to seek harmony – continue to open today for those with the personal virtues of courage, openness, and honesty to do theology synodally in collegial communion with one another. If Catholic theologians are “to harmonise their many and varied approaches and contributions” in a synodal exercise of their ministry, as the ITC

73. *Ibid.*, p. 159, also J. RATZINGER, *Schlusswort zu der Diskussion mit Walter Kasper*, in MÜLLER (ed.), *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 4 (n. 35), 340-342, p. 342.

74. W. KASPER, *Ein gebrochenes Verhältnis zur Moderne – Überlegungen zu meinem ersten Disput mit Joseph Ratzinger*, in *Communio: Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift* (2023/2) 190-197, p. 190 [cited 1 September 2024]. Online: <https://doi.org/10.14623/com.2023.2.190-197>.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 193. Although Manuel Schlögl raises some significant “follow-up questions and clarifications” about Kasper’s account (see M. SCHLÖGL, *Lesarten der Moderne – Kardinal Kaspers Überlegungen zu Joseph Ratzingers “gebrochenem Verhältnis zur Moderne” – ein Kommentar*, in *Communio: Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift* (2023/4) 436-442, [cited 1 September 2024]. Online: <https://doi.org/10.14623/com.2023.4.436-442>), nevertheless what Kasper says here fits with the Ratzinger’s conclusion to the debate in 1970 quoted above.

suggested in 2018, it will be essential first to recognise that a wide diversity and a fluid plurality of perspectives belong to the authentic character of Catholic theology in its task of making the message of Jesus Christ present today. But in the final analysis, as both Balthasar and Rahner have reminded us, if this “ministry of theologians” is to be truly synodal, it must be actually lived out in the sacramental and catholic unity of the Church.

APPENDIX: THE TEXTS

1. *Balthasar to Rahner, 4 September 1968, KRA II, A, Balthasar*

This text may be accessed in M. LOCHBRUNNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologenkollegen: Sechs Beziehungsgeschichten*, Würzburg, Echter, 2009, pp. 213-214 and M. LOCHBRUNNER, *Hans Urs von Balthasar, 1905-1988: Die Biographie eines Jahrhunderttheologen*, Würzburg, Echter, 2020, p. 423.

2. *Ratzinger to Rahner, 4 September 1968, KRA Abt. 47-1010 Nr. 2418*

DR. JOSEPH RATZINGER

o. PROFESSOR

74 TÜBINGEN, FRIEDRICH-DANNENMANN-STRASSE 22

4. September 1968

Herrn Univ. Professor P. Dr. Karl Rahner

8 München 19

Zuccalistrasse 16

Lieber Herr Kollege,

als ich zu Beginn dieser Ferien Hans Urs von Balthasar traf, entwickelte er mir einen Plan, den er vorher, wenn ich mich recht entsinne, in Gesprächen mit Heinrich Schlier gewonnen hatte. Nachdem in der gegenwärtigen Situation bischöfliche Lehrschreiben und päpstliche Verlautbarungen sich als ungeeignete Mittel erwiesen haben, um die Grenzen der Theologie und die Linie, in der ihre Aufgaben zu entwickeln sind, deutlich zu machen, ist er zu der Überzeugung gekommen, daß eine entsprechend fundierte Erklärung namhafter Theologen eine entsprechende Funktion übernehmen könnte. Es ginge darum, in der gegenwärtigen Krise des gläubigen Bewußtseins “lignes de force”, wie er sich ausdrückt, herauszuarbeiten, die nicht verurteilen, die aber doch klar werden lassen, wo legitim Theologie endet und welche wesentlichen Ausgangspunkte für sie unaufgebbar sind. Es geht dabei, wie gesagt, nicht darum, Verurteilungen auszusprechen und, soweit kritisch geredet werden muß, soll es selbstverständlich nach beiden Seiten hin geschehen, d.h., auch eine falsche Lehramtspraxis, der die gegenwärtige Krise ja zum nicht unerheblichen Teil zu danken ist, wird ebenso auszuschließen sein wie ein falscher Modernismus.

Ich halte diesen Plan von Herrn von Balthasar für richtig und wir haben daraufhin versucht, Vorstellungen zu gewinnen, wie er ins Werk zu setzen sei. Es soll nun so vorgegangen werden, daß zunächst Balthasar einen Basistext erarbeitet und daß sich dann am 12. auf 13. Oktober 1969 in Würzburg eine kleine Kerngruppe trifft, die den Text kritisiert und für eine endgültige [page 2] Bearbeitung Sorge trägt. Als Teilnehmer dieser Zusammenkunft sind außer Schlier, Balthasar und mir vorgesehen Professor Schnackenburg, der bereits seine Zustimmung zu dem Projekt erklärt hat, aber möglicherweise am 13. Oktober noch nicht aus der Ostzone zurück sein kann, angesichts der Schwierigkeiten in der CSSR aber doch, wie Balthasar hofft, gar nicht in die DDR einreisen kann; Professor Kasper, der an der Zusammenkunft teilnehmen wollte, ist leider ebenfalls schon belegt und ebenso Professor Pieper. Schließlich wollten wir noch Sie um Ihre Mitarbeit bitten. Herr von Balthasar wagt es nicht, Sie direkt anzuschreiben und hat daher mich gebeten, Sie einzuladen; er wäre aber s e h r froh, wenn Sie zusagen könnten. Ich darf Sie also in seinem und meinem Namen bitten, zu kommen, wenn es Ihnen möglich ist. Lubac will der Sache beitreten und hat auch bereits eine Reihe von französischen Unterschriften in Aussicht gestellt; über die Frage der um Ihre Unterschrift zu ersuchenden Gelehrten wird man sich in Würzburg endgültig verständigen müssen. Die Veröffentlichung des Textes soll im Kösel-Verlag erfolgen; Herr Dr. Wild hat bereits seine Zusage zu dem Projekt gegeben.

In der Hoffnung, Sie in Würzburg treffen zu dürfen, verbleibe ich
mit herzlichen Grüßen

Ihr ergebener

Joseph Ratzinger.

3. *Rahner to Ratzinger, 7 September 1968, KRA Abt. 47-1010 Nr. 2418*

7.9.68

Lieber Herr Kollege,

gestern erhielt ich einen kurzen Brief von Balthasar, heute den Ihrigen, Bei beiden geht es um die gleiche Sache. Ich muß mir diese Angelegenheit noch etwas überlegen. Aber vorläufig meine ich so: Zunächst: wahrscheinlich werde ich aus Termingründen an der "Tagung" am 13.10. nicht teilnehmen können. Selbst wenn sich die Sache so entwickeln wird, daß ich mitmachen kann. – Grundsätzlich halte ich die Idee eines solchen "Manifests" für möglich, sinnvoll, ja für allmählich notwendig. Ich habe vor einigen Tagen in Nijmegen über dieselbe Idee schon mit Schillebeecks [sic] gesprochen, der mit mir einig war, vorausgesetzt, daß die Sache international aufgezogen und nicht die Erklärung einer kleinen, von vornherein, abgegrenzten Gruppe wird, die als solche schon mehr oder weniger bekannt ist und darum den eigentlichen Zweck in der kirchlichen Öffentlichkeit gar nicht erreichen kann.

Es ist natürlich nicht notwendig, daß jeder beliebige Theolog[e] unterschreibt (Balthasar schrieb, daß W. Kasper vorsichtig den Kopf aus der Schlinge gezogen habe, das klingt anders als das, was Sie schreiben, als ob es sich bei ihm nur um Termschwierigkeiten handle). Aber es müßte sich um eine Sache handeln, bei der doch viele mitmachen. Denn es kommt hier nicht nur auf die Sache an, die gesagt wird, sondern sehr wesentlich darauf, wer sie sagt und mitvertritt. – Wichtig scheint mir zu sein, daß, wie Sie selbst schreiben, nach beiden Seiten geredet wird. Nicht nur gegen einen “Modernismus”, so sehr ich dessen Gefahr sehr hoch einschätze und es in den letzten Zeiten oft genug in Vortr[ä]gen gesagt habe. Ich habe auch in der letzten Zeit wieder so viele Dinge von der “Orthodoxie” her erlebt, daß man schier verzweifeln könnte.

Ich will Ihnen gestehen, daß mich bittere Gefühle beschlichen haben, wenn ich jetzt plötzlich für Balthasar gut genug bin, da mitzumachen. Ich habe ihn in der Öffentlichkeit nie attackier[t] sondern geschwiegen. Er aber macht mich doch immer wieder zum großen Vater aller modernen Ketzereien, ganz abgesehen davon, daß auch seine Polemik gegen (z.B.) Metz weder sachlich noch vornehm ist. Und wenn B. in seinem Brief nun sagt, er habe in der 3. Auflage der “Cordula” gesagt, daß “meine eben noch vertretbaren Thesen (Christologie)” (so der Brief) von “den tausend Simplifikatoren so schändlich mißbraucht werden, und er Lubac als Schiedsrichter zwischen sich und mich aufgestellt habe, so schreibt er gleichzeitig, daß er das Gesagte in der Cordula selbst doch nicht zurücknehmen könne. Ich kenne Lubac sehr gut und hab ihn von Herzen gern (auch wenn er heute all mählich nur noch den Teufel am Werk sieht). Aber was soll seine Schiedsrichterfunktion? Ich bin bei Gott nicht der Meinung B. müsse alles für gut und richtig finden, was ich schreibe. Abe[r] ob meine Thesen “eben noch vertretbar” sind (in der Cordula sind sie ja das auch nicht), das soll er doch zu beurteilen ändern, der Kirche, meine ich, überlassen. Jedenfalls bräuchte er mich nicht so verketzern, wie er dies getan hat (und z.B. in Sachen des “anonymen Christentums”, obwohl er der Sache nach haargenau an anderen Stellen dasselbe sagt und es nicht zu merken scheint). Ich sage das alles nur, um Ihnen klar zu machen, daß ich mich noch frage, was ich in einem Kreis solle, in dem Leute wie B. (und Schlier, auf den sich B. auch in diesem Brief beruft) mich für einen Ketzer halten, also zu den Leuten rechnen, die sie zu bekämpfen ausziehen. Sie werden verstehen, wenn ich mir den Text von B. sehr genau anschauen werde, bevor ich ihn unterschreibe. – Es ist gewiß besser, wenn eine kleine Gruppe den Text konzipiert und kein Konzil von Theologen. Aber liegt er einmal vor, dann sollte man eine möglichst große Gruppe von Theologen zu gewinnen suchen. Ob ein Schoonenberg gewinnen solle oder könne, mag eine Frage sein. Aber ein Schillebeeckx wäre z.B. ein Mann, an den man herantreten könnte und zwar mit Hoffnung auf Erfolg. Ich würde meinen, auch Küng könnte dafür Verständnis finden. Hat man schon an einige Moraltheologen gedacht, da man doch dieses Gebiet in

diesem Manifest nicht einfach mit Schweigen wird übergehen können. Es sollte ja nicht so kommen *[sic]*, daß sie z.B. so ungefähr *[sic]* der Jüngste unter den Unterzeichnern werden. Wir müßten uns doch zutrauen, einen Text zu erstellen, den zu unterschreiben auch Jüngeren “zugemutet” werden kann. Warum z.B. nicht Metz, Kasper und ähnliche Leute, die beim Leser den Verdacht überwinden helfen, es handle sich bloß um die Alten und “Zurückgebliebenen”, bloß um die “ehemals Modernen”, die jetzt nicht mehr mitkommen, oder die Sache sei “von oben” inspiriert und manipuliert und da habe man keine anderen aufreiben können. Die Erklärung darf dann allerdings nicht einfach inspiriert sein von einer Mentalität, wie sie sich bei Balthasar und Schlier zeigt *[sic]*. Ihr Name, der von Schnakkenburg *[sic]* geben mir zwar die Hoffnung, daß die Erklärung nicht eine Neuauflage der Cordula wird, aber sicher bin ich mir noch nicht, daß Sie, Sch[n]ackenburg usw. obsiegen werden. Man muß es doch fertig bringen können, sich von grassierenden Häresien in der Kirche von heute abzugrenzen und dafür eine große Anzahl “namhafte” Theologen zu gewinnen, ohne eine Pronunciamento einer bestimmten Clique zu fabricieren. Das müßte doch heute in der Kirche noch möglich sein.

Mehr kann ich i[m] Augenblick nicht sagen. Ich verweise nochmals auf die ersten Sätze des Briefes. Bitte halten Sie mich auf dem Laufen.

Mit herzlichen Grüßen ihr ergebener.

k.r.

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ABSTRACT. — On 4 September 1968, Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote to Karl Rahner, inviting him to a meeting of eminent theologians in Würzburg on Sunday 13 October. This was the first communication between the two since Balthasar had published a biting critique of Rahner’s theology in his 1966 *Cordula*. Rahner immediately replied – but to Joseph Ratzinger, not to Balthasar – outlining his judgement on the tensions and plurality that characterised Catholic theology at that tumultuous point in the history of the Catholic Church and Western society. In that moment, the opportunity to forestall later divisions (e.g. into the *Concilium* and *Communio* factions) was missed – due to a failure of personal, communal, and collegial relationships. And yet this doorway still lies open before Catholic theologians today, as they are called to exercise a “synodal” ministry within the Church, bringing a plurality of methodologies and approaches in theology into dialogue for the sake of the unity of the one faith.

RÉSUMÉ. — Le 4 septembre 1968, Hans Urs von Balthasar écrivit à Karl Rahner pour l'inviter à une réunion d'éminents théologiens à Würzburg, le dimanche 13 octobre. Il s'agissait du premier échange entre les deux hommes depuis la publication par Balthasar, dans son ouvrage *Cordula* (1966), d'une critique acerbe de la théologie de Rahner. Celui-ci a immédiatement répondu — mais à Joseph Ratzinger, pas à Balthasar — en exposant son jugement sur les tensions et les disparités qui caractérisaient la théologie catholique à ce tournant tumultueux de l'histoire de l'Église catholique et de la société occidentale. Ce fut un moment où l'opportunité de prévenir les divisions ultérieures (par exemple entre les factions *Concilium* et *Communio*) a été manquée, en raison de l'échec des relations interpersonnelles, communautaires et collégiales. Pourtant, cette porte reste ouverte aux théologiens catholiques d'aujourd'hui, qui sont appelés à exercer un ministère «synodal» au sein de l'Église, en faisant dialoguer une pluralité de méthodologies et d'approches théologiques au nom de l'unité d'une même foi.