

Karl Rahner's Work on the Assumption of Mary into Heaven

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Abstract

Karl Rahner completed his *Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis* in 1951 but did not receive permission to publish it from his Jesuit superiors. The work was only published in 2004, twenty years after Rahner's death. This essay examines his treatise on the Assumption of Mary and the objections of the censors. The relation between the treatise and Rahner's publication of 1947, "On the Theology of Death," receives special attention. The shorter work was appended to the Marian treatise as an "excursus" but laid the foundation for the later work. Rahner reinterpreted the dogma of the Assumption in light of the resurrection of the dead, which the assumption of Mary's body and soul into heaven anticipates. Among Rahner's many speculative comments, this essay focuses on three. First, at the final resurrection, the soul (separated at death from the body) re-creates a new and glorified body as its fulfillment and perfection. Second, the glorified body expresses a metaphysical holiness that matures between the moment of death and the final judgment. And third, the resurrection of the body completes the transformation of the world as a new heaven and a new earth that began with the Incarnation. The censors criticized Rahner's theology of death as too speculative and his Mariology as too minimal. Yet *Lumen Gentium's* treatment of Mary as a sign of hope until the second coming was a partial vindication of Rahner.

Introduction

In his *Abstracts of Karl Rahner's Unserialized Essays*, Daniel Pekarske said that Karl Rahner wrote only three "complete books" (Pekarske 2009: 5). The three were *Spirit in the World* (Rahner's doctoral dissertation from 1939), *Hearer of the Word* (his philosophy of religion from 1941), and *Foundations of Christian Faith* (his basic course in theology from 1976). To these three we must add a fourth title, the *Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis*, a work in German on the Assumption of Mary into heaven.

Rahner finished this 344-page tome in 1951, but the book was not published until twenty years after his death. The Jesuit censors to whom Rahner had submitted the work did not allow it to go to the press. The work contained assertions, they alleged, that were "insufficiently grounded," and it raised unanswered questions "that reach far beyond the scope" of a Marian treatise. The judgment of the censors was a blow to Rahner. In 1951 he was 46 years old. He had been a seminary professor for more than fifteen years and had distinguished himself with numerous publications. Rahner accepted the censorship unhappily. To be sure, he was able to publish parts of his book on the Assumption as articles and small monographs. Regina Pacis Meyer, the editor of the Rahner's Assumption volume in the *Sämtliche Werke* edition, lists these publications in her introductory report. But Rahner himself never saw in print the work as a

whole. Dan Pekarske said that Rahner only wrote three “complete books,” and that is true if we mean books published in his lifetime. The book on the Assumption of Mary appeared in 2004.

In this essay we will first sketch Rahner’s argument in the *Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis*. Rahner paid less attention to Mary as the heavenly queen of Catholic piety and instead emphasized her membership in the Church. Among the redeemed, said Rahner, she was the first. We shall see that Mary’s fate at the end of her life anticipated the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. After examining Rahner’s “eschatological Mary,” we will examine the objections of the Jesuit censors. To what did they object, and what improvements did they recommend? Finally, we will discuss Rahner’s book in the context of his life and work. His failure to publish it was an enormous disappointment. What motivated him to write a book that his Jesuit superiors considered unready for publication? What does his failure to get their permission reveal about the tension between his theological spirit and the spirit of his age?

Rahner’s Eschatological Mary

Let me begin by describing Rahner’s “eschatological Mary.” Rahner argued that the meaning of the Assumption into heaven should be sought, not primarily in the stories of Mary’s *transitus* or *dormition*, but in the Church’s consciousness of faith. The Assumption describes the Virgin as the first of redeemed humanity. At her death, she experienced a perfection or completion that other Christians hope for at the second coming of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. The meaning of the Assumption is to be sought, not in the special privileges that belong to Mary alone, but in Christian eschatology. The Assumption of Mary’s body and soul into heaven illustrates the Church’s faith in a providential God who saves us through Jesus Christ. Mary’s Assumption anticipates the new creation that will reach its fulfilment at the end of time.

Expressed this way, Rahner’s thesis is hardly revolutionary. In 1992, forty-one years after the definition of the Assumption, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* linked Mary’s destiny to Christian eschatology. It stated, “The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is a singular participation in her Son’s Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians” (CCC 1992, no. 966). Mary’s Assumption “body and soul” into heaven illustrates the fundamental Christian belief that God intends to save the entire creation. The Marian dogma, in Rahner’s view, reinforces the Church’s teaching about God’s salvific will. With the incarnation of the Son, God put into action a plan to reconcile all things. Mary, who bore Jesus in her womb, was the first to receive the salvation for which all Christians hope. In 1951, Rahner presented the “new” dogma of the Assumption as an expression of traditional Catholic faith, especially the teaching on eschatology.

If that were all there was to Rahner’s *Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis*, however, the book would have been far shorter and the Jesuit censors likely would have approved it for publication. In order to understand more clearly the reasons why in 1951 the book was considered problematic, we need to appreciate Rahner’s “eschatological Mary” and his theology of death. His thesis was that Mary is a type of the Church and her death is paradigmatic for all Christians. At her death she experienced the glorification of her body that Christians await at the final resurrection. Mary, however, did not have to wait until the end of time. Unlike every human being who preceded her, she entered into glory at the moment of her death. Today, in light of the *Catechism*, this seems unobjectionable. To what did the Jesuit censors object?

The answer takes us back to 1947. Two years after the end of World War II, Rahner published a long essay called “Toward a Theology of Death.” It appeared in a journal called *Synopsis*, edited by a doctor of psychosomatic medicine named Arthur Jores (1901-1982). *Synopsis* was not a theological journal and it usually published articles about medicine and natural science. I do not know how well Rahner was acquainted with Jores (who contributed an article to a 1964 *Festgabe* for Rahner) or why Rahner submitted his essay to Jores’ journal in 1947. But one thing is clear. Four years after 1947, when Rahner had completed *Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis*, the essay “Toward a Theology of Death” was appended to the Marian treatise as an “Excursus.” It added 69 additional pages to the 344-page tome.

The word excursus implies that Rahner’s book *On the Theology of Death* was somehow outside of the Marian question. But the censorship report about Rahner’s book on Mary begins with a critique of Rahner’s treatment of death. The censors disliked (1) its treatment of the doctrine of the separation of body and soul at death, (2) its suggestion that the soul develops between the moment of death and the final resurrection, and (3) its speculation that all of the dead might be saved at the end of time. Rahner’s *Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis* presents an eschatological Mary, and we need to consider the relationship between the book and his excursus on death. The excursus was appended to the text on the Assumption but laid the groundwork for it. Let me sketch the relationship between the book and the excursus under three headings.

1. Soul and Body

My first heading has to do with the soul’s relation to the body. The Church teaches that, at the moment of death, body and soul separate. In 1274, for example, the Council of Lyons insisted that the souls of the just (apart from their bodies) are cleansed after death (Neuner and Dupuis 1982: no. 26, p. 18). Thirty-seven years later, in 1312, the Council of Vienna condemned the proposition that the rational soul is not the “essential form” of the body (Neuner and Dupuis 1982: no. 405, p. 120). These medieval teachings make a fundamental point. They affirm that the soul and body separate after death. The body ceases to live but the soul is immortal.

At Mary’s death, however, body and soul were assumed into heaven. They never separated. Rahner asked about the proper relationship between the two. The Bible implies that the word “body” refers to the whole of the human being, but the 13th-century Council of Lyons took a narrower view. To Rahner, the narrower view remains relevant. Lyons taught that the soul is the body’s “essential form.” It thus has, for Rahner, a certain primacy over the body. The soul provides the essential form, and the body is nothing more than the soul’s outward expression. Body and soul form a unity, said Rahner, and the Assumption of Mary’s body and soul attests to it. The teaching about the separation of the soul from the body might suggest that the disembodied soul, before the resurrection of the flesh, had no connection with the material world. Rahner had doubts about that, and his doubts dismayed the Jesuit censors.

In the interval between the moment of death and the final resurrection, the bodies of the dead decompose. What then is raised? Rahner treated this question in relation to Mary’s Assumption. Against those who believe that she never died, Rahner devoted 49 pages to a discussion of her death. The Assumption does not imply that Mary left an “empty tomb” (SW 9:174), he said, and it remains an “open question” whether the fate of her corpse and of her glorified body are identical (SW 9:182). Rahner’s open question regarding Mary’s material remains disturbed the censors. His refusal to rule out the decomposition of Mary’s corpse

seemed to deny her bodily integrity. By insisting on her death, however, Rahner was suggesting that the body that was assumed into heaven was a glorified and perfected body. His goal was to link Mary to all the dead who await resurrection on the last day. The atoms of her material body, like ours, are no more than raw material. Citing St. Thomas, Rahner said that the soul, in the general resurrection of the dead, “builds the body anew” (SW 9:170). One need not decide, he said, whether the glorified body of Mary is identical to the material remains (SW 9:171). To assert that Mary died neither speculates about her corpse, said Rahner, nor denies her bodily assumption into heaven.

Rahner’s comparison of Mary’s Assumption to the final resurrection illuminates his argument about the soul’s priority in its union with the body. The Church teaches both that Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven, and that the soul and the body separate at death. The body decomposes but the soul survives. The Church rejects the materialist view that the corpse and the person are identical. But Rahner disliked the implication that the soul, after death, is somehow disembodied. He brought this out particularly in his excursus *On the Theology of Death*. There Rahner argued that, because the soul is closely united with the body, it must have a relationship to the material world of which the body is a part. That relationship does not cease at death. Instead, he said, death liberates the soul for a new kind of relationship to the cosmos. Rahner expressed the matter in this way: “The spiritual soul through its embodiment is in principle open to the world.” To that world, he said, it has a “pancosmic relation” and the soul can even be considered a “co-determining factor of the universe” (SW 357, ET 22). The Jesuit censors, however, rebuked Rahner’s speculation about the continued “bodily” existence in the material universe of the soul after death.

2. The Particular and the Universal Judgment

A second eschatological factor in the treatment of Mary has to do with time. At Mary’s death, she was assumed body and soul into heaven. It happened immediately. But with the death of other Christians, time passes between the moment of death and the bodily perfection of the final resurrection. This interval stimulated Rahner’s thinking. He recalled the Church teaching that death completes a person’s earthly journey. Putting aside the question of purgatory, he said that there is no place or location below heaven, no *Sheol*, where the dead must await God prior to the final resurrection. In 1336, Pope Benedict XII affirmed that the souls of the just will see God at the moment of death (Neuner and Dupuis 1982: no. 2305, p. 685). Our pilgrimage on earth concludes with the beatific vision. The deeds of this life express our decision for or against God, who weighs them at the particular judgment. So says Catholic tradition. Why then, asked Rahner, does the Church insist upon an interval between the moment of death and the final resurrection?

By way of an answer, Rahner described the interval between an individual’s death and the final judgement as a kind of chasm. On one side of the chasm are the “last things” – death, judgement, heaven, and hell – which arise specifically at the moment of death. On the other side of the chasm is eschatology, a much bigger question that includes the second coming of Christ. “Real biblical thinking,” said Rahner (SW 9:190), concerns the resurrection of the body. Between the moment of death and the final resurrection, he speculated, there may be a growth in holiness. At Mary’s Assumption into heaven, her body was glorified and perfected. Does such a glorification and perfection await the dead, Rahner asked, who look forward to the last day?

At first, such speculation seems impossible. Benedict XII had insisted that the just come to the beatific vision at the moment of death. They need not wait until the end of time in *Sheol* before being admitted to heaven. But Rahner suggested that souls can also mature in the interval between death and resurrection. The being of a person starts as an embryo and develops. The same is true for the metaphysical being of holiness, he said, which develops as well. The justified enjoy the beatific vision at the moment of death, but that vision continues to unfold in them (SW 9:199). In his book on the Assumption, Rahner said that the beatific vision will go on maturing until the last day.

He sharpened that insight in his excursus *On the Theology of Death*. There he stated that the soul, once separated from the body, continues to affect the world. It does so as the consequences of the soul's life become clearer. Rahner expressed the continued influence of the deceased person's soul in this way. "The individual person," he said, "once rendered pancosmic through death, by this real ontological and open [23] relation to the whole cosmos, might come to have a direct influence within the world" (SW 9:357-358, ET 22-23). In death, that is, people offer to the world the consequences of their life. This has a decided effect, said Rahner. "It is through his death," he said, "that man in some way introduces as his contribution the result of his life into the radical, real ground of the unity of the world" (SW 9:382, ET 63). The body may disintegrate after death, but the soul continues to make its mark. Separated from the body, the soul relates to the material universe, and may even be said to influence it. Said Rahner: "The world is, in a certain sense, the body of those [deceased] persons" (SW 9:361, ET 29). The Jesuit censors rejected this as contradicting the separation between body and soul at death. Although they were willing to concede Rahner's point that "The soul retains a kind of union with the material world," nevertheless they judged that Rahner was wrong to say that the soul finds a new "body" by relating to the cosmos. The censors were also concerned about Rahner's suggestion that death brings about the perfection of all things, a topic to which we now turn.

3. The New Creation

St. Paul wrote, "Whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Cor. 5:17). Rahner believed this verse illustrates the determining factor of Christianity. With the crucifixion we have entered a "new" and "final aeon" (SW 9:182 ff.). It is an eschatological age that will not end until the Second Coming. The new creation begins with those who are "in Christ" and ends at the resurrection of the dead. The interval between them is not really an "in-between time," said Rahner, but rather a single "phase." It starts with the death of Christ (and our dying with him) and extends to the final resurrection in which God will raise our bodies to their spiritual perfection (SW 9:194). Between Christ's earthly life and his return in glory the new creation unfolds.

Rahner's book on the Assumption linked the resurrection of the body to the world's perfection. "The absolute perfection of the human being" Rahner wrote, "can only be considered in and with a transformation and new creation of the world" (SW 9:202). The resurrection of the body implies not just the perfection of people, but of all things. This stems, said Rahner (SW 9:219), from the Gospel's teaching about the bodily resurrection of the Son of God. The resurrection of Christ's body implies an environment in which the perfection of the body is possible. We call that environment "heaven," said Rahner, meaning the transfigured cosmos to which the resurrected bodies of the just, even the body of Jesus, already belong (SW 9:188).

Having a body implies openness to others. Jesus' resurrected body dwells with the resurrected whose bodies have been perfected (SW 9:234). That is the "place" of the new creation.

In the excursus "On the Theology of Death," Rahner did not advocate a theory of *apocatastasis*. He did not argue that all beings, even the damned, will somehow be saved. But the Jesuit censors feared that he was close to that position. They inferred this from Rahner's view that the dead participate in a process by which all things are transformed by Christ. At death, he said, the human being is surrendered "to the disposition of the incomprehensible God" (SW 9:370, ET 43). All human beings long for eternal life, Rahner suggested, and so have "a tendency to that perfection" which would make death "a pure and experienced maturation from within" (SW 9:372, ET 48). Such maturation is possible because Christ experienced the emptiness of death, which Rahner called "the void of the bodily end" (SW 9:381, ET 61). The excursus "On the Theology of Death" implies a Christology by which death, traditionally the punishment for sin, is utterly changed. How we are saved deserves further attention.

The Church teaches that, in the crucifixion, Christ made satisfaction for human sinfulness. But the death of Christ was more than a passive experience of allowing his persecutors to take his life. Rahner said that Christ's death "becomes the expression and embodiment of his loving obedience, the free transference of his entire created existence to God" (SW 9:381, ET 62). Faithfulness to the Father is more important than paying a price. Christ could transfer creation to God "in virtue of a grace necessarily his due as a divine person," said Rahner. It was, he continued, the "divine grace which divinized the life of his humanity" (SW 9:381, ET 61). The Jesuit censors were troubled by the attribution to Christ of grace, and we shall say more about that. In Rahner's view, Christ as man accepted death in obedience to the Father and, by doing so, transformed death.

When Christ died, said Rahner, his "spiritual reality" was "inserted into this whole world in its ground as a permanent determination of a real ontological kind" (SW 9:382, ET 63). The Son of God accepted death. With that acceptance, death was no longer simply a punishment for sin. It is the assumption by God's Son of the final earthly reality that belongs to all people. It also transformed death. Henceforth, dying in the Lord is, for Christians, really no death at all. Talking about the perfection of all human beings through death, Rahner insisted that the *aeon Christi* was transforming the cosmos. He did not assert that all will be saved, but the Jesuit censors found that Rahner's theses about a transformed cosmos implied such a thing.

Let us bring this section on the eschatological Mary to a close. In the Foreword to his book on the Assumption, Rahner announced that the work was not only "scientific" but also "important to the faith of the Church." Our sketch of the book's eschatological meaning shows why Rahner could claim such importance. The entrance into heaven of Mary's body and soul led Rahner to analyze the relationship between the two, starting with the medieval teaching about the soul as the body's substantial form. That teaching emphasized the immediate judgment at the moment of death in comparison to the end of time. Next Rahner considered the interval between death and bodily resurrection. In it he detected a little-appreciated possibility, that of the soul's continued growth in holiness. The disembodied soul still has a real relationship to the cosmos. Lastly Rahner saw that the Assumption's teaching about the perfection of Mary's body anticipates the final resurrection of all human bodies. More than a celestial queen, Mary is precisely a type of the pilgrim Church.

All of this suggests why Rahner's book *On the Theology of Death*, written before the tome on Mary, is more than an excursus. Rahner suggested that those who are "in Christ" constitute a "new creation" that will come to perfection at the final resurrection. Then and there the bodies of the just will, by the power of God, come again under the influence of their souls. The embodiment of these perfected spirits, said Rahner, takes place within a transformed cosmos, the "new heaven" and "new earth." In sum, the Marian dogma of 1950 is not about Mary alone, but about Christian hope. This was Rahner's positive interpretation of the Assumption of Mary. But aspects of it disturbed his superiors.

Censorship by Religious Superiors

In the Editorial Report to Volume 9 of the *Sämtliche Werke*, Regina Pacis Meyer described the unsuccessful submission of Rahner's book on the Assumption to the Jesuit generalate. He had hoped to publish his book in 1950 prior to the formal definition of the dogma by Pius XII on November 1. Rahner did not complete the work until June 13, 1951, however, seven months after the papal definition. The Jesuits invited Rahner's brother Hugo and a second reader to review the manuscript, and the two readers gave Rahner their support. We know, however, that the Jesuits had some doubts about the book thanks to a letter dated October 9, 1951 by Father Franz S. Lakner, a colleague at Innsbruck who was appointed as a third censor. His comments illuminate Rahner's work and the situation in which he was writing.

The Letter of Franz Lakner

Regina Pacis Meyer quotes Lakner at length. His letter began with praise, noting that he had read Rahner's work "to great advantage" (SW 9: xxvi), but he soon expressed doubts. "On account of many points" in Rahner's work, said Lakner, "I cannot find justification for what follows from your premises." If Rahner "had merely raised questions, which arise in immediate connection with the Assumption," said Lakner, "the judgment would not be so difficult." But Rahner wanted to do more than explain the new dogma in what Lakner called "a popular and psychologically compelling way." He wanted to provide a fundamental reinterpretation. He did so, unfortunately, without the necessary "scientific exactitude," said Lakner, and argued in a way that was not "sufficiently grounded" (SW 9: xxvii). For that reason, Lakner could not approve Rahner's work. He requested that the Jesuit provincial appoint yet another reviewer.

Lakner made two additional points that shed light on the situation in 1951. One was his wariness about bringing to the public a controversial work. Lakner wrote, "In order not to experience something similar to what we experienced with the book written by Father Jungmann about the early proclamation of the gospel, in which I was the reviewer, I believe that it is wise and desirable that we achieve the greatest possible measure of certainty, greater than with ordinary publications" (SW 9: xxvii). Lakner referred to the 1936 publication of Josef Jungmann's *The Early Proclamation of the Gospel and the Preaching of Our Faith*. The Jesuits had approved it, only to see it withdrawn from booksellers at the request of the Holy Office (Sander 2016, p. 33).¹ This had been an embarrassment, and Lakner did not want a repetition.

¹ "Das Buch [by Josef Andreas Jungmann, *Die Frohbotschaft und unsere Glaubensverkündigung* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1936)] fand große Zustimmung, aber auch ebensolchen Widerspruch und wurde auf Drängen des Hl. Offiziums noch im Jahr seiner Veröffentlichung aus dem Buchhandel zurückgezogen."

In addition to urging caution, Lakner made a comment that seems to impugn Rahner's theological reputation. He wrote:

For some time I have heard from others the opinion – it might be unanswerable – that Your Reverence begins by widely circulating certain opinions, without first having treated them in a fundamental scientific way. One could level a reproach precisely against this book with certain justification (SW 9: xxvii).

Lakner objected that Rahner expressed theological views without first justifying them. The book on Mary seemed to Lakner a prime example. He concluded his letter to Rahner by explaining the necessity for yet another review.

The consequence of Father Lakner's judgment was inexorable. Although the Jesuit Provincial in Innsbruck sent Rahner's book to two other theologians, both of whom reviewed it favorably, nevertheless their comments were not enough to overcome the suspicion that the book had generated. Eventually the Provincial instructed Rahner to send his book to the Jesuit General in Rome. In a five-page cover letter dated December 13, 1951, Rahner claimed that his work was the object of unmerited mistrust. But after four months he received his reply in the form of a censorship report. The report was six pages long, written in Latin, and dated April 12, 1952. It stated that his book on the Assumption needed to say more and bring more to completion, and that only an improved work would be ready for publication. Rahner had to make changes if his work were to be approved.

The Censorship Report

In her introduction to volume 9 of Rahner's *Sämtliche Werke*, Regina Pacis Meyer summarized the censorship report under five headings, of which the two most important were about Rahner's thoughts on death and his thoughts on Mariology. The thoughts on death (SW xxxi) came first. The censors said that Rahner's work (according to Meyer's paraphrase of the censors) "gives up assertions about a 'separate soul' [separate from the body], capable of existence, and consequently about an "intermediate situation" between an individual's death and the universal eschatological resurrection and consummation of all people, in order to make room for the concept of the perfection of all human beings through death." Rahner's treatment of the separation of body and soul was troubling. Rahner, by emphasizing the priority of the soul over the body, speculated about its continued relationship to the material world. Noting the possibility of the soul's growth in holiness, he suggested that the interval between death and final resurrection was a time of perfection and maturation. This was implicit in the Church's teaching about purgatory, but the Censors objected that Rahner was speaking about all souls, not just those in purgatory.

It also disturbed the censors that Rahner attributed faith to Jesus Christ. At his death, said Rahner, Jesus accepted "in faith" the loss of his ability to control himself. The censors disagreed with Rahner that one could predicate faith of the Son. Moreover, Rahner presented death as a mystery in which one cannot know, at the moment of expiration, whether one will be saved or not. Rather than simply a punishment for sin, said Rahner, death is the condition for the possibility of defining one's life as an event of salvation or damnation (SW 367, ET 38). The censors objected that death is more than the condition for a possibility. They countered that the dead can have a well-founded understanding of the situation of their souls before God.

The second major theme of the censorship report concerned Mary's cooperation in the redemption and Rahner's overall treatment of Mariology. Rahner had argued that the Marian titles of "mediator of all graces" and "co-redemptrix" are commonly misunderstood and inappropriate. He preferred to see Mary as a type of all the faithful and to speak of the universal human mediation of holiness in the Communion of Saints. In the eyes of the censors, however, his rejection of the Marian titles did not comport with the recent teachings of the Magisterium. Its pronouncements seemed to affirm Mary as co-redemptrix by emphasizing her suffering with Jesus and her willingness to sacrifice her Son. By ignoring such texts, said the censors, Rahner had not dealt "in a rigorous manner" with her role in redemption.

The censors also judged that Rahner was a Mariological "minimalist." This was apparent, they said, in his willingness to leave open the question of whether the corpse of Mary remained in the grave. It was also apparent in Rahner's relative silence about what Catholic theologians taught about Mary's bodily integrity. Moreover, he did not give sufficient weight to Mary's perpetual virginity. The censors acknowledged that Rahner may have had a legitimate concern to dampen Marian enthusiasm, but his minimalistic approach was inadequate. To assert (as did Rahner) that Mary "was saved in both the active and passive mode" hardly sufficed, they said, to describe her divine motherhood and participation in the redemption.

Conclusion

Having looked at Rahner's treatment of Mary and his excursus on death, and having noted the concerns of the censors about the two, we can begin to assess the importance of Rahner's fourth "complete book," the posthumously published *Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis*. The book stands out as a thorough reinterpretation of the 1950 dogmatic definition. The Assumption expressed for Rahner not simply the Mariological enthusiasm of the mid-twentieth century, but the hope of every Christian. Rahner's book presented Mary, not as a remote heavenly queen who mediated the grace of Christ and who co-redeemed humanity with him, but rather as a type of the Church, the pilgrim people of God, whose yes to God made her the first of the saved.

Rahner's book breathes a different spirit than the Marian fervor of his time, and that raises a question. How did Rahner write a book that departed so radically from the Mariology so prevalent in the 1940s and 50s? It is easy to forget that, in the middle of the twentieth century, Christianity was locked in a battle with the official atheism of the Communist bloc. For many secular people, Marxism stood for emancipation from the *ancien régime*. It promised to free the world from an oppressive past through a philosophical enlightenment that measured truth in material terms, not in metaphysics. The Catholic Church, by contrast, upheld God and the perennial truths of right reason. In the Church's battle with Communism, the Virgin Mary was a champion who had visited children in Lourdes and Fatima. She had promised to cast down the mighty from their thrones and to lift up the lowly, not by a proletarian revolution but in the name of divine faith. Catholics prayed to Mary for the conversion of Russia. The papal definition of her Assumption was a symbolic gesture with political, cultural, and theological repercussions.

In that context, Rahner's book on the Assumption was a surprise. Rahner had studied the metaphysics of knowledge in St. Thomas' *Summa* and was no materialist. He undoubtedly appreciated Mary as a symbol of anti-Communist piety. His book on the Assumption, however, contested many assertions common to Mariology at the time. Reputable Catholic theologians

had said that, because Mary was free from original sin, she retained the preternatural gifts that Adam and Eve lost in the Garden of Eden. Thus Mary never experienced pain during childbirth, never suffered except when she offered her Son on Calvary, and never died before she was assumed into heaven. Rahner, however, took a different tack. He argued that suffering is not simply a consequence of sin but a participation in the passion of Jesus Christ. Mary must have both suffered and died. That was the human condition. Jesus bore it, and his mother could do no less. How did Rahner arrive at this insight, so contrary to the Mariological spirit of his time?

A partial answer can be found in ecumenism. Rahner concluded his book by reflecting on Mary's Assumption and ecumenical relations. He was aware of Protestant criticisms of the new dogma. Protestants said the Assumption was not Apostolic teaching, that it misrepresented salvation as being already present, and that it removed Mary from the midst of the pilgrim people and made her a mediatrix and co-redeemer. Rahner took issue with the Protestant critique. It misunderstood, he said, the development of doctrine. It had a stunted view of realized eschatology. It denied that Mary had achieved the salvation for which Christians hope. The Protestant view of Catholic Mariology, in Rahner's eyes, did not do justice to the Christian faith. It did not reflect Apostolic tradition.

Rahner nevertheless appreciated the Protestant critique, which may have reinforced his wariness of extreme Marian enthusiasm. Although there are no testimonies to the Assumption of Mary in the Apostolic age, Pius XII had declared it a dogma. The Assumption therefore must be an implicit part of the Apostolic deposit of faith, that is, a consequence or development of that deposit. To make this argument, Rahner reinterpreted the Assumption of Mary. He discovered in it an expression of early Christian eschatology. He claimed that the truth of the dogma of the Assumption lay not in the legends of Mary's fate that distinguish her from the rest of the faithful, but rather in the grace of Christ that belongs to all Christians. Fifteen years later, his view was affirmed in *Lumen Gentium*. There Mary is an "image" or "type" of the Church that shines forth "until the day of the Lord shall come, as a sign of sure hope and solace to the people of God during its sojourn on earth" (LG, no. 68). Rahner's ecumenical sensitivity and wariness of extreme Marian enthusiasm help to explain the uniqueness of his book, which anticipated Vatican II's understanding of Mary

Regina Pacis Meyer's summary of the Jesuit censorship report, especially its critique of Rahner's theology of death, provides another explanation of the book's uniqueness. "On the Theology of Death," completed before his work on the Assumption of Mary, disturbed the censors. Rahner had taken issue with the radical separation at death of the soul from the body. He preferred to say that the seemingly disembodied soul still has a relationship to material reality and that the glorified bodies at the final resurrection express the soul. Rahner had grappled with the interval between the moment of death and the final resurrection, arguing that souls can grow in holiness. The possibility of growth in holiness had suggested to him that death, rather than a punishment for sin, is the condition for the possibility of the soul's final perfection. These were the themes of his theology of death, published in 1947, three years before Pius XII formally defined the Assumption of Mary into heaven.

Rahner's theology of death, we conclude, was far more than an excursus or a series of reflections remote from the Assumption of Mary. They expressed convictions that had matured in the closing years of World War II. As the date for the formal definition of the Assumption approached, Rahner's theology of death set the stage for his analysis of the dogma of the Assumption. His central insight was that death, rather than being merely the punishment for sin,

was for Christians a participation in the death of Christ. Death is not just a moment of shameful defeat, our loss of the ability to dispose of ourselves, but a moment of culmination and surrender. It culminates our lives and enables us to surrender them to God.

In light of this, the Assumption of Mary's body and soul into heaven could not mean simply that she had, through her yes to God and motherly care for her son, cheated death. Immortality did not set her apart from every other member of the Church. The common argument that Mary did not die reflected the traditional disparagement of death as the wage of sin. Rahner's theology of death, with its affirmation of death as participation in Christ, illuminated the fate of Mary in a different way. Her death, like that of her son, was a culmination of her life and a surrender of it to God. If Jesus was willing to die, and if Christians die with him, then death also must be seen in positive terms as a supreme expression of faith.

In 1952, the censorship report from the Jesuit Generalate disappointed Rahner. He would never see the publication of *Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis*. Franz Lakner, Rahner's colleague, criticized him for circulating his opinions without treating them first in a fundamental and scientific way. In 1951, the theological climate demanded conservatism and caution.

By 1956, when Rahner published a series of eight conferences given at the University Church in Innsbruck under the title *Mary, Mother of the Lord*, he offered a popular treatment of Mariology quite different from the critical treatment of 1951. Rahner's 1956 work states that Mary had the "function of conceiving redemptive grace" and may be "called" co-Redemptrix. To be sure, Rahner noted that "the full implications of [this definition] are still a matter of discussion" (Rahner 1964: 13), but he was at least willing to apply that title to Mary. His 1956 work does not discuss Mary's "death" but simply acknowledges it (91), thereby avoiding another contested issue. Finally, the book of 1956 acknowledges that the Mariological title of "Mediatrice," although not "a defined truth in the strict sense," is "already in customary use" (93). *Mary, Mother of the Lord* is the sort of cautious work that Franz Lakner would have welcomed.

Rahner's tome of 1951 breathed a different spirit. His theological flights troubled his colleagues, who refused permission to publish. Today, however, Rahner's speculation about the possibility of the soul's spiritual development after death both stimulates and provokes us. His Mariology found a better reception in later life. It is a project of "demythologization," designed to free Mary and the dogma of the Assumption from some of the symbolism they had acquired so that the theological truth – that one of us human brings helped to bring about the incarnation of God, and so became the first of the redeemed – might stand out more visibly. It is a demythologization, but not in the sense of a scientific truth freed of mythology, but a theological truth freed from historical accretions that have obscured it. The peers who reviewed Rahner's work interpreted it negatively, i.e., as having a "minimalistic" Mariology. Today it looks like Rahner saw into the heart of the matter. The ultimate accolade for Rahner's book is this: his sober assessment of Mary anticipated the 1965 publication of *Lumen Gentium* and the gradual acceptance of an "eschatological" Mary.

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