

RAHNER'S CHRISTIAN PESSIMISM: A RESPONSE TO THE SORROW OF AIDS

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[Editor's Note: The author suggests that the universal sorrow of AIDS stands as a metaphor for other forms of suffering and raises distinctive theological questions on the meaning of hope, God's involvement in evil, and how God's empathy can be experienced in the mystery of disease. As an expression of radical realism and hope, Rahner's theology helps us find in the sorrow of AIDS an opening into the mystery of God.]

IN ONE OF his novels, Nikos Kazantzakis describes St. Francis of Assisi asking in prayer what more God might require of him. Francis has already restored San Damiano and given up everything else for God. Yet he is riddled with fear of contact with lepers. He confides to Brother Leo: "Even when I'm far away from them, just hearing the bells they wear to warn passers-by to keep their distance is enough to make me faint"¹ God's response to Francis's prayer is precisely what he does not want: Francis is to face his fears and embrace the next leper he sees on the road. Soon he hears the dreaded clank of the leper's bell. Yet Francis moves through his fears, embraces the leper, and even kisses his wounds. Jerome Miller, in his phenomenology of suffering, describes the importance of this scene:

Only when he embraced that leper, only when he kissed the very ulcers and stumps he had always found abhorrent, did he experience for the first time that joy which does not come from this world and which he would later identify with the joy of crucifixion itself. . . . If Francis felt drawn to the leper instead of compelled to recoil from him, it was because he saw embedded in the wounds of this outcast the priceless gem of his own nothingness. The joy which has often been recognized as characteristic of the saints . . . springs right from that

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¹ Nikos Kazantzakis, *Saint Francis*, trans. P. A. Bien (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962) 94. Kazantzakis took his inspiration from the *Legenda* of Bonaventure. For a discussion of this episode as foundational to Francis's vocation and pivotal to his embrace of the cross, see Ephrem Longré, *François d'Assise et son expérience spirituelle* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1966) 16-18.

wound as from its original source. . . . What we avoid when we turn away from [the outcasts] is the original wound we have buried as deeply as we can inside ourselves. The joy of the saints comes from reopening it.²

In pale imitation of Francis, this article focuses on the wound of AIDS. I wish to acknowledge the sorrow of that disease but also to grasp the hope that comes only from facing its reality and its mystery. I want to suggest that Karl Rahner's theology of "Christian pessimism"³ offers a theological hermeneutic within which the experience of AIDS can be interpreted and pastorally embraced. While other theological avenues are possible, Rahner's approach is particularly apt. The starting point for his theology is an unflinching acceptance of the full reality of the human condition, a commitment to truth—to begin with what is the case. Furthermore, Rahner's is a solidly Christocentric theology, pushing through the central motifs of the revelation of God in Jesus and finding their focus in the interstices of human existence. A theology such as this, rooted in the real, centered on Christ, and clarified in human existence itself, can point us beyond the present situation toward a horizon of hope; it can ground a compassionate response to the sorrow of AIDS and, by analogy, to other experiences of human sorrow. If theology is an account of our hope, this article intends to be an exercise in theology in that most foundational sense.

AIDS is the point of departure for these reflections. But tens of thousands of people daily witness and suffer the deaths of loved ones and friends to a host of other devastating diseases and evil causes, such as poverty, social injustice, war, and genocide. Why, then, begin with AIDS?

First, AIDS is a major source of suffering and death on a universal scale, respecting no human distinctions. Researchers report that since 1981, some 28 million persons have become infected, and six million have died. There have been more than 540,000 AIDS diagnoses and over 300,000 deaths in the U.S. alone. Contrary to popular perceptions, this has never been only a gay disease, especially outside the West. Even in the U.S., the numbers are now rising most dramatically outside the gay community. In the 25–44 age group, AIDS is now the number-one killer of men and women combined. By the year 2000 there could be as many as 150,000 AIDS orphans in the U.S. alone. Especially hard hit are the very poor, primarily in the African-American and Latino communities, where rates of infection are dramatically disproportionate to the size of these communities in relation to the general population. More than 80% of HIV-infected infants come from these communities. Despite the promise of new drug therapies in

² Jerome A. Miller, *The Way of Suffering: A Geography of Crisis* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1988) 175.

³ Karl Rahner, "Christian Pessimism," in *Theological Investigations* 22, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 155–62.

industrially developed countries, by the year 2000 there will be a minimum of 38 million, and perhaps as many as 60 to 70 million infected adults. Those most vulnerable are the very poor, especially women and children in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where the disease is spreading in plague-like algorithms.⁴ Given the sheer numbers, AIDS commands our theological attention.

Second, AIDS has a kind of metaphorical quality. It is unique as a new disease, but as a form of human suffering it can shed new light on our approach to other human calamities. This point, first made brilliantly by Susan Sontag,⁵ was recently further developed in an MIT-sponsored study:

All illnesses are metaphors. They absorb and radiate the personalities and social conditions of those who experience symptoms and treatments. Only a few illnesses, however, carry such cultural salience that they become icons of the times. Like tuberculosis in *fin de siècle* Europe, like cancer in the first half of the American century, and like leprosy from Leviticus to the present, AIDS speaks of the menace and losses of the times. It marks the sick person, encasing the afflicted in an exoskeleton of peculiarly powerful meanings: the terror of a lingering and untimely death, the panic of contagion, the guilt of "self-earned illness."⁶

Given its metaphorical quality, many of the questions AIDS raises have broad reach beyond AIDS itself; they may extend to other forms of human sorrow that afflict individual persons and implicate entire communities and societies. What we say about AIDS within the context of theology may have implications beyond AIDS, and possibly even for theology.

Third, AIDS, among all diseases, has been singled out by the Catholic Church, from the Vatican AIDS Conference to the efforts of local churches, in a concerted call to compassion.⁷ Among the reasons for

⁴ Statistics are taken from Jon Fuller, S.J., M.D., "AIDS Prevention: A Challenge to the Catholic Moral Tradition," *America* 175 (December 28, 1996) 13–20; and *AIDS in the World*, ed. Jonathan M. Mann et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1992) 3–4. For information about the epidemic in Africa, see Barbara O. de Zaluondo et al., "AIDS in Africa: Diversity in the Global Pandemic," in *Living with AIDS*, ed. Stephen R. Graubard (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1990) 423–63.

⁵ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

⁶ Paul Farmer and Arthur Leinman, "AIDS as Human Suffering," in *Living with AIDS* 355. See also Richard L. Smith, *AIDS, Gays, and the American Catholic Church* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1994) esp. chap. 1. For more comparisons of AIDS with other new forms of disease, see Mirko D. Grmek, *History of AIDS: Emergence and Origin of a Modern Pandemic*, trans. Russell C. Maulitz and Jacalyn Duffin (Princeton: Princeton University, 1990) 101–9. For comparisons with syphilis, cholera, and polio, and reactions to epidemics in general, see Charles E. Rosenberg, "What Is an Epidemic? AIDS in Historical Perspective," in *Living with AIDS* 1–17.

⁷ See, e.g., Pope John Paul II, "Pope Addresses Vatican AIDS Conference," *Origins* 19 (November 30, 1989) 434–36; United States Catholic Conference Administrative Board, "The Many Faces of AIDS: A Gospel Response," *Origins* 17 (December 24, 1987) 481–89;

this response is surely the fact that there come together in AIDS a number of inescapable factors: a congruence of changing patterns of sexuality (both homosexual and heterosexual), of religiously and socially proscribed behaviors or practices such as homosexual intercourse and drug usage, and of suffering and terminal disease on a massive scale, especially among the legions of hidden poor. When AIDS arrived with slamming force upon the world around 1981, it was immediately clear that this disease would pose a challenge to some established paradigms in Catholic theology, at least in moral theology, by virtue of its very newness and complexity.⁸ More than other diseases, AIDS links sexuality, appetite, disease, guilt, shame, suffering, and death in ways that only grow more complex when we factor them into the complex realities of poverty, race, gender, class, culture, and religion—all projected onto a universal map. Like death itself, AIDS asks not only for the Church's pastoral response, but also for our theological attention, in order to plumb this reality for intelligibility within the context of faith.

Remarkably, especially in light of the Catholic Church's own attention to AIDS, systematic theologians have hardly begun to address the many questions and issues it raises. Though theologians have grappled courageously with the Holocaust, social and economic injustice especially in poor countries, and the changing patterns of gender relations and identity in society and Church, the complex reality of AIDS has not yet produced a comparable theological yield. While there have been significant works in spirituality, pastoral theology, and on specific issues in moral theology,⁹ there has been little response from Catholic systematic theology.¹⁰ Yet should we not reexamine the theological tradition that now offers us a reflective context for our discussion of AIDS? How can this tradition serve us in confronting and beginning to comprehend the experience of AIDS? Does the tradition offer the foun-

National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Called to Compassion and Responsibility: A Response to the HIV/AIDS Crisis," *Origins* 19 (November 30, 1989) 421–36; Archbishop John Quinn, "The AIDS Crisis: A Pastoral Response," *America* 154 (June 21–28, 1986) 504–6. See also "A Pastoral Letter on AIDS: California Bishops," *Origins* 16 (April 23, 1987) 785–90.

⁸ For some discussion of the Catholic Church's reaction to AIDS in relation to its reaction to the emergence of gay culture, see Smith, *AIDS, Gays, and the Catholic Church* esp. chap. 2. See also John Coleman, "The Homosexual Revolution and Hermeneutics," in *The Sexual Revolution*, ed. Gregory Baum and John Coleman, Concilium 173 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1984) 55–64; John H. Gagnon, "Disease and Desire," in *Living with AIDS* 181–211.

⁹ The literature in spirituality and pastoral theology is too extensive to cite here. In moral theology, see, e.g., James F. Keenan, "Prophylactics, Toleration, and Cooperation: Contemporary Problems and Traditional Principles," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 29 (1989) 205–20.

¹⁰ There are, of course, exceptions. See, e.g., Enda McDonagh, "Theology in a Time of AIDS," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 60 (1994) 81–99, and Normand Bonneau, "Reflections on the Mystery of God and the AIDS Crisis," in *AIDS and Faith*, ed. Normand Bonneau et al. (Montreal: Novalis, 1993) 9–38; both of these contain good bibliographies.

dations for an effective pastoral response, or is that pastoral response taking place alongside a theological tradition that cannot handle the complexity of this disease?

I pose these questions because the Catholic Church's own call for a compassionate pastoral response to AIDS is honest only if we approach AIDS as a reality that speaks to our faith and our understanding of it. Hence, we are compelled to approach AIDS within the theological terrain of faith, rather than relegate it to the realm of spirituality or pastoral practice alone, as if it had nothing substantial to contribute to the understanding of faith in Jesus Christ. A professed compassion that does not issue from and lead to a deeper penetration of the empathy of Jesus constitutes a deficient form of Christian compassion. Jesus' empathy, which led him to enter the worlds of those outcasts for whom he showed compassion, even to the point of joining them, was a path to God.

Indeed, it seems obvious even to the casual observer that AIDS raises the mystery of God. AIDS presses properly theological questions upon which the integrity of pastoral strategy finally stands. As with all calamitous evils, AIDS puts God into question. More precisely, it asks: What does it mean to hope in God in the midst of seeming hopelessness, without denying the utter darkness of the sorrow of AIDS? Further, where is God to be found in the AIDS darkness? Is God somehow the cause of so much evil? Does so much evil represent, in some sense, God's judgment? Correlatively: How does God relate to those who actually suffer from this disease? Does the God who shows divine empathy in Jesus actually suffer? And finally: How can our answers to these theological questions ground a compassionate pastoral response that issues from faith and does not simply stand alongside it?

I will attempt a theological approach to these questions in five parts: First, there is some need to explain the unusual expression, "Christian pessimism," which sets the context for what follows. Second, in light of Karl Rahner's theology of the cross, I inquire into the meaning of hope in God within a situation of darkness, especially the darkness of death. Third, I explore the place of God in relation to so much darkness, the issue of evil and providence. Fourth, I inquire into God's relation to the sufferer and I ask how the notion of divine empathy in the midst of darkness can theologically ground the compassion that the Church counsels. Finally, I suggest further theological challenges posed by AIDS.

CHRISTIAN PESSIMISM

It would be a mistake to presume that Rahner's Christian pessimism is a theological expression of morbidity. Rahner's own delight in the joys of life is well known and is lyrically expressed in many of his writings. Rahner was first of all a Christian, one who believed that where sin abounds, there grace abounds yet more (Romans 5:21). In his own words, "Christianity is a message of joy, courage, and unshakable

confidence."¹¹ Nevertheless, the term "Christian pessimism" springs from Rahner's own pen. What does it mean?

In a short address entitled "Christian Pessimism," delivered in Frankfurt on November 10, 1983, Rahner described our human predicament as one of "radical perplexity."¹² Taking his cue from 2 Corinthians 4:8–10 ("we are perplexed, but not driven to despair"), Rahner argued that perplexity is a permanent existential, a given fact, of human life. It does not force us to despair, but as a permanent existential it will not be overcome within the span of human life. It will only be overcome within the ambit of God's provident mercy, the fulfillment of which takes place in God's future, in the eschaton.

In some of his subsequent writings, Rahner elaborated upon this "radical perplexity." He meant, first, that life is ultimately uncontrollable by human means, by Promethean thrusts toward knowledge and manipulation of reality undertaken without God as ultimate horizon. Human life is a dauntingly incomprehensible reality; no one theory about its meaning, no politics or technology, no genetics or medical technique, no psychology or therapy, not even one philosophy or theology, can encompass the entire mystery of human existence. What Heidegger termed "calculative thinking"¹³ has proved to be a path toward dead ends because it cannot begin to encompass this perplexity. We have finally begun to doubt the limits of science itself. In the face of this perplexity, "faith lies in what we hope for but do not yet see" (Hebrews 11:1).

Furthermore, into the heart of this finite reality, evil continues to insinuate itself, mutating into ever new sinister and devastating forms, often bringing about intense suffering, even the destruction of very good lives. This aspect of perplexity is the dark reality of human existence and its entanglements in sin, suffering, and death that come to light in tragedy. The Christian, therefore, is a realist, indeed, a kind of "pessimistic" realist, because faith "obliges [us] to see this existence as dark and bitter and hard, and as an unfathomable and radical risk."¹⁴ There are no short-range answers to this dark reality on the human side of the scale. Only by running the risk of this existence and embracing the sorrows that it brings in its wake, as God did in Jesus, can one begin to speak of hope. The Cross is such an important symbol in Christian self-understanding, because on the Cross sorrow was fully embraced and hope mysteriously born.

Christian pessimism then describes the experience of being a Chris-

¹¹ "Christian Pessimism" 160.

¹² *Ibid.* 156.

¹³ See Heidegger's "Memorial Address," in *Discourse on Thinking [Gelassenheit]*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) 46–47. For a discussion of the triumph of *techné* over *poiesis*, see George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978). See also Paul Crowley, "Technology, Truth and Language: The Crisis of Theological Discourse," *Heythrop Journal* 32 (1991) 323–39.

¹⁴ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978) 403.

tian within the perplexing and often dark reality of existence.¹⁵ But this is not an everyday sort of pessimism, an attitude bordering on cynicism. This pessimism is Christian, because it is precisely in the experience of perplexity that the Christian finds hope—not as the possibility of an escape from sorrow but as the locus of the encounter with God. It is within reality as it is that the Christian believes God to have been most fully revealed to us. Thus in the expression “Christian pessimism” Rahner held two terms together in a dialectical unity: the “pessimism” of unflinching realism about the human condition, and the “Christian” hope for human beings that can only begin with what is real. But reality for the Christian includes what cannot be seen, what is promised as our hope.

After this preliminary sketch, I now focus briefly on three dimensions of Christian pessimism that pertain to the present project: its radical realism about the darkness of life, its roots in the doctrine of sin, and its acceptance of the moral ambiguity of the human condition.

Realism

Rahner wrote that a Christian is “a person who accepts without reservations the whole of concrete human life with all of its adventures, its absurdities, and its incomprehensibilities.”¹⁶ The Christian is called upon to accept reality as it is rather than to evade it through a false religious piety. One must face squarely and with appropriate humiliation the stark reality of sin—one’s own, and the world’s—and ultimately the reality of suffering and death that are, at least indirectly, the tragic consequences of sin. Human freedom is actualized in the context of a profound acceptance of self and of reality, “without leaving anything out, and without closing oneself to the totality of what in the ultimate depths of reality is inescapably imposed upon humankind as a task.”¹⁷

In adopting this realism, we discover that there is much that people

¹⁵ This idea is developed in some of Rahner’s later essays. In one of his darkest writings, he muses: “There still echoes in our ears the triumphant cry of a humanity that once thought itself on the brink of self-created fulfillment. Now, however, we feel that we do not really know any more, that all our ideals are rapidly wearing thin, that everything is dissonance, that all our ideals and programs are pitifully impotent in the face of an ever-increasing hopelessness” (Rahner, “Utopia and Reality,” *Theology Digest* 32 [1985] 139–44, at 143). In this essay, Rahner spoke with increasing frequency of the inevitable disappointment and bitterness of life, of disappointment as a basic mood of our existence: “As a result, whether as Christians or as human beings, we have no reason to be particularly optimistic. To be honest, I believe we are living in a wintry time for society and the church. . . . As Christians we should not try to spare ourselves failure, disappointment, and ruin with the ideological sweeteners being peddled in society and the church” (ibid.). And he referred more frequently to the failure of the body in illness as a prelude to death; see his “Christian Dying,” in *Theological Investigations* 18, trans. Edmund Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 230–34.

¹⁶ *Foundations* 402; the translation has been slightly emended for inclusive language.

¹⁷ Ibid.

cannot change; recognizing this fact seriously shapes their future. Rahner used the dramatic metaphor of "imprisonment" to describe much of human existence. By this he did not imply the final inescapability of certain conditions of life, entrapment, nor a definitive personal surrender to the hopelessness of our predicament, despair, but rather the sheer force of our inherited objective reality through which we exercise our freedom and actualize ourselves as persons: our gender, constitution, orientations, cultures, intelligence, imagination, etc. None of these factors is finally determinative of our freedom, but, by the same token, none is completely under our final control. Hope is found from within these imprisonments, since as Rahner wrote, a "Christian believes that there is a path to freedom which lies in going through this imprisonment."¹⁸ This freedom is gained not simply by endurance or sheer will power in overcoming obstacles. He insisted, "We do not seize it by force, but rather it is given to us by God insofar as he gives himself to us through all of the imprisonments of our existence."¹⁹ This gift of freedom is actualized by "going through" reality as it is, within the confines of our various imprisonments.

Darkness describes two realities: the confusion of suffering our imprisonments, and the miasma of suffering on a wider, universal scale. I would argue that AIDS, for example, is a form of suffering that sends waves of physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering throughout whole continents. But there is also the darkness of anguish, of confronting the truth about ourselves, of coming up against the imprisonments of our lives, and facing full throttle the complex of our moral, physical, and spiritual selves in relation to others and to God. The experience of truth can be, ironically, the darkness of confusion because what one sees is how perplexing life is, an admixture of great goodness of desire and incalculable failure and loss, mixed with a sense of unforgiving fate. The person who receives an AIDS diagnosis knows full well the meaning of darkness in this sense. This darkness is part of the human condition in general; as a part of human reality, it is ignored at our own peril.

Sin

To be imprisoned is to be subject to the sin of the world. In Rahnerian doctrine, original sin denotes the historical entanglement in guilt which helps shape the actualization of freedom by human persons, individually and socially.²⁰ This entanglement in guilt is, as it were, passed on from one generation to the next as a permanent existential of the human condition within history. It is ratified in our own personal histories of sin in counterpoint to grace.

This notion of the sin of the world leans on what Rahner meant by freedom. Christians understand themselves to be free persons in the

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 403.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 110.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

sense that each human person is constituted as transcendental openness to everything without exception: truth, love, beauty, goodness, the absolute.²¹ This freedom is exercised within the concrete, categorical dimension of existence when we realize our identity as unique spiritual persons in relation to others. Successive acts of freedom help determine the final state of our lives, for which each is finally responsible, a responsibility nevertheless held in the ambit of God's mercy. Yet we cannot actualize this freedom in an absolutely unhindered way, as though we were monads in self-possession of utterly pure, abstracted natures. The actualization of our freedom takes place within a set of historical and even determining factors and in mutual relationship with other persons and their limitations. We co-determine one another, not only in freedom, but also in our sinfulness. The actualization of human freedom is then co-determined by what Rahner termed the "guilt" of the world, the ontic burden of sin, a mutually shared history of guilt.²²

Family life can offer a helpful illustration of this co-determination by guilt. A family tree can be as much a picture of entanglement in guilt as it is a diagram of life. As we develop a unique identity within a family, we gradually differentiate ourselves from the others and discover our own personality and vocation. But this discovery is not the result of an autonomous act of self-development. We are shaped by our home environment, including its moral deficits, as well as by our peers, churches, schools, media, and numerous other factors. We do not emerge as unique persons in abstraction from the concrete conditions and the ideals and histories of the other people with whom we must interact, nor in abstraction from their guilt. Our lives bear the stamp of the history of other persons.²³ Rahner elaborated: "All of human experience points in the direction that there are in fact objectifications of personal guilt in the world which, as the material for the free decisions of other persons, threaten these decisions, have a seductive effect upon them, and make free decisions painful."²⁴ Thus, "even a person's most ideal, most moral act of freedom enters tragically into the concrete in an appearance which, because co-determined by guilt, is also the appearance of its opposite."²⁵ Any consideration of the human predicament has to take into account the reality of sin and the incongruous ratifications of it in our freedom.

Ambiguity

It would be a mistake to interpret this co-determination in guilt as a final determinism. Free decisions are painful but, under most normal circumstances, not absolutely impossible. Even in the conditioned and

²¹ *Ibid.* 402.

²³ *Ibid.* 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.* 107.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 109.

perplexing state within which that exercise takes place there is a path to freedom. The actualization of freedom can result in either an objectification of grace or an objectification of guilt and more usually some admixture of both. Just as grace meets and transfigures the darkness of life, making room for patterns of goodness, so guilt in many subtle ways co-determines under grace the good acts of a good person. "[T]he good act itself always remains ambiguous because of the co-determination of this situation by guilt. It always remains burdened with consequences which could not really be intended because they lead to tragic impasses, and which disguise the good that was intended by one's own freedom."²⁶ What one intends as a gesture of love could turn out to be an act of selfish domination, an act "lured on" by cupidity, to borrow a phrase from Bernard of Clairvaux.²⁷ Conversely, even the experience of grace is not without ambiguity within the contours of what Paul terms "the flesh".

Christian pessimism, therefore, offers a theological context for embracing the sorrow of AIDS: it is utterly realistic about the darkness of life's imprisonments, it presumes our entanglement in the sin of the world and our mystifying ratifications of it, and it acknowledges the moral and existential ambiguity of the human condition, the admixture of guilt and grace, out of which AIDS has emerged. But Christian pessimism also implies a theology of hope, a hope one discovers, as Francis did, by entering into the reality of the leper. If what we seek is an account of our hope, then we need to go down that road and inquire more deeply into the sorrow of suffering and death. How, standing soberly within the catastrophes of life, such as AIDS, can a Christian face death and still lay claim to hope? And what does this mean?

HOPE IN THE FACE OF DARKNESS

Pessimism, as Rahner defined it, is part of the essence of Christian existence but not the whole of it. The darkness of life is the theater of freedom; reality is the place where hope dawns. As a transcendental reality, hope is a name for the orientation of human beings toward the God who is not only the source and sustainer of all that is but who

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ See Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, trans. Jean Leclercq and Henri Rochais, with analytical commentary by Emero Stiegman (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1995) 36. For Bernard, *cupiditas* does not bear only negative connotations. It is one of Bernard's names for love and emphasizes that the natural origin of love for God is a proper self-love coordinate with our creatureliness. Stiegman comments: "Readers accustomed to Saint Augustine's more ordinary use of *cupiditas* as the self-love (*amor sui*) or pride which is the root of all sin must take special note of this. Bernard is more optimistic than Augustine in the manner in which he emphasizes and dwells upon that side of concupiscence which opens onto grace" (ibid. 149). Bernard's phenomenology of love, planted as it is in a well-developed theological anthropology, could be enlisted in a fresh appraisal of the relationship between sin, grace, and concupiscence, especially in light of contemporary understandings of human sexuality.

anoints this existence with the divine self-gift. God promises to be "my good" or "our good." The horizon of hope is thus the mysterious God who is the beginning and end of human existence and encompasses all human existence in divine providence.

Hope, however, is not merely a matter of deciding to turn ourselves over, through some hybriatic spiritual act, to the infinite context of our lives, thus being spared the real pains and sorrows of this earthly existence. For although hope is, in a transcendental sense, the goal of our freedom, we know it precisely only within the categorical experiences of darkness. We gain a deeper sense of hope as we see earthly realities more and more as provisional, passing, and incomprehensible.²⁸ Hope as a theological virtue, i.e. a habitual bearing toward God given by God and revealing of God, becomes a reality in direct proportion to our acceptance of the ultimate incomprehensibility of existence.²⁹ Thus, the Christian cannot deny the sting of suffering and death in the name of hope. The Christian is baptized into hope because baptized into Christ's death (Romans 6:3). Reality pushes toward the truth of its brutal end. A facile optimism about life and what we can accomplish within it "is excluded by the Christian conviction that we arrive at God's definitive realm only by passing through death."³⁰ All of life's perplexity is finally confronted by the perplexity of death itself, that "radical fall into the abyss of divinity" which is "the experience of the arrival of God."³¹ Finally, then, both the radical realism of Christian pessimism and the hope toward which it points push us toward God.

As John of the Cross suggested, those who have everything taken from them, through death, tragedy, calamity, or spiritual trial, are ironically those who even in their darkness can finally find themselves most secure in God.³² In the darkness of existence, one reaches the threshold either of hope or despair—two experiences which are intrinsically related in their dancing on the precipice of hopelessness.³³ How does the Christian escape despair and find hope in the darkness of suffering and death? For Rahner, it is a matter of grace, "the co-existential of pessimism" communicated by God to the human person.³⁴ But it also involves a person's active submission, in a kind of obedience, to this grace, precisely by embracing what is awful. For grace often comes unexpectedly in darkness, and often it is only the

²⁸ "Utopia and Reality" 142.

²⁹ Rahner, "The Human Question of Meaning in Face of the Absolute Mystery of God," in *Theological Investigations* 18.89–104, at 94.

³⁰ "Christian Pessimism" 157.

³¹ *Ibid.* 161.

³² John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, in *Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Cavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: ICS, 1979) 363–64.

³³ See William F. Lynch, *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1965) 81–88; see also Rahner, "Following the Crucified," in *Theological Investigations* 18.157–70, at 164.

³⁴ "Christian Pessimism" 160–61.

darkness that one sees. How many people would immediately see grace in the suffering of a loved one from AIDS, or would embrace its reality without dread? There is a seemingly natural tendency to pull back from darkness, to avoid the darkness and thus the grace which is, as it were, forced upon us by the trials of life.³⁵ For Rahner, however, the Christian posture toward reality is to face reality and try to acknowledge it as it is, not in a position of fatalism, but in an active surrender which is at the same time an acceptance of God's dark grace. Rahner here wrote of "falling into the abyss of God's incomprehensibility."³⁶ At this point systematic theology folds into its source, the experience of God.

In Rahner's theology of death, this falling into the divine abyss in hope is the way in which Christians can face death, in a blessed resignation marked with normal human fear and anxiety, but also with trust in the ever greater God.³⁷ We can learn much about Christian hope, in fact, by thoroughly contemplating death, as Rahner urged. For Rahner, as for Heidegger, death is not limited to the physical demise and climax of organic human life. Rather, it is a permanent existential of the human situation. We are beings-toward-death from the moment of our conception. We are, in fact, dying by installments throughout the time that binds our lives.³⁸

Nevertheless, death ordinarily comes to us against our wills. There is an active force to death which we cannot escape and must finally accept. At the same time, Rahner suggested, Christians can, through an active faith, imagine dying as a gradual handling over of oneself to God with ever increasing desire and willingness. There is not only a passive dimension to death, in which death is, as it were, imposed upon us, but also an active dimension in which we dispossess ourselves and let ourselves fall into the abyss of death willingly as the final defining act of our lives.³⁹ For Rahner, an "active consummation" of life characterizes a precisely Christian death.⁴⁰ As the shifting boundaries of earthly life gradually dissolve through the organic processes of dying, so this surrender can bring us to a profound "yes" to God. If it does, the moments of dying become the moments when God accepts us in a final way. These moments are not limited strictly to the deathbed itself or to the final breath. That particular temporal occasion is only the em-

³⁵ Aeschylus comments: "The gods enthronèd in their holy place / Use violence, methinks, to give man grace" (*The Agamemnon of Aeschylus*, trans. J. C. Lawson [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1932] 13).

³⁶ "Christian Pessimism" 160-61.

³⁷ Leo O'Donovan, "A Journey into Time: The Legacy of Karl Rahner's Last Years," *TS* 46 (1985) 621-46, at 642.

³⁸ Rahner, "Following the Crucified" 169-70.

³⁹ Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, trans. Charles H. Henkey (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961) 48; see also Leo O'Donovan, "Karl Rahner, S.J. (1904-1984): In Memoriam," *Cross Currents* 34 (1984) 211-12.

⁴⁰ "Christian Dying" 245-47.

phatic end of a reality that actually stretches over our life-time and comes into dramatic focus in the suffering of life that leads to death.

The narrative of Jesus enters the picture at this point. It is not accidental but essential to Christian self-understanding that the cross of Christ should stand as the central symbol of faith. The cross provides a stark reminder that the human condition is entwined in the sin of the world and points to inherent ambiguity as the locus of human guilt and divine mercy. It not only reminds us of the harsh and dark realities of life, but also that we cannot evade them in the name of religion or compassion. Quite the opposite. The cross of Christ says that death is not simply a part of the future, but it is the future, pressing upon us now as surely as the force of gravity that holds us fast to earth.⁴¹

But the cross represents not only our facing life's darkness but our embracing the darkness as the place where the God of hope will be encountered. Rahner wrote stirringly that "Christianity is the religion which recognizes a man who was nailed to a cross and on it died a violent death *as a sign of victory* and as a realistic expression of human life."⁴² Thus, the cross is properly the central symbol of Christian faith.⁴³ On the cross Jesus finally surrenders himself to the abyss of darkness threatened by creaturely nothingness, his falling into a void which was at the same time a release into the mystery of God. This release is the graced destiny of all of us, though one made terrifyingly dark by the involvement of sin in our physical demise. The cross of Jesus is therefore a symbol of the intrinsic connection between the sin of the world and death, but it also stands at the threshold of hope.⁴⁴

What makes Rahner's theology of the cross even more distinctive is that the meaning of the cross as a path to hope is anchored not only in the agonies of Jesus' own passion, but even in the promise of his life at his birth. "We should notice here," Rahner wrote, "that He came into the world the same way we did in order to come to terms with the pre-given facts of human existence, and to begin to die."⁴⁵ As birth is tied to death, the Incarnation is intrinsically tied to the death of Jesus. This parallels and even roots Rahner's understanding of death as an ongoing and active process of surrender to God, from birth through expiration, rather than as a simple clinical event. Rahner expressed this linkage between death and hope in a poignant Christmas meditation which focuses, ironically, on newborn life: "When we stand in faith before the Child's crib, we have to see that it is here that the

⁴¹ Simone Weil, *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force* (Willingford, Penn.: Pendle Hill, 1956) 21-22.

⁴² Rahner, *Foundations* 404; italics added.

⁴³ O'Donovan, "A Journey into Time" 623, 628, 637.

⁴⁴ *On the Theology of Death* 64.

⁴⁵ Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Kenneth Baker (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965) 147.

decline called death begins, that descent which alone saves because its emptiness is filled with the unutterable inconceivability of God . . ."⁴⁶

One arrives finally at a stance within existence that is anchored in and redeemed by hope: a surrender of everything through dying to God, even from the earliest stirrings of a human life. For a Christian "believes that everything positive and beautiful and everything which blossoms has to pass through what we call death."⁴⁷ This stance is consistent with a quiet joy in life and a love for life that in no way denies the bleak landscapes of human existence but opens life to the future of God. Death, even death from AIDS, is not merely the necessary experience of submission to an inevitable clinical demise. From a theological point of view, precisely as a dying, it can also be seen as an active surrender to the God of hope after the pattern of Jesus.⁴⁸ "We come from a beginning we did not choose and go to an end that is lost in God. . . . We never know with ultimate certitude how we relate with our freedom to the inescapable situation of our existence; we have to accept our beginning, give our ultimate love to the end we call God, and with hope leave whether or not we do it in God's hands."⁴⁹ As ongoing surrender to God dying is consistent with the turn toward the eschatological horizon of hope that characterizes Rahner's Christian pessimism.

THE PLACE OF GOD

If Christian pessimism is to contextualize Christian hope in the midst of darkness, we must take up a further question about the place of God in this dark reality. The degree to which we implicate God in the darkness of this world (or, for that matter, in its goodness) is a classic problem. John Hick formulates the problem as follows: "If God is perfectly good, He must want to abolish all evil; if He is unlimitedly powerful, he must be able to abolish all evil: but evil exists; therefore either God is not perfectly good or He is not unlimitedly powerful."⁵⁰ To distinguish authentic Christian hope from facile optimism or from delusion, the God in whom we hope needs to be a God perfectly good, unlimitedly powerful, and not the cause of darkness.

⁴⁶ Rahner, "Jesus Christ as the Meaning of Life," in *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*, trans. Robert Barr (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 56.

⁴⁷ *Foundations* 404.

⁴⁸ *On the Theology of Death* 48–51, 58.

⁴⁹ Rahner, "Utopia and Reality" 142. This sentiment was expressed movingly by Pedro Arrupe, the late Jesuit superior general, who spoke from his own heart of darkness after suffering a debilitating stroke: "More than ever I find myself in the hands of God. This is what I have wanted all my life from my youth. But now there is a difference; the initiative is entirely with God. It is indeed a profound spiritual experience to know and feel myself so totally in God's hands" (Arrupe, *Hearts of Fire; Praying with Jesuits*, ed. Michael Harter [St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1993] 66).

⁵⁰ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Norfolk, England: Collins/Fontana, 1968) 5.

Rahner treated this classic problem in his essay "Why Does God Allow Us to Suffer?" Here he argued that the attempt to answer why God allows us to suffer can tell us something important about God. While Christian faith cannot hold that a good and all-powerful God directly induces human suffering, it does maintain God's absolute sovereignty in freedom and power. We reach a point at which it is impossible for us to sustain the classical distinctions between what God ordains by permission and what God permits through indirect causality. In trying to comprehend the meaning of AIDS neither of the classical positions, permission of evil or indirect causality of it, is adequate. To argue that God permits the disease in order, for example, to draw the sufferer closer is to make claims about the divine prerogatives beyond human competence. To argue that God has indirectly caused the suffering of disease could lead one to conclude that the disease is some kind of divine judgment. Both classical views search for a moral or metaphysical calculus to elevate disease to a metaphysical state, as well as to limit the freedom and omnipotence of God, thereby diminishing God's mystery.

Rahner preferred the term "allow" in order to suggest a position that avoids such a conundrum: "Having regard to God's omnipotent freedom, which knows no bounds, causing and permitting seem to us to come so closely together that we can ask quite simply why God allows us to suffer, without having to distinguish a priori in this 'allowing' between God permitting and causing."⁵¹ In the case of the sufferings brought on by nature (e.g. earthquakes) or involving the processes of nature (e.g. disease), Rahner admitted the validity of the distinction between God's "permitting" suffering and God's "causing" suffering, but he opted for saying that God "allows" such suffering because that term does not make the traditional distinctions, for instance, between permitting and causing which have led to metaphysical impasses. In this position on God's relation to physical evil, Rahner goes beyond Jacques Maritain who used the term "admit" to describe a position lying somewhere in the middle of the classical distinction between God's permitting and God's indirectly causing suffering. Maritain wrote:

Evil of nature, or suffering, is the object neither of a permission nor of a will properly so called of God—let us say rather that it is admitted by God, in this sense that from the very fact that God wills and causes, as transcendent first Cause, the good of the material universe and of the things of this universe, He causes at the same stroke, but indirectly and per accidens or in an extra-intentional manner, the losses and evils linked inevitably and by nature to the goods and to the gains in question (no generation without corruption, no life

⁵¹ Rahner, "Why Does God Allow Us to Suffer?" Edward Quinn, trans., in *Theological Investigations* 19 (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 195–96.

without some destruction, nor any passage to a superior form of life without some death . . .).⁵²

In Maritain's position, therefore, God is implicated albeit indirectly. Rahner's "God allows" tried to avoid this conclusion since the lines between physical and metaphysical causality are so tenuously drawn.

To press this further, Christian pessimism principally addresses suffering brought on by the ambiguity of our moral state. Some diseases—notably AIDS, but also various venereal diseases, some forms of hepatitis, and possibly even lung cancer—reflect this ambiguity in that they involve both the physical and moral domains; they are diseases usually brought on in part as a result of acts involving the exercise of some degree of human freedom, although this degree varies widely from one person to another. Still, the claim is often made that because human freedom is involved at all, the physical and spiritual suffering of AIDS is "self-earned" and, further, ordained by God as a kind of judgment for sin. In dealing with such arguments, Rahner refrained from judging and preferred to say that God allows such suffering.⁵³ Although the conditions for the possibility of sin are given with the divine gift of freedom, and sin is often intertwined with physical suffering, there is no way by which moral evil, much less the physical consequences so intimately connected with human sinfulness, can be said to be caused by God, even indirectly. According to Rahner, "sin arising from creaturely freedom (which is never absolute) is itself by its very nature interwoven in an indissoluble and undelimitable way with other suffering."⁵⁴ While we can perceive sin as the ontological foundation of suffering, we certainly cannot say that sin is caused by God, even indirectly, any more than God could have caused the sinfulness that led to the suffering of Jesus' crucifixion. For Rahner, the physical consequences of the moral perplexity that eventuates in sin cannot be said to be caused by God but only allowed. God creates only the conditions for the possibilities of sin and its effects by creating everything in freedom. By creating all things in freedom, God allows for contingencies which could only be disallowed by removing freedom. In general, then, Rahner avoided the language of causality (that sin leads to suffering, or, by implication, that suffering is the consequence of sin and the experience of divine judgment) in order to stress that God is responsible for the whole of creation in freedom, a claim which includes not only the possibility of evil and suffering, apparent and real, natural and moral, but also the possibility of grace given and received in the heart of sin and suffering.

What does this tell us about God? The mainstream tradition from

⁵² Jacques Maritain, *God and the Permission of Evil*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1966) 1 n. 1.

⁵³ "Why Does God Allow Us to Suffer?" 195.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 196.

Augustine through Aquinas would conclude that God, as the absolutely sovereign and free source of all that exists, is the one for whom all eventualities within freedom are given as possible, and who can draw good out of all possibilities, even the bleakest, "if only we are willing."⁵⁵ This solution, however, does not make suffering comprehensible either as consequence of sin or as divine judgment. It is still encountered as a surd, a stumbling block to comprehensive schemes of meaning. The question "Why does God allow us to suffer?" looks for an answer found partly outside God in a moral or metaphysical calculus, a theodicy. While Rahner did not reject this classical approach, he did note that it does not finally explain why God allows suffering, but only how it can be said that God allows it. He held that all that can be said with certainty is that God has created all things in freedom to allow for their optimal good, as well as the good of the whole of creation, and that in that freedom God allows the darkness of evil, of which suffering and death are the primary examples. Beyond this, we have to admit in the last analysis that the question is unanswerable because suffering is ultimately incomprehensible.

Pushing the question "Why does God allow suffering?" even further probes into the reality and intentions of God who is incomprehensible. Thus Rahner concluded, "The incomprehensibility of suffering is part of the incomprehensibility of God."⁵⁶ The incomprehensibility of suffering is a limit experience that takes us to the edge of the incomprehensible God. This is not to say that we have here the reason for suffering—as if suffering had a reason—but simply to express that suffering leads us to the incomprehensible nature and freedom of God.⁵⁷ In the failure of a moral or metaphysical calculus to provide an explanation, suffering can lead to despair and ultimately in death to perdition. But as a limit experience that leads us to the edge of incomprehensibility, it can be the "beginning of redeemed finality in God."⁵⁸

In the end, the question why God allows suffering will lead us to surrender in adoration to the God who is absolutely free in goodness and power, and who in that freedom and power submitted to suffering and death, to be revealed as the God who, in the victory of life, remains all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28).

DIVINE EMPATHY

If the God one comes to see in AIDS is a God of hope in the midst of darkness, who allows for this darkness but does not cause it, then what

⁵⁵ John Hickey Wright, "Providence," in *New Dictionary of Catholic Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1988) 818.

⁵⁶ "Why Does God Allow Us to Suffer?" 206.

⁵⁷ See Job 42:2-3: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. . . . There I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."

⁵⁸ "Following the Crucified" 164.

more can be said about this God? In order to focus this question better, I return to death from AIDS. Some might say that I have set up a romanticized view of death in which death becomes one more item on the checklist of Christian perfectionism. There is no perfect death and often a death from AIDS does not allow for the kind of active submission that Rahner described. If dying involves an active submission to God's grace in hope, it must also depend on God's initiative of grace. Christian pessimism is above all a theology of hope in God's final victory, not our own. But perhaps we have also run the risk of an overly optimistic view of God. We still must ask: Is God somehow within suffering and death, and not just a transcendent observer of it? Is God's empathy involved or detached? If involved, then how? And how might this inform our pastoral approach to the sorrow of AIDS?

Unlike Sobrino, Moltmann, and others, Rahner did not endorse the notion of a suffering or crucified God. Rahner found this formulation unacceptable. This would imply that God is so mired in the contingent and the finite that the transcendent glory in which we hope would be purely mythical. The notion of hope would then become a mere theological construct. But for Rahner the issue was ultimately rooted more deeply in a christological misunderstanding in which the communication of properties between Jesus and the Father become the foundation for such a strong identification of Jesus with God that Jesus' suffering is held to be literally the suffering of God. In this "neo-Chalcedonian" understanding, to say that Jesus is divine is to say that God actually suffered and died in Jesus. In response to such a claim, Rahner asserted that "Jesus' lot is God's lot" in a true sense, but not in a sense that would sacrifice the divine transcendence.⁵⁹ To assert further, without qualification, that "Jesus is God, therefore God actually suffers" reflects a confusion between union of natures and identity of natures. Chalcedon holds to a union of natures in the person of the Word, but not their actual identity.⁶⁰

Does God then stand aloof? Is there any divine involvement? Is our hope an illusion? Here for Rahner is where the full humanity of Jesus became crucial because the Word of God made flesh "must be God's own reality,"⁶¹ even as it remains a free human reality. For Rahner, as for Thomas Aquinas, it is proper to describe Jesus as the "instrument of the divine" (*instrumentum divinitatis*). Aquinas laid the groundwork for understanding Jesus in his human autonomy, and the uniqueness

⁵⁹ "Jesus Christ as the Meaning of Life" 57.

⁶⁰ "A representative of pure Chalcedonianism. . . , while continuing to maintain the hypostatic union of divinity and humanity in Jesus, will insist here that, in this union of divinity and humanity, the nonconfusion must also be safeguarded. Death and finitude belong only to the creaturely reality of Jesus. They remain 'this side' of the infinite distance separating God and creature; they remain on the creaturely side of the one 'God-man.' The eternal Word, in his *divinity*, can undergo no such historicity nor any 'obedience unto death' " (ibid. 56).

⁶¹ Ibid. 59.

of his human experience, as the singular and unique locus of freedom for the exercise of God's saving work.⁶² On the cross Jesus surrenders himself in death to the incomprehensible God. Because he is "God's own reality" made flesh, it can be said that God is intimately present in that surrender, for God is in ontological relation to Jesus through the Incarnation. In a formal way, then, God participates in the suffering and death of Jesus, who is nevertheless a free human being. And so, by analogy from Incarnation to grace, it can be said that God participates in our suffering and death.

But how? While Rahner held that one should not assert that God actually suffers in the suffering of Jesus (or in our own), one may argue that God is present in such sufferings as empathic love, much as a mother is present within the suffering of her child through empathy, in what Michael Dodds has called an "empathic union."⁶³ So in a true sense Jesus can be said to be the empathy of God. If this is so, then in some real sense God can be said to be empathic, just as a mother is. And with the same christological understanding one could go a step further and even speak of what the great Dominican Gerald Vann called the "sorrow of God," a sorrow expressed by God through the freely bestowed compassion of Jesus for the sick, the suffering, the grieving, and even the dead.⁶⁴ Thus, in Jesus, the sorrows of the human lot are really met by the sorrow of God in and through the one who wept over the fate of Jerusalem, who bore our griefs, and who was despised and rejected by many—the man of sorrows.

Vann foreshadowed this approach in his response to the horrors of the Second World War. How, people wondered, could so much carnage have happened under the eye of a loving God? Vann said that, in a sense, one can assert without compromise to the divine transcendence that "God suffered." He wrote: "When I share in the suffering of someone I love, that actual sharing is the expression of something deeper, something permanent: the will-to-share, which is what we call love. And so in the mystery of redemption: the actual sharing is done

⁶² Paul Crowley, "Instrumentum Divinitatis in Thomas Aquinas: Recovering the Divinity of Christ," *TS* 52 (1991) 451–75.

⁶³ Michael J. Dodds, "Thomas Aquinas, Human Suffering, and the Unchanging God of Love," *TS* 52 (1991) 330–44, at 339. Dodds bases his argument on the theologically legitimate predicate nominative "Jesus is God." Therefore, Jesus' suffering is in some sense God's own. While this is certainly supported by Aquinas, I would prefer to rest the argument on Aquinas's equally strong emphasis upon the creaturely autonomy of Jesus in relation to the divinity of the Godhead and on his development of this in his doctrine of instrumental causality. Dodds illustrates this empathic union with the love of a mother for her suffering child. "The mother . . . may be hardly at all aware of her own feeling of sadness, being conscious only of her child's pain, which she somehow experiences as her own. Here the lack of any reaction of sadness or suffering in her, distinct from the suffering of her child, points not to apathy, but to the profundity of her love."

⁶⁴ To my knowledge, this expression was coined by Gerald Vann, in *The Pain of Christ and the Sorrow of God* (London: Blackfriars, 1949); see also his *The Divine Pity* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1946).

through the humanity of Christ, but that actual sharing is the expression of deeper and permanent mystery in the Godhead, the will-to-share, i.e., the will to be a *companion*.⁶⁵

For Rahner divine empathy is shown most definitively on the cross of Christ.⁶⁶ God sees fit that the suffering and dying of Jesus which marked his entire life become the revelation of divine empathy, and ultimately of God's answer to the perplexity of existence.⁶⁷ And I would argue that the cross is indispensable for a Christian confrontation of the sorrow of AIDS and its harvest of death. Darkness yields to hope because the sorrow of those who suffer this disaster is met by the sorrow of God. The Church counsels compassion not alongside its theology but in concert with it, because the empathy of God is itself revealed in the cross of Christ. This divine will to share, to be a companion in suffering and dying, revealed in the empathy of the Incarnate God, ultimately grounds the Church's call to compassion for persons with AIDS.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Christian pessimism therefore describes a faith stance planted firmly in the dark reality of human existence. It is properly pessimistic because it boldly admits the reality, sinfulness, and ambiguity of life found in the entanglements of sin, suffering, and death that come to light in tragedy, while claiming there are no short-range answers to this darkness. It is properly a Christian pessimism because in the experience of darkness the Christian finds hope, not as an exit from suffering, but as something better, brought about with help from beyond oneself. This hope for something better brought about by divine empathy is revealed in the cross, the root of our hope.

⁶⁵ Vann, *The Pain of Christ and the Sorrow of God* 66-67.

⁶⁶ Those such as Balthasar who maintain that Rahner's transcendental-incarnational Christology does not adequately admit the negative decisiveness of the cross and, implicitly, the darkness present in human experience, must still contend with the pivotal role of the cross in Rahner's later work. Especially in Rahner's later writings, the cross is not extrinsic to his incarnational theological schema, or included within an incarnational schema that "determines in advance the place of the cross in this system, of the whole of soteriology" (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, trans. Richard Beckley [Glen Rock, N.J.: Newman, 1966] 63); see also Leo O'Donovan, "The World of the Cross," *Chicago Studies* 25 (1986) 95-110, at 105; and Rowan Williams, "Balthasar and Rahner," in *The Analogy of Beauty: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. John Riches (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986) 11-34, at 32. Although the incarnational-transcendental emphasis of his earlier Christology is not lost in Rahner's later work, this very approach was always cast by Rahner between an "always-already" communication of God's saving grace in all of human life, and the "not-yet" that must arise from an honest appraisal of life's darkness and the limitations that it places upon human freedom; see David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 432. While Rahner's starting point is not the cross (see Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness* 11), the judgments of the cross, experienced in the agonies of fleshly existence, are subtly present in his incarnationalist Christology.

⁶⁷ See Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* 65; "Following the Crucified" 166.

And it is proper to speak of hope, because the cross is the symbol of the helping reach of God to humanity in the perplexity of darkness. The Christian is one who can say that God is for us and for our salvation within this darkness, because God has been revealed in Jesus as a God of empathy, a God who sorrows. While one cannot see the final outcome of existence, one's hope is real because God has been and can be really known in this darkness. This hope enlivens and emboldens the Christian along the way to find grounds for faith, active love, compassion, and joy.

Christian pessimism is a way of theologically framing the reality of AIDS and grounding the compassion the Church professes. Can one go further? Can one learn from the example of a Francis, who did not hold the leper at arm's length but kissed his wounds and let the leper free him? In the example of Francis one sees the penetration of another's world, and letting that world into one's own to the point of conversion. If a source of sorrow such as AIDS demands to be interpreted by theology, could the sorrow and even mystery of this disease itself in some way inform our theology, or perhaps our theologizing, if we were to allow it to do so?⁶⁸ The possibilities for theology are rich.

AIDS as reality and as metaphor urges us to develop a theology that consciously serves the pastoral mission of the Church because systematics and spirituality emerge from the common ground of the real both seen and unseen. Such a theology will not rest content with grounding expressions for pastoral compassion while holding at arm's length the human reality that evoked these calls. Rather, it will invite a theologizing that asks human beings to be attentive to reality, reverential in the face of the truth that it discloses, intellectually reflective upon this truth, and prayerful, discerning, and loving in our response to the human condition it represents.⁶⁹ It could require a revision of some cherished ways of framing theological approaches to sin, suffering, and death, as well as the experience of God in relation to the unfolding of human experience in our time (e.g. the transformation of sexual gestalts). This need has already become clear in the realm of moral the-

⁶⁸ Jerome A. Miller recommends this as a philosophic method: "It is possible to interpret all possible Answers in terms of what a crisis is, instead of interpreting what crisis is in terms of one of the Answers whose effect is purportedly to end it. Instead of allowing an Answer to govern our understanding of crisis, it is possible to allow our understanding of crisis to govern our evaluation of all possible Answers. . . . [T]he truth about crisis is a truth every claim to wisdom must integrate, if it is to be congruous with the basic nature of human existence" (*The Way of Suffering* 5).

⁶⁹ I am indebted to Howard Gray, S.J., who has influenced my thinking here; Gray elaborates upon the experience of the Good Samaritan in Luke's account in a way that parallels the example of Francis: "The Samaritan 'saw' the reality before him, not his fear or his prejudice but a human being who had everything taken from him. If we are to be genuinely human, we need to see, to be able to let reality become part of our life, form our vision, catch our attention. Prayer, reflection, awareness, mutuality—the ability to be reverent and accepting—are radical human needs. . ." (Gray, "Integrating Human Needs in Religious Formation," *Review for Religious* 53 [1994] 107–19, at 112).

ology, where the realities of AIDS, especially in relation to human sexuality, have forced a review of some theological positions developed before the emergence of this disease and before the changes in sexual consciousness and patterns of sexuality that have taken place in recent years throughout the world.

What might such a theology look like? And how might it be done? It would have to grapple and begin with the real. Some liberation theologians such as Sobrino and Ellacuría take the real as a starting point and invoke Rahner as partial inspiration.⁷⁰ Reality has also been the point of departure for various offshoots of liberation theology (e.g. feminist theologies). But for Rahner, the real included the spirit, that dimension of human reality that is not often considered when we talk about reality. A comprehensive approach to the real is called for by the fact of AIDS and the perplexity of the human experience that it evokes. How might such a theology of the real proceed? One approach could be both phenomenological and narrative, perhaps the theological equivalent of William Lynch's investigation of the healing powers of imagination or of Jerome Miller's extended philosophical essay on suffering. AIDS pushes us toward fresh approaches to the foundational narrative of faith, that of Jesus himself, as it works in dialectical relationship with the continual outpouring of the "data" of human experience.

AIDS is a contemporary leper's bell for theology. Are not theologians, in the exercise of their scholarly agenda, being called upon to play the part of Francis on the road, recognizing that often enough the way to a deeper apprehension of God points to a direction far different from the one we are trained to take.⁷¹ If the story of Jesus tells us anything, it is that this direction, the way of the leper, is the way to the God who wills to share in our lot.

⁷⁰ For example, Sobrino's Christology, which follows a method of correlation between *fides qua* and *fides quae* by placing faith in Christ in contemporary context, follows what he interprets to be the direction set by Rahner; see Sobrino's *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 26–28; see also his principle of "fidelity to the real" in *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988) 14–20. Ignacio Ellacuría, whose emphasis on the real was heavily indebted to the Spanish philosopher Xavier Zubiri, also builds on Rahnerian principles about the revelation of God in history; see "The Historicity of Christian Salvation," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 251–89.

⁷¹ See Miller, *The Way of Suffering* 175.