

Chapter 3 Christology: Betting our Lives on Jesus

Rahner's Christology is a powerful resource for deepening our commitment to Jesus Christ as the absolute savior and definitive prophet. Christianity is not merely a philosophy of life or an acquired wisdom, but involves a personal relationship to Christ that is never complete and always open to further growth. As Rahner put it: "I am a Christian in order to become one." We can use Rahner's vast writings on Christ to respond to specific challenges people face today in making the Lord the center of their lives.

Historicity

Beginning with a fundamental challenge, we can ask if we know enough about Jesus of Nazareth to bet our lives on him. Do we have enough historical knowledge of Jesus to justify committing ourselves to him? Modern scripture scholarship has sharpened the problem by calling into question the historical accuracy of some Gospel material. Scholars tell us the Gospels are not objective biographies but rather documents of faith, written by believers in order to spread and deepen commitment to Christ. In many cases, we don't know if we have the exact words of Jesus. There are discrepancies between the Synoptics and John's Gospel: for example, was the Last Supper on Passover or the day before. Some miracles appear to be legendary, like sending demons into swine who jump over a cliff. There is the possibility that the Transfiguration scene is actually a post-resurrection event placed back into the public ministry of Jesus. These and many other questions generated by Gospel scholarship are now available to ordinary believers in a popular form, creating doubts for some Christians about continuing a relationship with Jesus begun in childhood.

Modern theology has debated this challenge in terms of the relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. How does the Christ revealed in the New Testament relate to the historical Jesus? Do we know enough about the life and ministry of Jesus to affirm the validity of the Gospel witness? At one extreme are agnostic scholars who claim we can know very little about Jesus of Nazareth: for example, only that he was an itinerate rabbi who once called God "Abba." At the other extreme are those who reject modern scholarship in favor of a fundamentalist conviction that the Gospels are inerrant portrayals of Jesus.

Beginning with the remarkable fact that over two billion people in the world today say they are followers of Jesus, Rahner presents various ways believers can vindicate their faith for themselves and share it with others in a credible way. As Christians, we cannot offer logically compelling proof to non-believers that Jesus is truly the Son of God. We can offer a coherent account of our belief and demonstrate by example that it helps us live lives of greater responsibility and love. For ourselves, we must learn to accept calmly the inevitable gap between our commitment to Christ and the available historical evidence. We do this effectively in other areas of life; for example, most of us live on the assumption that a particular man is our biological father without

having absolute proof of paternity. By a similar logic, Christians live out a belief in Jesus without having absolute certitude about all the facts of his earthly life. Belief in Christ is self-validating when it helps us to understand the deep questions of life and to live in a loving way.

Rejecting both extreme agnosticism and inerrant fundamentalism, Rahner recognizes that mainline Catholic scholarship maintains that we do have a substantially correct picture of the historical Jesus. His own approach, however, bases his Christology on the single bedrock historical fact that Jesus did claim to be the absolute savior, the one charged with establishing the reign of God in the world. The whole New Testament reflects this historic claim made by Jesus and all four Gospels attest to it in various ways. For Rahner, the resurrection makes this claim of Jesus credible. The Father raised Jesus to a new glorified life, thus validating his life as the definitive prophet. In justifying our own Christian faith, we can bypass the miracles of Jesus as well as his questionable sayings and concentrate on his claim to be the absolute savior. Rahner's approach frees believers today to maintain faith in Christ without answering every problem with the historical Jesus raised by scripture scholars.

Docetism

Some Christians today have trouble establishing a genuine relationship with Jesus because they do not accept his true humanity. He is true God and worthy of worship, but it is hard to think of him as brother or friend because he is not really like us. Rahner believes that many Catholics today are implicit heretics, unable to accept the full humanity of Jesus. He calls them "crypto-Docetists," recalling the early heresy of Docetism that claimed Jesus did not have a real physical body but only the appearance of one. To prompt reflection, Rahner asks if we can affirm that Jesus shuddered before the Mystery and went to his death in darkness. Hesitancy in giving an affirmative answer to such questions suggests the need for a deeper appreciation of the full humanity of Christ.

Traditional Christology, based on John's Gospel and developed in the early Councils of Nicea, Ephesus and Chalcedon, has a descending dynamism. The eternal Logos comes down from heaven and pitches his tent in our midst, as one translation of John's Gospel has it. The Word becomes flesh. The Son of God assumes the complete human nature of Jesus in the hypostatic union. Although the essence of this union was never officially defined, there is a proper exchange of attributes so that we can legitimately say the eternal Son of God died on the cross and the son of Mary rose from the dead. For Rahner, this traditional from above or descending Christology has the enduring value of safeguarding the divinity of Jesus so that he is not reduced to one of many provisional prophets or religious geniuses. On the other hand, the mere repetition of the traditional formula of Chalcedon that Jesus is one person with two natures, human and divine, can lead to a denial, at least implicitly, of his full humanity and true human personhood. Simply saying Jesus is God without nuance or explanation can lead to the heresy of monophysitism, a denial of the full humanity of Jesus.

In order to overcome the limitations of Chalcedon, Rahner developed an ascending or from below Christology that begins with the human Jesus portrayed in the synoptic Gospels. He is a man like us in all things but sin, as the Apostle Paul put it. Jesus is born of Mary, grows up without much notice in Nazareth, is baptized by John, prays to God, gathers disciples, preaches the good news, heals the sick, exorcises demons, remains faithful to his mission, runs afoul of the religious and political authorities, and is executed by crucifixion. He knew the full range of human emotions, including joy in the beauty of God's creation, frustration with his disciples, anger in the Temple, anxiety in the Garden, and abandonment on the cross. As Luke tells us, Jesus grew in wisdom, age and grace, suggesting development in his consciousness of his identity and mission.

When the disciples first encountered Jesus they were attracted by the man and his teaching, but struggled to understand him in depth. Only after the resurrection did they come to a full realization of his true identity as the Son of God. Taking seriously the synoptic perspective, Rahner sees Jesus as a fully human person who was so open to the divine presence and so responsive to the divine call that it is true to say he was God personally present in our midst. Consciously and actively, Jesus freely accepted God's self-giving love totally and completely. Throughout his life, he remained faithful to his role as the absolute savior charged with establishing God's reign in the world. When he met with failure, he had to revise his approach, but always in fidelity to the divine will. He did not seek suffering, but accepted it as the byproduct of meeting his responsibilities. Faithful to his mission, he disregarded the warning of the disciples and went to the capital city of Jerusalem where his enemies arrested him. In his agony in the garden, he prayed to be spared the anticipated suffering, but, as always, in the context of choosing his Father's will. Despite his feeling of abandonment on the cross, Jesus freely handed himself over to his Father. This portrayal of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels provides fertile ground for an ascending Christology that highlights the humanity of Jesus. For Rahner, Christology is the fulfillment of anthropology. Jesus is the best that the evolutionary process has produced. He is our model of the human person fully alive, completely actualized, and totally loving. Rahner insists that this approach denies nothing of the traditional descending Christology and implies the fundamental Christian teaching that Jesus is the son of God. As an alternative orthodox approach, ascending Christology has the great advantage of challenging implicit Docetism, while enabling all of us to identify more completely with Jesus who is truly one of us.

Scientism

Some people today find it difficult to relate to Jesus because their modern scientific worldview clashes sharply with the static world of the Bible. To them, the claim that God came down from the heavens above, lived briefly on this earth and then returned to heaven sounds mythological. Jesus seems like a Hindu avatar who appears briefly in human history only to soon disappear. Keenly aware of the challenges created by modern science, Rahner developed what he calls "a transcendental Christology," that presents the incarnation of the Son of God as an intrinsic possibility within an evolutionary view of the world. God is the source and goal of the one, unified, material-spiritual evolving world. Rahner speaks of matter as "frozen spirit" with the

intrinsic possibility of developing toward spirit, eventually leading to human beings, who are inspirited bodies or enfleshed spirits. Our evolving world is the result of God's self-communication which created the big bang some 13.7 billion years ago and has continued to guide and sustain the evolving universe ever since. As the material evolving world became more complex, it became more open to spirit and consciousness. The evolving world became conscious of itself when human beings arrived on the scene. Humans now play the role of cooperating with God in the ongoing creation of the world. Historically, some human beings have been more receptive to God's self-giving than others. The German philosopher Karl Jaspers identified "the axial age," from about 800 to 200 BC, when especially receptive humans appeared in different parts of the earth and made important contributions to the spirituality of the human family. Jaspers' list includes Confucius and Lao Tzu in China, Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha in India, Isaiah and Jeremiah among the Israelites and Socrates in the Greek world. Mindful of this kind of historical development, Rahner imagines a point where divine self-giving love and a gradually deepening human receptivity meet in a person who is totally and completely open to God's grace. This person would be the absolute savior who makes definitive and irrevocable God's saving will. The dialogue between God and the human family would continue, but an ultimately positive outcome would be assured. The Christian claim is that this imagined meeting point of divine self-giving and human receptivity did actually occur in history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Incarnation

Transcendental Christology sets the stage for a categorical Christology that can take up all the traditional questions about Christ in an evolutionary framework. From this perspective, the incarnation has no hint of mythology, but appears as the definitive fulfillment of the divine self-communication that is the Source of the whole process of evolution. As the incarnate Word, Jesus makes the invisible God present in our history. He is the concrete parable of the Father, the visibility of divine love, the sacrament of the Gracious Mystery.

The Christian doctrine of the incarnation asserts not only that Jesus is the Word made flesh, but also that divinity and humanity remain permanently and irrevocably united in him. The resurrected Christ remains the God-man, who continues to mediate on our behalf. This reminds us of the intrinsic value of the common human nature we all share with Christ and highlights the abiding support of the Lord who shared our earthly experience of joy and sorrow.

Rahner's Christology not only clears the way for Christians today who are formed by modern science to commit themselves to Christ, but also encourages a spirituality deeply rooted in the concrete physical dimension of everyday life. We grow to maturity not by being lifted out of the material world, but by immersing ourselves more fully in the human condition. We make spiritual progress not by despising the physical realm, but by embracing it as the divine milieu. The story is told of a little girl who is afraid ghosts are in her bedroom. She seeks comfort from her mother who assures her that there are no ghosts and that God is with her to protect her. The girl replies, "yes, but I need someone in here with skin." As Rahner emphasizes, the incarnate Word responds to the human need for skin, for tangible presence, for a concrete form of the invisible God.

A Masochistic Piety

Some Christians have a limited relation with Jesus because their piety centers exclusively on the horrible suffering he endured to save us from our sins. The popularity of Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* suggests the extent of this type of piety. Rahner's theology of the death and resurrection provides a broader understanding of the salvific activity of Christ that opens up the possibility of a healthier relationship to him. His holistic anthropology precludes thinking of death as the separation of soul and body, involving the demise of the body and the ongoing life of the soul. Death is, rather, an activity of the whole person, our freest act that makes definitive our fundamental option for good or for evil. In death, we pass from this life to everlasting life, taking with us all that makes us the unique person we are, the product of all our acts of freedom throughout our earthly lives. The Bible typically speaks of the afterlife in terms of the resurrection of the body. Under the influence of Greek philosophy, Christians today often express their ultimate hopes in terms of the immortality of the soul. Rahner struggled, unsuccessfully, until the end of his life to find a way to include the resurrection of the body and immortality of the soul in a single unified statement of belief that would encompass both.

Death of Jesus

Participating fully in the human condition, Jesus freely accepted death as a byproduct of fidelity to his mission. He was not a masochist seeking suffering; he was committed to the will of God and that brought him to death on a cross. Through his death, he brought to focus and fulfillment his whole life of loving service. On the cross, he made definitive and irrevocable the surrender to the will of God that characterized his very being. As Rahner poetically expressed it, Jesus "allowed death to swallow him into the innermost center of the world" so that he "might establish his divine life in it forever." The most significant element in the death of Jesus was not the terrible suffering he endured, as some forms of popular piety have it, but rather his complete obedience to the divine will, even to death on a cross as the Apostle Paul expressed it in his letter to the Phillipians (2:1-12).

Resurrection

Turning to the resurrection, Rahner warns us against various false interpretations. It is not the resuscitation of the body of Jesus as he had done for Lazarus. Jesus was not simply raised in the subjective faith of the disciples as the Protestant New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann claimed. The resurrection is rather the validity of the life and message of Jesus and the vindication of his claim to be the Absolute Savior charged with establishing the reign of God. Rahner's approach encourages us to look to the resurrection for other positive messages: God is totally trustworthy, faithful to the divine promises; Jesus is indeed the definitive prophet; the Holy Spirit transcends death; death is not the last word but paradoxically leads to new life; love is not foolish but is stronger than death; grace is more powerful than sin; the final salvation of the world is assured.

From a pastoral viewpoint, Rahner advises us to proclaim the resurrection in the context of the human desire for ultimate meaning and for a love imperishable. The resurrection enables us to believe what we desperately hope is true, that all of our good actions have a permanent validity and that none of our efforts to love others are ever wasted. As Christians, we are baptized into the paschal mystery, sharing in Christ's death and resurrection. We have died with him and we shall live forever with him, that is our hope. The fact that billions of people throughout history have professed belief in Jesus, a man who knew so much failure and rejection, is indeed remarkable in itself. Applying Rahner's imagery, the resurrection is like "the first eruption of a volcano" indicating that God's loving fire is "in the interior of the world," already embracing many and primed to bring all things into the divine light. I like to think of the resurrection as a second big bang releasing an inexhaustible spiritual energy into the world which sustains and guides not only Christian believers but all human beings. When shared with others, this energy is not diminished but multiplied. Ultimately it will triumph over all the dark forces in the world. Through his death and resurrection, Christ has created a vast reservoir of spiritual energy which assures the final victory of good over evil.

Rahner's theology of the paschal mystery puts commitment to Christ in a positive light. We can relate to him not as a revered figure from the past but as the living Christ present to us today across all barriers of time and space. We can follow Christ not merely as one who suffered terribly but as the Lord who won the victory over suffering and death. Discipleship involves dying to self, but always for the sake of a new, more vibrant life in service of the reign of God.

Traditional Soteriology

Some Christians who accept Christ as their savior are uncomfortable with popular ways of explaining his saving work. Classic soteriology as developed by Anselm of Canterbury (d 1108) held that human sins were infinite because they offended the infinite God. Only Jesus as a divine being could offer the necessary infinite satisfaction to God for the sins of mankind. At a popular level this satisfaction theory tended to make God into an angry tyrant who demanded that Jesus suffer horrible torment to make up for offenses against the divine majesty.

Rahner offers an alternative explanation of salvation designed to highlight God's universal love and Christ's role as representative of the whole human family. The story of the human race, always a mix of grace and sin, is really a single unified history, despite all its diversity and fragmentation. That history is created by a dialogue between human beings and the gracious God, who wills to speak a definitive word of love to the human family. God's offer of himself can be definitive only if accepted in an irrevocable way in the act of dying. Jesus, as the exemplar of perfected humanity, represents the whole human race. His death, freely accepted, made irrevocable his lifelong commitment to do the will of God. Resurrection, as entrance into glorified life, is not the result of a divine judicial judgment, but simply what happened organically when Jesus emptied himself totally and surrendered himself completely to God's love. Rahner summarizes his theology of salvation: "We are

saved because this man who is one of us has been saved by God.” As a result, the loving God has made his desire to save all people present in our world “historically, really, and irrevocably.” For Christians uncomfortable with the notion of Jesus as the victim of divine displeasure, Rahner offers a theology that stresses God’s abiding love and Christ’s free commitment to the cause of God and humanity. As Christians, we commit ourselves to Jesus not as a passive victim of divine wrath but as the faithful one freely accepting death on a cross as a passage to risen life.

Christian Exclusivism

Christians interested in dialogue with world religions need a way to combine their personal commitment to Christ with an openness to the truth, goodness and beauty in other religious traditions. Christian exclusivism maintains that divine revelation is confined to the Bible and Church teaching while other religions are untrustworthy products of human origin. For Catholics, Vatican II ruled out this option by making positive statements about world religions as genuine vehicles of grace and truth and by encouraging interfaith dialogue. Reacting strongly against such exclusivism, recognized theologians like John Hick and Paul Knitter, have insisted that major religious traditions like Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam are genuine vehicles of grace apart from any direct connection with Christ. Rahner holds a position between these two options based on his conviction that Christ, as the absolute savior, must be the prime guiding and sustaining presence operative throughout the whole history of salvation, which began with the first humans and will be complete only at the end of human history. This dynamic presence is manifest in the world religions and reaches its definitive highpoint in Christianity. The God who wills the salvation of all people, communicates the divine self to the whole world, creating a universal revelation and the possibility of saving faith for all who follow their conscience. Thus Rahner can speak of an anonymous Christianity present in other religious traditions and of anonymous Christians who live out Gospel values without an explicit reference to Jesus. He recognizes that these terms should not be used in actual dialogue with other believers and that they could be offensive. On the other hand, he insists that they express the traditional Christian view that all grace is Christic. As an aside, Rahner said he would gladly accept being called an anonymous Buddhist by someone complimenting him for exercising the kind of compassion enjoined by the Buddha.

In interreligious dialogue, Rahner advised using the language of spirit, a suggestion that has influenced Catholic participants. Christ is operative in other religions through his Spirit. Christians believe the Spirit, who was at work in the whole history of Israel, was a guiding force in the life and ministry of Jesus. The Spirit, that came upon Jesus at his baptism, guided him to a desert retreat and sustained him in conflict with Satan. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus became life giving Spirit for all people at all times. This same Spirit was at work in the influential religious prophets and spiritual masters such as Moses, Confucius, Siddhartha Gautama and Muhammad. Christians can enter into dialogue with the world’s great spiritual traditions, confident in their commitment to Christ and therefore open to ways his Spirit is operative in other religions.

Personalistic Language

Some Catholics are generally uncomfortable with talk of a personal relationship with Jesus. They may associate this language with evangelical Protestants who speak boldly about accepting Jesus in their heart as their personal savior at a particular moment on their spiritual journey. As a young man, Rahner preferred more sober expressions of his commitment to Christ. Only later in his life, as he himself tells it, could he speak comfortably about "throwing his arms around Jesus in an act of love." The fact that a great theologian continued to grow in his faith is itself instructive for those struggling to avoid complacency and deepen their faith. On the other hand, there are Catholics who are as uncomfortable with Rahner's language as they are with evangelical expressions. Perhaps they will eventually be more at ease with such personal expressions of faith. In the meantime, they need a way of speaking about Christ that feels authentic and does not seem inferior to more emotional faith expressions.

Christ should play a central role in the lives of all Christians, a more important role than any finite reality, including the Church, the Bible, other prophets, money, pleasure, power and status. We can imagine various ways Christians might express this fundamental centrality of Christ. He is my moral compass in a world of competing values. His life of love and service is my greatest source of inspiration. For me, Jesus is the supreme source of wisdom. He is the Good Shepherd who guides me through the dark valley. Contemplating his death on the cross was the only thing that enabled me to deal with my father's death. Jesus is the Son of God and I worship him at Mass. Christ is the cosmic Lord who rules the whole universe. These typical statements all express the centrality of Christ in the life of Christians. They all can be deepened and expanded, but they need not be considered inferior to more personal expressions of faith in Christ.

Reflecting on the Life of Jesus

Rahner's Christology not only clears away obstacles to faith in Christ, it also invites prayerful reflection on Jesus and his role in Christian life. His spiritual writings are especially valuable resources for such reflection. There we find an invitation to engage Jesus of the Gospels "in the way two lovers gaze at one another in the living of their daily life together." In this experience, we meet the real Jesus who communicates truths to us "that otherwise we should not have known." The shape of Christ's life is the norm and ideal for our own lives. Rahner invites us to engage specific events recorded in the Gospels, trusting that Jesus is the standard for a fulfilled human existence. This is not an abstract analysis of a Gospel passage, but a faith-penetrated remembrance of specific occurrences in the life of Jesus.

The Birth of Jesus

Luke's version of the birth of Jesus has captured the imagination of Christians for two millennia: a

Roman census forces Joseph and his pregnant wife Mary to travel from their hometown of Nazareth to Bethlehem; there is no room for them at the inn and so Mary gives birth to her firstborn son in a stable and places him in a feeding trough for animals; with great rejoicing, an angel of the Lord appears to nearby shepherds informing them that a Savior has been born, who is Christ the Lord; they go and find Mary and Joseph and the baby in the manger, just as the angel had said; the shepherds leave glorifying God while Mary ponders the whole event in her heart; eight days later, when the child is circumcised, Mary and Joseph give him the name Jesus.

Rahner begins his reflection on this familiar story by noting how Jesus “subjects himself to time.” The Word of God “risked entering into this dull reality to become a troublesome outcast, the member of a dispossessed family, and a citizen of an enslaved land.” His birth on the outskirts is unrecognized, hardly suitable for the arrival of God on our earth. Jesus came into the world as have all of us, subject to the human condition, on a journey that includes joys and sorrows, and culminates in death. Christian faith sees in this time-bound story, the appearance of God in human history. Through the birth of Jesus, God’s love for human beings appears in a definitive way. Only this core Christian conviction makes human existence, with all its senseless suffering, bearable. Christ, born as a member of our race, is God’s final word spoken to the world, establishing the inevitable victory of divine grace over all the darkness of life. Thus it is fitting that the angels rejoice at the birth of Jesus. Rahner concludes by inviting further reflection on the Word made flesh who is “the source both of our disturbing restlessness and of our heartfelt joy.”

The Private Life of Jesus

It is important to reflect on the private life of Jesus even though we know so little about it. The Evangelist Luke tells us that Jesus grew in wisdom, age and grace, suggesting that he experienced normal human development. He lived a very normal life in Nazareth, the difficult life of a Galilean peasant under the control of the Roman occupying power and its unjust tax system. His religious sensibilities were shaped by the regular practice of his Jewish heritage, including daily prayer, immersion in the Scriptures and periodic celebrations of the great feasts. He earned a living doing manual labor as a carpenter. Jesus did all this without attracting any special notice from his neighbors in Nazareth, suggesting that he must have adapted to his life situation spontaneously and naturally. Moreover, it seems remarkable that Jesus waited so long to begin his public ministry, especially since we can presume he was anxious to undertake his life mission. We can imagine Jesus practicing the virtue of patient waiting for a big part of his life. As Rahner points out, for most of us patient waiting is a difficult, challenging task. Our patience is tested on a daily basis by normal interruptions and delays that come our way. In a broader perspective, each phase of our life has its own importance but must eventually give way to the next phase as we constantly move into an unknown future. It is often difficult to determine if we have moved into the next phase of life too soon or waited too long, but our Christian faith calls us to accept the harsh truth that we cannot control future developments and must wait patiently for what we cannot plan.

In developing the virtue of patient waiting, Jesus, who waited so long to start his public mission, remains our model.

Jesus Remains in the Temple

At the age of 12 Jesus makes a pilgrimage with his parents to Jerusalem to worship Yahweh in fulfillment of the Law. Respect for the Jewish Law characterized the whole life of Jesus. He said he came not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. At the very end of his life Jesus was still living out his Jewish heritage as he celebrated a Passover meal with his disciples. Rahner says Jesus lived “in the flesh of religion.” His humility allowed Jesus, “the most spiritual person to submit himself to forms and laws coming from without.” Furthermore, Jesus formed a community of disciples who carried on the ritual practices of baptism and eucharist and established institutional forms. As Christians today, our spiritual lives are “regulated by laws and precepts.” For Rahner, as long as we journey in darkness “the highest type of religious experiences and the most intense love must be governed by certain external laws.” To put that religious truth in context, Rahner reminds us that Jesus also taught us to worship in spirit and truth, conscious that God always remains greater than all external signs and institutional forms. Rahner also invites us to ponder the conflictual aspect of the story. Jesus remains behind in the Temple without telling his father and mother which causes them great distress and anxiety. He chooses to follow the sovereign call of God even though this means violating the fourth commandment that mandated honor be given to parents. The tension between Jesus and his parents is real, but not caused by sin or malice on either side. In making application to us, Rahner notes the common human tendency to assume that the conflicts we experience in life are due to some sort of malice such as pride or narrow-mindedness, usually assigned to the other individuals or groups. This assumption, often wrong, can only poison conflicts and delay their resolution. Conflicts occur inevitably in various settings: family relationships, neighborhood interactions, political debates, culture wars, and international interactions. Rahner highlights some common ecclesial conflicts: between clergy and laity, between contemporary life and Canon Law, and between “the movement of the Spirit and written regulations.” We have a better chance of dealing with these tensions constructively if we assume good will on both sides. The story of the conflict between Jesus and his parents suggests that tensions in life can be transformed into positive energy if we accept them with humility and love.

Rahner goes on to suggest we think of the Temple event as a coming of age story in which Jesus learns to become more responsive to the Spirit in following his Father’s will. Rahner imagines that Jesus knows “a tormenting loneliness” in the Temple and a deep emotional pain in hurting his parents without being able to offer a satisfactory explanation. Jesus was exercising the “charismatic element” in his life, a responsiveness to the Spirit that goes outside of traditional norms, customs and laws. He responded to God’s will without consulting his parents or getting their permission. Rahner applies this to the Christian life which is always more than just following traditional forms. There is a proper existential ethics which bids us to follow the promptings of the Spirit who addresses us by name in all our particularity. We need a charismatic element in the Church so

that the faith community can gradually discover its full potential for effective witness to Christ. As Rahner strikingly puts it: “God has not resigned in favor of the Church’s administrative apparatus.” With his typical balance, he goes on to insist that charismatic gifts make their biggest impact by remaining in the Church where they can be supported and guided by its official machinery. The first pilgrimage of Jesus to the Temple is a surprisingly rich resource for reflecting on our spiritual quest: the potential value of institutional forms for guiding our journey; healthy ways of dealing with the inevitable conflicts of life; and the importance of listening for the unique call of God within an ecclesial context.

Wedding Feast of Cana

In John’s Gospel, Jesus works the first of his seven great signs at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. Rahner imagines the joyful scene: “people are drinking and laughing” and “the wine is good.” Everyone is contributing to the joyful mood, including Jesus who “fits into the context” and is in no way a “killjoy.” On the contrary, he “loves human beings” and “their earth and their joys, the flavor of wine and the carefree laughter from childlike hearts.” Rahner adds: “Later on, people who cannot stand themselves will even call him a carouser and a drunk.” At Cana, Jesus works his first miracle, “quietly and unobtrusively,” so that the joyful celebration can continue. He came into this world “to redeem the flesh,” to teach people “to believe they can be human beings for all eternity without becoming either animals or angels.” Inspired by Christ, we “can love the earth and God” because the earth is “the sacrament of God” and God is the creator and fulfillment of the earth. The miracle of Cana brought a brief moment of joyful celebration for the wedding guests but it continues to speak to us of our brother Jesus who loved this earth and redeemed it for all eternity.

Jesus Tempted in the Desert

Before Jesus begins his public ministry he goes to the desert to fast and pray. In preparation for preaching the reign of God, he seeks union with his Father in heaven. By withdrawing to the desert, he leaves behind everything needed for human survival in order to seek God, undistracted by any finite reality. Through this action, Jesus proclaims to all of us an essential truth of life which Rahner expresses this way: “one thing only is necessary, that I be with God, that I find God,” while everything else is secondary and must be sacrificed for love of God.

Continuing his meditation, Rahner notes the common element in the three temptations of Jesus: the discrepancy between what he knew about himself as the Son of God and his experience of hunger, neglect and weakness in the desert. In each temptation, Satan urges Jesus to use his power to avoid suffering, but Jesus refuses to opt out of the human condition and resigns himself to the poverty, loneliness and limitation shared by all humans. As Rahner points out, this self-emptying of Jesus enables us to identify with him and to learn from his example that acceptance of life on its own terms is an essential component of Christian spirituality.

Jesus Multiplies the Loaves

The story of the feeding of the multitude is found six times in the Gospels, the most attested of the miracles of Jesus. The story line is familiar: the disciples suggest Jesus dismiss the crowd because it is late and they have no food; Jesus tells them to feed the people themselves; they don't have enough so Jesus blesses the loaves and fishes and all have enough to eat with a large amount left over. In commenting on the story, Rahner identifies Jesus as a prophet who speaks the word of God and as a compassionate man who attends to the physical needs of people. Teaching in a deserted place, Jesus draws a large crowd, hungering to hear the word of God. While delivering words of eternal life, Jesus becomes aware that they are getting hungry, and with typical compassion, he satisfies their physical hunger. The people respond by wanting to make Jesus their king so that they can have a continuing source of material goods. At that point Jesus withdraws from the crowd, returning to the mountain.

Rahner sees the story as a commentary on the common human temptation to want more despite already having enough. He thinks this tendency is intensified in our technological age which makes so many goods readily available. We can see this as a form of consumerism which puts emphasis on achieving happiness by acquiring more and more things. Our Christian challenge is to keep our priorities straight. Following Christ's teaching is more important than acquiring additional material goods. Concluding on a positive note, Rahner points out that the things of this world have a fundamental goodness and used properly can bring us closer to Christ.

The Transfiguration

Rahner begins his meditation on the Transfiguration of Jesus by reminding us that Jesus "had a human heart susceptible to joy and sorrow, pain and consolation." There was "a place in his soul" for "changes of joy and sadness, jubilation and lamentation." Jesus wept and knew moments of happiness. He was "filled with joy, with zest, stirred by compassion, shaken unto death and deceived." He was like us in all things but sin.

During his public ministry, Jesus had to endure a great deal of misunderstanding, opposition and rejection. In Galilee, the early enthusiasm soon dissipated as people "sought miracles and bread more than faith." Both Pharisees and Sadducees opposed him. In Jerusalem the religious establishment saw him as a threat to their authority and position. His disciples had great trouble understanding the deeper meaning of his teaching, and his people rejected his claim to messiahship. There still remains for him "only one thing: suffering and the cross."

Rahner imagines an emotionally distressed Jesus getting Peter, James and John to accompany him up Mount Tabor for an evening of prayer away from the busy noise of the world. Jesus treasured his times of prayer to his heavenly Father. Now on the mountain, his intense union with God "fills up all the chambers of his soul, it embraces his body, drawing it, too, into the blessedness of God's light and God's unity." The face of Jesus was like the sun and his clothes were radiant as light.

The presence of Moses and Elijah is a sign that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and “the wellspring” of the Spirit at work in all the prophets. Jesus talks with them about his impending death which will release the Spirit for the redemption of all people. As at his baptism, the voice of his Father confirms that “this poor, praying Jesus, consecrated for suffering, and heroically prepared for the cross, is God’s very beloved Son.” Rahner concludes that in the Transfiguration, the heart of Jesus finds in God “power which turns a dying into a victory and into the redemption of the world.”

Jesus Casting out Demons

The Gospels present Jesus as an exorcist who cured people by casting out demons. In Luke 11: 14-23, he drove out a demon from a man who was mute and the man began to speak and the crowds were amazed. Some claimed that he exorcised people by the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons. Jesus argued that this did not make logical sense and that he actually drove out demons by the finger of God, indicating that the kingdom of God is present. Commenting on the exorcism, Rahner says it suggests the fundamental outlook of Jesus on all finite worldly realities: everything created by God has a fundamental goodness; but, at the same time, everything finite is threatened by demonic forces.

Giving this Gospel passage a social dimension beyond its original intent, Rahner says it contains an implication that “every Christian has a cultural mission” to challenge demonic powers and to spread the kingdom of God. Christians are called not simply to pray that the kingdom comes, but to participate actively in the humanizing of culture. The earthly culture is not the kingdom, but is “a kind of sacramental sign” that God loves the world despite its sinfulness and “enfolds it in the love of his creative will.” The eyes of faith see all that is “sound, pure, true and mature” in our world as a grace of Christ. Christians have the mission to name that grace and to extend and intensify its impact.

By the same token, Christians are also called to name the demonic elements in the culture and to enter the battle against them. Rahner warns against deceiving ourselves in this matter. It is easy to overlook evil tendencies because they are widespread and everyone accepts them. Conscious that we have not directly contributed to these cultural evils, we may find ourselves “drifting with the tide accepting as self-evident a culture that has been made diabolical by the forces of debasement.”

Furthermore, it is difficult for Christians who become aware of cultural evil to know how to respond. There is the danger of trying to impose the “old values” on today’s world, thus “merely preserving what was evil yesterday” in the fight against what is evil today. On the other hand, “we cannot fulfill our cultural mission by just saying yes and amen to every current trend.” A contemporary Christian spirituality calls for a discernment of spirits, prudent judgments and courage to work for a “Christian, purified and exorcised culture.” This is, of course, a mission that will find its completion only at the end time. “Christian leaven, when mixed with the dough of this world, is fated never to become entirely pure, entirely radiant, entirely aflame.” Still we must labor on, alert to signs of the presence of the kingdom and always reliant on the power of Christ, the exorcist

who cast out demons and assured the final victory over them. Rahner's interpretation of the exorcising activity of Jesus, has kinship with important themes of liberation theology, such as social sin, systemic evil, false consciousness, orthopraxis and the liberating power of Christ. Rahner himself said he did not fully understand liberation theology, but he supported the liberation theologians, including Gustavo Gutierrez, and enunciated themes supportive of the liberational movement. His reflection on Christ the exorcist makes that clear.

Jesus Teaching

In chapter 8 of John's Gospel, Jesus is teaching in the treasury in the temple area. He presents himself as the light of the world that overcomes the darkness, as the ambassador of the Father, and as one greater than Abraham. Rahner uses John's portrayal of the superiority of Jesus over Abraham as a basis for discussing the way Jesus understood himself. Rahner does not distinguish John's Christology from the self-perception of the historical Jesus. In other words, he is basing his meditation on the distinct understanding of Jesus found in John's Gospel. With that in mind, let us consider Rahner's four main points.

First, the Johannine Jesus, expressing his human thoughts, says, "before Abraham was, I am." Jesus knows he is the one who "dwells with the Father from all eternity." He "feels it in his bones," as Rahner phrases it, that he is God present in the world. Secondly, Jesus views himself as one who not only speaks the truth, but is the truth. He is "at one with himself;" he knows who he is and what he wants; and he understands himself perfectly. His soul is not "brittle, fragmentary, obscure, discordant and opaque," but strong, whole, clear and harmonious. Thirdly, Jesus does not seek his own glory but does the will of his father. He embodies "selflessness, defenselessness, service, devotion, self-effacement," and sheer mercy. He is the "true middle, the mediator who unites us with the Father." Finally, Jesus knows that he is "the sinless one," a conviction he holds in "the infinite humility of his human heart," without boasting or self-assertion. After recounting all of these marvelous qualities of Jesus, Rahner insists that they need not separate us from him. We too are God's children, born of divine love. We also share in God's truth by participating in the life of Christ. We are touched by divine love, as was Jesus. The Spirit empowers us, as it did Jesus, to do the will of God and spread the kingdom in the world. Christ, the model of fulfilled humanity, helps us know ourselves better as sons and daughters of God and to appreciate the way grace is at work in our lives.

The Last Supper

On the night before he died, Jesus sat together with those he called friends for a final meal. He sat with them at table, as he often had, because the common sharing of bread and wine expresses the fellowship of fidelity and love. He sat with them for one last time because he knew he had to go alone to the "outermost darkness and solitude of death," as Rahner phrases it. During the meal he shares with them bread and wine which, "through the power of his creative word," have become his body and blood. In that sharing the disciples

are united to Christ and “embraced by love which joins them to each other.” The sacred meal anticipates the eternal banquet when Christ will complete his redemptive work.

Looking for a way to express the “unfathomable mystery” of this farewell meal, Rahner employs evocative language. “In that hour Jesus accepted his death as the giving of himself to God for the redemption of the world.” Jesus “bravely walks” toward his death, “a life-bearing death,” that touches “the innermost being” of the disciples who through their table fellowship with Christ are “encircled by the grace of God.”

At the end of the meal, Jesus tells his disciples: “Do this in remembrance of me.” Faithful to this command, the Church celebrates the Eucharistic meal, which makes present for us the new and eternal covenant established by Christ. He is for us “the crucified One and the resurrected One,” “the eternal grounds” for trusting ourselves to God, “the lover” who experienced “the deepest helplessness of being human” so completely that it “became victory itself.” When we celebrate in remembrance of the Last Supper, we proclaim the abiding presence of Christ “as pledge of eternal life,” as “the beginning of the transformation of the world,” and as “the irresistible presence of the glory of God in the darkness of sin.”

By celebrating the Eucharist, “we ourselves are contained in the Yes of the Son to the unfathomable ordinance of the Father.” We join with Christ in offering praise and thanks to God. In the power of the Eucharist, as the presence of Christ’s love, “everything becomes recommitted, everything opens up, everything finds its solution.” Rahner concludes his reflection on the Last Supper with a reminder that all the meaning and power of the Eucharist becomes operative in us in proportion to our faith and our openness to God’s grace.

The Agony in the Garden

Following his usual custom, Jesus goes to the garden of Gethsemane after the Last Supper, aware that Judas the betrayer will look for him there. He takes with him the disciples of Tabor who experienced the Transfiguration, but they deal with their anxiety by falling asleep. In his moment of need, Jesus is left with companions who do not understand him and have no consolation to offer. In his commentary, Rahner notes that Jesus accepts his Father’s will and therefore, “lets his strength trickle out in weakness, his courage drown in fear and his love sink into the darkness of Godforsakenness.” He is “immersed in deadly anxiety” and “overpowered by something he apparently cannot control.” His cry for help is “drowned in silence.” The Father “leaves His Son crushed, covered with bloody sweat, powerless.” And yet out of that “mute nothingness, into which the agony of his cry disappears, comes something wonderful” as Jesus receives the energy to rise up and accept his cross.

Rahner interprets the whole Agony in the Garden in terms of strength encountering weakness. Jesus, the Son of God, “falls on his face” and loses all power. He is “confronted with the absolute futility of his work. He had given himself totally to establishing the reign of God and now he has to face the failure of his mission. Jesus asks that he be spared the chalice of failure and suffering which is “sheer horror” and “absolute impotence.” Despite this agony, Jesus accepts the chalice, commits once again to doing God’s will and in the

process transforms the cup of suffering into the new and eternal covenant. Applying the example of Jesus to our own "Gethsemane-existence," Rahner repeats the good news: "there is no darkness in which God does not live," and "no abyss greater than the abyss of divine love and mercy." Jesus, who suffered such emotional torment in the garden, remains for us a sign of hope, especially when we meet defeat and failure on the spiritual journey. The darkest moments cannot finally prevail over the light of divine love.

Betrayal

Judas, the betrayer, came to the garden with Temple police to arrest Jesus. The disciples flee, including Peter, who said he was ready to die with his master. Jesus is "thrust into the terrible loneliness of the man who is abandoned, betrayed, rejected."

Rahner invites meditation on the "Godlessness of sin" manifested in the betrayal by Judas. Sin is the rejection of divine love and a "fundamental perversion of loyalty." It is "a degradation of the creatures' relationship to God" and "a darkening of one's own mind." Nevertheless, wherever sin exists grace more abundantly as the Apostle Paul teaches us. Rahner specifies this Christian confidence: "God's faithfulness remains even in betrayal, and, in fact, achieves its end through it." For Christian spirituality, Judas remains a striking reminder of the abiding threat of sin, while Jesus, the apparent victim, represents the transforming power of divine grace.

Jesus Before the Sanhedrin

Roughly treated, Jesus is dragged before the Sanhedrin, accused of blasphemy worthy of death. He is condemned in the name of good order, national pride, the good of the country and belief in Yahweh. The religious authorities do not accept the sworn testimony of Jesus that he is the long-awaited Messiah. Rahner points out that the "Sanhedrin mentality" remains alive today, even in the Church, when people "presuppose a certain power over God," or criticize God "in the name of one's own limited knowledge," or confine God's immense love to "our limited measuring rods." Paradoxically, through his condemnation by the Sanhedrin, our Lord calls us to open our hearts to the liberating love of God which challenges all religious small-mindedness.

Jesus Before Pilate

Before Pilate, representing the vast power of the Roman Empire, Jesus stands in noble silence. To the pagans, the preaching of Jesus is foolishness. Pilate is so worried about the disputes surrounding Jesus that he is prepared to let an innocent man be executed for the sake of peace and order. The governor is guided by a worldly wisdom that may seem clever, but is really a superficial reading of the situation. Rahner asks us to see if Pilate's sense of worldly wisdom has invaded our own consciousness and influenced our behavior. A genuine Christian spirituality does not settle for a cool, rational, worldly wisdom, but strives for the kind of noble simplicity and dedication to truth manifested by Jesus before the Roman governor.

Jesus Tortured

Pilate released Barabbas but Jesus he scourged and delivered to them to be crucified. The Gospels do not go into detail but this is a direct attack on the Lord's body. Rahner sees it as "a sadistic attack made by a callous soldier," which amounted to a violation of the personhood of Jesus inflicted by "human malice and depravity." After the scourging Pilate says: "Behold the man." Rahner invites us to behold this disfigured man and perceive the face of God. Jesus is carrying in his body the sinfulness of the world and the personal wickedness of human beings who are always ready to justify their vile deeds. But he bears these marks of sin in order to transform them into signs of God's compassionate care. By following Jesus, we can achieve "a true humanism" that has no illusions about human existence but can face all the dark forces with confidence in the power of divine grace. This Son of Man mocked and tortured is truly "the Glorified One," the "One who carried his passion into glory."

The Death of Jesus on the Cross

The cruel death of Jesus on the cross is both the high point of his mission and the supreme catastrophe of his life. Jesus is betrayed and abandoned by his friends and rejected by the religious leaders of his people. He feels abandoned by his Father and "his mission seems to disappear into deadly silence." At the same time, his death is "the deepest and most personal act of his life." It is the hour of his glorification, the reason he came into the world. All of his life Jesus was obedient to the will of his Father. This submissive obedience to God has, as Rahner puts it, a "certain mystical sense" about it that defies our usual categories. By his obedience, Jesus absorbs "that which is totally foreign to him, the sinfulness of the world," and transforms it into the power of God's love. The obedience of Jesus is "the silent Yes" to his excruciating death intensified by his sense of abandonment.

According to Rahner, the death of Jesus was not only an act of acceptance of suffering but also a loving Yes to "the incomprehensibility of God." It is only through love that human beings can express their essence and escape the prison of selfishness. Throughout his life, Jesus endured the ultimately mysterious character of God and this act of loving endurance reached its peak on the cross, expressed in his cry "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me." It was this same self-emptying love that prompted him to promise a thief crucified with him that he would join him in paradise. A lifetime of following God's will prepared Jesus to declare with ultimate trust: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." The Incarnate Word who knew "the dignity of a mission, the abyss of ruin, the consummation of obedience and the deep love of the heart" surrendered himself into his Father's hands.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to take up the cross. This is a most difficult challenge and we all know the temptation to escape the cross, perhaps in subtle and disguised ways. Moreover, Rahner reminds us that human existence "offers an abundance of suffering and futility which cannot be mastered by sober courage

alone.” Given a sense of our own limitations, we turn to the crucified Lord, to provide the strength we need to manage this suffering without falling into despair, cynicism and a sterile resignation. Our Christian calling is “to continue the sacrifice of the Lord in our own lives,” trusting that this leads to eternal life.

The Risen Christ

The Gospels give witness to the resurrection of Jesus through reports of the empty tomb and, more importantly, various appearances to his disciples, including Mary of Magdala, Thomas the Twin, Peter and the other apostles, and Cleopas and his companion. These stories do not comprise a consistent narrative and cannot be harmonized. We cannot determine if Jesus first appeared in Jerusalem or Galilee, nor whether he appeared first to Mary of Magdala or Peter. In these stories, Jesus is typically not immediately recognized; for example Mary at first takes him for the gardener. Rahner believes that these appearances are “secondary clarifications of an appearance of the risen Jesus which properly lies behind these visions.” The early witnesses were all convinced that Jesus lives on and that his cause “was not invalidated by his death.” We do not need “to visualize to ourselves the peculiar nature of his physical risen existence,” especially since we cannot really imagine the glorified life of Christ which is outside our time-space framework. Our faith is not finally based on a report of the empty tomb or objective eye witness accounts of the first disciples. Rather we hear the appearance accounts as statements of faith in the context of our own experiences, simple and ordinary as they might be, of the power of the risen Lord. We can, for example, relate the story of Thomas to situations when the risen Christ has strengthened us to say My Lord and my God in the midst of nagging doubts and can compare the Emmaus story to the times we have recognized Christ in the Eucharistic liturgy. All the New Testament appearance stories interact with our specific experience of the risen Christ to form, as Rahner phrases it, “one testimony” that Jesus lives.

In leading our meditation on the risen Christ, Rahner wants us to keep in mind that the death and resurrection and exaltation of Jesus form one unified event, the paschal mystery. Christian life is always sustained and guided by that paschal mystery. We follow the crucified and risen one. We cannot celebrate Easter without Good Friday, which remains an ignominious failure without the resurrection. Distortions in spirituality are inevitable when the paschal dialectic collapses: for example, without the cross piety seeks cheap grace and utopian dreams; and without Easter, life becomes pointless and suffering has no redeeming value.

Jesus is raised to life as a whole person. As Rahner insists, divine love seized “the totality of his concrete human existence – including his body.” His whole destiny and everything he experienced on earth has “entered into the glory of the Father.” When raised by his Father, Jesus left nothing behind; not his cross, not his abandonment, not his death. He remains for us the crucified and risen Lord.

For Rahner, the resurrection is the firm foundation for hope in a world that knows so much suffering. Contemplating the risen Christ, eyes of faith recognize that the seeds of the final victory of good over evil have been planted. In his death, Jesus plunged into the heart of the world, a mixture of grace and sin at the deepest

level; through his resurrection he has not abandoned the world but redeemed it at its very roots. Now a positive outcome of human history is assured. Death has lost its ultimate power over human beings. Love will be tested but never totally defeated. Christians have no recipe for ridding the world of sin. Sin remains an abiding factor in human existence; death and futility continue to stalk the earth. Christian spirituality, however, does foster a calm realization or “courage for victory” that we can face the evil in the world because Christ has conquered all the demonic forces and assured the triumph of God’s blessings.

The Ascension of Jesus

The Acts of the Apostles has the most explicit and vivid report of the Ascension of Jesus. After his death and resurrection, Christ appeared to his disciples over a forty day period instructing them about the reign of God. He tells them not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for the promised Spirit. Empowered by this Spirit, the disciples will give witness to Christ to the ends of the earth. With that, he was lifted up and a cloud took him from their sight. Rahner recognizes that modern science does not allow us to take this description of Jesus going up in the heavens literally, but he insists that this scientific advance is a proper Christian development that prompts us to reinterpret the Ascension and its meaning for today. In the context of the old cosmology, Christians could think of heaven as a place existing before the time of Christ, who opened its gates through his death and resurrection. In the context of modern cosmology, Rahner suggests that we think of the Ascension as establishing heaven and recognize Christ as “the founder of heaven.” This enables us to speak of heaven in terms of human fulfillment rather than as a place where disembodied souls go after death.

For Rahner, the feast of the Ascension is a celebration of Christ’s presence, not his absence. True, he has left this earth, which was his physical home for over three decades. During that time he was confined to a tiny space and a brief time. Through his death and exaltation he is now present to all people in all places and times. As promised, Christ is now present through his Spirit who dwells within us. We carry this Spirit with us wherever we go as an inexhaustible source of energy and guidance. From this perspective, we can better appreciate the statement of Jesus that we are better off if he departs. Rahner adds that the Ascension, “the universal event of salvation history,” is especially helpful when “the lights of the world grow dark” and we experience “an emptiness of the heart.” Then the Ascension, a feast of abiding presence, strikes us as especially good news.