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Chapter 2 Doctrine of God and Prayer

Rahner's understanding of God reflects a variety of influences: his experience as a Catholic believer and his training as a Jesuit priest; his studies with Martin Heidegger; his examination of the metaphysics of knowledge in Aquinas; his philosophy of religion; his Christian anthropology; and his reinterpretation of traditional Christian teaching on grace, Trinity, revelation, salvation and Christ.

Reason and Faith

In developing his doctrine of God, Rahner did not accept a sharp distinction between philosophy and theology or reason and faith. He rejected both the Enlightenment ideal of reason as a detached neutral instrument and the popular notion of faith as a personal conviction immune from critical examination. For him, philosophy always contains a secret or implicit theological dimension, as long as it is true to its own inner dynamism and does not arbitrarily restrict its search for wisdom. Reason is unavoidably influenced by social conditions and cultural assumptions, as well as personal interest and bias. For Rahner, genuine faith is not opposed to reason, but is its greatest accomplishment and highest achievement. Reason is true to itself when it recognizes its limitations before the mystery of being, and faith is authentic when it accepts the mystery as caring and loving. Faith is not an irrational feeling or an arbitrary opinion; it is a conviction that must vindicate itself as genuine knowledge through a process of critical reflection. This intrinsic dialectical relationship between faith and reason, as Rahner saw it, is crucial to understanding his approach to the doctrine of God.

Rahner initially approaches the question of God through his anthropology, which sees human beings as essentially oriented to mystery. We cannot know God directly, but only as the Source and Goal of the dynamism of the human spirit. Our drive for knowledge and love implies a quest for

absolute truth and love. Theology as doctrine of God grounds and completes anthropology. Our treatment of human existence in chapter one sets the stage for this chapter on God.

Mystery

In his theological works, Rahner typically uses the word “mystery” to refer to the source and goal of the dynamism of the human spirit. He opted for this term because it calls for further reflection and carries a more inviting tone than the traditional language of being. Referring to the goal of human transcendence as mystery reminds us that it is not a particular being or object contained within our time-space coordinates. The goal must remain nameless, undefined and, in principle, not subject to limitation. We know mystery precisely in knowing ourselves as self-transendent creatures with longings that always exceed our apprehension and grasp.

When Rahner examined our drive for a love that is totally fulfilling, he referred to the goal of this longing as the “holy mystery.” We know the gracious character of mystery through a transcendental reflection on the giving and receiving involved in loving personal relationships. Christian faith affirms that the holy mystery does not remain distant and uncaring, but draws near as a loving personal presence, most fully realized in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.

Foundations of Christian Faith

Rahner’s most comprehensive theological work is *Foundations of Christian Faith*, designed to present Christian belief as a whole without attempting to explain every aspect of it or answer all objections to it. The first two chapters of *Foundations* repeat many of the ideas from his philosophical writings, but place them in a more explicit theological context. After an introduction that explains his methodology and deals with epistemological problems, the first chapter presents an anthropology with Christian overtones. Human beings are persons who can have a loving relationship with God. We are

finite creatures, responsible before the Creator for ourselves as a whole. Our transcendence is lived out in historical experience where our origin and ultimate goal remain hidden from us. In all our human striving, we remain dependent on the ineffable mystery that encompasses us.

The Word "God"

In chapter two of *Foundations* we find Rahner's developed doctrine of God. It is a reflection on our transcendental experience of encountering the absolute mystery. We only know what the word "God" means by reflecting on our fundamental orientation to mystery. In this reflection, anthropology and theology are united, forming a solid basis for his contention that the experience of self is the experience of God. He begins his reflection with a linguistic thought experiment. What would happen to human beings if the word "God" disappeared from our vocabulary without a trace or an echo? We would then be unable to reflect on our lives as a whole and to seek the ultimate meaning of our existence. We would not realize that the deepest questions had faded from our consciousness, and, therefore, we would revert "to the level of clever animals." In fact, the word "God" does exist, kept alive by believers as well as by those who deny god's existence. We ourselves do not create the word "God." On the contrary, it comes to us as a gift in the history of language. Rahner finds some truth in Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous admonition to remain silent about things that cannot be expressed clearly. For Rahner, God is "the final word before wordless and worshipful silence in the face of the ineffable mystery."

Knowledge of God

After showing how the word "God" functions by keeping open the great questions of identity and meaning, Rahner examines at length what kind of knowledge we have of God. He rejects as illegitimate the common practice of forming a concept of God and then asking if this being exists. He

insists that we can only know anything about God by reflecting on our transcendental experience of mystery. For Rahner, there is no natural knowledge of God, as the manualist theology claimed, but only a supernatural knowledge rooted in the graced character of our transcendental experience that is always mediated by concrete historical realities.

God and World

Assessing two of the common ways of understanding the relationship between the world and God, Rahner finds an element of truth in pantheism, since it is open to God as the primordial ground and the ultimate goal of transcendence. He is harsher in his criticism of a naive theism that portrays God as a supreme being who stands over against created reality. This kind of dualism, which shares some of the assumptions of popular atheism, is in danger of making God into a being among others and of misinterpreting the inner dynamism of the world.

Rahner opts for a God who is distinct from the world as its creator and yet is intrinsically present as its divine energy. This God remains mysterious, indefinable, and ultimately beyond all measure. This position reflects Rahner's linguistic point that the word "God" does not function like other words signifying individual objects or events within our temporal-spatial world. It points, rather, to the source and goal of our longings that cannot be contained within our limited frame of reference.

Proofs

In exploring what we can know about God, Rahner takes up the question of the validity and function of the traditional proofs for God's existence. He denies that these proofs provide new previously unknown knowledge of God and rejects the traditional claim that they can demonstrate the existence of a first cause or most perfect being that we call "God." The proofs function, rather, as a secondary reflection on our primary transcendental knowledge of God. Each of the five traditional

proofs found in Aquinas highlights some aspect of our experience that points to the holy mystery. Rahner suggests that individuals seeking to vindicate their faith should reflect on their most meaningful and revealing experiences: for example, the capacity for absolute questioning; overwhelming anxiety; the joy that passes all understanding; and the sense of an absolute moral demand. These experiences all reveal a transcendental relationship to mystery. In them, we know ourselves as finite and we co-know God as our intrinsic dynamism and as the ultimate goal beyond our control. The proofs attempt to name the mystery co-apprehended in the deeper experiences of life. They make explicit the fundamental structure of human existence which is dynamically oriented to the ultimate goal we call "God."

Analogy

Continuing his discussion of God, Rahner returns to an analysis of religious language, especially the traditional idea of analogy. He rejects the popular notion that analogical language stands midway between univocal and equivocal language. For him, analogy is rooted in our essential condition as human beings, who know particular things against a horizon that cannot be comprehended in categories drawn from this world. Not only is language necessarily analogical, but, more fundamentally, we exist analogically, oriented to mystery that surpasses all the categories, symbols, and words derived from our worldly experiences.

Rahner detects an unavoidable tension in all efforts to speak about God. Our language always falls short, inadequate to the task of speaking about the holy mystery. Traditional scholastic theology made a similar point by insisting that our language about God is more unlike than like the holy mystery. Rahner applies his notion of analogy to the statement that God is a person. This does not mean that God is an individual center of consciousness, like a human being who is separate from all other humans. It does mean that God cannot be reduced to an impersonal cosmic principle or an

unconscious ground of being. God is a person in the sense that we can have a personal relationship to the holy mystery that includes worship and prayer.

Dependence on God

In our temporal experience as infinite searches with finite capabilities, we know ourselves as creatures. For Rahner, creation is not merely an event that occurred billions of years ago, but an ongoing process by which God sustains the world and all human beings in historic existence. We are totally and radically dependent on God who always remains free in relation to the finite world. Rahner claims that the more we realize and accept our dependence on God, the more we experience true freedom. In this regard, human beings face two types of temptation: either to shift our proper responsibility for ourselves onto God; or to act autonomously without recognizing or accepting our dependence on God. We achieve true freedom by resisting these two temptations and accepting our total dependence on the holy mystery that empowers us to act freely.

Finding God in the World

In the last section of his treatment of God in *Foundations*, Rahner takes up the issue of finding God in the world. Religious traditions, including Christianity, speak about God in categorical terms: for example, intervening in history, working miracles, and inspiring sacred books. Rahner thinks that many people today who are comfortable relating to the ineffable mystery in general are put off by the concrete claims of religions that God has acted in specific ways in history. His fundamental response to this concern is that God is present to the world through a “mediated immediacy.” This means that God’s presence in the world as its origin, goal and inner dynamism is always accomplished in and through particular finite realities. In scholastic terms, God acts in the world not as an external efficient cause, but as a type of formal or intrinsic cause. Religious claims of God’s specific activity in human

history are attempts to make explicit the transcendental presence of God in the whole world. Aquinas made the same point by insisting that God works through secondary causes. God causes the world and the chain of casualty we observe in it; but God does not insert the divine presence as a link in that chain. Religious claims about divine interventions in history are really faith statements based on the concrete manifestations of God's abiding presence in human history. To illustrate this point, Rahner asks how to interpret the origin of a good idea that comes suddenly to an individual and proves to be correct, valid and helpful. It is possible to trace the idea back to psychological factors, previous experiences, lingering memories and other finite causes. At the same time, believers, who freely accept their dependence on the holy mystery, can also legitimately claim that good ideas are inspired by God and say a prayer of gratitude for them. Rahner sees no reason why believers cannot extend this explanation to all the good things that happen in life, so that, as he puts it, they are seen as "an inspiration, a mighty deed, however small, of God's providence."

Grace

Rahner expanded his doctrine of God by reinterpreting the traditional teachings on grace and the Trinity. From the Greek Fathers of the Church, including the great seminal thinker Origen, he retrieved the fundamental notion of uncreated grace. The Holy Mystery gives to human beings not a created reality but the very divine self. God is both the giver and the gift. The divine self-communication created the world and continues to sustain its evolving development. It brought human beings into existence and guides the historical process, God's self-giving found its fulfillment in Jesus Christ the perfect respondent and will reach its ultimate goal at the end time where God is all in all. The Christian God is not remote but draws near in loving intimacy. God's self-giving divinizes us, makes us temples of the Holy Spirit and incorporates us into the Body of Christ. Rahner was critical of certain developments in the theology of grace in western Christianity. Contrary to Augustine's

salvation pessimism that spoke of large numbers who are damned, Rahner emphasized a salvation optimism based on the power and omnipresence of uncreated grace. He insisted that just because grace is a free gift does not mean it is rare. On the contrary, divine grace informs, sustains and guides the whole evolving cosmos and all aspects of human existence. We live and move and have our being in the divine milieu. The whole world is indeed charged with the grandeur of God, as the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins suggested.

Experience of Grace

Popular Catholic piety in the United States, influenced by the Baltimore Catechism, tended to view grace as a kind of supernatural sitting on top of our natural being, out of the range of our normal every day consciousness. Rahner, echoing the integrated theology of Aquinas, insisted that grace penetrates and transforms human nature. To say grace is supernatural means that it is totally gratuitous and not that it is extrinsic to human nature. God is not removed from consciousness, but is the condition present in all our knowing and living. Thus Rahner's theology of grace confirms the conclusion of his philosophy of religion that God is co-known in all individual acts of knowing and by logical extension co-loved in all acts of love. This sets up the spiritual imperative that we must always be on alert for clues to the divine presence, for glimpses of the Spirit, and for intimations of the Gracious Mystery. Once again, the experience of self is the experience of God. All things are potentially revelatory. Everything that constitutes our human existence can speak to us of God. Our experience of grace is often paradoxical, grounded in our ability to see light in the midst of darkness. There are degrees of religious experiences based on our closeness to God and on our ability to reflect on our experience of the divine presence and to express it accurately. History and culture affect our perception of the presence of the Spirit. Some experiences are more effective catalysts for spiritual insight than others. In our culture today, for example, personal relationships and the burden of

freedom seem to have a special power to evoke a sense of the mystery dimension of life. We can distinguish two general types of spiritual experiences; boundary or limit experiences, such as failure and death, which remind us of our total dependence on God: and ecstatic experiences, like deep joy and intimate love, which suggest the gracious character of the mystery that always surrounds us. All of our attempts to speak about our experience of divine grace are always limited and incomplete. God is always beyond all our words and images. For Rahner, following Aquinas, God remains incomprehensible even in the beatific vision. In heaven, we encounter the inexhaustible love of God.

Doctrine of God

Rahner's theology of grace alerts us to the abiding presence of God in all aspects of our daily lives. In our secular world, however, God's presence is often eclipsed by the busyness of life and the cares of this world. Human existence can become one-dimensional, lived on the surface with little sense of the depth dimension. We can become totally caught up in _____ concern while neglecting matters of ultimate concern. Sensitive to this challenge of the secular age, Rahner advocated what he called "a mystagogical" approach to pastoral ministry and spiritual development. He borrowed this term from classical liturgical texts when it refers to initiation in the sacramental life of the Church and applies it to the current effort to initiate people today into a deeper sense of the mystery dimension of life. The mystagogical task is to help individuals to interpret correctly their deeper experiences, to achieve a greater conceptual clarity of the depth dimension of human experience and to find a proper symbolization of their religious experience. The dimension of common human experiences as the first step in a process of relating the Christian tradition to contemporary life. For example, contemporary theology has reinterpreted the classic Christian understanding of salvation to include various forms of liberation from demonic forces operative in this world, but this has current

relevance only if people are aware of ways in which the secular world can imprison us in destructive habits of mind.

Pastoral leaders can employ many different ways of opening up the mystery dimension of life. Dialogue with science on the immensity of the expanding universe, for instance, can remind us of our own limitation in mastering reality and our dependence on a much larger force.

Language which is vivid, colorful and poetic has a power to disclose the mysterious depth of human existence. While technological, scientific language promotes mastery of the material world, evocative language, which exercises power over us, can open up finite reality to the infinite. Rahner notes the mystagogical function of “primordial words,” which originate in the deep experience of persons and cannot be defined in terms of better known words. He often exemplified this function by analyzing the word “heart,” which points to the center point of human beings, a place of unity, deeper than the split between body and soul, where we encounter God. People who practice centering prayer can focus on various primordial words like “heart” to receive the gift of greater openness to the gracious Mystery.

The writings of Rahner contain many “mystagogical passages” with an inherent power to evoke mystery. At times he will insert a more concrete image in the middle of an abstract theological analysis. In the introduction to his *Foundations of Christian Faith*, while discussing transcendental experience, he suddenly compares our accumulated knowledge to a small floating island, illumined by the light of science, which is born by the sea. The image _____ a crucial question: what do we love more, the small island of our scientific knowledge or “the sea of infinite mystery.”

Rahner’s spiritual writings are filled with poetic passages that challenge superficial explanations of human existence. He described “the strange world full of blind forces and _____ instincts” within us, a writhing coil of cravings and blind possibilities.” He warns us not to give too much power to these dark forces, making them “idols to be _____ in our lives.” The depths of our inner

life, “the strange infinities within us,” are not “pools of stagnant bitterness but the waters of infinity springing up to eternal life.” Here we have a vivid description of the destructive tendencies in our own soul transformed into a greater consciousness of the mysterious presence of the _____ in the depth of our being.

In assessing his daily routine, Rahner sees his soul as “a bomb-packed highway” filled with “countless trivialities, much empty talk and pointless activity, idle curiosity and ludicrous pretensions of importance.” He blames himself for this state of his soul; he has dug this rut himself, transformed even holy events “into the grey tedium of dull routine.” And yet he comes to see more clearly that the path to God “must lead through the very middle of my ordinary daily life.” Only God’s love can transform the dull routine of life into “a hymn of praise.” Rahner’s descriptions of daily life are a form of what the psychotherapist Abraham Maslow called “rhapsodic communication.” In conveying his discoveries of peak experiences, Maslow found that an abstract description of such experiences made little impact on his audience, but if shared with them a vivid description of a peak experience many individuals would be reminded of a similar experience in their own lives. Rhapsodic language tends to resonate. Leaders charged with the mystagogical task do better with they speak about the spiritual life less abstractly and more concretely.

A transcendental mystagogy finds its completion in a categorical mystagogy that makes explicit connections with traditional Christian piety. In reflecting on nature, Rahner admitted that it was hard for him to appreciate the beauty of the created world. He thought it was “the numbness of my spiritual faculty” that kept him from “going into raptures” over oceans, snowcapped mountain peaks, and the evolving universe. With _____ regrets, he confesses that he cannot “instinctively feel” the true glory of divine creation. His response to this perceived spiritual limitation is to join himself to the prayer of “that chorus of poets” who extoll the power and splendor of God’s creation. Thus he prays in

the style of the *Canticle of the Sun*, the great hymn of St. Francis of Assisi, trying to make his own one of the great classic statements of the way the beauty of this world serves as a ladder taking us to the Source of all beauty.

Echoing Francis, Rahner begins by praising our “sister sun” who gives us light and is the “very image” of the exalted God. His praise of God extends to moon and stars, to wind, air and cloud, to water, fire and mother earth. Reflecting on his prayer, which does not come naturally or instinctively from his heart, Rahner notes that we may pray “in whatever way is _____ of us,” suggesting that joining our prayer with those more _____ to the divine presence is a spiritually wise practice that is ultimately heard by God.

Authentic religious experiences often involve an “odd discernment” of the surprising presence of the Spirit. Rahner has interesting lists, experiences where persons act according to their conscience without any real hope of earthly reward or even personal satisfaction. He offers various short descriptions of such experiences designed to prompt deeper reflection: choosing to be silent and not defend ourselves against an unjust attack; forgiving a person even though they owe our action for granted and offer us nothing in return; obeying the will of God which leads to no earthly advantage; making a sacrifice that was unnoticed, thankless and gave us no inner sense of satisfaction; persevering in the love of God without any emotional payoff; doing an act of kindness to (for??) someone which elicits no expression of gratitude and leaves us feeling empty. Rahner goes on to say that if we have known any of these types of experience, then “we may be sure that the Spirit was at work within us,” and eternity encountered us in that brief moment. Such encounters with God remind us that our significance transcends worldly wisdom and that certain challenges in life can be faced with an “unbounded confidence quite _____ with worldly results.” Rahner and spiritual direction attuned to the often hidden presence of grace in challenging situations can function as true mystagogues for people who experience very little consolation in following the uncompromising demands of Gospel ideals. In

preaching, teaching and counseling, Mystagogue helps others to come to a more explicit understanding of the often hidden presence of the Spirit at work in ordinary life. This requires a genuine sensibility to individuals who find deeper reflection difficult and even frightening as well as well as to those who are immersed in worldly concern are prone to examine introspection.

Effective mystagogues are able to speak about common human experience in ways that resonate with ordinary people. They are good listeners, attentive to the concrete ways that parishioners talk about their joys and hopes as well as their failures and disappointments. They avoid jargon and ____ theological discussions, concentrating instead on the concrete language used by people to ____ their joys and challenges. When parish leaders do their mystagogical work well, parishioners often say things like: “you have expressed clearly what I have felt vaguely;” it seems you can read my mind or you must have heard our family discussion.” One of the highest predictors of homily effectiveness is the statement “the preacher understands my heart.” Mystagogical preaching opens up the mystery dimension of life and shows how the scripture readings illumine and guide the deepest questions of life. They offer diverse descriptions of the human adventures including the distinctive experience of women as well as men, of younger parishioners as well as older ones, and persons of homosexual orientation as well as heterosexuals.

Pastoral leaders can learn from the field of phenomenology how to construct descriptions of common experience that resonate with a wide variety of parishioners. Sensitive Mystagogues stay open to the full range of human experiences, describing significant aspects fully and accurately in search of the presence of divine grace. This means paying attention to the way people express their conscious dreams for a life filled with meaning, purpose and commitment, as well as their emotional reactions such as joy and anxiety, that accompany their everyday life in the world. Mystagogical effectiveness is tied to the ability to detect and use important symbols that capture and illumine significant spiritual experiences. Putting these insights from phenomenology into practice, a preacher

commenting on a passage from the book of Jonah might speak of the “Jonah syndrome” as a way of symbolizing the common temptation to escape from God and to evade responsibilities, which often produce a vague anxiety. People who can identify with Jonah are more receptive to the positive aspects of following God’s will.

Rahner’s theology of grace helps fill out his doctrine of God by insisting that the ultimate Goal of human aspiration is not remote but draws near as the loving Source of our spiritual dynamics. The presence of the Holy Spirit within us grounds the spiritual imperative to stay alert for clues to divine grace sustaining and guiding our everyday lives.

Trinity

Rahner’s doctrine of God also incorporates a critique and a reinterpretation of the traditional western theology of the Trinity, which typically began with a discussion of the existence and attributes of the one God and then moved to examine the three persons in God. Rahner preferred the common Eastern practice of beginning with the distinctive ways we relate to each of the three persons constituting the Trinity. He was also leery of Augustine’s psychologizing approach which claimed to know something of the inner life of the Trinity, commonly expressed as the Father speaking the Word and their mutual love spirating a third person, the Holy Spirit. Finally, he warned against simply repeating the traditional teaching that there are three persons in one God because in the modern world this leads to the heresy of tritheism and the popular perception that there are three gods. Rahner began his treatment of the Trinity with the threefold way we experience God in history and then applied this to the inner life of the Trinity. He expressed this approach in the axiom “the economic Trinity is the imminent Trinity.” By knowing how God relates to us, we know something true about the inner life of God. According to Christian revelation, we experience the one God in a threefold way. Scripture, which speaks of the divine presence living within us as in a Temple and

serving as our Advocate, invites us to call the one God the Holy Spirit. The New Testament, which tells the story of Jesus of Nazareth, who walked this earth, went about doing good, freely suffered death on a cross and was raised to life, calls us to name the one God the Word or the Son. Christian revelation, which speaks of God sending the Spirit to animate us and sending the Son to liberate us from sin, encourages us to name the one God, Father. Thus, we relate to God in three distinct modes which correspond to real differences within God. This frees us to develop a Trinitarian monotheism and to speak of God as a communion of love. God shares the divine life with us, encouraging us to form relationships of loving mutuality and respect. Christ calls us to share in his community building mission of spreading the reign of God. The Spirit summons us to a communion of love where justice and peace flourish and to a life of worship and prayer where we respond to divine blessings.

Spiritual Writings

Rahner's doctrine of God, often poetically expressed in his spiritual meditations, insists on the ultimately mysterious character of the One who is beyond all words and images. The incomprehensible God is the "nameless Beyond behind all that is familiar to us," the "infinite Enigma that conceals all other enigmas." And yet Rahner can pray to the inexhaustible One in familiar terms "Thanks to your mercy, O Infinite God, I know something about you not only through concepts and words, but through experience." Grateful for meeting God in joy and in suffering, he speaks the truth: "You have seized me; I have not grasped you." Rahner continues his prayer: "I can never forget You, because You have become the very center of my being." As a representative of the long tradition which recognizes the limitations of religious language, Rahner provides a critical challenge to the rapidly expanding fundamentalism which claims direct access to God and detailed knowledge of the divine will. Furthermore, Rahner's consistent emphasis on the ultimately mysterious nature of God

provides a solid foundation for the postmodern impulse to name God in various ways without pretending to exhaust the divine reality.

Summary

Throughout his whole life, Karl Rahner maintained the faith conviction that we human beings have a positive orientation to God. In an effort to explain and defend this belief, he made use of both philosophy and theology, convinced that faith is not opposed to reason, but is its highest achievement. His early philosophical works offered an initial vindication of his faith in God by demonstrating that being as a whole is co-known in every act of knowing and that human beings are open to a possible revelation from God in history. His theology of grace makes the case that the holy mystery is not remote but lives within us, guiding our spiritual journey. His reinterpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity reminds us of our threefold relationship to the one God, the Father who creates and sustains us, the Son who saves and liberates us and the Holy Spirit who animates and guides us.

Prayer

Rahner's doctrine of God provides a solid foundation for the Christian practice of prayer. For him, prayer can be grasped as meaningful only in its actual practice. Prayer is a fundamental act of human existence which "must be its own justification and advertisement." It is the central religious practice which acknowledges our complete dependence on the triune God. Rahner wrote many scholarly articles about prayer and once described his book *On Prayer* as one of the best statements of his theology. At the same time, he often insisted that what we say in prayer is far more important than what we say about prayer. Prayer addressed to God involves a relationship which remains ultimately mysterious. Some of Rahner's important material on prayer can be summarized in the following five dialectical pairs. Each pairing contains a contemporary challenge to authentic prayer, a theological

perspective, an example from the prayer life of Jesus and a prayer of my composition, usually a paraphrase or rewording of one of Rahner's own prayers.

1. Prayer lifts our minds and hearts to the God above and fosters familiar conversation with the God within. Our challenge is to develop a more mature prayer life that retains a childlike confidence in the Father who loves us. Rahner's theology reminds us that God is both the transcendent Mystery that rules the universe and the intimate Presence that sustains and guides us. The Gospels tell us that Jesus committed himself totally to the will of the God who sent him to establish the kingdom and, at the same time, addressed the sovereign Lord as "Abba," the familiar term, like Daddy or Papa, used by children for their fathers.

Thank you Abba for revealing Yourself to me in my everyday experiences of joy and suffering. You have taken the initiative and become the true center of my existence. May I remain ever mindful of this great gift.

2. Prayer is both a gift and an expression of our freedom. Our challenge is to avoid a false pride that sees our prayer as a personal accomplishment and a paralyzing question that absolves us of all responsibility to develop a viable prayer life. Scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit prays in us enabling us to address God as Father, thus reminding us that all prayer is a gift. At the same time, we are free persons, called to responsible cooperation with the Spirit in the process of responding to the God who calls us by name. Jesus received the Spirit at his baptism by John in the Jordan River. This Spirit drove him into the desert where he prayed in preparation for his battle with Satan. During his ministry, he prayed for individuals and shared his healing spirit with them. Faithful to the Spirit, Jesus freely accepted death on a cross and in the process became life-giving spirit for the whole human family.

I must stop the busy routine for a moment and address words of praise to You, Holy Spirit, living within me. I adore you as the Light that illumines my dark moments, the Compass who guides me along the path of moral decisions, the Hope that sustains me when stalked by despair, the Love that propels me out of selfishness into life-giving relationships, the Power that enables all my prayers. Help me recognize and praise you as the Gift of my life and the Source of my being.

3. Prayer involves a unity of interior sentiments and external expressions. Some of us say prayers regularly and struggle to mean what we say, while others have a rich interior life that remains unexpressed. We are enfleshed spirits and our bodies are symbols of our souls. To achieve integration, we strive for a fruitful interplay between inner sentiments and external gesture, at the same time accepting the inevitable gap between the two. The quest for a totally authentic prayer life inevitably finds us disappointed. Ideally, we gradually come to a greater realization of our total dependency upon the God who rules our lives, and find more helpful ways of improving our prayer lives: for example learning various meditation techniques, finding the best places and times for private prayer, and participating wholeheartedly in liturgy. Jesus lived constantly out of his Abba experience of total intimacy with God which energized his complete dedication to the cause of God and humanity. He expressed and deepened this fundamental relationship by participating in the great Jewish feasts and by carving out private prayer time in the midst of his demanding ministry.

God, sometimes the demands and responsibilities crowd out my awareness of your constant presence. Please make my meditation time more fruitful so that I am more mindful throughout my busy day that I am never alone, but always carried

by your loving embrace. Help me to learn from your Son and my Lord to walk always in your presence and to find time and place to nourish my spirit.

4. Prayer is both private and communal. A growing number of believers today find comfort and solace in prayerful reflection, but are not comfortable praying in groups or in formal liturgy. Some regular churchgoers have difficulty finding connections between liturgical prayer and their private devotional life. Rahner insists that we are essentially social beings who grow as persons in and through various communities, including the family, intermediate associations and the local church. We meet God in the sanctuary of our hearts as well as the church sanctuary. In prayer, we have the opportunity to encounter Christ our brother and to participate in the life of his body, the Church. Our moments alone with God should prepare us for public worship and communal prayer should nourish our spiritual life. The Gospels, especially Luke, tell us that Jesus sought opportunities to engage in private prayer and prayed before key decisions, like calling his disciples. Jesus also appreciated the value of communal prayer as suggested by his participation in formal Jewish worship and by his request that the disciples pray with him during his Agony in the Garden.

Gracious God, O Lord, when we share in the Eucharistic meal Your Son comes to us as our nourishment and we become what we eat, the Body of Christ. May what we celebrate in the sacred liturgy always be enacted in the daily witness of our everyday lives with its mix of hard work and moments of prayerful reflection.

5. Prayer includes adoration and petition. Some Christians have to admit that most of their prayers are devoted to asking God for things they desire for themselves or others, while rarely offering prayers of praise or thanksgiving to God. Other Christians who have grown to reject crude

notions of an intervening God now find themselves questioning the value of petitionary prayer. This problem demands a more extensive treatment, especially since Rahner's doctrine of God has helped create this difficulty. Prayer is a form of truth telling that gives expression to the fact that we are totally dependent on a Power greater than ourselves. All that we are and have is a gift. Proper praise to the Lord of the cosmos and gratitude to the Giver of all gifts gives expression to these fundamental truths. As Rahner put it, prayer of adoration is "the last moment of speech before silence," the final reflection before abandoning ourselves to the Gracious Mystery beyond all comprehension. Moreover, it is God who makes our prayer of praise possible, empowered by the Spirit who lives within us and instructed by Christ who invites us to give glory to our Father. The regular practice of prayer not only gives expression to our sense of dependency but helps strengthen and intensify it. In and through this process, we develop our true freedom and a proper sense of responsibility for ourselves as a whole. From this perspective, prayer appears as essential to our own spiritual growth. Liturgical prayer is not simply a device for community building but an essential act of communal worship offered to God, who can be addressed as our Father through Christ and empowered by the Spirit.

Divine Intervention

Questions about petitionary prayer arise from Rahner's doctrine of God, which challenges the popular notion that God intervenes periodically in human affairs in response to requests from faithful people. For Rahner, God cannot intervene now and then because God is always already present in the whole of human history as the Source and Goal of all human activities. The gracious One is always on the side of good in the struggle against evil, always present to us as the Power that sustains and guides us. The God who raised Jesus to life never abandons us and always supports us. Through his paschal mystery, Christ is present to all people in all places and all times as the absolute savior and definitive

prophet. The Holy Spirit anoints all people and not just a select group of believers. Divine grace is omnipresent like the air we breathe. The human opportunity and task is to cooperate with the God who wants good for us, to follow the example of Christ who planted the seeds of the final victory over evil powers, and to tap the power of the Holy Spirit who is our Advocate in the ongoing struggle against demonic forces. Rahner warns us not to think of the sufferings of life as a divine punishment for our sins or as a test of our virtue. When afflicted, it is natural to ask why, but far more beneficial to ask how - - how can we cope with the inevitable sufferings of life, trusting that God is with us and for us in the great struggles against all the dark forces.

A Defense of Petitionary Prayer

Within this theological framework Rahner offers a vigorous defense of petitionary prayer. The Hebrew Scriptures, especially the Psalms, are filled with explicit petitions, asking God for specific help. In the Gospels, Jesus urges his disciples to ask for divine favors with great confidence that the Father hears our prayers. He taught us to pray the Our Father with its petitions for daily bread, forgiveness for sins and deliverance from temptation. Jesus himself responded to faith filled requests for healing. In offering prayers of petition, Rahner reminds us to begin by surrendering to God's will, as Jesus taught us in the Lord's Prayer. "Thy will be done" precedes "give us this day our daily bread." A proper surrender of will means: letting go of the desired results and not making an idol out of what we desire; overcoming the temptation to manipulate God or achieve a magical result; and recognizing that our prayer might be answered in different ways than we envision.

After surrender to God's will, we can place ourselves before God with all our concrete needs, desires, fears and burdens. This is not an inferior form of prayer and in a way involves a type of praise by recognizing that God is the true source of all blessings. Petitions involve a healthy sense of call and response, since God first speaks to us, calling us by name in the very act of sustaining us in life. By

raising Jesus to a glorified life, God has already answered the deepest longings of our heart in the most radical way. The resurrection is the ultimate positive response to the petition that we are, expressed by our desire for personal happiness, loving relationships and a more just and peaceful world. As Christians, we believe God is personally involved in human affairs. Rahner insists that there is an orthodox way of speaking about God changing for the sake of human beings, as happened in the Incarnation with the Logos taking on human flesh for the first time during the reign of Caesar Augustus. Rahner's notion that "God changes in the other" sets a frame for thinking about the dynamics of petitionary prayer, without relapsing into a crude interventionist notion of divine providence.

Our Human Family

As members of the one human family of God, we are all connected by bonds that are deeper and more significant than all the differences that divide us. Christ died and rose for all people and the Holy Spirit animates and unites the whole universe and all the inhabitants of spaceship earth. As interconnected persons, we have the power to influence one another. Sometimes the influence is perceptible: for example, when a young Pakistani girl speaks up for the importance of education for women and continues the crusade after being shot in the head, we all benefit. We can imagine an African American high school student praying for the Pakistani girl and in the process finding motivation to go to college herself. Another example: a husband prays for reconciliation with his wife after a serious dispute, which moves him to apologize and her to accept his overture, leading to a reconciled relationship, an answer to prayer. Many times, however, the causal connections engendered by petitionary prayer are not evident, but this does not mean that no connections exist. We can assume that the deep relationships forged by the Spirit among all human beings enable some transfer of positive energy between individuals and groups, however mysterious the process might be.

Prayers for others in need and for worthwhile causes operate on that assumption, trusting that the Spirit works for the good of all.

Prayer and Miracles

Rahner insists that effective petitionary prayer does not involve a miraculous breaking of the laws of nature. For him, miracles are signs of the presence of the reign of God, as John's Gospel makes clear. Miracles occur when individual believers detect the hand of God at work in a special way in particular events. The material world is open to spiritual energy. The laws of nature contain more possible developments than scientific inquiry currently recognizes. In petitionary prayer, we are not asking for God to break the laws of nature, but for openness to the often surprising power of the Spirit.

Practically, prayer of petition has important positive consequences: reminding us of our complete dependence on God and our personal limitations; alerting us to problems in the world as when we pray for people starving in Sudan or suffering from local wars; moving us to constructive action to help ourselves and others; and opening our minds and hearts to greater cooperation with God's grace in the great task of humanizing our world.

Gracious God, I adore you as the Lord of the stars. I praise you as the source of all beauty. I worship you as the Fulfillment of my longings. I thank you as the Giver of all good gifts. I put before you my prayers for a peaceful heart, loving relationships and a just world. I realize these are gifts from you, and that I must cooperate with your grace in pursuing them. All my words of adoration and petition seem so feeble. They seem to float off into empty space. Please help me persevere in lifting my mind and heart to you.

