

EXPERIENCES OF A CATHOLIC THEOLOGIAN

KARL RAHNER, S.J.

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[Translators Introduction: Shortly before his death in March 1984, Karl Rahner offered this brief retrospective on his life's work as a theologian in which he focused on four "experiences" which, as he approached the end of his life, he considered crucial to any form of theological reflection. With characteristic modesty he uses these experiences as a way of critically reviewing his own theological work. Pride of place goes to what he calls the analogical nature of all theological assertions since Rahner always favored an apophatic way of speaking about God. Yet this God does not remain distant but has communicated God's very self to humankind. This self-communication of God, an experience of grace, is the second experience discussed here and constitutes for Rahner the core of the Christian message. A third retrospective experience is that as a Jesuit his theology has some affinity with the spirituality of his religious order. At least, that was his hope—that he would be able to incorporate some of the "existentialism of Ignatius" into his own way of theologizing. A fourth and final experience is the "incongruence" of theology with the other sciences. Nevertheless, if theologians are not to preoccupy themselves with a purely abstract concept of God, they will see the various natural sciences and artistic expressions such as music, visual art, and poetry as revealing the hand of God.]

The experience of "not-knowing," of not being able to provide any clear answers to a multitude of problems and questions, led Rahner to plea for a greater modesty in theological discourse: "A theology that wishes to answer all questions clearly and thoroughly is guaranteed to miss its proper 'object'." ("Why Doing Theology Is So Difficult," in Karl Rahner in Dialogue, ed. Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons [New York: Crossroad, 1986] 216). This expe-

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rience, in turn, is linked to a central tenet of Rahner's theology, namely, to the God of incomprehensible mystery, who cannot be explained with rationalistic clarity. Rahner concludes his retrospective by returning to a familiar emphasis on God as the absolute future, a future which can be reached only through the medium of death. Death and eternal life constitute radical caesurae, which he can describe only in the paradoxical language of emptiness and fulfillment, darkness and light, question and answer.]

AFTER HAVING RECEIVED so many *laudationes*, I feel somewhat anxious as I now rise to speak. But I will do my best. In the program for this conference my topic has been given as “Experiences of a Catholic Theologian.”¹ I am not referring here to very personal or intimate experiences that make up one’s biography. Such experiences will never find their way into print. Nor am I referring primarily to experiences with the Church, with ecclesiastical politics, or to my experiences as a cleric. I do not regard these experiences as that important, and so I will not dwell on them today. What I am referring to are the experiences of a theologian, or better yet, experiences of someone who was given the task of being a theologian, but who is not quite sure whether he has done justice to this task. This doubt stems not so much from a general sense of human limitation but rather from a sense of being pushed to the limit—something essential to any theological effort, since one must speak of the incomprehensible nature of God. If, therefore, my talk here is about “experiences,” it should be noted from the outset that, although we are dealing with theological statements intended as objective, this is not to deny that there is undeniably present a subjective dimension in the way I have selected these experiences.

ANALOGICAL AFFIRMATIONS

The first experience I want to talk about is the experience that all theological statements—even if this is manifest in a variety of ways and degrees—are analogical statements. This goes without saying for any Catholic theology. It is explicitly stated, on one page or other, of every theology and, since Erich Przywara, has become even more self-evident for theologians.

¹ We express our special thanks to Prof. Dr. Ludwig Wenzler, Director of the Katholische Akademie of the Archdiocese of Freiburg, Germany, and to the Provincial of the Jesuit Oberdeutsche Province for their permission to publish this English translation. Rahner’s address was given at a conference of the Katholische Akademie, held on February 11–12, 1984, in honor of Karl Rahner’s 80th birthday. It was published in German in *Vor dem Geheimnis Gottes den Menschen verstehen: Karl Rahner zum 80. Geburtstag*, ed. Karl Lehmann (Munich: Schnell & Steiner, 1984) 105–19. The text also appears in *Karl Rahner in Erinnerung*, ed. Albert Raffelt (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1994) 134–48.

Nevertheless, my conviction is that this principle is continually overlooked in individual theological assertions. I want to share my alarm about this kind of oversight.

Let me begin in a rather simple way. A very basic, simple understanding of the concept of analogy runs along the following lines: an analogical way of thinking is characterized by the fact that, with the help of such an approach, an assertion about a specific reality is legitimate and unavoidable. However, at the same time, the assertion must always be negated in a certain sense. Were we merely to apply this concept alone to the reality at issue without negating it, without acknowledging this strange and uncanny back and forth between affirmation and negation, we would be mistaking the real object and end up in error. But this mysterious and uncanny negation necessary for the truth of an analogical statement is more often than not left unclarified and forgotten. It is not possible here to develop an actual metaphysics of knowing (*Erkenntnismetaphysik*) analogical statements. By so doing, we could counter the unsophisticated and naïve belief that an analogical term is simply an amalgam between an ordinary univocal utterance on the one hand and an equivocal utterance on the other. A true understanding of analogy, however, would acknowledge the fact that analogy comprises a fundamental and basic structure of human cognition.

Here I touch on the essence of analogy—something too frequently overlooked and, in particular instances, altogether ignored—namely, the negation of an affirmative statement of conceptual content precisely in its affirmation. The Fourth Lateran Council clearly stated that from the perspective of this world, that is from any starting-point we might conceive of based on human knowing, nothing substantial of a positive nature about God can be stated without, at the same time, perceiving the radical inadequacy of such affirmative statements. Yet time and again in our theological praxis we forget this. We talk about God, about God's existence, characteristics, about three persons in God; we speak of God's freedom, of God's binding will, and so forth. Of course, we need to proceed in this manner; we cannot simply keep silent about God. Indeed, it is only after we have first spoken that it is possible—really possible—to be silent. But in such discourse we usually forget that any statement made about God is legitimate only to the extent that it is always simultaneously negated. It is a question here of enduring the uncanny suspension between affirmation and negation as the true and only fixed term of our knowledge. In so doing, our theological assertions descend into the silent incomprehensibility of God's very self. Our theoretical statements then share the same existential destiny as we do, namely, that of a loving, trusting self-surrender to the unfathomable reign of God, to God's merciful judgment and sacred incomprehensibility.

I think—I hope—that no theologian will seriously dispute what I have just said. But at the same time it is so often the case with us theologians that this single, formal proposition is simply mentioned somewhere in our theology alongside other things. This theological truism is hardly a vital force that really radically and inexorably pervades our entire theology in all of its statements. So often from our lecture podiums and our pulpits and from the Church's sacred dicasteries our pronouncements do not give the clear impression that they are replete with the complete humility of a creature. Only with such humility can one truly speak about God. Only then does one recognize that all discourse about God can only be the final moment before that blessed silence that fills the heavens with the pure vision of God face to face.

Of course, we cannot always append to each theological statement that it is meant only analogically and note that there is in fact greater dissimilarity than the explicitly stated similarity. Still, it should be recognized more clearly that in theology, when we make specific statements, we have not forgotten what we maintain in general and in abstract realms about the analogical nature of theological terms. If this basic principle, this theological axiom, were radically put into practice, then those hearing theological pronouncements would realize that vast dimensions of divine and created reality are not covered by such statements but remain silently empty. For example, we say that in death the human being reaches the definitive point of one's moral state, one's relationship with God; that the human being comes before the judgment of God. All this is true, but it really says incredibly little about the concrete reality that is meant—partly because of the use of a very formal and abstract way of speaking, and partly because of ways of thinking that may be moving but really are naïve.

We should certainly not try to fill the lacunas in our knowledge and faith with the simplicities of modern spiritualism, if for no other reason than that such attempts are uninteresting. But we should also realize that in making these kinds of theological affirmations what is revealed to us are the empty spaces, the gaps in our knowledge. Yet at the same time these lacunas, in many respects, remain hidden to us—something we are aware of, but overlook. Although we fill in these gaps in our knowledge, they still remain a mystery for us. For example, what does it actually mean to say that the Son of Man will return again on the clouds of heaven, that he truly gives himself to us—body and blood—in the Eucharist, that the pope is infallible in *ex cathedra* decisions, or that hell is eternal? More fundamentally, what does it mean to say that the human person could in one's puny creatureliness seriously have something to do with the infinite, unutterable reality of God's very self—something that transcends all infinite distances?

In theology we talk about many things and, when we have finished, we think—although this goes against our basic convictions—that we have real-

ly reached the end and that we can draw things to a close. We think that the few affirmations we have made will quench every metaphysical and existential thirst, not realizing the challenge (as we really should) that after making all these affirmations we are destined finally to reach that *aporia* that, according to Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:8, characterizes our human existence and that does not provide us with any answers. Here I do not want and I am unable to talk in greater detail about God's incomprehensibility and hence about the true object of theology. I want only to confirm the experience that theologians are worthy of the title only when they do not seek to reassure themselves that they are providing clear and lucid discourse, but rather when they are experiencing and witnessing, with both terror and bliss, to the analogical back and forth between affirmation and negation before the abyss of God's incomprehensibility. I want only to confess that as a mere individual theologian I give too little thought to the analogical nature of all my theological assertions. As theologians we devote too much time to *talking* about this issue and in all our talk we basically forget the very subject of our discourse.

GOD'S RADICAL SELF-COMMUNICATION

A second experience that follows naturally from what we have already mentioned is the fact that in our theology we often—or almost always—overlook the real core of what we have to address. Since the Second Vatican Council there has been much talk about the hierarchy of truths of the Christian message. Lazy and short-sighted theologians, when they get into difficulties with regard to individual questions in theology, like to get out of these situations by saying that, in regard to this or that individual question, it is not really all that important what is and what is not true. We give far too little thought to what constitutes the real core of the Christian message. It can certainly and rightfully be said that Jesus of Nazareth is this focal point, the One who was crucified and rose again, and after whom we call ourselves Christians. But if that is true, and if it is to be of help, then it needs to be said why and how this Jesus is the only One to whom we can entrust ourselves in life and in death. What kind of answer can we give to this question? The answer can only be the confession that the actual self-communication of the infinite God, transcending all creaturely reality and any finite divine gift, is given in Jesus and in him alone, and is promised, offered, and guaranteed to us through him. If this were not the case, then the reality of Jesus could perhaps ground *one* religion, perhaps the best religion, namely, the Jesus-religion. But it could not be the absolute religion solemnly pledged to all humankind, because the reality of Jesus and its message would remain in the realm of the finite and the contingent.

For me, therefore, the true and sole center of Christianity is the real

self-communication of God to creation in God's innermost reality and glory. It is to profess the most improbable truth, namely, that God in God's very self with infinite reality and glory, with holiness, freedom, and love can really and without any holding back enter the creatureliness of our existence. Everything else that Christianity offers or demands of us is by comparison only provisional or of secondary importance.

What I am talking about here can also be expressed in another way. If I were to deny this, I would be contradicting what I have already stated about the analogical nature of all theological statements. For me, all of the most pious enthusiasm for Jesus (*Jesuanismus*), all involvement for justice and charity in the world, all humanism that wants to use God for the human being rather than casting the human being into the depths of God, would be a religion characterized by an unbelievably modest humanism. Such a humanism is simply not an option given the immense might of God's love, a love whereby God truly pours out divine love. We can want either everything, namely the pure divinity of God, or we are condemned, that is we are buried in the prison of our own finitude. In Catholic theology one may speculate whether a "pure nature" could be happy and complete in itself under the distant sovereignty of God. In truth, however, reality is constituted in such a way—and this precisely because of the relentless draw of grace—that we either suffocate in our finiteness or come to where God, God's very self, is. Of course, it could be held that the only claim we can make here is the rather sober one that, with the possible exception of a few saints, this thirst for the absolute, the relentless draw of the unconditional, and this ecstasy (*ecstasis*) of the finite spirit into God is not to be found among ordinary persons. Even if it is the case that, for the most part, in our theologizing we focus only on how those who are cared for by the Church and the sacraments come before the face of God, we should reflect much more on how we could imagine the journey of all peoples—even the most primitive human beings a million years ago, as well as non-Christians, and even atheists—in such a way that this journey leads to God's very self.

Of course, one can say—though I find this a bit weak and rather facile—that actual divine salvation is possible everywhere and for all peoples throughout history, and that this happens in ways known only to God. This is all very true. So much so that I, together with all Christian theology, must in the end leave things to the unfathomable judgment of God who is really able to penetrate with liberating love the crevices in this fierce concrete bunker that is our egoism. But in a time when Christianity really could and should be presented in a way that it can be offered to people of all cultures and in every age, so that it might become their earnest religion, then in general and in every age we need to devote more thought to "anonymous" Christianity, even if the controversial term as such is not so important for me. It may well be a gross presumption on the creature's part if an indi-

vidual does not want to let oneself be saved, when one cannot see how one's neighbor is being saved. But it can also be a sublime act of love of neighbor—one required ultimately from each Christian—when one hopes for oneself only within the framework of a universal hope, a hope for all people. This line of thought then gives rise to a view of how God's grace—which in the final analysis is God's very self in self-communication—is really poured out on all humanity and not merely on the few who have been sealed by the sacraments.

My contention, moreover, is that a Christian theologian is not prevented from thinking that the theme of human sinfulness and forgiveness of guilt through pure grace is, in a certain sense, somewhat secondary compared to the theme of God's radical *self*-communication. It is not as if we do not get caught up time and again in our egoism because we are sinners. It is not as if we are not in need of God's forgiving grace, something we need to accept as pure grace—without our thinking we have any personal claim on God. It is not as if God's self-communication does not always take place in fact by way of forgiveness. It is not as if our fundamental experience of sinfulness—a despairing experience as far as we are concerned, but one in which we initially experience our freedom in a concrete way—does not correspond to the actual situation in which a person truly begins to reach out for God. Christian experience has given concrete witness to this fact down through the ages. But today we see how difficult it is for people to accept justification simply as forgiveness of sin. Moreover, for a Catholic theologian, God and God's promise of self to humanity (in whatever way this is understood in greater detail) already exists as pure grace prior to sin. This sheer and unexpected miracle of God, a God who bestows God's very self and who turns such a love into the adventure that is God's own history. If we accept this, then I think we can easily hold that God's self-communication to the creature is more pivotal than sin and the forgiveness of sin.

I know that such a claim is highly problematic, especially when placed under the judgment of Scripture. But even if we basically cannot think about sin in any way outside of the framework of God's love for the sinner, there is also at least the danger of *hubris* that we might take sin too seriously. By doing so, we could forget perhaps what most shocks us about the appalling aspects of the history of humanity, namely, that, in spite of everything, this is more the result of the creatureliness of humans in all their innocent stupidity, weakness, and the domination of their instincts than real sin for which a true account will have to be given before the judgment seat of God. And therefore I believe from a thoroughly Christian perspective—and not simply from an inflated kind of humanism—that belief in God's free self-communication in grace should be prior to any confession of humanity's sinfulness. Moreover, a study of the history of faith clearly shows how our knowledge is historical and undergoes continual

changes and shifts of emphasis. If this fact has been recognized explicitly since the era of historicism where such changes were actually made and endured, we can thus legitimately claim the right to critically make such shifts in emphasis today too. Indeed, one might suggest that it is only by incorporating such changes that one can make the Christian message plausible and coherent to modern men and women.

As far as the reflections in *this* talk are concerned, it is not just a question of naming and describing this Christian reality as such, but rather of trying to say something about the experience one has had of this reality, however “subjective” this may seem. And therefore it must be conceded here, even with a little trepidation, that the notion of sin and the forgiveness of sin—and this is certainly problematic—are less prominent in my theology than the theme of God’s self-communication. But surely theologians—within their own limited subjectivity—cannot hope to encompass every possible experience of what it means to be Christian. Thus if people hold these limitations against me, then I can rejoin by asking them whether they do not need to take into account the weaknesses of their own unavoidably subjective theology. Such limitations are inevitable if we want to express our basic theological position clearly.

SCHOOLS OF THEOLOGY

A *third* experience also selected rather arbitrarily can be mentioned. In the past, when a theologian practiced theology as a member of a religious order, that is, as a member of a congregation formed according to a certain spirit distinguished from that of other orders, this theology bore the distinct and tangible imprint of the theology of that order. The major orders such as the Benedictines, the Dominicans, the Franciscans, and the Jesuits each had their own style of theology, a fact that was acknowledged then. Each order cultivated its own specific theology and each distinguished its theology from that of other religious orders. They were proud of their respective theological traditions and they even had their own officially recognized doctors of the Church as well as key figures in the various theological “schools.” In all of this, there is nothing objectionable provided, of course, that these differences do not degenerate into stubborn conflicts along party lines—something that occurred quite often in the past. Nowadays I think this is no longer the case. As far as legislation of my order is concerned, I ought to teach, for example, the so-called *scientia media* and consequently should oppose and reject the Thomistic theology of grace as expounded in the Baroque era. Today, such clearly distinctive theologies associated with religious orders no longer exist and can no longer exist. A number of factors now make it simply impossible for a member of a religious order to advocate among reasonable people such a specific school theology handed

on from one generation to the next. These factors include: the manner in which theological questions are nowadays formulated, the wealth of theological material that has to be considered, the sheer weight of contemporary biblical scholarship, and the more objective conclusions of dogmatic and historical theology.

The genuine differences evident in theology today cut right across the orders. This does not mean, however, to belabor the obvious, that the theology of a member of a religious order has nothing to do with the distinctive character of the life and spirituality of that order. For example, I would hope that Ignatius Loyola, the great founder of my order, would recognize something of his own spirit and spirituality in my theology. At least I would like to think that that is the case! If one can be so bold, I would argue that in one or another point I am actually closer to the spirit of Ignatius than was the notable Jesuit theology of the Baroque era which sometimes did not pay sufficient attention to what I might call the existentialism of Ignatius. A few years ago on the occasion of one of my birthdays, the communist Ignatius Silone autographed one of his books for me with the hand-written inscription “unum in una spe: libertas.” This inscription reminds me as a Jesuit of that simple but magnificent closing prayer of the *Spiritual Exercises* when Ignatius entrusts himself totally to God without reservation and where the notion of freedom holds pride of place over the Augustinian triad of memory, understanding, and will. I do not believe that this choice of words and way of speaking were simply by chance. I also do not believe that the traditional Jesuit theology took this fact seriously enough. I am not convinced that I have done a better job in my own work, but at least I have tried to move in that direction.

At any rate, as a Jesuit I do not consider myself bound to any narrow school theology. This is even the case in regard to adherence to a particular philosophical school. On the whole, I also developed a greater appreciation for Thomistic philosophy as interpreted by [Joseph] Maréchal as opposed to Suarez’s interpretation on which I had been trained initially. Of course, the type of contemporary philosophy and theology that I have tried to practice can be criticized as not having moved beyond a certain eclecticism. But where in the world is there a systematic philosophy and theology that cannot be suspected of eclecticism—since philosophy and theology are clearly derived from various sources and backgrounds? How can we do theology today except in as wide as possible confrontation and dialogue with the enormous variety of contemporary anthropological sciences? How can theology—one that wants to listen in all quarters and to learn from various sources—avoid this accusation of eclecticism? Of course, I know that in my theology there is perhaps quite a lot that does not fit together in a clear and unambiguous manner. The reason for that is the original pluralistic character of the sources of our knowledge, which makes very dif-

ficult any attempt on our part at an adequate and all-embracing reflection on the coherence of our statements. Therefore, a theologian can only request from both supporters and opponents that they approach one's theology with gracious goodwill and regard one's starting point, basic orientations, and formulation of questions as more significant than the "results" which, all things considered, can really never be conclusive.

THEOLOGY AND OTHER SCIENCES

A *fourth* and final experience can be mentioned, although this is already implicit in the previous experiences, and is certainly not as such the most important for theology. I am referring to the lack of congruence between theology and the other sciences. By this I am not referring to the subtle issue of a theological theory of knowledge or a general epistemology. What I mean is the simple fact that I know and have experienced only a very small amount of humanity's experience and knowledge as explored in all the sciences, but also in poetry, music, the fine arts, and even in the history of humanity in general—though as a theologian I should be well informed about all of this. If as a theologian I inquire not about an abstract concept of God, but wish to approach God directly, then absolutely nothing of what God has revealed as Creator of the world, as Lord of history, should be uninteresting to me. Naturally, it could be piously claimed that everything that is necessary for my salvation is contained in Holy Scripture, and that one needs to know nothing beyond this. But if I wish to love God for God's own sake and not only for the sake of my personal salvation, then in order to find God I cannot restrict my interest to Scripture alone. Rather, everything through which God permits God's very self to be perceived in this creaturely world will be of interest to me. This is especially the case for the theologian whose task it is to intellectually oppose every kind of false egoism relating to salvation. Although I would like to know more about the variety of human experiences as explored in the sciences, the arts, and historical events, I am quite ignorant of much of this. For the theologian all these human experiences speak of God even if the individual theologian knows very little about them. Thus one's theology—despite all existential engagement theologians like to refer to—is so abstract, so colorless, so far removed from revealing the human person and the world. To be sure, the theologian has in the last analysis, only one thing to say. But this one affirmation should comprehend that mysterious core of all reality. Yet, as a theologian, every time I open a book on modern science, I become quite panic-stricken. Most of what is written in these books is quite foreign to me. Moreover, I am more than likely not capable of understanding their content. Hence, as a theologian, I feel somewhat compromised faced with this reality. Then the pale abstraction and hollowness of my own theological concepts hits me with a shock.

As a theologian, I maintain that God created the world but, since I know so little about the world, the notion of creation remains strangely empty. As a theologian, I also proclaim that Jesus, as well as being human, is Lord of all creation. Then I read that the cosmos extends thousands of millions of light-years and I ask myself somewhat fearfully what my previous statement actually means. St. Paul still knew which sphere of the cosmos belonged to the angels. This is something I do not know.

I ask myself with trepidation whether about half the souls in the kingdom of God have ever had a personal life history. I ask this since authentic church teaching holds that a personal, spiritual, and eternal soul exists from the moment of an egg's fertilization by sperm and that any other view is simply not acceptable. How is the fact of the countless number of spontaneous abortions reconciled with this notion of a personal history of freedom right from the start? I find no clear answer when I ask myself what is the precise meaning of the claim that the first humans over two million years ago constitute the first subjects of salvation history and revelation. I let secular anthropology teach me to be more careful about differentiating between body and soul—something that continues to be problematic. This implies that I can no longer interpret the teaching contained in the encyclical *Humani generis*, namely, that the human body derives from the animal kingdom whereas the soul is created by God, as dualistically as it initially appears. I even ask myself, since this could be quite pertinent, whether a pope could resign from office because of an illness that rendered him incapacitated. I could continue along this line, noting problems that modern science puts to theology, without theology having yet come up with any very clear answers to these kinds of questions.

On the one hand, there is the so-called permanence and clearly unchanging character of human nature, as this is presumed by moral teaching on the laws of nature. On the other hand, we try to reconcile this with the fact that human beings with their constantly developing and changing genetic structure are to be situated within the whole history of evolution. It is not surprising then to be rather taken aback at times by the unambiguous and unchangeable tone of the Church's moral promulgation given that such certainties are not that obvious within human beings? Given this situation, theologians need to be careful and modest, but they must have the courage to proclaim their message and retain their own convictions.

As a theologian it is possible to console oneself in all of this with the observation that no clear synthesis exists even among the natural scientists, namely a harmony between what they postulate *as* scientists regarding their work and what they experience over and beyond these individual items of scientific knowledge, for example, issues such as human freedom, responsibility, and questioning. If theologians have these bitter experiences of "not-knowing" and courageously and without prejudice accept them,

then they could serve as an example and stimulus for other scientists to manifest a similar modesty and awareness of the limitation of their own knowledge. In this way, tensions between the sciences are not only not removed, but become even more accentuated because they are acknowledged. Moreover, the unavoidable conflict between the different scientific disciplines and theology could be embraced by that peace that reigns among those who in their own particular ways have an inkling and an experience of the mystery we call God.

WHAT IS TO COME

There would be many more similar experiences to recount and those we have been describing are certainly not the most important. I could relate my experiences with my colleagues at the universities in Innsbruck, Munich, and Münster. I could speak of my 62 years experience as a Jesuit in my order. I could recount both pleasant as well as less happy memories of experiences with Rome. And so on. Life is certainly rich, even if with age it gradually slips away into a mist of forgetfulness.

But I would still like to try to say something of an experience which runs at an angle to all that I have recounted so far, and thus cannot be numbered with all these other experiences. I am referring to that experience of waiting for “what is to come.” When as Christians we acknowledge an eternal life which will be given to us, it seems that this waiting for what is to come, initially at any rate, is nothing particularly special. Hope for eternal life is normally spoken of in rather unctuous and consoling tones. Far be it from me to disprove of such language provided it is meant sincerely. But I must personally confess to feeling a little uncomfortable when I hear such talk. It seems to me that the conceptual models used to clarify what is meant by eternal life are for the most part insufficient to deal with the radical break that takes place at death. Eternal life—strangely described as continuing “beyond” and “after” death—is clothed too much with realities with which we are familiar. Eternal life is thus imagined along the lines of continuing to live on, or as a meeting up with those who were close to us, or as friendship and peace, or as a banquet and a celebration. These and similar conceptions focus on the never-ending and ongoing character of eternal life.

Yet I fear that the radical incomprehensibility of what is really meant by eternal life is in this way trivialized. What we call the direct vision of God in eternal life is downgraded to one pleasant activity alongside others that go to make up this life. What is not properly perceived is the unspeakable enormity of the fact that the absolute divinity, God’s very self, stoops down naked and bare into our narrow creatureliness. I admit that it seems to me to be both an agonizing and an always incomplete task for the contempo-

rary theologian to come up with a better model for understanding the notion of eternal life—a model which would exclude these difficulties from the outset. But how? But how? The angels of death will gather up all that trivia that we call our history from the rooms of our spirit (though, of course, the true essence of our active freedom will remain). The starry ideals with which we have rather presumptuously adorned the higher spheres of our life will have faded away and gone out. Death will have erected a huge, silent void. And we will have silently accepted this state in a spirit of faith and hope as corresponding to our true destiny and being. Our seemingly long life then appears as a single short explosion of our freedom like an extended replay, an explosion in which question is transposed into answer, possibility into reality, time to eternity, potential freedom into exercised freedom. Then within that immense terror that is death will come a cry of unutterable joy which will reveal that the immense and silent void we experience as death is in reality filled with the primordial mystery we call God. It is filled with God's pure light, with God's all-absorbing and all-giving love. Perhaps there in this incomprehensible mystery we can catch a glimpse of Jesus, the blessed one who appears to us and looks at us. It is in this concrete figure of Jesus that all our legitimate assumptions about the incomprehensibility of the infinite God are *divinely surpassed*. I would not like to call what I have just said as a description of what is to come. Rather I have merely offered, however falteringly and provisionally, an indication of how one might expect what is to come, namely, by experiencing the descent that is death as already the ascent of what still awaits us. Eighty years is a long time. For each one of us, however, the life span apportioned to us is that brief moment in time which will be what constitutes our ultimate purpose and meaning.²

² Our special thanks to Dr. Roman Siebenrock, director of the Karl Rahner Archives at the University of Innsbruck, who drew our attention to some brief spontaneous remarks that Rahner made immediately following his presentation. Not all of his words are decipherable on the video recording, but what follows is our translation of what is clear on the tape: "Honored guests, after this celebration I do not want to rise to speak again, except for a few words at the very end. Now I want to thank you for listening to this little story . . . written for an 80th birthday [?]. I thank you from my heart, and I would kindly ask you not to have me expand any further on this, nor to dwell on what has already been said. I thank you sincerely. As an ordinary Christian, as one who knows what really matters, I would ask you to say perhaps a little prayer to God for me so that at the end God will grant me love and mercy."