

Appendix: Karl Rahner's Work on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

ASSUMPTIO BEATAE MARIAE VIRGINIS *His 1951 Work on the Assumption, with additions up to 1959*

An Outline by Mark F. Fischer, based on the text in:

Karl Rahner, *Sämtliche Werke*, Volume 9, *Maria, Mutter des Herrn*, Edited by Regina Pacis Meyer (Freiburg: Herder, 2004).

Rahner's *Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis* begins with a brief Foreword, in which Rahner announces that his work is not only "scientific" but also "important to the faith of the Church" in that it concerns eschatology. He divides the text into five chapters. The first three chapters lay the foundation for the fourth chapter, a 184-page effort to situate the Assumption (and Mariology in general) within the redemption achieved by Christ. The final fifth chapter (38 pages) summarizes the meaning of the dogma. This is followed by a 44-page excursus *On the Theology of Death*.

1. The Correct Starting Point (p. 5).

The first three chapters lay the basis for the constructive fourth chapter, but they are not merely a preamble that could be cut off from an independent main thesis. The first chapter, a 13-page Introduction that Rahner calls "The Correct Starting Point," suggests the life-setting in which he wrote the book. The Assumption of Mary, said Rahner, is a "new dogma." Believers must have "courage before the pain of a new knowledge" (SW 9:9), he says, courage to hear "the word of Christ . . . in the mouth of the Church that Christ authorized" (SW 9:11). Although Rahner acknowledges that some may be "suspicious" of the doctrine as excessively pious or expressive of Marian enthusiasm, nevertheless he believes that the "The Church is the measure of our faith," and that belief is the "correct starting point" for a theological understanding of it. In this first chapter, Rahner speaks as one who finds the doctrine a challenge but important.

2. The Development of Dogma (p. 18).

The second chapter on the "Development of Dogma" presents what Rahner considers to be the "problem" of the development of the Assumption doctrine. It is that the expression of the dogma, in Rahner's words, "has not always been apparent in the Church's consciousness of faith" (SW 9:18) and is not "provable as an explicit doctrine at every moment in Church history" (SW 9:19). Rahner intends to explicate it as an example of the development of dogma and aims in this second chapter to show how dogma develops. His central idea is that the Assumption of Mary, rather than being based on information about Mary from the period after the early Church, is rather a development of fundamental ideas about Christian salvation that go back to Christ and the Apostles.

3. The History of the Teaching about the Assumption (p. 50).

Rahner's treatment of the development of dogma prepares the way for Chapter Three, titled "The History of the Teaching about the Assumption of the Holy Virgin" (SW 9:50-125). In the first half of this chapter, Rahner surveys the history of the Church's teaching about Mary's Assumption, starting with the fifth-century accounts of the *Transitus* of Mary and progressing through medieval teaching and Scholasticism to Vatican I. Then, in the second half of the chapter, Rahner considers the "theological present" up to 1950 (SW 9:94-102) and the place of the Assumption doctrine in the Church's consciousness of faith.

Rahner's analysis of the history of the dogma begins with what he calls a "shocking but true fact," namely, that "the first centuries of the Church knew nothing about, and thus did not concern themselves explicitly with the question regarding the earthly end of the Blessed Virgin" (SW 9:51). Rahner calls the fifth-century publication of Mary's *Transitus* and the story of her empty grave a "legend" (SW 9:53) and a "pious wish" (SW 9:64). After a review of the historical literature, Rahner draws this conclusion: "We thus have the right to evaluate the *Transitus* legends as an early popular theology that asks in theological terms how the end of the Virgin's life must have taken place" (SW 9:111). Here Rahner distinguishes the metaphysical and religious truth of the Assumption of Mary from the narratives, starting in the fifth century, that describe it.

After laying out the history of the teaching about the Assumption, Rahner asks how it is a development of dogma. The Church's essential truths stem from the time of Christ and the Apostles, he says. How (in the absence of testimonies to the Assumption prior to the fifth century) is a theologian to show its apostolic origin? The answer can be found, he says, by taking "the more difficult but truer way" (SW 9:111), namely, the way of showing that the truth of Mary's Assumption is implicit in the Church's consciousness of faith. The new dogma testifies to Mary's experience of the "new creation" about which St. Paul speaks. It belongs to the Church's eschatology and doctrine of the Last Things. (SW 9:124). In this Rahner foreshadows *Lumen Gentium*, which situated Mariology within ecclesiology.

4. The Doctrine of the Eschatology of the Most Holy Virgin (p. 125).

In the fourth and longest chapter, "The Doctrine of the Eschatology of the Most Holy Virgin," Rahner lays out his argument that the Assumption should be understood as an expression of Christian eschatology.

Preliminary Remarks (§1, p. 125)

Rahner says in his Preliminary Remarks that he will not merely repeat the truths that the Church has already guaranteed but will respond to the Assumption dogma in light of his "overall spiritual situation" (SW 9:126), that of a Catholic theologian before a "new" dogma.

The Possibility of an Eschatological Question Regarding Mary (§2, p. 127).

Then in section 2 Rahner relates Mary to the traditional doctrine of the last things. Here he sketches his main thesis, namely, that the Assumption should be interpreted as a question of eschatology. Rahner assumes – contrary to the pious belief of many enthusiasts – that Mary actually died. With that assumption he can ask about the kind of death that she experienced and what happened to her after her death (SW 9:127). The Assumption of Mary is eschatological, he argues, because of her relation to Jesus Christ. Mary's virginity, her "yes" to the angel, and her gestation and birth of Jesus, all signify that she brought salvation into the world. With Mary's son, the "last things" – not just death, judgment, heaven, and hell, but the "final aeon" of human existence – have arrived. At the end of her life, says Rahner, Mary "left the world in order to enter into an eternal final salvation" (SW 9:132). That final salvation is not just hers alone, but ours as well.

The Death of the Holy Virgin (§3, p. 133).

After laying out the eschatological question, Rahner treats Mary's death. One cannot simply define death, he says, as the punishment for the original sin of Adam. To be sure, Adam lost the "praeternatural gifts" of immortality and freedom from suffering, as the Book of Genesis relates. The Virgin's Immaculate Conception, Rahner then argues, did not free her from pain

and death. Pain and death are not necessarily due to sin, nor are they necessarily punishments. The argument of the Council of Orange in AD 441 that God was not unjust to condemn humanity for the sin of Adam does not imply, Rahner argues, that the sinless Virgin was freed from death. She died in a bodily “perfection” or “consummation” that all humanity looks forward to at the second coming of Christ (SW 9:164).

The question of Mary’s death leads to a second question about her body and soul. Death is traditionally considered the separation of the soul from the body, but Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven. Rahner refuses to identify Mary’s transfigured or glorified body with her empirical body on earth (SW 9:167-168). The atoms of our empirical bodies, he says (claiming the support of St Thomas, fn. 407), are just raw material organized by the soul. In the resurrection of the dead, the soul builds the body anew (SW 9:170). Mary’s transfigured body was not necessarily the revived material of her earthly body (SW 9:173). We need not speak of an empty tomb, says Rahner, but should affirm that Mary found in God her bodily perfection. It is a matter of eschatology, not history. The Church speaks of the destiny of Mary’s holy body, not the fate of her corpse (SW 9:182).

The Already Present Beginning of the New and Eternal Aeon” (§4, p. 182).

After Mary’s death, Rahner begins a section titled “The Already Present Beginning of the New and Eternal Aeon” (Chapter 4, §4, pp. 182-190). The “aeon” of which he speaks is the age or era defined by the incarnation of God’s Word in Jesus. The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Rahner paraphrases Mark’s gospel as follows: “The history of nature and spirit in dialogue with the living God has entered into its final decisive phase” (SW 9:185). The eternal aeon is “already present” with the incarnation. In this aeon, “created reality” – starting with the humanity of Jesus – has become “revelatory” (SW 9:186). The final aeon supersedes the previous aeons of Adam, the Patriarchs, and the Mosaic Law. It reveals God’s plan to save all of creation through Christ.

The Total Perfection of Humanity as Now an Already-Given Possibility” (§5, p. 188).

Rahner’s treatment of the “new and eternal aeon” gives way to a much longer section on the human body titled “The Total (Including the Bodily) Perfection of Humanity as Now an Already-Given Possibility” (Chapter 4, §5, pp. 188-241). In it, Rahner links the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body with an ultimate perfection or consummation for which every human being hopes. Mary’s Assumption into heaven took place at the end of her life, and thus differs from the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. But Mary, like us, was redeemed by her son. Her Assumption indicates that a bodily perfection or fulfillment is possible for all human beings. Mary was the first to achieve it, suggesting its possibility for everyone.

Fulfillment and Bodily Resurrection (§5.1, p. 190).

The 53 pages of this section on bodily perfection contain three parts. The first treats the idea of “Fulfillment and Bodily Resurrection.” The “fulfillment” or “perfection” experienced by Mary at her Assumption into heaven, says Rahner, differs from the resurrection of the dead. Time elapses between the moment of death and the end of time. Christians other than Mary must await the second coming, the final judgment, and the resurrection of body. To be sure, the Church has taught since Pope Benedict XII and the 14th-century Council of Vienna that, at the moment of death, the justified Christian comes into the presence of God (SW 9:195-96). But the soul can develop after death, argues Rahner. The doctrine of purgatory implies that. For the dead, the beatific vision of God only reaches perfection at the final resurrection (SW 9:200). Until then, the dead still have a relationship with material world. They are not “a-cosmic,” says

Rahner, but in a sense still belong to the world (SW 9:201). The living can relate to the dead as both await a final perfection at the final judgement.

The Possibility of a Now Already-Given Total Perfection of Humanity (§5.2, p. 202).

After speaking about human fulfillment at the resurrection of the dead, Rahner moves to the topic of the perfection of humanity. Here he describes the “Christian perfection” of the human being, “a perfection that begins with death and is fully unfolded in the resurrection” (SW 9:202). Earlier Rahner had called attention to the “in-between,” the time between death and the end of time. They are not two events, he said, but rather “a unified process that stretches from the death of Christ (and our dying with him) to the spiritual perfection of graced humanity including its bodily dimension” (SW 9:194). Rahner believes that the story in Matthew’s gospel about the time of the crucifixion, when “many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised” (Mt 27:52), may refer to this spiritual perfection. The Gospel shows the possibility, even before the general resurrection, of what Rahner calls the “total, even bodily, perfection” of the human being (SW 9:214). The localized resurrection when Jesus was crucified foreshadows Mary’s Assumption and the resurrection of the dead.

The Content Today of An Already-Given Total Perfection of Humanity (§5.3, p. 220).

The final part of Rahner’s analysis of the resurrection of the body treats the meaning of what he calls the total perfection of humanity. Resurrection, he says, has to do both with time and place. First, in relation to time, Rahner compares the localized resurrection in Jerusalem following the crucifixion to the general resurrection of the dead at the end of time. Matthew 27:52 shows that a bodily resurrection before the second coming is possible (SW 9:222). Indeed, it happened to Mary. But it does not explain why some were raised at that moment in time and others and others were not. Eschatological time (or the *aevum*) differs, according to Rahner (SW 9:226), from time measured in hours (or the *tempus*). One cannot date-stamp such an experience.

The resurrection of the body implies not only a time but also a place or environment. Such a place, however, is difficult to locate, as Rahner readily concedes. The medieval Fathers and the Scholastics imagined heaven as a place to which humanity aspires (SW 9:232-233). In Rahner’s view, heaven is not a pre-existing place that admits a transfigured body. It is better to say, he argues, that “the historical experience of resurrection creates the ‘space’ of heaven” (SW 9:238). This is the “new heaven and earth” described in the Book of Revelation, says Rahner, an “environment of transfigured humanity in its bodily perfection” (SW 9:240). The Assumption invites us to consider anew this eschatology and the participation in it of all human beings.

The Total Perfection of the Holy Virgin and Mother of God (§6, p. 241).

The last part of Rahner’s doctrine of the eschatology of the Virgin Mary focuses on Mary’s total perfection. Rahner begins by restating the thesis of the chapter. The perfection of all humanity is possible, he says, due to the death of Christ; and it was Mary who first achieved that perfection (SW 9:241).

Universal, Foundational, and Methodical Preliminary Remarks (§6.1, p. 241).

The final section comprises three parts, of which the first is about method. Here Rahner indicates his epistemological foundation. Mary’s Assumption into heaven reveals that she was “perfected in body and soul.” This perfection is “implicitly contained in other truths that we know from her” (SW 9:243) – namely, that she died and now lives; her earthly life is finished, she can no longer die, and thus she has been transfigured (SW 9:244). Bodily decomposition

happens over time but not the transfiguration of the body. It takes place in the “aevum” of eschatological time.

Dogma’s Overall Picture of the Holy Virgin (§6.2, p. 253).

Next, Rahner considers the picture of Mary in dogma. He argues that the total perfection of Mary follows not from accounts of Mary’s *transitus* or dormition, but from a “general Marian faith.” The gestation of Jesus in Mary’s womb is more than a merely biological or purely human event. It concerns the “bodily becoming of the Son of God” achieved “through the power of the Spirit upon a virgin” (SW 9:255). Although the grace of God was present before Christ, nevertheless the incarnation brought something new into the world. The birth of the Son was an eschatological act through which Mary’s own redemption became possible (SW 9:259). The incarnation already presupposed the death of Jesus, Rahner says, because death belongs to “all flesh.” Mary “cooperated” in the redemptive work of Christ but did not “mediate” it as a “co-redeemer” (SW 9:265). She is rather the representative of the Church, says Rahner, because she “accomplished bodily and in the highest conceivable manner what the Church has done in a general (although less complete) way – namely, offered the incarnate grace of the Father” (SW 9:267-268). The redemption happened through her. She is redeemed in the most complete sense.

The Assumption of Mary into Heaven (§6.3, p. 284).

Rahner concludes his 184-page chapter on the eschatology of Mary with a reflection on her Assumption into Heaven. The Assumption is in fact Mary’s “perfection,” “completion,” or “consummation” (*Vollendung*). This understanding of the Assumption, he argues, “is contained in the overall account of Mariological faith and proceeds exactly from the basic Marian principle” (SW 9:284). Rahner had said in Chapter 3 that the stories of Mary’s *transitus* or dormition are expressions of a deeper truth. Here Rahner explains the meaning of that truth:

Through her death, Mary experienced a separation from the world in the sense of a perfection [or completion], and made the transition (as does every human being who dies) from being a pilgrim [on earth] to the finality of her personal decision before God’s judgement, precisely because she achieved a blessed finality (SW 9:284).

The death of Mary brought her before God, as it does every human being. But the doctrine of the Assumption means that Mary achieved in advance the perfection that others hope to achieve at the resurrection of the dead. All Christians believe themselves to be redeemed. The new dogma affirms that Mary was redeemed first and in the fullest sense.

At the end of this section Rahner discusses the kind of proof that he offers for his thesis. He argues that the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary is implicit in the Church’s consciousness of faith. The proof does not stem from fifth-century accounts of Mary’s *transitus*, but is a consequence of her being redeemed in the fullest sense. She exemplifies, Rahner says, the “indivisible perfection described in the Bible, namely, that the one human being in the Spirit can achieve the redemption of his body (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 5:2-5) as well as the salvation of his soul” (SW 9:293). What the Church claims for Mary, he says, is what every Christian hopes for in the final resurrection. Rahner’s proof stems from the fundamental Christian belief in redemption, a level of proof that elevates and distinguishes his interpretation from that of others.

5. Conclusions. The Meaning of the New Dogma (p. 309).

After Chapter Four’s lengthy treatment of the eschatology of the Blessed Virgin, the fifth and final chapter summarizes the meaning of the dogma. Rahner abstracts from the minute

analyses of the previous chapters and summarizes his conclusions about the doctrine of Mary's Assumption in general terms.

Universal Considerations of the Meaning of the New Dogma (§1p. 309).

The first sub-section is looks at the Assumption from a "universal" viewpoint. The feast days of the Church are not about abstract theological truths, Rahner says. They celebrate the saving deeds of God. The Assumption of Mary has more than a specifically Mariological import. It affirms the one truth of God and of the one sent, Jesus Christ. Moreover, the "communion of the Saints" is the communion of all creation. It suggests that the dead have an "open" and "universal" relation to the cosmos (SW 9:316). The ultimately resurrection of the dead does not mean that one's relationship to the world is cancelled at the moment of death. No, it reveals the real basis of our relationship to the world, which is God's creative and providential will.

The Eschatological Meaning of the New Dogma (§2, p. 318).

After his "universal considerations," Rahner turns to the Assumption's "eschatological" meaning. The "new dogma" concerns not just Mary alone but God's plan for the end of all things. Most people fear their own deaths and the end of time, says Rahner, but Christians should take the view of St. Paul, that death is a "going home" and a "being with the Lord" (Phil. 1:23). Moreover, it is not enough to be concerned about one's own private salvation, says Rahner. Christians ought to be concerned about the collective dimension of salvation with its "prospect of the true end of all things brought about by God in Christ" (SW 9:321). Even the Church, Rahner says, will come to an end; and it should be "driven by a 'holy anxiety' to become unnecessary" (SW 9:322) in the light of Christ. Because the Feast of the Assumption implies the end toward which all things tend, says Rahner "This Marian event should not be recalled in a merely enthusiastic way as the 'privilege' of the holy Virgin, but should be seen as a piece or a part of the beginning of the last things of the world" (SW 9:324).

The Anthropological Meaning of the New Dogma (§3, p. 327).

Anthropological concerns follow the eschatological concerns. Mary was assumed "body and soul" into heaven. For Rahner, that means that body and soul were not a "duality" but united in her final perfection (SW 9:328-329). Because of that unity, the material world has value, sacraments can be channels of grace, and the human spirit unfolds in history. Like body and soul, nature and grace are also united. Nature is not the opposite of grace but is oriented toward it (SW 9:330). A poor young woman can become the vessel through which God's salvation arrives. There is no "real" bodily or human essence that is not oriented toward the divine (SW 9:330), says Rahner, anticipating his teaching about the supernatural existential. Apart from its divine orientation, he says, nature is no more than an abstraction. Although modernity has sought to grasp nature in a neutral way – as something distinct from God's salvation – nevertheless the Assumption into heaven of Mary's redeemed flesh reveals the unity of nature and grace in a concrete image (SW 9:331). Biblical faith is not a commitment to propositions, Rahner says, but rather "the unconditional act of holding ourselves open to a reality that has power over us, that defines us, and is a part of our own reality" (SW 9:331). Human nature does not separate us from God but rather shows us the way to God (SW 9:333).

The Mariological Meaning of the New Dogma (§4, p. 333).

In the fourth section, Rahner discusses the "Mariological" meaning of the Assumption. He says that Christian faith is directed, not exclusively at the person of Mary, but also on her place and function in salvation history (SW 9:334). Christian love for Mary belongs to the

entirety of Christian life (SW 9:335). She is the one whom God chose to bring Jesus into the world. At her death God bestowed on her the perfection, body and soul, for which other Christians must wait until the end of time. The Assumption is not just something which pertains to Mary alone, independent of her significance for all Christians. The Christian love for Mary, Rahner says, is a love for what God has done for and through her (SW 9:338).

The New Dogma and Ecumenical Endeavors (§5, p. 339)

Rahner's *Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis* concludes with a brief treatment of the Assumption and ecumenism. Because Mary is redeemed in the fullest sense and so represents redeemed humanity, says Rahner, she is a "type" of the Church (SW 9:340). Many Protestant Christians, however, oppose the new dogma. Their opposition reflects underlying disagreements about Scripture and Tradition as sources of revelation. Protestants allege that the new dogma does not go back to the Apostles. Rahner replies that the heart of this issue is not Mary *per se* but rather the meaning of the development of doctrine, about which there is no unanimity even in Catholic circles.

Second, some Protestants object that the Church is a pilgrim. Salvation is a hope, not an absolute future (SW 9:344). The Assumption of Mary, by contrast, implies that salvation has already come to at least her, thus undermining the Church's pilgrim nature. Two questions, according to Rahner, are at issue here: First, whether the human being can be said to possess salvation "in-between" death and the resurrection of the body; and second, whether salvation is truly present and effective since the time of Christ. Protestant objections to the doctrine do not reflect Protestant rejection of Mary but suggest that Catholics and Protestants need a better understanding of the last things (that in Christ have already begun).

Finally, Protestants claim that the new dogma removes Mary from her rightful place in the midst of humanity and places her next to God and Christ as one of the foundations of salvation (SW 9:344). Rahner objects to this interpretation. He says that the new dogma merely posits that Mary has already entered into that for which all hope, namely, the resurrection of the flesh and eternal life. The new dogma contributes nothing to Catholic opinions about Mary as the co-redemptrix and mediator of grace (SW 9:345). It only reinforces what Christians have all along believed – namely, that Mary lives and has been saved by God. Rahner concludes the book with these words: "If we believe the 'new' dogma in our hearts and acknowledge it in our prayer, we are only acknowledging anew the ancient faith, that the eternity of God and his eternal light in the midst of passing time and the darkness of history is already present today" (SW 9:347).

Excursus: On the Theology of Death

Immediately following the last page of Chapter 5 is an "excursus" titled "Zur Theologie des Todes."¹ This work was translated in 1961 by Charles H. Henkey, and W. J. O'Hara

¹ In the *Vorwort* to *Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis*, Rahner explained (SW 9:4) that *Zur Theologie des Todes* appeared in a shorter version in the journal *Synopsis*, vol. 3. The journal was a collection of studies in medicine and natural science edited by Arthur Jores of Hamburg. In 1958, Rahner published a longer version of it in the series *Quaestiones disputatae* (no. 2), and this is the version contained in the *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 9. About it, Rahner's *Vorwort* said, "Because this publication is available to few readers, but the study of the death of Mary must refer to it often, it is proper to print it here in a somewhat longer version. It must be said that such an excursus no longer wants to be a very decisive sketch of a preliminary treatment of a genuine theology of death. Since in such a work everything is so approximate, the author hopes for a mild and well-intentioned judgement from his colleagues [SW

thoroughly revised the translation in 1965. References to the text in the following summary will refer to pages in both *Sämtliche Werke*, volume 9 (SW 9) and the 1965 English translation (ET).

I. Death as an Event Concerning Man as a Whole

Rahner began by suggesting that he will review the “clearly determined propositions of the Church’s doctrine on death” (SW 9:351, ET 11). His book will examine three kinds of propositions (SW 9:352, ET 12): existentially neutral statements on death, which describe it as an event common to all men (Part I); statements about death as the decisive event for sinful man, “in which man’s sinful perdition finds its complete expression and retribution” (Part II); statements about death as “the summit, the supreme act of the appropriation of salvation based on the death of Christ” (Part III).

1. The Universality of Death

The human being is subject to natural laws, and all must die. Faith (as distinct from medicine) teaches that death is due to the disobedience of Adam and Eve. So death is part of a history that has moral and spiritual dimensions.

2. Death as the Separation of Body and Soul

Faith tells us that death is the separation of body and soul. “The body lives no more,” he wrote, “and in this sense we can and must say that the soul separates from the body” (SW 9:354, ET 17). But Rahner was unhappy with this formulation. “This description is certainly not an essential definition of a kind that would satisfy the demands of metaphysics or of theology,” he wrote. It is “a description and nothing more, and in no way a definition of death in its very essence” (SW 9:354, ET 17). Rahner argued that in death, the soul assumes a new relationship to the material world. “For since the soul is united to the body, it clearly must also have some relationship to that whole of which the body is a part, that is, to the totality which constitutes the unity of the material universe” (SW 9:355, ET 18). The soul, in short, is not separate from the world, and the world in some sense becomes its body. Rahner put it this way: “The spiritual soul through its embodiment is in principle open to the world” (SW 9:357, ET 22). The soul becomes “all cosmic” and may come to have, through actions performed in the world, an influence on the entire universe. Rahner’s speculation about the continued “bodily” existence of the soul after death in the material universe proved to be a point with which the Jesuit censors who reviewed Rahner’s work took issue, and they were equally unhappy with his judgment that the separation of the soul and the body is merely a “description” rather than an ontological reality.

3. Death as Concluding Man’s State of Pilgrimage.

The Church teaches that, with death, humanity’s state of pilgrimage comes to an end. At that time a person’s decision for or against God becomes final. “The world is, in a certain sense, the body of those [deceased] persons,” Rahner said. “Their death slowly brings the universe to its own final stage” (SW 9:361, ET 29). So the dead continue to have an effect on the universe. Their demise is not merely a passive experience, a succumbing to a merely biological process, but “an active consummation from within

9:5]. Perhaps he can at some point offer a larger work on this topic; he has worked a long time in any case on such an investigation” (9:4-5). Rahner must have suspected that his reflections “Toward a Theology of Death” were incomplete and might not receive universal affirmation.

brought about the person himself, a maturing self-realization” (SW 9:362, ET 31). The censor rejected the idea that the cosmos is the “body” of the soul of the deceased.

II. Death as the Consequence of Sin

The Church teaches that death is the consequence of sin. Our death, as Rahner put it, is “as the death of Adam, as the death of a sinner” (SW 9:364, ET 33). Humanity lost its original justice in Adam’s rejection of God. Death demonstrates the chasm between people and God that exists from the beginning of the human race. From this Rahner explores six consequences:

1. Adam’s Freedom from Death

Adam’s sin brought death into the world. But that does not mean, said Rahner, that Adam would have lived endlessly. No, at the end of his life, Adam would have achieved a stage of perfection. His end would have been “a pure, apparent and active consummation of the whole man from within, without death in the proper sense, that is, without suffering from without any violent dissolution of the actual bodily constitution” (SW 9:365, ET 34-35). A sinless Adam would have enjoyed, at death, the bodily perfection that Christians await at the resurrection of the body.

2. Death as Guilt and as a Natural Phenomenon

Death “cannot be merely a consequence of man’s empty and meaningless guilt,” argued Rahner. If death is also a consequence of human nature, then it “must like all natural events bear a positive intrinsic meaning” (SW 9:365, ET 35). For one who dies “in Christ,” death can be “the participation in, and appropriation of, his redemptive death” (SW 9:365-366, ET 36). Death in Christ, Rahner will go on to say, is not death at all.

3. Further Exploration of the Essence of Natural Death, in virtue of which it can be an Event of Salvation and of Damnation.

Death has a certain “obscure, hidden character,” said Rahner (SW 9:367, ET 38). The dead are no longer visible to the senses, but they have not ceased to exist. The meaning of their death can be interpreted as a dialogue. On the one hand, death is “an active fulfilment from within” and “an act of self-completion.” On the other hand, death is “a destruction, a rupture, an accident which strikes man from without” (SW 9:368, ET 40). It is not simply a punishment for sin, but the condition for the possibility of one’s spiritual fate. It is a moment of both self-fulfillment and self-dissolution, said Rahner, and it is impossible for the dying to fully judge their situation. “Death in the individual case may be either salvation or damnation,” he said, “punishment for sin or an act of faith” (SW 9:369, ET 42). This hiddenness and obscurity troubled the censor, who said that the teaching that one cannot know the meaning of death was “unheard of” and “not to be publicized” (SW xxxvi).

4. Death as a Penalty for Original Sin

Although death is a penalty for sin, Adam was created free and upright. Human nature longs for freedom from death. “Adam’s exemption from death” must “represent some kind of ‘need’ or ‘requirement,’” said Rahner, the loss of which has the character of punishment (SW 9:372, ET 47). The dying person experiences a darkness that ensued from Adam’s sin, a darkness that should not have been. Thus death is punishment in the sense that it expresses the situation brought about by original sin.

5. Death as Personal Mortal Sin

Death is also an expression and penalty for personal mortal sins. For that reason, death “is different for the just and for the sinner even when the external event, which in everyday life we call death, seems to be the same” (SW 9:374, ET 50-51).

6. Death and the Devil

Rahner considered the devil as a fallen member of the angels. Angels are the defined as the pure spirits who, in their unfallen state, will the perfection of the world, including the consummation of the human being in death. The fallen angel, however, does not will the perfection of the world. The will of the devil is “the perfection of his essence in proud autonomy, without grace” and “the perfection of the universe without grace” (SW 9:376, ET 53). The devil tempts humanity to a similar graceless fulfillment.

This section concludes with a brief summary of Chapter II. Death is a punishment, yes, and human beings shrink from it. But death is more than punishment. People should regard it “in the light and power of Jesus Christ who died and rose again” and in whom “eternal life penetrated in death the very depths of the world, in order to give life to the world” (SW 9:377, ET 55).

III. Death as a Dying with Christ

Instead of regarding death one-sidedly as the punishment for sin, Rahner argued that it has a “natural” and “neutral” character. It can be both punishment and the appropriation of the redemption of Christ.

1. The Death of Christ

This section begins with a consideration of Christ’s descent into hell. Rahner argued that the descent into hell should not be considered simply as a redemptive activity performed by Christ after the crucifixion. The descent is also “an essential factor in his death” and shows that “Christ died our death” (SW 9:378, ET 57). His death is our redemption, said Rahner, but redemption is not easy to explain. The medieval “satisfaction theory,” according to which the infinite dignity of Christ’s divine person rendered satisfaction to God for the offenses of humanity, may obscure God’s mercy. The incarnation of the Son, preceding the event on the cross, indicates the divine favor long before that favor was won by the Son’s sacrificial death. The satisfaction theory, argued Rahner, “does not make it intrinsically clear why it was through Christ’s death that we were redeemed, and not through some other possible act of our Lord, which would also have been of infinite value” (SW 9:380, ET 60). Christ’s death was not comparable to any other act that he could have performed. In dying, said Rahner, Christ “experienced in himself the darkness which is the specific character of human death and the deprivation of the personal consummation in the void of the bodily end” (SW 381, ET 61). In experiencing this suffering, he revealed “the divine grace which divinized the life of his humanity” (ibid.). These two assertions – that in death Christ experienced deprivation and that his humanity was divinized by grace – were troubling to the censors. Rahner’s point, however, was to present the crucifixion and death of the God-man as exemplary. Through the death of Christ, said Rahner, his spiritual reality “enters into an open, unrestricted relationship to the cosmos as a whole” (SW 9:382, ET 63). In short, life in Christ becomes an intrinsic principle of the world.

2. The Death of the Christian as a Dying with Christ

The death of a Christian in the state of grace is different from that of the sinner. The grace-filled death, said Rahner, “no longer has the mark of a punishment for sin, but, like concupiscence in the justified man, has the character of a mere consequence of sin” (SW 9:384, ET 67). Positively speaking, the death of a Christian cannot be called death but is the beginning of eternal life. It corresponds to God’s intention to save. Rahner wrote, “The process of dying with Christ, and obtaining new life thereby, secretly dominates life here on earth” (SW 9:385, 68-69). The horror of death, once embraced by Christ, is transformed into the advent of God. His death, as “an act of grace” (SW 9:386, ET 71), enables the Christian, through the grace of Christ, to belong to God. “His grace became ours” (SW 9:386, ET 71). The censor of Rahner’s work disliked the implication that Christ lived from grace.

3. The Sacramentally Visible Union between the Death of Christ and the Death of the Christian

The Christian dies with Christ and the “old man” is buried with him. The sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist, and Anointing make this union with Christ visible. In Baptism, the Christian “dies to sin” by assimilating his death. In the Eucharist the Christian celebrates the death of the Lord, said Rahner, and the sacrament announces “the mystery of his death” by which his grace “became ours” (SW 9:389, ET 76). The sacrament of Anointing “assumes the character of a consecration to death” in which the dying person endures death “in companionship with the Lord” (SW 9:391, ET 78). By these visible signs the Christian is “to hear the good news of death, which is life, and of the coming of the Lord” (SW 9:392, ET 80).