

# Following Jesus today: A Rahnerian theology of discipleship

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**FOLLOWING JESUS TODAY**  
**A RAHNERIAN THEOLOGY OF DISCIPLESHIP**

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the S.T.L. Degree  
from Boston College School of Theology and Ministry (Weston Jesuit)

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## Introduction

How can I speak about God? That is the question that I ask myself when I am in front of my computer, posting on my Facebook wall or writing an article for my blog. That is the question that I ask myself every time I prepare a homily for the prison or the parish. That is the question that I ask myself every time I share my faith experience with my fellow Jesuits. That is the question that I ask myself every time I read the Scripture and when I pray. That question is at the beginning and at the end of my theological reflection.

How can I speak about God? That question is always a starting-point because there is not a definitive answer. Although I never find the adequate words to speak about God, I do not cease in my pursuit and I keep trying. This STL thesis is therefore an attempt to respond to that general question through the lens of discipleship. Inspired, nourished and founded in the theological work of Karl Rahner, I try to develop in this thesis what I would call a Rahnerian theology of discipleship for today.

How can I speak about God then? In this thesis I divide this general question into three particular questions: How is it possible to follow Jesus? What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? How does a disciple of Jesus act in this world? I try therefore to find a response to each of these questions. That is why this thesis is divided in three chapters: Christology as theological foundation, anthropology and grace towards spirituality and a practical theology for today. My goal for this STL project is to approach discipleship in a way that can be thoughtful and meaningful for our contemporary world.

### ***a. To follow Jesus, to “follow” on Twitter***

To follow Jesus is both a vocation and a task as well. I am convinced that every Christian should be aware of this. And that is what I have intended to do with this STL thesis by reflecting on discipleship. I am an active user of the social networking and micro blogging service called Twitter. I follow what other people post about topics that are of my personal interest and I post different kind of things that I think could be interesting for those who follow me. Twitter is a space where we follow each other, even though we don't know who we are or where it is sufficient to know somebody by their name and reputation to follow him or her.

I follow some prominent journalists and fellow Jesuits. Other people follow their favorite artists. Twitter is not like Facebook where to become a friend of anybody you have to be accepted first. On Twitter you just follow the ones you think can provide you with information or the ones you can exchange opinions or generate a debate with. At the same way, you are followed by those interested in what you post. Thus millions of people use Twitter in the world and for each of them, to follow somebody, has this meaning: you just need to push the enter tab on your keyboard or pass your finger over the screen of your iPad, and immediately you follow somebody that you may barely know.

This is one of the reasons for my personal interest in reflecting about what it means to follow Jesus today, especially when to follow somebody can be understood by many people in completely different ways. Therefore I cannot resist making the connection with our Christian way of understanding what it means to follow Jesus. For us Christians, this has a strong theological meaning;

this is at heart of our own understanding as human beings, members of the Church and disciples of Jesus.

Nevertheless, for millions of people in the whole world, to follow somebody is linked today to the way we communicate on the Internet, where we do not need to know in a personal way those whose opinions, feelings or statements we follow. We experience now being in a middle of a crossroad, where the Church could go in one direction with a long-held tradition of theological understanding while the world could just be going the other way, even though both use the same word “follow”.

Talking about following Jesus is not just a reflection about the meaning of a word. It means above all thinking about the way we Christians understand our discipleship. The historical circumstances are an invitation to go deeper into our theological reflection. If we want to talk about following Jesus, we have to be certain of what we want to say to avoid any kind of confusion. I’m interested in showing in what sense following Jesus is not just about imitating his actions, following his commandments or admiring his courage. We follow Jesus because we cannot do otherwise if we are honest with our deepest call as human beings. Following Jesus is a personal experience that we can have today. It is personal because nobody else can have it in our place and it is related to our own personal existence in the world. If we believe that Jesus is alive today in his Church, through his Spirit, then we can say that it is possible to have a personal relationship with Jesus today.

This is one of my concerns in doing theology. I think, as Karl Rahner did in his own time, that we cannot do any theological reflection if we are not in dialogue with our contemporary world. Thus, in a world where following

somebody is as easy as pushing a tab on our keyboard, we have to reflect on the way we understand and explain what it means to follow Jesus today.

***b. A Rahnerian theology of discipleship***

Karl Rahner did not elaborate a theology of discipleship. We do not find in Rahner a systematic approach to discipleship. Nevertheless we can see his care and interest about discipleship throughout all his theological reflection. The relation between God and the human being is at the center of his theological endeavor. This preoccupation summarizes Rahner's project. Everything else is related to or is a consequence of this preoccupation: his Christology, his reflection on Trinity, his theology of grace, his anthropological and transcendental approach, his ecclesiology, his Ignatian theology, his eschatology, and his reflection of the role of the Christian in the world. All these themes have to be understood as inter-dependents on each other. To have a better impression of what Rahner wanted to say we have to see the whole picture of his work and at the same time we have to closely see each angle of his theological enterprise.

That is what I have tried to do on my quest. I have read different texts from Rahner to try to grasp his theological insights that I consider to be helpful to understand discipleship today. A seminar on Rahner gave me the possibility to deepen my knowledge of Rahner's theology. Even though difficult at times to read and to understand, I found in Rahner's approach a framework to my own theological reflection. Now Rahner has become my referential point when I write or speak about theology, and I would even dare to say, when I do theology, understanding it as an academic process as well as a way of living. It

was by reading Rahner that I came to this idea of shaping a Rahnerian theology of discipleship today. I claim that discipleship has to be understood as the possibility of having a personal and intimate relationship with Jesus in our present time.

I claim that this proposal is Rahnerian because it is a product of research based on Rahner's theological reflection. Rahner is the only source I investigated for this purpose. Therefore, Rahner's theological work is at the ground of this whole project. It is a theology of discipleship because it is centered on the experience of every human being who decides to follow Jesus and on the implications of this decision. I try to analyze what are the conditions of possibility of this relationship, how this relationship becomes a reality and in what way can this relationship be experienced in our contemporary world. It is a practical proposal because it is a response to a particular situation for our present time.

In the first chapter I set up the theological foundations of this project. We cannot forget that this thesis is a result of a pastoral concern and is born in an ecclesial context. Therefore the first point gives me the tools to take the risk and to start a theological endeavor. Here, I discuss fidelity to tradition and openness to creativity as two faces of the same coin in any theological reflection. For Rahner creativity is important to develop new reflections about our faith. I try to be creative and faithful to our tradition at the same time proposing this theology of discipleship. In the second and third points, I present some insights of Rahner's theological work on Christology and Trinity. The definitive communication of God to humankind is expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Rahner's emphasis on Jesus' humanity is



important for us to understand his role as mediator between the creator and his creatures. It is this humanity of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Word of God, the Logos made human, the Man-God, which allows us to have access to the Trinity.

Even though many people have criticized Rahner's theology for being too centered on anthropology, a deeper reading of Rahner's work will show us that his theology is rooted in a deep experience of God. Humanity, after all, cannot be understood if it is not in relation to God. This is why the first step of this project is to establish the ground of our discussion in God. Then we can move to examine our own humanity as the place where the grace of God can be experienced. This is what I develop in the second chapter. If the humanity of Christ allows us to enter into relationship with God, what about our own humanity? Thus, I analyze the place of our human existence in this relation between God and the human race.

In the first point of my analysis I discuss the anthropological and transcendental approach of Rahner's reflection. Christian faith has to be understood as a universal religion. This is Rahner's concern that I make mine. This universal claim stressed by Rahner will help us to understand that every human being is able to receive God's self-communication. Salvation is offered to everyone in the world. That does not make us all disciples, but sets the possibility of every man and every woman to accept God's offer of grace. In the second point, I go further in my reflection to discuss what it means to follow Jesus. Ignatian spirituality and Rahner's reflection on Ignatian discernment help me to explain how we become disciples of Jesus. To follow Jesus is to make an explicit choice to do so because we are free to fulfill what is most human in us,

and to use Ignatian discernment that gives us the tools to find God in our deepest desires. To follow Jesus, then, is an experience of obedience in faith. In the third point, I discuss how our discipleship can be understood as sacramental, expressing God's grace through our lives as disciples and in the way we live it with others.

The first chapter centers on Jesus Christ as the one who gives access to the mystery of the Trinity, while the second chapter centers on our own humanity as the place where God's grace acts for it is through our own humanity that we can listen to God's will and accept as free beings to follow Jesus. The third chapter centers on the way a disciple of Jesus relates to others within the Church, outside of it and in our contemporary world.

The third chapter proposes a practical theology built on the theological and anthropological foundations I developed in the first two chapters. In my first point in this chapter, I claim that the Church is the place where discipleship has to be lived. This means being respectful of our neighbors and recognizing how God's grace is present within the Church, while being always open to reflect about our faith and to be ready to discuss about it with our contemporaries. My second point stresses the fact that our discipleship is lived in a Church that is not isolated, but related to others in the world, those who are not Christian and non-believers. In my third point I propose how a disciple of Jesus should act in a world that can be considered as post-Christian, post-ideology and post-modern; he can do this by putting the accent on the necessity of establishing a dialogue with our contemporaries.

## **Chapter One**

### **Theological Foundations: Rahner's Christology for today**

Inspired by Karl Rahner's theological reflection I intend to shape a theology of discipleship for today. I intend to reflect on the conditions of possibility that allow human beings to follow Jesus, what it means for us as Christians and how we can apply this theology of discipleship in a practical way. That is the goal of the whole project, but I have to go step by step. The first thing to do is to investigate, following Rahner's reflection, the theological foundations for a Christian discipleship. I claim that following Jesus today has to be understood as our own capability to have a personal and intimate relationship with Jesus in our present times. I seek to establish the ground of this reflection by considering this question: Is it possible for us, human beings, to have a personal relationship with Jesus today? I will try to respond to it by analyzing the conditions of possibility of this encounter. To accomplish that, I will follow Rahner's Christology for today.

The first point to consider involves engaging the tension between fidelity to our tradition and openness to creativity. As Christians we recognize ourselves as part of a long tradition. At the same time we are aware that new times require new ways of transmitting the Christian message. The challenge is: how are we to embrace what the tradition says about our Christian faith without surrendering our rational faculties? If we pretend that our faith has a universal dimension, which is accepted and respected as an intelligent

reflection and not a mythical invention, we must try to be creative and faithful at the same time, in order to establish a true dialogue with our contemporaries.

The second point focuses on Jesus of Nazareth and how his life, death and resurrection are the definitive self-communication of God. Our understanding of Jesus is important to understanding what it means for each of us that Jesus brings about our salvation. I will show in what way Jesus is the definitive communication of God to the human race. A God that gets involved in our history can neither be found outside of the history of his people, nor outside of the history of Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, we have to be open to the narrative of the Gospels. The key to understand that we are not dealing with a figure from the past is the Resurrection. This is important because I will argue that if we can have a personal relationship with Jesus today, it is because Jesus is alive today.

The third point analyzes how Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Logos that shares our human nature, is part of the Trinitarian dynamic and how he opens the door to us so that enabling us to participate in this mystery. Rahner's theology of the Trinity will help me to accomplish this task. We should not forget that our Christian faith is a Trinitarian faith. Each time we talk about Jesus and his relationship with God, we are talking about the Trinitarian experience that can be known. Why is this important to this project? It is because I want to demonstrate that it is possible to have a personal relationship with Jesus today. And this relationship is possible because we believe that the cross was not the end of the story. Jesus is the Risen One who gave us the Spirit that accompanies the Church, the Spirit that brought Jesus from the dead. Jesus of Nazareth cannot be dissociated from the one who was resurrected by the

power of God's Spirit. Our emphasis on the Resurrection and the abiding presence of the Spirit will help me to affirm that we can have a personal relationship with Jesus today.

### ***1. Fidelity to tradition and openness to creativity***

The whole project of a Rahnerian theology of discipleship intends to be a new approach to an old theme. Discipleship of Jesus has been treated for so long and in so many different ways. Is there still anything new to say? I am convinced that we have to speak about discipleship today in a new way. One of my concerns is how to dialogue with our contemporary world about Christian faith? And the challenge is how to do it by being faithful to our tradition yet creative at the same time. Rahner's reflection on this matter is helpful to keep the tension between fidelity to a tradition and openness to creativity.

As Christians we cannot start any project without acknowledging what our tradition has to say about the relation between Jesus and God, and the relation between Jesus and humanity. Nevertheless our fidelity to our dogmas cannot be divorced from the new ways we can find to talk about them. Thus, I will try to be creative and faithful at the same time in this dialogue with the contemporary world.

We are part of a long and lasting tradition. Our experience of faith is rooted in the personal experience that a group of people had of Jesus many centuries ago. Even the first Christian communities understood themselves as heirs of a bigger tradition when they decided to keep reading what we know of as the Old Testament. Therefore, we cannot understand ourselves if it is not in relation to our past, to our dogmas, to all the theological reflection that has been

done so far. But what is the best way we can relate to our tradition, to our dogmas?

Rahner himself is a good example of the tension that exists between fidelity to a tradition and a creativity that is open to the future. His own way of saying things, his own creativity, was not divorced from his fidelity to the Catholic tradition. He insisted that every Catholic theologian should not ignore the classical formulations of Catholic theology. "When we come to deal with Christology, we cannot move beyond the traditional formulation of the dogma to the point where we can do without it entirely."<sup>1</sup>

What moved him was a real love for the Church and her authorities. Rahner understood those theologians who wanted to lead the Church into the future. But he asked those pioneer theologians to keep in contact with the faithful and with the bishops. "This concern is also an essential part of a genuinely Catholic theology, even if the pace of the march into the future of faith seems to the impatient to be rather slow."<sup>2</sup>

But taking care of the faithful is not the same as staying silent. Rahner acknowledges that even the most abiding formulations of faith require explanation, especially if we try to engage in a dialogue with the modern culture. It means that the classical formulations of faith "have to be expanded by the addition of other statements, even though these have widely differing degrees of binding force."<sup>3</sup> He stays loyal to the classical formulations and does

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Rahner, "Christology Today", *Theological Investigations 21* (trans. H. M. Riley; New York: Crossroad, 1988), 220.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

not pretend to change them, but he is open to new interpretations, even if they are considered only in relation to the old formulas.

We cannot just forget the classical formulations, even as we have to explain what they are about to the newer generations. This is our job as theologians. "Catholic theologians should, in addition to their other approaches, always strive to obtain from the old formulations of Christology new insights which seem important and indispensable for bringing their present-day Christology into a positive relationship to current ways of thinking."<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, we should let ourselves be questioned by the impulses that come from outside our own tradition so as to look at the classical formulations in new ways. And, at the same time, we should try to find in these old formulations traces that can lead us to new approaches. There is a double movement, from outside and from inside, that will help us to say anew what is old.

Any individual truth is only an emergence, not a conclusion, Rahner claims. "In the last resort any individual human perception of truth only has meaning as beginning and promise of the knowledge of God."<sup>5</sup> It is the nature of our human knowledge of truth to be open to God's truth, even though we cannot contain the totality of God's truth. However "every truth of the God who reveals himself is given as an incitement and a way to the closest immediacy of communion with him, it is all the more an opening to the immeasurable, a beginning of the illimitable."<sup>6</sup> Though Jesus represents the definitive revelation of God, we cannot say that we have fully understood God's revelation. What is at

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Rahner, "Current Problems in Christology", *Theological Investigations 1* (trans. C. Ernst; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), 149.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

stake is not God's communication, but our human capacity to understand this revelation. We have to understand any individual truth as founded in the always-bigger truth of God.

Rahner was a man ahead of his time. He grew up in a different era from ours. He received his formation as a Jesuit scholastic in a very different Church from the one we live in. But he was always seeing further. He criticized the way seminarians were formed with textbooks that claimed to tell the whole truth about God, lacking a sense of the greater mystery of God. With all the answers in a book, it was not necessary to think. It is in that historical and concrete context that we have to understand what he says. Rahner was not talking in an abstract way. He was trying to respond to a particular situation. And that situation is not so different from what happens now in many ecclesial spaces where the truth of our faith is reduced to a few documents, even though we have a very rich and long tradition of reflection within the Church. I claim with Rahner that any individual truth has to be understood as a beginning of something new in the way we understand our relationship with God. And this is not opposed to being faithful to the classical formulations of our faith, as they have been transmitted by our tradition.

The classical and old formulations of our faith are not definitively closed, but opened to our own creativity as theologians and as Christians. Rahner is convinced of that. He acknowledges that the old formulations are considered sanctified formulas and they are the product of a work that has lasted centuries within the Church "in prayer, reflection and struggle concerning God's



mysteries.”<sup>7</sup> But at the same time he claims that the old formulations derive their life from the fact that “they are not end but beginning, not goal but means, truths which open the way to the –ever greater- Truth.”<sup>8</sup>

To be creative is an exercise of our human reason. As a good heir of Aquinas tradition, Rahner believes in the strength of our human capacity to think and reflect. Human understanding is a pillar in Rahner’s theological reflection. For Rahner, it is important to do justice to God’s truth as well as to the human ability to understand. “Anyone who takes seriously the ‘historicity’ of human truth (in which God’s truth too has become incarnate in Revelation) must see that neither the abandonment of a formula nor its preservation in a petrified form does justice to human understanding.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, to be able to imagine and to create new ways of saying the old is what does justice to human understanding.

We cannot escape the tension between tradition and creativity. On one hand, we can understand our classical formulations of faith as the end of a reflection, the last word pronounced about a truth of faith. On the other hand, we can understand these formulations as the beginning of a new way of doing theology, just the first words of an ongoing reflection. This tension is present in the Chalcedonian formulation of the mystery of Jesus, and according to Rahner, we cannot make a choice: We have to look at these formulations as end and as beginning at the same time. “We shall never stop trying to release ourselves from it, not so as to abandon it but to understand it, understand it with mind and heart, so that through it we might draw near to the ineffable,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 150.

unapproachable, nameless God, whose will it was that we should find him in Jesus Christ and through Christ seek him.”<sup>10</sup>

At this point it must be clear that any effort to speak about Jesus to our contemporary world has to take account of the classical Christological formulations. “We shall never cease to return to this formula”.<sup>11</sup> But return does not mean repetition. It is not only an end but also a beginning. And this recreation is the theologian’s task. For Rahner, Catholic theology must take history seriously as the locus where revelation occurs. “A more intense interaction between fundamental theology and dogmatics must start from the concrete historical Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>12</sup>

Hence any approach to the classical Christological formulations has to be rooted in the Jesus of Nazareth that we meet in the Gospels. Our discussion about the ancient Christological formulas is not a discussion about language. It is about a concrete person: Jesus, “who is the source of belief in the Church and Scripture.”<sup>13</sup>

“The Church is right to value highly its ancient Christological formulas, the product of a long and troubled history of faith. Every other formula must be tested to see whether it clearly maintains that faith in Jesus does not acknowledge merely a religious genius or the prophet of a passing phase in the history of religions, but the absolute Mediator of Salvation now and always.”<sup>14</sup> For Rahner, it is important that we acknowledge the tension that exists between the humanity and the divinity present in Jesus Christ. This is what the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Rahner, “Christology Today”, 223.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Rahner, “‘I Believe in Jesus Christ.’ Interpreting an Article of Faith”, *Theological Investigations* 9 (trans. G. Harrison; New York: Seabury, 1972), 168.

Chalcedonian formula expresses and helps us to remain rooted in Jesus of Nazareth who is the Risen One.

## ***II. Jesus of Nazareth and the Risen Jesus***

Christology, Rahner insists, begins with the question, "What does Jesus mean for us?" Only then is it possible to ask the question, "Who must he be if he has this significance for us?"<sup>15</sup> Rahner sees Jesus "as the unsurpassable access to the immediacy of God in himself, not just as an access to this immediacy as idea and possibility but as the inherently victorious promise of the realization of this immediacy."<sup>16</sup> It is in the beatific vision, however, that the "absolute and fundamentally unsurpassable immediacy to God finds its completion."<sup>17</sup> What Rahner is trying to do with this affirmation is to set the grounds for "the genuine universality of a religion."<sup>18</sup>

What is at stake then is the role of Jesus in our access to God. We have been promised an immediate encounter with God at the moment of the beatific vision, but any other encounter with God has to be mediated. It is thus the Incarnation of Jesus, the mediated immediacy of God, which makes any relationship with God possible. That is why it is so important to analyze how we understand the way we become related to Jesus. In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus is the absolute self-communication of God to humankind. God's self-communication is expressed in the human nature of the Logos incarnated. Therefore, Jesus is close to God as well as he is close to humankind. For that reason we can call him the Mediator between the creator and his or her

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<sup>15</sup> Rahner, "Christology Today", 224.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

creature. It is through our own humanity that we are related to Jesus and it is our own humanity that gives us the means to accept God's self-communication.

#### **A. The absolute self-communication of God**

According to Rahner, through the life and word of Jesus we experience that "the history of the offer of an unsurpassable and absolute self-communication of God to humankind has entered a phase which can rightly be interpreted as the final phase of the history of human freedom as well as its first real beginning."<sup>19</sup> God's offer of self-communication in Jesus represents the end of an era, as well as the beginning of something completely new. The universe is not the same after Incarnation. God's self-communication in Jesus marks a new time opened to the unlimited. "Jesus is God's promise of himself to humankind, essentially absolutely unlimited and existentially now in a phase of eschatological irrevocability."<sup>20</sup>

In Jesus proclamation, it is implicitly expressed that the kingdom of God has come in him through his message and his work. If the kingdom of God is definitive and not just an earthly kingdom like others, it must be identical with God himself.<sup>21</sup> Rahner wants to overcome a model in which God is related to the world only as the creator and preserver of a world different from him, with its own possibilities and goals.<sup>22</sup> In creating the universe God constitutes something absolutely different from Himself. But when God decides to communicate to the creature what God communicates is his own self. It is through Uncreated Grace that God acts in the world. Uncreated Grace is not the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

consequence of creation. Uncreated grace is the way God communicates himself to man.<sup>23</sup>

Jesus is the irreversible pledge of the God who communicates himself as the content and goal of history.<sup>24</sup> This statement is “necessarily coterminous with the classical statement of Christology concerning the hypostatic union.”<sup>25</sup> And Jesus is also the irreversible acceptance of this divine offer. “If Jesus is to be God’s victorious self-promise in history, the historical fact of this victory and its manifestation is conceivable only if it is seen as the irrevocable acceptance of this divine self-offer in Jesus.”<sup>26</sup> Jesus is the offer and the acceptance at the same time.

We cannot run away from the hypostatic union. Rahner is going to insist on this point again and again. “The promise of the Spirit given through Jesus not only signifies the salvation of man, but rather the self-communication of the absolute God as he is in himself to humanity.”<sup>27</sup> Rahner claims that by his free Incarnation the Logos creates “the order of grace and nature as his own presupposition (nature) and his milieu (the grace of the other spiritual creatures).”<sup>28</sup> This comprehension of the hypostatic union will help us to have a deeper understanding of the Trinity. “The Logos would not be merely one of the divine persons who could become man if they wished: he would be the person in whom God communicates himself hypostatically to the world.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Karl Rahner, “Nature and Grace”, *Theological Investigations 4* (trans. K. Smyth; New York: Crossroad, 1982), 175.

<sup>24</sup> Rahner, “Christology Today”, 226.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Karl Rahner, “The Two Basic Types of Christology”, *Theological Investigations 13* (trans. D. Bourke; New York: Crossroad, 1983), 216.

<sup>28</sup> Rahner, “Nature and Grace”, 176.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Creation is therefore important as the place where God communicates himself. "Because, and to the extent that, God will not empty himself and bestow himself in an act of love into a void of nothingness, the world becomes that which opens itself to receive its own glory, which is sufficient for it."<sup>30</sup> Rahner claims that the world "comes to be in that God himself utters himself."<sup>31</sup> According to Rahner, the human being and the world are conceived as God's self-utterance. "This self-utterance of God is thought of as achieving its point of eschatological irreversibility in Jesus."<sup>32</sup> Creation of the world and human existence are unified in Jesus, the fullness of God's self-communication.

It is important, according to Rahner, to conceive the deed of God as one, in order to understand that the individual realities and events of the world are connected with one another remaining distinct from one another, and they all unified in Jesus. "The intrinsic unity which exists between the creation of the world and that unique event within this world which we recognize in faith in Jesus of Nazareth."<sup>33</sup>

Rahner also explains that the condition of possibility of the self-utterance of God outside himself is set by the immanent self-utterance of God in his eternal fullness.<sup>34</sup> It is a Trinitarian dynamic and this truth "might be the key to understanding why precisely the Logos of God became man and why he alone become man."<sup>35</sup> It is true that the constitution of something different from God is God's work without any distinction of persons. Nevertheless, everything

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. "The Two Basic Types of Christology" p 218.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>34</sup> Karl Rahner, "On the Theology of the Incarnation", *Theological Investigations 4* (trans. K. Smyth; New York: Crossroad, 1982), 115.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

changes when God “expresses himself in himself and for himself and so constitutes the original, divine, distinction in God himself.”<sup>36</sup> When God utters himself “this expression speaks out this immanent Word, and not something that could be true of another divine person.”<sup>37</sup>

This immanent Word will become flesh in the world in the man Jesus of Nazareth. This man, claims Rahner, is the self-utterance of God in its self-emptying, “because God expresses himself when he empties himself”<sup>38</sup>. That is the way God proclaims himself as love. God hides the majesty of this love, according to Rahner, when he “shows himself in the ordinary way of men.”<sup>39</sup> That’s what he does in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. God expresses his love for his creation in Jesus, a love that will be manifested in the words and actions of Jesus, a life that will reach its plenitude in his death and resurrection.

## **B. Jesus’ death and resurrection**

For Rahner, “the definitive and irrevocable acceptance of God’s promise of himself, visible in history, can be conceived as taking place only through what we call, in Christian terms, Jesus’ death and resurrection.”<sup>40</sup> Rahner highlights that Jesus’ death is of fundamental importance to salvation history because “it makes definitive the acceptance of God’s offer of himself to Jesus and in him to humankind.”<sup>41</sup>

Rahner claims that any “Christology for today and tomorrow would have to say much more than in the past about the highly personal loving relationship

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Karl Rahner, “Christology Today”, 226.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

of the individual human being to Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>42</sup> This relationship should be understood “as a dying with Jesus in absolute hope, and in a surrender to the incomprehensibility of the eternal God.”<sup>43</sup> Our relationship with Jesus has to open us and lead us to the eternal God. In this way, Christology would have a universal dimension and it would not be understood just as a particular religion.<sup>44</sup>

Christology has to be rooted in the terrestrial experience of Jesus of Nazareth, an experience that is only comprehensible if seen as a whole: his life, death and resurrection, which bring salvation to the human race. Therefore, it is the human experience of Jesus that is the condition of possibility that allows every human being in his quest for salvation to encounter Jesus as Savior: “In Jesus man experiences the fact that the mystery of man, which it is not for man himself to control, and which is bound up with the absurdity of guilt and death is, nevertheless, hidden in the love of God.”<sup>45</sup> Jesus’ death and resurrection expresses this hidden love of God for humankind.

In his theology of death, Rahner finds a beautiful metaphor to talk about Jesus’ death and how his death is related to the whole of creation. Rahner compares Jesus’ body to a vessel, which is shattered on the cross, and this action allows his Spirit to be poured out all over the cosmos. “He became actually, in his very humanity, what he had always been by his dignity, the heart

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p 227.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Rahner, “The Two Basic Types of Christology”, 215.



of the universe, the innermost center of creation.”<sup>46</sup> This is how Christ’s humanity can enter into an effective active relationship with all humankind.

According to Rahner, the reality of Christ consummated through his death “is built into this unity of the cosmos, becoming a feature and intrinsic principle of it, and a prior framework and factor of all personal life in the world.”<sup>47</sup> The whole of the reality of Christ, his Incarnation and his death, as well as his resurrection, are the ground of human life. Rahner argues that “the world as a whole and as the scene of personal human actions has become different from what it would have been had Christ not died.”<sup>48</sup> It means that the world is different because of Jesus’ death. Rahner claims that possibilities of “a real ontological nature were opened up for the personal action of all other men which would not have existed without the death of our Lord.”<sup>49</sup>

Jesus’ death allows us to enter into a relationship with God in a way that was not possible before. “Jesus of Nazareth, as the one who, from the depths of his being, grounded in God, has surrendered himself in obedience to this God and has been accepted as such by him – this is made plain by the Resurrection.”<sup>50</sup> Jesus was able to surrender himself in obedience to God “because he was and is the one who had always been accepted by God.”<sup>51</sup>

Rahner claims that Jesus in his self-interpretation, his death and his resurrection, is the unsurpassable, definitive and eschatological word of God’s

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<sup>46</sup> Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (trans. W.J. O’Hara; Freiburg/London: Herder/Burns & Oates, 1965), 66.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Rahner, “I Believe in Jesus Christ”, 167.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

affirmation of himself to the world.<sup>52</sup> This affirmation contains, according to Rahner, the traditional doctrine of the hypostatic unity of the Logos with the human reality of Jesus. "By accepting Jesus as God's irreversible, definitive self-promise to us we are already confessing him as the consubstantial Son of God."<sup>53</sup> It is his life, death and resurrection that enables us confess his divinity.

### **C. The Incarnation and the human nature of Jesus**

We cannot do any serious Christological reflection, Rahner would say, if we do not take account of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is the problem that Rahner finds in our classical Christological formulations of faith. According to him, the Church's Christological dogma never claims to be an adequate condensation of Biblical teaching,<sup>54</sup> and so, there is always space for further Christological and Biblical theology that can keep us close to Jesus of Nazareth.

Rahner wants to highlight the human nature Jesus, the Logos. He wants us to go back to the narrative of the Gospel as a way to keep us rooted in Jesus of Nazareth, something that, according to him, the Chalcedonian formulations of Jesus do not do enough.<sup>55</sup> This is why Rahner insists that all Christology must "be forced to return to the quite simple experience of Jesus of Nazareth,"<sup>56</sup> again and again, in order to achieve intelligibility and to justify its own propositions.

When Rahner stresses the humanity of Jesus he is not diminishing the place of the Logos. According to Rahner, we must conceive the relation between Jesus, the Logos and his human nature as one where both independence and

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<sup>52</sup> Karl Rahner, "Jesus Christ – The Meaning of Life", *Theological Investigations* 21 (trans. H. Riley; New York: Crossroad, 1988), 216.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Rahner, "Current Problems in Christology", 154.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>56</sup> Rahner, "The Two Basic Types of Christology", 221.

radical proximity equally reach perfection, and thus, remains “the perfection of a relation between Creator and creature.”<sup>57</sup> The reality of Christ, Rahner says, is intrinsically unique and cannot be derived from anything else<sup>58</sup>. “The reality of Christ appears as peak and conclusion of the mysterious goal of God’s plan and activity for his creation from all eternity.”<sup>59</sup>

There is where we find the Incarnation of the Logos as the ontological goal of the movement of creation as a whole, in relation to which everything prior is merely a preparation for this moment.<sup>60</sup> Rahner claims that the Incarnation appears as oriented from the very first to “this point in which God achieves once and for all both the greatest proximity and distance from what is other than he.”<sup>61</sup>

Rahner argues that in Christ the world as a whole, even in its physical reality, has really reached historically through Christ that point in which God becomes all in all.<sup>62</sup> The Logos, according to Rahner, not only becomes man in Christ, but we can say that it assumed a human history.<sup>63</sup> The Logos assumed the entire history of the world and of humanity before and after Incarnation, and the fullness of that history and its end. It follows, says Rahner, that Christ has always been involved in the whole of history as its prospective actuality.<sup>64</sup>

Rahner acknowledges the tension between humanity and divinity in Jesus Christ. And we cannot get rid of this tension. The Logos possesses the absolute divine being, but his identity cannot be understood without the human

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<sup>57</sup> Rahner, “Current Problems in Christology”, 162.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

nature Jesus assumed. Humanity is, according to Rahner, a reality absolutely open upwards. The human being reaches its highest perfection “when in it the Logos himself becomes existent in the world.”<sup>65</sup>

Rahner insists that we should not think of this humanity as something added on to God. We should understand it as God’s very presence in the world, “and hence see it in a true, spontaneous vitality and freedom before God”<sup>66</sup> If we do that, according to Rahner, the abiding mystery of our faith becomes more intelligible, and “also an expression of our very own existence.”<sup>67</sup>

Once again, Rahner reclaims our humanity as an active player in this cosmic drama. He does not put the accent on the knowability of the object, but in the subject and his openness with regard to that object.<sup>68</sup> To understand God’s self-communication, we have to examine what are the conditions of possibility in our humanity for this communication to be received. The focus is therefore on our own capability as human beings to believe in Christ and through him in God’s offer of self-communication. “We only radically understand ourselves for what we really are, when we grasp the fact that we are existential beings because God willed to be man, and thereby willed that we should be those in whom he as a man can only encounter his own self by loving us.”<sup>69</sup>

Humanity is at the foundation of Rahner’s theological reflection. This is why he insists on the place we must give to the humanity of Christ, which helps us to understand our own humanity. Rahner criticizes the view that Christ finds

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 184.

a place only as God, and not as human, in the ordinary religious act of every Christian when it does not refer precisely to the historical life of Jesus.<sup>70</sup>

We have to offer a picture of the world, says Rahner, where Christ as man is meaningful.<sup>71</sup> The final and decisive event of human history has already happened: God has become man. "The summit of all 'evolution', the irruption of God into the world and the radical opening of the world to the free infinity of God in Christ, has already been realized for the whole world,"<sup>72</sup> even though everything must still reveal itself within the world "in the reflection and the image of all history still to come, in an eschatological climax."<sup>73</sup> Already, but not yet.

Jesus of Nazareth is, according to Rahner, not merely an utterance from God to man. Jesus cannot be subsumed under the category of prophet and religious reformer. He is "the definitive, unsurpassable and victorious utterance of God to man."<sup>74</sup> The Incarnation, says Rahner, is "the historical supreme point of a transcendental, albeit free, relationship of God to that which is not divine."<sup>75</sup> God enters into this relationship to have his own personal history of love with his own creation.<sup>76</sup>

What God does is not only an action of descending to the human nature, but also an action of ascent of this human nature. Rahner claims that the created reality through which God's self-communication takes place "must be

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Rahner, "The Two Basic Types of Christology", 215.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

the reality of God in such a unique way.”<sup>77</sup> God’s presence in Jesus has to be unique: “God’s word of revelation for us beyond which there can be no other must be God’s own reality.”<sup>78</sup>

The issue at play is our own capacity to enter in a relationship with God. For that we need is a mediator. That is what Jesus does. In order to do that Jesus has to be fully human and fully divine. Jesus’ human reality, claims Rahner, “must be something that is not merely established by the God who is beyond the world, but it must be God’s own reality.”<sup>79</sup> We are completely different from God. This is why we need a mediation that allows us being in relationship with God. To be a mediator Jesus has to share our human nature and at the same time his relationship with God must be unique, namely he must be divine himself.

As we have seen before, we cannot get away from our classical formulations of faith. What we Christians call Incarnation, Rahner notes, “is the uncompounded and inseparable unity of God and man, in which God remains totally God, man is radically man, and both are One, uncompounded and inseparable, in this Jesus who is the Christ of faith.”<sup>80</sup>

“If God himself is man and remains so forever”<sup>81</sup>, all theology is therefore eternally anthropology. If “God remains the insoluble mystery, man is forever the articulate mystery of God.”<sup>82</sup> Our classical formulations have the form of an end and a beginning. And Christology, Rahner contends, is also the end and beginning of anthropology. We can therefore say the same about Jesus in

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<sup>77</sup> Rahner, “Jesus Christ – The Meaning of Life”, 217.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Rahner, “I Believe in Jesus Christ”, 168.

<sup>81</sup> Rahner, “On the Theology of the Incarnation”, 116.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 117.

human history. "It is the theology which God himself has taught, by speaking out his Word, as our flesh, into the void of the non-divine and sinful. It is also the theology which we pursue in faith, unless we think that we could find God without the man Christ, and so without man at all."<sup>83</sup>

### ***III. Jesus and the access to God as Trinity***

Rahner puts it clearly: we cannot find God if we don't take account of our own humanity. And it is Jesus Christ who helps us to understand our own humanity for he is the one who gives us access to God as Trinity. According to Rahner, the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word of God is the very center of the reality from which we Christians live. And it is this mystery of the Incarnation that opens us up to the mystery of the divine Trinity. "Only here is the mystery of our participation in the divine nature accorded to us."<sup>84</sup>

But what can we say about the mystery of the Trinity? "Christian theology must always address itself to the Trinitarian confession of faith."<sup>85</sup> However this is one of the most difficult topics to explain in Christian theology. How can we explain that we are monotheists like Jews and Muslims, yet at the same time that we believe in one God constituted as three different persons? There is no an easy answer.

One possible solution to avoid the difficult issue is just not to talk about it. After all, many Christians do not know what it is about and most of them do not understand what we say when we talk about the Trinity. As Rahner says, if

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>85</sup> Karl Rahner, "The Mystery of the Trinity", *Theological Investigations 16* (trans. D. Morland; New York: Crossroad, 1983), 255.

we erase the doctrine of Trinity as it has been presented for a long time, many Christians will continue with their lives without any problem.<sup>86</sup>

Although silence could be the easiest way in engaging the Trinity, Rahner can help us to go in a different direction to face the problem and to talk about the Trinity because this doctrine is fundamental to our understanding of the Christian faith, as it is most relevant to our daily life. "We must try to make the doctrine of the Trinity fruitful for practical Christian living, given that the Trinity is of crucial importance for actual Christian life and spirituality."<sup>87</sup>

"If God is Trinitarian and is actually related to man and not merely by appropriation, then the communication of being and of self by God must also be Trinitarian."<sup>88</sup> Rahner's anthropological approach can be helpful for us to understand this communication. We can talk about the Trinity only on the basis of our experience of the life, death and resurrection of Christ. It is Jesus Christ who leads us into the mystery of the Trinity.

#### **A. Economic and Immanent**

The axiom, "The Trinity of the economy of salvation is the immanent Trinity and vice versa,"<sup>89</sup> is a very powerful statement that can help us to understand how we experience the Trinity. If the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa, it means that we can have access to God's inner-relationship thanks to Jesus Christ. Yes, we can know God in his most intimate experience because he wanted to communicate himself in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>86</sup> Karl Rahner, "Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise 'De Trinitate'", *Theological Investigations 4* (trans. K. Smyth; New York: Crossroad, 1982), 79.

<sup>87</sup> Rahner, "The Mystery of the Trinity", 256.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>89</sup> Rahner, "Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise 'De Trinitate'", 87.



God's communication cannot be partial; it has to be a complete communication. Everything we know is what God wanted to communicate to us, and it must be God in his totality. Even if we are not able to comprehend this communication totally, we can grasp it with grace that is the Spirit of Jesus Christ. God really is the way God has revealed God-self to us.

When we talk about the Trinity, then, we are not talking primarily about a doctrine, but about an experience. "When entering upon the doctrine of the Trinity, we need not hesitate to appeal to our own experience of Jesus and his Spirit in us as given in the history of salvation and faith. The Trinity is not merely a reality to be expressed in purely doctrinal terms: it takes place in us, and does not first reach us in the form of statements communicated by revelation. On the contrary, these statements have been made to us because the reality of which they speak has been accorded to us."<sup>90</sup>

Even though we make a distinction between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity, because of the Incarnation the immanent Trinity does not stay distant from us, on the contrary in knowing the economic Trinity we do know the immanent Trinity. It is in Jesus Christ that we can understand God as three persons. There is no other way to understand this mystery.

When we talk of Christ we do not do it in an abstract fashion, but of Jesus as he has been narrated about in the Scriptures. Rahner wants to rescue the Trinity from irrelevance and he does it by rescuing Christology from mythology. For this reason, our access to the mystery of the Trinity is possible through the Gospels where we are told how the Father is revealed in his Son and how his

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 98.

Spirit is sent to his disciples. We go from the experience lived by the disciples to our own experience of the Trinity.

The Father is by definition “the unoriginated one who is essentially invisible and who shows and reveals himself only by uttering his Word to the world. And the Word, by definition, is both immanently and in the economy of salvation the revelation of the Father, so that a revelation of the Father without the Logos and his incarnation would be the same as a wordless utterance.”<sup>91</sup> The Father and the Logos are related and they act together, but each one of them keeps his specific action towards the world. Therefore, “the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be adequately distinguished from the doctrine of the economy of salvation.”<sup>92</sup>

For Rahner, it is important to be clear about the role of Jesus. He is not simply God in general. He is the Son, the second divine Person. We cannot forget that it is precisely, the Logos of God who has become human.<sup>93</sup> “The Logos is such as he appears to be in revelation: as the revealer of the triune God by virtue of the personal being which is proper to him alone, as Logos of the Father and not as one of the possible bearers of revelation.”<sup>94</sup>

We cannot say that any of the three persons could be incarnated, but only the second person. God has become man, but not just any of the persons: only the Logos assumed Flesh. The Incarnation of the Logos reveals something of himself, about his proper divine being, which cannot be understood, separate from humanity. This insistence points out that each of the three persons has

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 92.

different functions and roles. It is not that any of the persons could incarnate, for this would mean on the one hand that it would not do justice to God because the three persons would be undifferentiated, and, on the other hand, it would not do justice to human nature, which constitutes the real symbol of Logos himself.

As Rahner puts it, something takes place in the world, outside the immanent divine life.<sup>95</sup> "It is an event of the Logos alone, the history of one divine person in contrast to the others."<sup>96</sup> It does not mean that the Logos is not related to the other divine persons, but each person communicates himself to man in his own special and different way. "This Trinitarian communication is the real ontological foundation of the life of grace in man and of the immediate vision of the divine persons at the moment of fulfillment. This self-communication of the divine persons obviously takes place according to and by virtue of their relation to one another."<sup>97</sup>

But what is particular to the Logos is the assumption of the human nature, which is not an outward mask or a dress uniform<sup>98</sup>. It is, according to Rahner, "by virtue of its origin, the constitutive real symbol of the Logos himself."<sup>99</sup> "What Jesus is and does as man, is the self-revealing existence of the Logos as our salvation among us. But then we can really say, in the full sense of the words; here the Logos with God and the Logos with us, the Logos of the

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

immanent Trinity and the Logos of the economy of salvation, is strictly one and the same.”<sup>100</sup>

Rahner claims that the Trinity can be “really possessed by us in the historic experience of salvation and grace which is given in Jesus and the Spirit of God working in us.”<sup>101</sup> This is what allows us to have access to the mystery of the Trinity, which is mediated by the human nature that we share with the Logos. It is our human existence rooted ontologically in Jesus Christ, the Logos of God, what makes possible our encounter with God.

#### ***IV. Conclusion***

The project of this first chapter was to develop what are the conditions of possibility for us human beings to have a personal encounter with God through Jesus Christ. Our initial question was: Is it possible for us, human beings, to have a personal relationship with Jesus today? I claim that it is actually possible and I’ve tried to show what are the theological foundations of this affirmation. In the second chapter I will discuss Rahner’s theology of grace that will show us how this personal relationship with Jesus is possible.

A personal relationship with Jesus has to be understood in the light of our Christian tradition as its background. This is why I engaged in the first part in a discussion about the fidelity to our own tradition and the openness to creativity. Any discussion about Jesus has to include our classical Christological formulations. Nevertheless, this loyalty to our roots cannot be divorced from a dialogue with the contemporary world. Our project of shaping a theology of discipleship for today is part of this openness to creativity.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 99

Our fidelity to the classical Christian formulations of faith leads us to discuss the central place of Jesus of Nazareth in our reflection. His life, death and resurrection are the definitive self-communication of God. Our intention of creating a theology of discipleship of a universal dimension has to be rooted in our comprehension of Jesus Christ as the definitive communication of God to the human race. Because of the Incarnation human history is not the same. Jesus marks an end and a new beginning opened to an eschatological climax.

Any Christology cannot be complete if it is not in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity. Our Christian faith is a Trinitarian faith. The human nature we share with the Logos gives us access to the mystery of the Trinity. Humanity mediates our immediate encounter with God. We can have a personal relationship with Jesus because of our humanity and because he is fully human and fully divine, a real mediator between the creator and his creatures.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Following Jesus: Rahner's spirituality for today**

In the first chapter I discussed the conditions of possibility of a personal relationship with Jesus today. What I will try to do in the second chapter is to develop what it means to follow Jesus today. In this chapter I would like to show in what way we can experience our relationship with Jesus and how it is shaped. If the first chapter was more theological because it emphasized the role of Jesus Christ as mediator between the creator and us, the second chapter will be more anthropological. I will focus my reflection on our own humanity as the locus of God's grace. In this way, I will be able to develop a spirituality of discipleship. The question that I will try to answer is: How is it possible to follow Jesus today? I will try to respond by analyzing Rahner's anthropological theology. His spiritual reflection on Ignatian discernment will also be helpful in discussing our capacity to choose to follow Jesus. This will lead us to reflect on our experience of sacramental life within the Church.

The first point begins where the previous chapter ended. At the end of it we saw that through the humanity that we share with the Incarnate Logos of God we can have access to the mystery of the Trinity. Our existence as human beings is rooted in the humanity of Jesus Christ. If the first chapter was focused on Jesus Christ's humanity, then this first point of the second chapter will focus on our own humanity as the place that God's Spirit inhabits. I will discuss Rahner's reflection on nature and grace and how he is helpful to understand our humanity as the locus of God's grace, while keeping safe God's freedom, as well

as our own capacity to accept God's gift. I will try to show how we can find in our own human nature the place where God's supernatural love can dwell.

Thus, I will move from anthropology to spirituality. The analysis of the way nature and grace are related, how they are unified while safeguarding their diversity in our own humanity, will allow me to develop a spirituality of discipleship. This point will be inspired by the Ignatian spirituality that undergirds Rahner's theological reflection. I will discuss Ignatian discernment as the way we can move from an implicit to an explicit acceptance of God's offer of his grace. The first point will help us to understand how every human being is created for and oriented towards God. In the second point we will go one step further: Ignatian discernment can help us to make a choice, of deciding to accept Jesus in our lives or not. If through this discernment we become aware that our humanity is opened to receive God's grace, this same discernment will bring us the means that will make it possible to follow Jesus in our present time.

Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises tell us that it is possible to follow Jesus because God's self-communication in Christ shapes humanity: by God's grace we become part of Christ's life. The grace that we receive is the grace of Christ. Our lives and the whole world are affected and shaped by Jesus' existence. And when we talk about Jesus' existence, we refer to the life and words of Jesus of Nazareth, whom Ignatius invites us to follow in the Spiritual Exercises, as well as in his permanent presence in our world and in our Church through his Spirit.

The third point will show how personal and ecclesial prayer is a way to go deep into our own encounter with Jesus. Discipleship cannot be understood apart from the Church and the sacraments, even as we should stay open to recognize God's presence outside the Church. However, we are first of all

invited to recognize the presence of the Lord in the Christian community at worship. It will help us to understand discipleship in a sacramental way.

### ***1. Humanity: the locus of God's grace***

In the first chapter we saw how Rahner insists that the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth is the key to understanding our relationship with God. It is the humanity that we share with Jesus Christ, the Logos of God that gives us access to the Trinity. It was important to set up Rahner's Christology as the theological foundation of our project. We have shown that the humanity of Jesus Christ is the condition of possibility of having a relationship with him. But what about our own humanity? If we talk about a relationship it means that there are two poles in relation. This is why in this chapter I will focus on our own humanity as the place where God's grace acts. We will move from a Christological focus to an anthropological one. Rahner teaches us that these two foci are neither opposed, nor in competition. "Anthropology and Christology mutually determine each other within Christian dogmatics if they are both correctly understood."<sup>102</sup>

Human being has to be understood, according to Rahner, as the being "who is absolutely transcendent in respect of God."<sup>103</sup> And, anthropology has to be understood therefore as a transcendental anthropology: "A transcendental investigation examines an issue according to the necessary conditions given by the possibility of knowledge and action on the part of the subject himself."<sup>104</sup> This is what I am going to do in the paragraphs below. I will try to examine the conditions that allow our possibility of knowledge with respect to God. God's

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<sup>102</sup> Karl Rahner, "Theology and Anthropology", *Theological Investigations 9* (trans. G. Harrison; New York: Seabury, 1972), 28.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 29.



grace is an offer to us. It is his initiative. What I will try to examine now is our capacity to accept this offer.

### **A. Transcendental anthropology**

Even though God's offer of grace is always his initiative, we cannot have any knowledge about it from God's point of view. We have to examine what we, as human beings, can say about it. God becomes the object of our analysis and we are the knowing subjects. But God "is not one object among others in the realm of man's a posteriori knowledge, but the fundamental ground and the absolute future of all reality."<sup>105</sup> In this sense, God can only be understood as "the absolute point of man's transcendental orientation."<sup>106</sup> It is only because of the transcendental horizon, Rahner claims, that God "can be understood at all."<sup>107</sup> Hence, what we have to investigate is man's receptivity<sup>108</sup>.

"The transcendental orientation of man to the incomprehensible and ineffable Mystery, which constitutes the enabling condition for knowledge and freedom, and therefore for subjective life as such, in itself implies a real, albeit a non-thematic experience of God."<sup>109</sup> According to Rahner, the experience of self and the experience of God constitute a unity, even though they are not identical.<sup>110</sup> It is through the self-experience that the subject recognizes that it is finite, and at the same time, in its transcendentality, the subject becomes aware of his or her "absolute orientation towards the infinite."<sup>111</sup> Every

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>109</sup> Karl Rahner, "Experience of Self and Experience of God", *Theological Investigations 13* (trans. D. Bourke; New York: Seabury, 1975), 123.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 125.

experience of God “is a process in which this subject is at the same time made present to itself and experiences itself.”<sup>112</sup>

As we already know, God himself is at the foundation of the reality of faith. God is our salvation “through his absolute self-communication”<sup>113</sup>. This salvation is mediated through the uncreated grace<sup>114</sup>. Rahner recalls this grace is the grace of Christ.<sup>115</sup> “If Trinity and Incarnation are implicit in the mystery of grace, it becomes intelligible that grace not only belongs to the core of the salvation/revelation reality, but is its core.”<sup>116</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to understand grace and how it is related to us. The only possible meaningful way to speak of grace at all, Rahner contends, is “within a transcendental anthropological context.”<sup>117</sup>

“Grace is God himself in self-communication.”<sup>118</sup> At the same time, grace is also “a conditioning of the spiritual and intellectual subject as such to a direct relationship with God.”<sup>119</sup> This allows Rahner to claim that the human being “is the one who listens to God in history.”<sup>120</sup> The human being is a being with an infinite horizon.<sup>121</sup> “In the fact that he experiences his finiteness radically, he reaches beyond this finiteness and experiences himself as a transcendent being, as spirit.”<sup>122</sup> However, even though this subject experiences himself open to the

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Rahner, “Theology and Anthropology”, 36.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>121</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith : An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (trans. W. Dych; New York: Seabury, 1978), 32.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

ineffable, he cannot understand himself as an absolute subject, except “only in the sense of one who receives being, ultimately only in the sense of grace.”<sup>123</sup>

According to Rahner, the communication of God as mystery can only take place in grace. It is through grace that God communicates himself and it is thanks to grace that the human being can receive God’s self-communication. “Mystery demands, as the condition of possibility of its being heard, a hearer divinized by grace.”<sup>124</sup> The human being is a being of “absolute and unlimited transcendence.”<sup>125</sup> Hence, his experience of transcendence can be described as “the limitless openness of the subject itself.”<sup>126</sup> Therefore, the human being, “because his real being, as spirit, is transcendence, the being of the holy mystery. Man is he who is always confronted with the holy mystery.”<sup>127</sup> Even when human being is not conscious of it, he “always lives by the holy mystery.”<sup>128</sup>

It is important now to discuss how Rahner explains the relationship between God and the non-divine. When Rahner elaborates his theology of grace he makes an important distinction between the quasi-formal causality on the part of God and his efficient causality; these are two different ways God approaches the non-divine. “By means of his creative efficient causality God brings into existence that which is absolutely other than he.”<sup>129</sup> God gives the human being its existence as human being by efficient causality. But in the Incarnation and grace, God gives himself. “God does not create something

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>124</sup> Karl Rahner, “The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology”, *Theological Investigations 4* (trans. K. Smyth; New York: Crossroad, 1982), 46.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 65.

different from himself, but imparts himself to the created nature. What is given in grace and incarnation is not something distinct from God, but God himself.”<sup>130</sup> This is God’s action as quasi-formal causality.

## **B. The Supernatural existential**

In Rahner’s doctrine of grace the central element is the uncreated grace, which is “the immediate self-communication of God in quasi-formal causality. This is in contrast to efficient causality. This distinction between efficient and quasi-formal causality in God is the clear basis for the essential and radical distinction between the natural and the supernatural.”<sup>131</sup> For Rahner, it is important to make that distinction even though he will notice that it is an impossible task for us to determine when our actions are motivated by one or the other. What is clear for him is that “God communicates himself in his own person to the creature, as absolute proximity and as the absolute holy mystery.”<sup>132</sup>

It follows that the uncreated grace is the quasi-formal cause of humanity in its transcendentality. In grace, God gives Godself to the human being. “God in his own most proper reality makes himself the innermost constitutive element of man.”<sup>133</sup> Rahner helps us to understand the movement of God’s self-communication. By creation God acts as efficient causality, but God’s self-giving cannot be reduced to an efficient cause. This is why Rahner insists that by grace God acts as quasi-formal causality. Rahner uses the term quasi-formal causality because he wants to safeguard divine transcendence. Formal implies an inborn

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>133</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 116.

potentiality that would be contradictory with God's gratuity. On the contrary, the quasi-formal keeps God's freedom safe with the supernatural existential.

Even though God communicates his own self, God never stops being God. We cannot understand God's offer of his grace as an achieved divinization of the human being. "Divine self-communication means that God can communicate himself his own reality to what is not divine without ceasing to be infinite reality and absolute mystery, and without man ceasing to be a finite existent different from God."<sup>134</sup> To have a real relationship both partners have to be free. God has to be free to offer his gift and the human being has to be free to accept this offer. None of this is possible if God does not offer his own self and through his grace the human being is able to receive this offer. That is what the supernatural existential tries to explain.

Our human nature is never pure nature. "It is a nature installed in a supernatural order which man can never leave."<sup>135</sup> Our nature, according to Rahner, is continually "being determined by the supernatural grace of salvation offered to it."<sup>136</sup> The nature of a spiritual being is not opposed to its supernatural elevation. "The supernatural elevation of man is, though not due to him, the absolute fulfillment of his being."<sup>137</sup> It means that our ordination for the possession of God is not due to our 'pure' nature, which does not exist, according to Rahner. My longing for God is rooted in the supernatural order. "It follows from the innermost essence of grace that a disposition for grace

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>135</sup> Rahner, "Nature and Grace", 183.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

belonging to man's nature is impossible, or it follows that such a disposition, in case it is needed, itself belongs to this supernatural order already."<sup>138</sup>

At this point in the discussion, we must have it clear that there are two different orders: the natural and the supernatural. Though these two orders are related, they should not be confused as mixed in an undifferentiated way. Our humanity is constituted by God's grace. But this constitution is not invasive of our own freedom as human beings. God establishes our spiritual self since our creation because God wants to communicate with us. For this communication to be possible, God gives us by grace the gift of our own capability to receive his communication. Even if it is given to us at the moment of our creation, and remains with us, this capability is always a free gift from God.

As spiritual beings that we are, we are oriented towards God. But this orientation cannot be understood as automatic or as an intrinsic consequence of our creation. If we understand our supernatural longing this way, God's offer would not be gratuitous at all. It would mean that at one point in our existence we would just reach grace as the result of a process that began with our creation. Rahner is against any understanding of nature as pure that would carry with it a false understanding of the supernatural as imposed and extrinsic. But, at the same time, Rahner is against any interpretation of the supernatural just as an evolutionary consequence of the nature. Rahner is always trying to keep safe God's gratuitous offer of grace and our own freedom to accept this offer of self-communication. We have to find a balance without falling into one or other extreme. The orientation towards God is not intrinsic to our nature and

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<sup>138</sup> Karl Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace", *Theological Investigations 1* (trans. C. Ernst; London: Darton, Longman & Todd), 308.

the supernatural gift of grace is not extrinsic. "The spiritual creature is constituted to begin with as the possible addressee of such a divine self-communication."<sup>139</sup>

Humanity is then "the event of God's absolute self-communication."<sup>140</sup> This is a statement that Rahner intends to be valid for every one in the world, the baptized, the justified, the pagans and sinners.<sup>141</sup> For Rahner, Christianity cannot be just a local religion; he wants to demonstrate how Christianity has a universal dimension, how Christianity can talk to every human being. The supernatural existential is therefore part of this intention. Rahner finds in this category the universal element that all human beings share. "The statement that man as subject is the event of God's self-communication is a statement which refers to absolutely all men, and which expresses an existential for every person."<sup>142</sup>

This self-communication, we cannot forget, is present in every person "at least in the mode of an offer."<sup>143</sup> Every person must be understood "as the event of a supernatural self-communication of God, although not in the sense that every person necessarily accepts in freedom God's self-communication to man."<sup>144</sup> God's self-communication is not only God's offer but also "the necessary condition which makes its acceptance possible."<sup>145</sup> The supernatural existential has to be understood as God's self-communication offered to human beings and "always present in man as the prior condition of possibility for its

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<sup>139</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 123.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 128.

acceptance.”<sup>146</sup> The supernatural existential refers therefore to God bestowing Godself upon every human being. If we are capable of having a relationship with God, it is because God offers himself in self-communication to us, and his supernatural grace is what allows us to accept this offer.

### **C. To say yes to Jesus is to say yes to God**

It is important not to forget the inseparable link between following Jesus with our decision to accept God’s offer of self-communication. If we open ourselves to accepting God’s grace in our existence, we open ourselves to Jesus Christ, through whom God’s grace is revealed in human history. Therefore, the humanity of Jesus Christ plays an important role in our decision to say “yes” to God. As we have noted above, the existence of creation is the product of God’s self-communication, and the Incarnation is certainly a unique moment in this relation between divinity and humanity. Since the Incarnation, both God and humankind are related to each other in a new and definitive way. Moreover, our humanity cannot be understood if it is not related to the Incarnation, to Jesus’ life, words, death and resurrection. “The whole human race is centered, from the beginning, on the Son of Man as the core of its meaning.”<sup>147</sup>

Humanity as such is God’s spoken language of self-expression. When God utters his Word humanity is created<sup>148</sup>, and this humanity as a whole comes to its fullness in the Incarnation. That is how we should understand what Rahner says about our relation to Jesus in an ontological way. The main reason to

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Karl Rahner, “On the Following of Christ” in *Karl Rahner: Spiritual Writings* (ed. P. Endean; Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 113.

<sup>148</sup> Karl Rahner, “The Theology of Symbol”, *Theological Investigations 4* (trans. K. Smyth; New York: Crossroad, 1982), 239.



follow Jesus cannot lie in the moral teachings of Jesus. We do not follow Jesus because we are told to do so; it is because it is a response of our deepest self to Jesus' call. Even if we decide not to follow Jesus, there is an ontological link that we cannot deny. "We must not water this participation in Jesus' life down to a matter merely of ethics, so to speak, or of the imagination. Any moral influence that Jesus has must be dependent, fundamentally, on a very real ontological influence."<sup>149</sup>

On the one hand, our lives are shaped by Jesus' existence, in other words our existence is rooted in Jesus' life, while, on the other hand, it is through Jesus' historical life that our access to the life of the Trinity is possible. Rahner claims that "in our being taken up into the concrete, historical life of Jesus of Nazareth our entry into the blessedness of the triune, inner-divine life is already happening."<sup>150</sup> Our encounter with the triune God is mediated through Jesus' humanity, which has to be understood as linked to Jesus of Nazareth's historical life, and through our own humanity.

According to Rahner, grace is "a concrete assimilation to Christ, a becoming part of his life. Thus it is the grace of Christ"<sup>151</sup> We are therefore oriented to the Incarnation of the Word, "we are drawn into the life of Jesus by the very fact of this Incarnation, and by the whole history of his living and dying."<sup>152</sup> That is why Rahner will insist that the life of each one of us "is really affected, specified, and fundamentally shaped by Jesus' existence."<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Rahner, "On the Following of Christ", 113.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

But we should not forget that all this is God's will. God's self-communication has as its goal the gift of his grace to us, human creatures, and this is possible through Jesus Christ, God's Word, God's symbol. Jesus is the symbol of God, or, as we would rather say, Jesus is the parable of God. Jesus, during his earthly life, spoke in parables to explain what God is, and then he became a parable that explains and allows the humankind access to understanding what God is. Jesus is therefore God's parable, God's symbol, because it is what it expresses. It expresses God, and doing it Jesus gives us access to God.

To follow Jesus is an existential call, and we are always free to give a positive or a negative response, to say "yes", or to say "no". It is a call that comes from our own humanity and the way we exist in relation to others in the world. However, we can shut ourselves off from this call. But even if we do it, according to Rahner, we will never succeed. "Even if we reject it personally, it remains the most central constituent of humanity."<sup>154</sup> We can say no to what is the most fundamental part of our own humanity, but even if we do it, we are still human. Thus, there is something of that truth of being human that we cannot escape from.

An example can help us to understand this. We can think about the most evil men in history, someone like Hitler. With his actions, he dehumanized himself, he said no to what is human, he did not act humanly. Nevertheless he was always a human being and he could have acted otherwise because of this human constitution. This is an extreme example. It does not mean that everyone who says no to Jesus will become an evil person capable of atrocities.

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

But the point is that even if we say no to what is most human in us, and in doing it, we say “no” to Jesus and to God’s grace offered in him, what constitutes us as human remains. Jesus’ humanity will always be the source of our own humanity.

“If we look at Jesus of Nazareth and listen to his word it will become clear what we are, and always have been: those whose basis and reason for living is the incarnate, eternal Word who in Jesus of Nazareth is publicly present in the world.”<sup>155</sup> This path is not alien to our nature, but the unfolding of what we are: “those who are destined in the deepest part of our being for life with Christ.”<sup>156</sup>

If we decide to follow Jesus, it is our personal and fundamental decision and we have to take responsibility for that, but following Christ is fundamentally an act of obedience, Rahner insists. “In the following of Christ, then, decisions for oneself and subordination to Christ are not in contradiction with each other: both are essential, fundamentally inseparable aspects of the one act of surrender to the Lord.”<sup>157</sup> At the end, we just obey our deepest call. We just surrender before God, before Jesus. We say “yes” because we have to say “yes” if we are honest with ourselves.

Being a Christian requires of us awareness of the tensions that we have to live with, sometimes in a more calm way and sometimes just as a wrestling. The freedom of one’s decision has to be held together with subordination to Christ. “You will not always find harmony between them easy to achieve or

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 119.

painless. The tension between them is something quite characteristic of Christian existence.”<sup>158</sup>

Following Jesus is not an act borne out of tensions. It requires the whole person to be involved in this personal relationship with Jesus today. We have to be open to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who gives us access to the Trinity. For this, we have to say “yes” to Jesus of Nazareth, his life, words, death and resurrection. This fundamental choice in our lives is possible through Ignatian discernment and the Ignatian Exercises, where we are invited to know Jesus inside of ourselves, to become able to love him and to follow him. The encounter between the Creator and his creature needs that internal knowledge of Jesus who takes us to the Father.

## ***II. Ignatian discernment***

At this point in the discussion, we have seen the role that our humanity plays in the possibility of having a relationship with God. Rahner’s theology of grace gives us the framework to understand how in our own humanity we can find the capacity to receive God’s self-communication. Rahner claims that every human being is able to do it. Thus, we are talking about a possibility that the whole human race shares. Rahner also argues that God’s grace cannot be understood without Jesus Christ. What we receive is the grace of Christ. There is then the importance to say “yes” to Jesus for this is the act of saying “yes” to the holy mystery of God.

This is what I have accomplished thus far in my analysis. This now enables us to continue constructing a theology of discipleship for today. I will

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

discuss Ignatian discernment as the way we can make an explicit choice for Jesus Christ in our lives. We move then from anthropology to spirituality. We have received God's gift and we are able to receive his communication. Now we have to analyze our spiritual lives as the ground where we can find that call that we have discussed about above. To become aware of God's call is the first step; the second is to decide what to do with this invitation. We know from our discussion that if we accept Jesus Christ we accept God. The question now is, how do we do it? How do we recognize God's call and by what means can I give a response? This is what I will try to analyze following Rahner's approach of Ignatian spirituality.

I claim that to follow Jesus is not merely about having Jesus as a model to imitate. It is an existential obedience in faith. It is something we cannot escape from. But this does not mean that we are programmed like robots. On the contrary, to follow Jesus signifies that we, as subjects, have to make a fundamental choice in our lives. What is at stake here is our freedom.

#### **A. A fundamental choice**

How can we make a decision? What is the best way to do it? "The fundamental decision which a human person makes for Jesus Christ, for discipleship of Jesus, and for the Church must fundamentally, if it is to be genuine and unconditional in the way that it should, occur through the method of existential logic that Ignatius teaches us."<sup>159</sup> Rahner's approach to this fundamental choice is made through the Spiritual Exercises. Rahner comes from the Ignatian School where we all are invited to make an election at one point in

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<sup>159</sup> Philip Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 207.

our lives. The best way to do it is through the existential logic, the term that Rahner uses to talk about the discernment of election in the Ignatian Exercises.

If discernment is possible it is because we, as human beings, have the choice to accept or deny God's offer of his grace in Jesus Christ. We can say "yes" or "no". However, it is not as simple as it seems to be. We are talking about God's offer of his grace; we are talking about an ontological relationship between Jesus, in whom this offer is made, and each one of us, members of the human race. Thus, to understand this dynamic we should understand how our fundamental choice in life is related to our own understanding of what it means to be a human being, and how this comprehension is not divorced from our understanding of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Logos that assumed human nature in Jesus of Nazareth. It is Jesus of Nazareth who is the clue to understanding our own humanity. Rahner insists in pointing out Jesus' humanity as well as his divinity; that is the tension we have to keep in view as Christians, this is the only way we can believe in him as our mediator.

Rahner's stress upon Jesus' humanity is linked to the centrality that humanity has in his own theological project. For him, the human person has an active role with respect to God's revelation. Though God's self-communication is a pure initiative coming from God, the human person is able to receive this communication, not by his own means, but thanks to God's grace. Nonetheless, God's gift of grace can always be accepted or rejected by the human person. And if we are able to reflect about this, it is because we, as human persons, have the capacity to accept God's communication and to give words to this experience.

This centrality of the human person in Rahner's theology is part of his Ignatian heritage. Even though Ignatius neither elaborated any philosophical theory, nor created any theological system, he was clear when he claimed that the human person was able to have an immediate experience of God. Ignatius was not the first to make this claim; he is part of a long tradition of men and women who were convinced that it was possible, but Ignatius goes a step further than any mystic. His *Spiritual Exercises* make it possible for any human being to do this. Today, we can say that any human being, Christian or not Christian, would be able to have this experience through these *Exercises*.

The human person is able to experience God; and, as we have seen it, this is possible because of God's grace. In the *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius proposes that the one who makes the retreat use his or her own capabilities of reflection, meditation and imagination to have an encounter with God. Ignatius is convinced that the human person can experience God. A man ahead of his time, Ignatius had the same insight that Rahner will develop much later: thanks to and through our own humanity, which cannot be understood outside of God, we can have a personal experience of God.

At this point in our discussion, we can say that we are certain that the human person is central in Rahner's theological reflection and in Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*. I think that both Rahner and Ignatius highlight how the human person is allowed by God's grace acting through his or her own humanity to have an immediate experience of God, an immediacy that is always mediated.

This immediate experience of God implies the participation of the human person as a whole. It is not an abstract experience that happens in our minds; it

is our whole person who takes part in this. What happens in this experience of God happens in our bodies, as well as in our souls. Just as we cannot deny Jesus' humanity in our journey of access to the Trinity, so too we cannot deny our own humanity in our personal journey of accepting God's grace.

Grace is always working through our own humanity, always waiting for us to accept it. We have been called from the beginning of creation to God. It is up to us to say "yes" and to follow God's self-communication expressed in Jesus Christ. This fundamental choice is rooted in the human person's freedom. Our freedom is the condition of possibility for this fundamental choice. But freedom is not the possibility of doing anything without any kind of control. God has created us, establishing in this way a relation of difference and dependence as well. In our human experience, the more something is dependent on us, the less it is different from us. But in our relationship with God things go in an inverse way. The more different we are from God because we are not God, the more dependent we are on our Creator. We are radically different from God, but our autonomy and independence are not absolute because we are radically dependent on him.<sup>160</sup>

This is paradoxical but it means that this radical dependence grounds autonomy. "All of this can be experienced only when a spiritual, created person experiences his own freedom as a reality, a freedom coming from God and a freedom for God."<sup>161</sup> Every human being has to experience himself as a free subject responsible before God to accept his responsibility and to understand

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<sup>160</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 79.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.



what autonomy is. "Man is at once independent and, in view of what his ground is, also dependent."<sup>162</sup>

As it becomes clearer, we, as human beings, are always related in one way or the other to God. We are not oriented towards him as robots, but his grace constitutes our human nature. We are free, but our freedom and autonomy are always dependent on him. It means that we are free to say "yes" or to say "no" to his offer of grace and salvation. According to Rahner, even if we say "no" to God's self-communication, this "no" is rooted in a "yes". Our "no" takes its existence from a much bigger and existential "yes".<sup>163</sup> "Man has always the opportunity to say 'no' and degrade his dignity or 'yes' and preserve it by the grace offered by God."<sup>164</sup>

We are transcendental beings and our transcendence that is oriented towards God in freedom is itself a gift from God. It is God's grace that constitutes my own capacity to accept or reject his offer. It means that if I say "no" to God, I am still using my freedom if I do this. But my freedom has been given to me by God himself and is God who supports this freedom. Therefore, when I say "no" to God I do it making use of God's gift. That is how we can understand that a "no" is possible because there is a "yes" who allows this "no" to be pronounced.

## **B. A personal election**

We put our freedom into practice when we make a decision concerning our lives. As we have already seen we are able to say "yes" or "no" to God's offer

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>164</sup> Karl Rahner, "The Dignity and Freedom of Man", *Theological Investigations 2* (trans. K.H. Kruger; New York: Crossroad, 1990), 242.

of his grace. To follow Jesus, we have to make a choice. I claim that the Ignatian Exercises gives us the tools to make a discernment process and to choose. Ignatius uses the term “election” to talk about the central moment of discernment. Ignatius understands his *Spiritual Exercises* as the way to find God’s will in our lives. We have to examine, therefore, our spiritual movements, which Ignatius will define as consolation and desolation, to make a choice, and we need to be free to make any decision. For Ignatius, true freedom is characterized by what he calls indifference. Thus, he will insist that indifference is necessary to make any decision.

Indifference should not be understood as a lack of interest. Being indifferent, for Ignatius, expresses a purification of our interest, a purification of our desires. It means that we feel free enough to take any decision. Indifference is the attitude we must have before we discover what is God’s will in such a way that I will be able to accept or reject what I understand God wants from me. Indifference implies that I approach discernment with no hidden cards, but am open to what I can find. Being indifferent does not mean that I do not care about my choice. On the contrary, it means that I really care, that it is important to me, important enough to avoid any kind of selfishness, any kind of personal interest. In this way, I can feel free enough to find God’s will where my deepest desires are rooted.

What Ignatius understands as indifference can be compared to what Paul calls the freedom conferred on us by the Spirit of God himself<sup>165</sup>: “Freedom with regard to all the individual powers and forces in our human existence,

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<sup>165</sup> Karl Rahner, “Christmas in the light of the Ignatian Exercises”, *Theological Investigations 17* (trans. M. Kohl; New York: Crossroad, 1983), 4.

both in our inner life and in our external situation.”<sup>166</sup> To be free enough to make an election in our lives, we have to be free from all the powers, forces and interests that are present in our daily life and that take us away from God. As Ignatius would say, we have to be away from our “*propio querer, amor e interesse*”<sup>167</sup>; only then will we be able to choose what is good for us.

Indifference is presented by Ignatius at the beginning of the *Spiritual Exercises*, in the Principle and Foundation.<sup>168</sup> Ignatius claims that the human person is created to “praise, reverence and serve God our Lord.”<sup>169</sup> And, everything else on the earth has been created for human beings to help them to achieve this end for which they are created for. But Ignatius emphasizes the fact that “one must use other created things in so far as they help towards one’s end, and free oneself from them in so far as they are obstacles to one’s end.”<sup>170</sup> To do this we need indifference. Ignatius makes this clearer at the end of this meditation: “We should not want health more than illness, wealth more than poverty, fame more than disgrace, a long life more than a short one, and similarly for all the rest, but we should desire and choose only what helps us more towards the end for which we are created.”<sup>171</sup>

To make an election in our lives, we have to be indifferent. And this is not possible right away. That is why Ignatius puts the election in the second week of the Exercises. And as we have already seen, it is fundamental that we are free enough to make a good election; as a matter of fact, the only way we

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Spanish original in the *Spiritual Exercises* for « our own wish, love and interest » (EE 189)

<sup>168</sup> Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings* (trans. J. A. Munitiz, P. Endean; London: Penguin Books, 2004), 289.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

can make a good election is if we are indifferent, as we are told in the Principle and Foundation of the Exercises. What we should prefer is what God wants; we are only to seek his will in our lives. It is in our freedom and indifference that the freedom of God can express itself, and this produces what Ignatius calls a 'consolation', the moment when we arrive at the right choice.<sup>172</sup>

Ignatian choice is, according to Rahner, "the place at which divine freedom, the consolation of indifference and our earthly decision in freedom for something specific are simultaneously consummated."<sup>173</sup>

Therefore, we have to be free to accept God's will and to say "yes" to God's call. It is this freedom that will give us the consolation of indifference. Rahner says that indifference is the calm readiness for every command of God.<sup>174</sup> "Out of such an attitude of indifference there springs of itself the perpetual readiness to hear a new call from God"<sup>175</sup> It is out of our indifference that we'll be able to hear what God is trying to say to us. Hence, we can say that God is always calling us, to holiness, to follow him, to enter more deeply into a specific choice, and to respond to ever-changing 'calls' in the here and now. This is why we have to pay attention to any of these calls of God and to discern and make a decision.

Does it mean then that we say "yes" to Jesus, that's it, the game is over? No, it is not as simple as that. In the *Spiritual Exercises* we are invited to make an election, which we do once in a lifetime and which we cannot keep changing our election all the time. But this does not mean that with our election made we

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Karl Rahner, "The Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the World", *Theological Investigations* 3 (K.H. & B. Kruger; New York: Crossroad, 1982), 290.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 291.

do not have to continue our discernment. Our election in the Ignatian Exercises was made once and for all, but it does not give us the possession of God. Therefore, to find God every time and everywhere, we have to confirm, again and again, the decision taken once before. What we repeat in the Ignatian Exercises then is not our election, but the confirmation of that election.

We should be attentive and ready to decamp from those fields where one wanted to find God and to serve him because he is not there anymore. We are invited, then, to get out of our own selves and to be ready, to be on hand, like a servant always ready for new assignments. We must have, according to Rahner, the courage to accept the duty of changing oneself, and of having nowhere a permanent resting place but embracing “a restless wandering towards the restful God.”<sup>176</sup>

Indifference becomes therefore the seeking out of God in all things. Indifference is what is needed to make our election, to choose to follow Jesus, to accept God’s offer of grace in Jesus Christ. The consolation of indifference is what confirms us in knowing that our election pleases God. But we change and God is not always where we think he is. Because God is greater than everything, he can be found where we cannot even imagine. It is the same indifference that enabled us to take this fundamental step towards him, which will also help us to seek him in the midst of the world.<sup>177</sup>

Our personal election cannot be done by any other than ourselves. The *Spiritual Exercises* are an encounter between the creator and his creature. And The creature is free to say “yes” and to follow Jesus. But we should not forget

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

that even though our decision seems to be clear and we feel consolation, we have to confirm our choice through our lifetime. With the passing of the years, we can change; it is thus important to see in what way God's will encounters our changed selves. Can we be sure that nothing will change in the future? We cannot know what will happen to us in the future, nor can we manage it. But the consolation experienced in the present is enough to keep us walking towards God.

For Rahner, it is important not to get confused in the process of our own election. We must have clarity about our own actions and how everything we do, every little choice we take, everything is nothing else but a self-surrender to the sovereign will of God.<sup>178</sup> "Man is ready to do God's will, and he knows that when he does it he is honoring God, his disposition of things, his position as supreme Lord."<sup>179</sup> Once again we have to admit that our freedom must be always understood as a 'dependent-freedom'.

The human person's freedom in history, according to Rahner, always takes the form of an obedient fitting in.<sup>180</sup> Our decision to follow Jesus is just a manifestation of our obedience in faith.<sup>181</sup> The paradox is that even when we make our own decision to choose God, what is actually happening is that God himself is choosing us and we are just being obedient. For in our election, we are the ones who are elected by him.

"The inalienable decision through which each of us has to find the concrete form for our following is also itself an act of obedience: the hearing of

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<sup>178</sup> Karl Rahner, "Being Open to God as Ever Greater: On the Significance of the Aphorism 'Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam'", *Theological Investigations 7* (trans. D. Bourke; New York: Crossroad, 1977), 34.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 36.

the individual imperative from God.”<sup>182</sup> As Christians, we have to hold together a lot of tensions. Our personal decision is an act of obedience; it is a response to that ontological claim seeded in us as a permanent offer of God’s grace. For Rahner, obedience to the universally applicable law of Christ and courage to find one’s personal way, both flow equally from what it is to be a disciple of the Lord. That is the difficulty and the greatness of our existence as Christians.<sup>183</sup>

Being a Christian then is about being able to perform this act of obedience. And the best way we can do it is through Ignatian discernment. That is what Ignatius thought at his time and that is also what Rahner was convinced of. Ignatian discernment can help us to be aware of God’s will that makes a claim on us to give a response, a choice that we cannot escape if we are honest with our own selves and if we are obedient to what being a human being is. Being obedient to God’s call in Jesus Christ is being obedient to our own humanity, the humanity that is constituted by Jesus’ own humanity, that humanity that was assumed by the Logos, that humanity that allows us to have access to the Trinity, that humanity that allows us to experience God’s own self-communication.

Therefore, if we are obedient to what we are, we are obedient to God. We are called to just become what God wants us to be, or in words of Ignatius of Loyola, we are just to pursue the end for which we have been created for: to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord. That is the general will of God for each of us. Our fundamental choice in life is thus a response to God’s offer of grace expressed permanently in Jesus. But as I have already explained, this is

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<sup>182</sup> Rahner, “On the Following of Christ”, 119.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

just part of the journey. Ignatian discernment is not just for one moment; on the contrary, it is for our everyday life: when we try to discover what God wants from us in our ordinary lives through the specific calls that we have to respond to.

Our acceptance of God's grace in Jesus happens in one concrete and historical moment, but our relationship with Jesus is not a static relationship, established once for all. Our relationship with Jesus is dynamic and we experience it in our daily life. This is why we need something as dynamic as the *Spiritual Exercises*, that are, as Ignatius explains, above all exercises of our soul. We need to practice them, again and again, all through our existence. If we try to read the *Spiritual Exercises* as a book we will get bored and we will not understand anything. Instead, we have to put those Exercises into practice. Even though our election has been done once in our lifetime, the confirmation of that choice has to be confirmed in the day by day experiences of our lives.

The Ignatian discernment is a school of desires. It is through our desires that we can find the will of God. We have been created with the capacity to receive God's communication. It means that we can discover in our transcendentality what is it that God wants for us. We have to learn to be in touch with our deepest desires and we have to learn to purify them in our encounter through prayer with God. When we talk about finding God's will, we do not mean that we will have absolute knowledge of what God wants, but what we will find how God is present in our desires. It is through our desires that God will show us his will, and it is through God's gift of consolation that God himself will confirm if our choices are in consonance with his will.



### ***III. The sacramental dimension of Discipleship***

Ignatian discernment then can lead us through our desires to take on the most radical choice in our lives: to follow Jesus. In this section, I will discuss in what way we can understand our discipleship has a sacramental dimension and in which way we can live our discipleship as members of an ecclesial community. This following of Jesus is possible through concrete actions in our society and in our Church. This is what we have to discover: in what way we can actually follow Jesus and discover his presence in our own lives and within the community.

From the moment that we freely and consciously say “yes” to Jesus we become aware of the responsibility that it carries with it. As any other relationship in our lives, we need to give time and to take care of the way we relate to Jesus. “Christianity really does understand itself, in its most distinctive essence, as an existential event: what we call a personal relationship to Jesus Christ.”<sup>184</sup>

How is it possible then to live this personal relationship with Jesus Christ? In the Gospel we can find what Jesus said and the way he lived, and how all this changed and touched the lives of his disciples. But once again we should not read the Gospel only as the experience of others. The Gospel speaks to us today in our lives. For Ignatius, this was clear as water. That is why during the Second, Third and Four Weeks of the Ignatian Exercises, we are asked to meditate with the Gospel so as to follow Jesus’ steps from his birth to his death and resurrection. It is through this journey with Jesus that we learn to discover

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<sup>184</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 306.

what our desires are and what our spiritual movements are in regard to these desires.

### **A. Prayerful life**

When we talk about meditation we are talking about a personal prayer that can be done during the Ignatian Exercises as well as during our daily life. Our personal relationship with Jesus is sustained in our capacity of praying individually and within the Church; such a prayer becomes a sacramental life experienced in community.

Ignatius wants “to follow the poor Jesus, the despised and ridiculed, the crucified.”<sup>185</sup> Ignatius wants to lead us into the foolishness of the Cross. That is, what we are to experience in our personal prayer is the foolishness of following someone who was crucified. The Cross has left its mark on our experience as Christians; we cannot run away from this. This explains our insistence to follow the real and historical Jesus of Nazareth, and we do this through our own personal experience of prayer and worship.

If prayer is so important in our lives as Christians, we should reflect on the place that prayer actually has in our lives and how we live out our experience of prayer. Rahner explains his understanding of this in terms of a real contemplative in action; he understands how private prayer and daily life are complementary and how it is important first to run away from the world to have a more mystical experience, wherein we subordinate ourselves to God, so that we can come back then to the real and concrete world of ours and there we can find God present everywhere.

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<sup>185</sup> Rahner, “The Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the World”, 282.

In order to do that we must have the '*fuga mundi*' experience before. Yes, we can find God everywhere, but that is possible because we have first found God out of the world, and it is God and not us who takes us back into the world where he is present because he has created this world as a consequence of his eternal love.

But what moves Rahner to make such affirmations? He examines Ignatian piety and he claims: "Ignatian piety is and intends to be primarily 'monastic' piety."<sup>186</sup> For Ignatius, the monk is important because he is the man "who dies into Christ."<sup>187</sup> The monk is the one who "flees out of the light of this world into the night of the senses and the spirit."<sup>188</sup> In this sense, the monk is a good example for Ignatius because, according to Rahner, Ignatian piety is "piety towards the God who is beyond the whole world and who freely reveals himself."<sup>189</sup> For Ignatius, this is very important. God cannot be reduced to the world. God is more than that. Christianity is, for Rahner, "in essence *fuga saeculi*, because it is the commitment to the personal God who freely reveals himself in Christ."<sup>190</sup> The God of Ignatian piety, Rahner says, is "the God of supramundane grace who deals with man freely and personally, and historically."<sup>191</sup>

On the one hand, we acknowledge God as the ground of the world, as the ultimate background of everything. Thus, we have acknowledged God in so far as he is able to appear to us in the mirror of the world.<sup>192</sup> On the other hand,

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 281.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 284.

even if God appears to us as the ground of the world and the world has the meaning of God, God is always a free, personal, eternal being, beyond the whole world and all finitude. Therefore, the world does not properly express what God is.<sup>193</sup> There is always this tension that a Christian has to hold together: how the world is the place where we can find God, but, at the same time, it remains God's creature and God is always beyond the world.

Ignatius approaches the world from God's point of view. Not the other way around. Ignatius has surrendered himself to the God beyond the world and to his will. He has had a personal experience of God. For this reason, he is prepared to obey God's word when he's sent back into the world.<sup>194</sup> Ignatius has experienced in his own skin what it means to abandon the world in the foolishness of the Cross. He decided to follow Jesus in his poverty, and in this way, to the Cross. And, it is from the Christ of the Cross that he returns to the world.

It is this strong experience that allows Ignatius to see the world through a new lens, to realize that it is possible to find God's presence acting in the world. This is what it means to be a contemplative in action. Ignatius seeks only the God of Jesus Christ by contemplating Jesus on the Cross. And, this is the contemplative experience lived in prayer that allows him to realize that he can seek and find Jesus who is also present in the world. It is not only an experience of contemplation, but also an experience of action in the world. "He is prepared

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 290.

in indifference to seek him and him alone, always him alone but also him everywhere, also in the world: *in actione contemplativus*.”<sup>195</sup>

As we noted above, the experience of leaving the world is not complete if there is not a return to the world from God. This is the spirituality of Ignatius. What makes this possible is the fact that we, human beings, can actually experience God.

For Ignatius, this experience is not exclusive to the saints and mystics in the history of the Church. It is something that can happen to us, as it indeed happened to Ignatius himself, as these words that Rahner puts in Ignatius’ mouth clearly show: “I experienced God, the nameless and unsearchable one... when He comes to us out of His own self in grace, just cannot be mistaken for anything else.”<sup>196</sup>

Rahner is convinced that God is able and willing to deal immediately with his creature. It can happen and human beings can experience it happening. “They can apprehend the sovereign disposing of God’s freedom over their lives and appropriate it.”<sup>197</sup> In the possibility of this experience happening nothing is imposed; it is just the free acceptance of a reality of the human constitution that is always there. “Its name is grace, and God’s own self is there, immediately.”<sup>198</sup> The human person is par excellence “the being which in virtue of its very nature is bound to keep itself in openness to an ever-greater future.”<sup>199</sup> God does not stop being ever greater and the man remains a man. However, they both meet in an immediate way.

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>196</sup> Karl Rahner, “Excerpts from ‘Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit,’” in *Karl Rahner: Spiritual Writings* (ed. P. Endean; Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 37.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>199</sup> Rahner, “Being Open to God as Ever Greater”, 27.

So far we have established that the fundamental choice of following Jesus brings with it a relationship that is expressed in our own experience of prayer. But following Jesus is not just a personal and individual experience. Nobody else can make a decision for us. Yet, we live our discipleship as part of the Church; we experience God and we worship him in community. Our experiences become then not only a prayerful experience, but also part of a sacramental life that we share with our neighbor. Discipleship has a deeply sacramental dimension

## **B. Sacramental life**

The sacraments are, according to Rahner, at once a sign and a strengthening of the attraction toward the life of Jesus, “toward the beating with the rhythm of his existence that has unwaveringly taken hold of the whole creation.”<sup>200</sup> The sacrament figures, Rahner claims, as “the supreme human and ecclesiastical stage of the word in all its dimensions which has been uttered in the Church.”<sup>201</sup> For him, what is necessary in Catholic theology is to develop a theology of the word that will become the basis for a theology of the sacraments. Word and sacrament should not be regarded as two different entities, but as united ones. Our creation as human beings is the product of the Word uttered by God himself. The Word of God is at the origin of any word uttered in the Church. We must work out, Rahner argues, “the essential character of the word uttered in the Church and through the Church as event of

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<sup>200</sup> Rahner, “On the Following of Christ”, 113.

<sup>201</sup> Karl Rahner, “What is a Sacrament?” *Theological Investigations 14* (trans. D. Bourke; New York: Seabury, 1976), 138.

grace.”<sup>202</sup> It is in this sense that the sacraments as the supreme words uttered in the Church are vehicles of God’s grace.

The sacraments are not just rules that we have to obey or rites that we have to celebrate as part of our tradition. The sacraments exist in the Church “as the eschatological presence of God’s salvation in the world.”<sup>203</sup> The Church is where the Spirit of God dwells and it is this Spirit that moves and gives life to the Church. It is through the sacraments as events of God’s grace that God’s salvation is permanently offered. It is through the sacraments that we already experience in our lives God’s promise of resurrection at the end of time.

“The word pronounced in the Church in the name and at the behest of God and Christ has in principle an exhibitive character.”<sup>204</sup> This means that this word effects what it signifies. We cannot say that God only acts through the sacraments; but what we can say and what we believe as Christians is that in the words and gestures of the sacraments God is actually acting and offering his grace, and God’s grace has an effect through the Church’s sacramental life.

That the word of God in the strictest and truest sense, Rahner claims, can exist at all is only because it is an event of grace.<sup>205</sup> When the word of God is uttered in the Church as such, it is then a saving event. Our experience of God, our personal relationship with Jesus would not be fulfilled, would not be completely true if it were not an ecclesial experience, which is experienced as lived and shared with the ecclesial community because the Church is intended

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 141.

to be the sacrament of the salvation of the world and of the unity of mankind as a unity in God.<sup>206</sup>

The Church is at the same time “the proclaiming bearer of the revealing word of God as his utterance of salvation to the world”<sup>207</sup> and “the subject, hearkening and believing, to whom the word of salvation of God in Christ is addressed.”<sup>208</sup> The Church is the one who preaches what she believes to the world and the one who believes what is preached.<sup>209</sup> As members of the Church, we are the ones who proclaim God’s word to others within the Church and outside of it. At the same time, we are the ones who listen to this word that is addressed to each one of us.

According to Rahner, the sanctifying grace that we receive in the Church is increased through the whole of a Christian life through prayer, penance, the carrying out of one’s duties, the keeping of the Commandments, and through sufferings undergone in faith, and through a Christian dying.<sup>210</sup> For Rahner, the Christian who really believes in the Incarnation of the divine Logos will feel the need to experience God’s action through the sacraments of the Church.<sup>211</sup>

The sacrament takes place in a historical dialogue between Christ in the Church, on the one hand, and man, on the other. Seen from both sides, this dialogue is “the constitutive sign of the one grace of Christ and of his Church, which is effective at this moment.”<sup>212</sup> The “incarnation” of grace and the process

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Karl Rahner, “Personal and Sacramental Piety”, *Theological Investigations 2* (trans. K.H. Kruger; New York: Crossroad, 1990), 110.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 125.



of its becoming tangibly historical reach their climax in the sacraments.<sup>213</sup> God offers his grace through the sacraments and we experience them in the Church.

When we talk of the Church, we have to remember that we understand the Church as the persisting presence of the incarnate Word in space and time. We imply then that the Church continues the symbolic function of the Logos in the world.<sup>214</sup> For this reason we can talk about the Church as the eschatological presence of God's salvation in the world. The sacraments are important in our Christian life because they make concrete and actual the symbolic reality of the Church as the primary sacrament in the life of the individual.<sup>215</sup> The Church is the one who gives us the sacraments but is at the same time the sacrament of Christ in the world.

#### ***IV. Conclusion***

Discipleship, as we have seen, has a sacramental dimension. Our understanding of the sacraments as events of God's grace in the Church and the way we practice them, as well as the way we worship God with others in the Church, help us to live our personal relationship with the Jesus we decided to follow. The sacramental dimension of our discipleship is rooted in the deep experience of personal prayer. We experience God within the community because we are able to experience God in our personal prayer and vice-versa.

The sacramental dimension of discipleship cannot be understood without our comprehension of what it means to follow Jesus. We have analyzed in this chapter the journey of personal discernment through the Ignatian

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Rahner, "The Theology of Symbol", 240.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 241.

Spirituality and how we can find God's will and make the decision to follow Jesus today.

This discernment is possible because every human being is capable of experiencing God's offer of his grace. Even though Ignatian discernment gives us tools to learn through the sea of our desires where God's will is for us, there is a universal dimension that gives every human person in the world the possibility to receive God's self-communication.

Throughout this chapter, I discussed the way we can exercise our freedom making what I call the fundamental choice of our human existence: to be disciples of Jesus. This decision opens up other different practical questions for our lives as Christians in the world and within the Church, that we will develop in the next chapter. I will propose in the third chapter a practical theology of discipleship. I will try to show how we can put into practice what we have discussed so far.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Discipleship in the world: A practical theology for today**

In the first chapter, I identified the theological foundations for a theology of discipleship today. In the second chapter, I discussed the spirituality that allows us to explain what it means to follow Jesus today. Now it is time to apply what we have presented in the last two chapters to sketch a practical theology for today. This is the goal of this third chapter. Now I will try to respond to the question: "How can a discipleship of Jesus be lived in our world today?" Following Rahner's reflection on the Church, and how it is related to those who are inside of it and those who are outside of it, I will discuss what defines the style of the discipleship of Jesus in the world today.

At this point we can be certain that following Jesus is possible today, not only because we are living in the present time, but also because Jesus is present today. Jesus Christ's presence is real here and now. His Spirit is acting continually in the Church and in the world. I claim that we, who are living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, can consider ourselves as contemporaries with Jesus, who lived two thousand years ago in Nazareth, even though we are not his contemporaries in a historical sense. If we believe that the Spirit guides the Church and has been present throughout the history of humanity and is still acting in the universe, then we can say that our relationship with Jesus is possible in our present time. We do not follow someone from the past; we follow someone who is alive now through the action of the Spirit of God.

To follow Jesus means that we are able to develop an intimate relationship with him. It is through personal prayer that we can be in touch with the abiding presence of his Spirit in our souls. It is possible therefore to have intimacy with Jesus Christ, but we have to cultivate it and take care of it. The Gospels can be helpful to find our own way to deepen our relationship with Jesus. This explains the emphasis given by Ignatius in the *Spiritual Exercises* to the mysteries of Jesus of Nazareth's of life.<sup>216</sup>

Our intimacy with Jesus cannot stay as an isolated realm in our lives. An intimate relationship with Jesus to be truly honest and complete has to be manifested in concrete actions in our ordinary daily life. When we decide to follow Jesus in an explicit way we become part of a community of disciples. We have a new identity as disciples that has to be translated into practical action. That is what I will discuss in this final chapter. The first point will analyze how this discipleship takes place within the Church. The second point will discuss our role as disciples outside the Church in relation with the non-believers and non-Christians. And, the third point will focus on the dialogue that a disciple of Jesus can establish with our contemporary world.

Rahner's Christology and his Trinitarian theology, as well as his spiritual reflection on Ignatian discernment, his theology of grace and his anthropological and transcendental approach are the pillars of our discussion. Nourished by all this I will now attempt to shape a theology of discipleship meaningful to us today. We do this so that we can apply it in our lives as Christians, and thus help us to understand that we are part of a bigger community: the world.

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<sup>216</sup> Rahner, "On the Following of Christ", 116.

## ***I. Within the Church***

“Faith means faith in the Church.”<sup>217</sup> This is part of our Creed, and if we choose to follow Jesus, we accept to do it within the Church. “The Church is the object of our faith.”<sup>218</sup> Rahner reminds us that “scripture and oral tradition have been transmitted in the Church.”<sup>219</sup> And, it is through the tradition of the Church that we have received the Christian faith. It is the Spirit of God, united to the Church, who keeps alive the memory of Jesus. “We are believers, hearers of the word of God as found in the mouth of the Church.”<sup>220</sup> Hence our discipleship is a discipleship in the Church.

To follow Jesus is not just a private issue. “The faith is only completely and truly possible in the community of the faithful, in the Church.”<sup>221</sup> Since Vatican II, the Church is recognized as the holy people of God, or “the Body of Christ in which all share in the priesthood of Christ.”<sup>222</sup> But the Church is also the episcopal hierarchy. And sometimes there can be some tension between those who have the authority to teach and the community of believers. Rahner was not exempt from it and before the Second Vatican Council he had some problems with Rome.<sup>223</sup> But he never stopped being faithful to the Church while, at the same time, being bold and outspoken when needed. He always understood his following of Jesus as discipleship within the Church.

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<sup>217</sup> Karl Rahner, “I Believe in the Church”, *Theological Investigations 7* (trans. D. Bourke; New York: Crossroad, 1977), 101.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>222</sup> Karl Rahner, “The New Image of the Church”, *Theological Investigations 10* (trans. D. Bourke; New York: Crossroad, 1977), 8.

<sup>223</sup> Herbert Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner, an Introduction to his Life and Thought* (New York: Crossroads, 1986), 92.

### **A. The Church: place of the Spirit, place of the disciple**

The Church is not just any possible place where discipleship of Jesus Christ can be lived. To follow Jesus means to follow him in the Church. Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is “the head, the foundation stone and the architect”<sup>224</sup> of the Church. “To her belongs the Spirit whom he has poured out upon all flesh when he departed to the Father at his death, in order that he may come in the Spirit of his Father, who is his Spirit also.”<sup>225</sup> We cannot then understand the Church if it is not in relation to Christ. “What we are considering here is the presence to each other of Christ and the Church in her cultic activities.”<sup>226</sup> And, this presence is possible because of the Holy Spirit of Christ.

The Church is the place where the Spirit dwells, and it is through the Church that the Spirit acts in the world. That is why we can say that the Church is also the place where the one who has decided to follow Jesus can live his discipleship. “Our experience of the divine truth necessarily takes place in the history of the Church, in our own human history.”<sup>227</sup> Therefore, discipleship means to believe in the Church, the place par excellence where discipleship can be put into practice.

How can we live then our discipleship in the Church? A sacramental life has to be nourished by a real preoccupation for those who suffer any kind of marginalization. Worshipping God with others has to be expressed in our openness to the difference between, and our respect towards, every human being.

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<sup>224</sup> Rahner, “I Believe in the Church”, 107.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Karl Rahner, “The Presence of the Lord in the Christian Community at Worship”, *Theological Investigations 10* (trans. D. Bourke; New York: Crossroad, 1977), 73.

<sup>227</sup> Rahner, “I Believe in the Church”, 116.

A fundamental part of our lives as disciples in the Church is marked by our sacramental life. This is why it is so important for us Christians to understand what a sacrament is, and how God's grace acts through the sacraments of the Church. Sacraments are not just rites; sacraments are the manifestation of God's love in our lives within the community of believers. Therefore, sacraments have to be understood as a constitutive part of our life as Christians. As Rahner says, "sanctifying grace is increased through the whole Christian life – through prayer, penance, the carrying out of one's duties, the keeping of the Commandments, through sufferings undergone in faith, through a Christian dying."<sup>228</sup> Hence, our sacramental life can be explained as a life lived in a sacramental way.

We can recognize Christ's presence when we proclaim and listen to the word of the Gospel,<sup>229</sup> through the sacraments,<sup>230</sup> through the Eucharist,<sup>231</sup> and through hope and love.<sup>232</sup> But our sacramental vocation cannot be fulfilled if we do not take account of those who are marginalized in our society and within the Church. If we accept that our own lives, our own humanity is a sacrament, as presence of God's grace, then we have to accept that my worship of God as a disciple of Jesus Christ is not only with others, but especially through others. A true disciple of Jesus has to be open to difference within the Church. A true disciple of Jesus must be sensitive to the sufferings of the others, Christians or not. To recognize Christ's presence through hope and love means that we take

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<sup>228</sup> Rahner, "Personal and Sacramental Piety", 110.

<sup>229</sup> Rahner, "The Presence of the Lord in the Christian Community at Worship", 78.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 81.

the risk to love the others, not just my friends or those who are members of my community, but every person in the world.

## **B. Love of God and Love of Neighbor**

My love of God as a disciple of Jesus Christ has to be translated into a practical love of my neighbor. Jesus summarized the commandments in two: to love God and to love the neighbor. Therefore, I can examine my way of being Christian, being truly a disciple of Jesus, according to the way I love God and the way I love my neighbor. "Love of God and love of neighbor stand in a relationship of mutual conditioning. Love of neighbor is not only a love that is demanded by the love of God, an achievement flowing from it; it is also in a certain sense its antecedent condition."<sup>233</sup> This is an interesting turn made by Rahner. To love the neighbor would not be just the consequence or the manifestation of the love of God. Rather, it can be understood in a sense as its condition of possibility. Only if I put into practice my love of neighbor will I be able to say that I love God.

For Rahner, it is important not to reduce the love of God to a commandment. "The love of God is the totality of the free fulfillment of human existence. It is not, in the last analysis, the content of an individual commandment, but is at once the basis and the goal of all individual commandments."<sup>234</sup> Our love of God cannot be something that we do because we have been taught to. To love God must be gratuitous. We do not love God just because we wait for something in return. We love God when we go out of

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<sup>233</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor* (trans. R. Barr; New York: Crossroad, 1983), 71.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.



ourselves without self-seeking, and we really lose ourselves in the “ineffable mystery”<sup>235</sup> of God. To love God is just an experience of surrender.

We should not forget that God creates out of love and we have been created for love: to love and to be loved. Rahner says that we reach out to this loving God “in adoration across all human reality.”<sup>236</sup> It is in humanity that we find God. “There is no love for God that is not, in itself, already a love for neighbor; and love for God only comes to its own identity through its fulfillment in a love for neighbor.”<sup>237</sup> Rahner claims that the only way we can actually know who God is when we love our neighbors.<sup>238</sup> If we really love God, Rahner says, we can manage to abandon ourselves in an unconditional way to another person.<sup>239</sup> Thus, all our relationships are shaped by the way we relate to God.

As we have discussed above, our love of God cannot be a love for convenience. The same applies to the love of neighbor. If I’m respectful of the other as other, it means that I cannot use the other just for my own interest. I have to believe that a true communion with brothers and sisters is possible.<sup>240</sup> I have to ask myself then, who is my neighbor and how should I act towards him or her. To find an answer we have to go back to the Gospel, where Jesus explains to us at different points the way I should act towards my neighbor.

This love has to be expressed especially in my love for the lesser people. We cannot talk of a communion of brothers and sisters if some of our brothers and sisters suffer poverty and exclusion from education and health care, or if they are discriminated because of their gender, their race, their sexual

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 72.

orientation, the language they speak, or the religion they profess. To love my neighbor is therefore to fight against any injustice suffered by my brothers and sisters.

### **C. A theological task**

I claim that a disciple of Jesus within the Church has a responsibility, a theological task. A disciple of Jesus has to be able to reflect about his or her own faith. There is a theological reflection that has to be done, though at different levels. Not every Christian has to be a theologian in an academic sense. However, we also need people who can pursue theological studies in view of an academic reflection. I will discuss first the importance of a theological work in the Church and how theology is related to the magisterium, sometimes not free of tension. Then, I will address the theological task that any disciple of Jesus can accomplish.

For Rahner, the theologian cannot be a purely intellectual expositor of the doctrine of faith, but “the one who thrusts all duly explained earthly realities into the incomprehensible mystery of God.”<sup>241</sup> Theology has to be pursued not as a career, but as a way of living. “The theologian is the one who shows that no human proposition, no matter how correct and useful it may and should be, is ultimately really understood unless it is released into the blessed incomprehensibility of God.”<sup>242</sup>

On the one hand, a theologian has to root his reflection in an intimate relationship with God. Theology can become then “the beginning and the

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<sup>241</sup> Karl Rahner, “A Theology that We Can Live With”, *Theological Investigations 21* (trans. H. Riley; New York: Crossroad, 1988), 112.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

foretaste of that eternal life on which we set our hope.”<sup>243</sup> On the other hand, a theologian has to acknowledge from the beginning that any human proposition cannot fully contain what God is and any theological reflection about it will always be just an approach to the Mystery.

Being a theologian does not come though without tension, and sometimes conflict with the Magisterium. According to the teaching of Vatican II, “the Catholic theologian is not simply free and uncommitted in regard to such an authentic teaching of the magisterium, he owes it respect.”<sup>244</sup> Rahner regrets that the magisterium of the last centuries describes the role of the theologian as a “subtle interpretation of the teaching of the magisterium and of defending this teaching by showing that it is contained in the original sources of revelation.”<sup>245</sup> However, he argues: “the actual dogmatic substance of faith as put forward by the magisterium in the Church’s proclamation is itself always theology.”<sup>246</sup> The relationship between the Magisterium and theology is therefore complementary as “the bones and the muscles of the body.”<sup>247</sup> The connection and the unity of the two is “not under the control of the magisterium but only under that of the Spirit, who directs the whole course of the history.”<sup>248</sup>

Although not every disciple of Jesus can accomplish this task, I am convinced that every Christian has to know how to give an account of what he or she believes. We are disciples of Jesus within the Church in the world and we have to learn how to speak about our faith with others, in our society, with

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Karl Rahner, “Magisterium and Theology”, *Theological Investigations 18* (trans. E. Quinn; New York: Crossroad, 1983), 57.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

other religions and cultures, with our contemporary world. For Rahner, it was important to show that the Christian faith can be a universal religion fighting any perception of our faith as a myth. It is our duty as disciples of Jesus to show others in the world that our following of Jesus is a reasonable choice.

## ***II. Outside the Church***

I have discussed in the preceding section the way discipleship can be lived within the Church. Now, I will examine the way discipleship can be experienced outside the Church. Even though these two sections are separated, we have to understand that they are profoundly related. When we say within the Church we do not imply a complete isolation from the world. It is within the Church because as a concrete and historical institution the Church functions in a particular way, but the Church is in the world and is in relationship with the world. Discipleship outside the Church makes reference to the way a disciple of Jesus can establish a dialogue with those who are not Christian and with those who are not believers. Even though for those who are not Christians, Jesus Christ does not have the same importance outside that Church that he has inside of it, I claim that Jesus can be a meaningful figure for those who are not part of the Church.

The Holy Spirit dwells in the Church and salvation is mediated through the Church. But God's grace is not offered exclusively to Christians; God's self-communication is offered to every human being, those within the Church and those who are outside the Church. According to Rahner, the experience of God "exists always and everywhere, whenever man implements his spiritual

knowledge and freedom, even if this is often not explicitly formulated.”<sup>249</sup> This affirmation opens up the possibility for every human being to have an experience of God. Therefore, a disciple of Jesus can see with eyes of respect and openness those who are not Christian or are non-believers.

### **A. The Anonymous Christian**

Even though the anonymous Christian theory developed by Rahner is not about discipleship, but about God’s grace offered to every human being, it is important for a disciple of Jesus to understand that God in his mystery and incomprehensible ways can offer his salvation to the whole humanity outside the Church, which remains however the privileged place where salvation is granted. This situation raises the question, according to Rahner, of the pertinence of the Christian message for those who are not part of the Church.<sup>250</sup>

A Christian, Rahner claims, has to reject any suggestion that the overwhelming mass of his brothers “are unquestionably and in principle excluded from the fulfillment of their lives and condemned to eternal meaninglessness”<sup>251</sup> We cannot just imagine such an injustice from God who is full of mercy and love. The Son of God embraced all men and women through his “self-sacrificing love.”<sup>252</sup> Therefore, if salvation is given through the Church, “somehow all men must be capable of being members of the Church.”<sup>253</sup>

An anonymous Christian, according to Rahner, is a person who is not explicitly a Christian, but who nevertheless participates in a state of grace. An

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<sup>249</sup> Karl Rahner, “Religious Feeling Inside and Outside the Church”, *Theological Investigations* 17 (trans. M. Kohl; New York: Crossroad, 1983), 234.

<sup>250</sup> Karl Rahner, “Anonymous Christians”, *Theological Investigations* 6 (trans. K.H. & B. Kruger; New York: Crossroad, 1982), 390.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 391.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

anonymous Christian is justified by faith, even if he or she has not accepted in an explicit way that he believes in Jesus Christ. It is anonymous because the person has not explicitly recognized himself as Christian, but Christianity is already implicitly affirmed in some way in his life.

A person who accepts himself as a human being “is accepting Christ as the absolute perfection and guarantee of his own anonymous movement towards God by grace.”<sup>254</sup> Rahner insists that “anyone who does not say in his heart, ‘there is no God’ but testifies to him by the radical acceptance of his being, is a believer.”<sup>255</sup> It is in our own humanity that we can find the key to understand how is it possible that all human beings can become Christians. If we all share the human condition, which means that we share the supernatural existential, we all can have access to God’s grace, which is always the grace of the Father in his Son. “Anyone who has let himself be taken hold of by this grace can be called with every right an ‘anonymous Christian’.”<sup>256</sup>

The ‘Anonymous Christian’ theory can help a disciple of Jesus to understand that his or her brothers and sisters who are not Christians in an explicit way have in themselves the capacity to accept God’s gratuitous offer of grace. Even though we do not share the same faith, we share our own humanity as a place where God’s grace can act. Therefore, the other human beings with whom I live in the world deserve my respect. Not being Christian does not mean that they are less important in God’s eyes.

As a consequence of this understanding, every disciple of Jesus has a mission. If we actually respect other’s beliefs we do not have to try to convert

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 394.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 395.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

them into Christians, but it does not mean that we cannot talk about Jesus Christ and his message. A disciple of Jesus has to be able to share his experience of God with others. A disciple of Jesus has to be able to proclaim the Gospel message in a world that is not Christian or that does not have any idea of God.

## **B. Non-Christian and Non-Believers**

For Rahner, it is important to highlight that after Vatican II the Church understands herself as related to non-Christian religions as such, “and not only a relationship to non-Christian individuals.”<sup>257</sup> And the motivation for this new understanding is not the Church’s missionary command, but the task of “fostering unity and love among men, and even among nations.”<sup>258</sup> What is at stake then is the unity of all humankind. And, this is not in conflict with “the Church’s self-understanding as the presence of the fullness of revelation or about its pressing obligation to engage in missionary activity.”<sup>259</sup> The basis for this relationship with the non-Christian religions is “the universal salvific will of the sovereign and benevolent God, the author of the universal history of salvation.”<sup>260</sup>

The declaration *Nostra aetate* of the Second Vatican Council is the basis for Rahner’s reflection on the importance of salvation in non-Christian religions. Rahner stresses that this declaration recognizes “what is ‘true’ and ‘holy’ in the different religions and that the concrete forms and doctrines of these religions

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<sup>257</sup> Karl Rahner, “On the Importance of the Non-Christian Religions for Salvation”, *Theological Investigations 18* (trans. E. Quinn; New York: Crossroad, 1983), 289.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

are to be regarded with straightforward seriousness.”<sup>261</sup> The other religions cannot be seen therefore as inferiors or less developed than our Christian faith. As disciples of Jesus, we have to take them seriously. Non-Christian religions, even though incomplete, “can be realities within a positive history of salvation and revelation.”<sup>262</sup>

According to Vatican II, “an opportunity of supernatural salvation and the opportunity of a real faith in revelation is offered always and everywhere to every human being at all times.”<sup>263</sup> It opens the possibility of God’s grace not only for those who are not Christians, but also for those who do not have any belief, those who consider themselves as atheists. Rahner claims that the transcendental, mental and supernatural relationship that every human can have with God is always mediated by events or circumstances of their own lives, for example “an atheist who is faithful to his conscience.”<sup>264</sup>

When we talk about the non-believers, we are not talking in an abstract way. Rahner reminds us that we are talking about people who surround us, “persons who are related to us, whom we love, to who we are bound with thousand ties of blood, of shared feelings, of life and destiny, of love”<sup>265</sup> More than that, Rahner insists that in many respects we are closer to the non-believers than “with those whom we call fellow members in the household of the faith.”<sup>266</sup> In this way Rahner helps us to put a familiar face on the “non-believers”.

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 293.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>265</sup> Karl Rahner, “The Christian among Unbelieving Relations”, *Theological Investigations* 3 (trans. K.H. & B. Kruger; New York: Crossroad, 1982), 355.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.



Our certainty that salvation is offered to every human being cannot lead us to affirm that we know that all men and women are saved. That would be erroneous and arrogant, according to Rahner. "We have to work out our salvation in fear and trembling and leave to God his secrets."<sup>267</sup> A disciple of Jesus has to be open to accept that finally the salvation of others is finally God's work. But we can approach them in a missionary way because we care for them and we want to work for their salvation too.

### **C. Outside the Church, Jesus still matters**

Our reflection thus far has made clear the point that a disciple of Jesus has to be respectful of those who are not Christian and non-believers. Every human being can have the possibility of receiving God's salvation. Besides, some of those who do not share our beliefs have a familiar face to us. This is the reality of our living in the world with others. But this respect for the difference we share with our fellow human beings, and our desire to live in communion with them, is not a reason to diminish the figure of Jesus, or to make him disappear. I claim that outside the Church Jesus still matters. Jesus can be presented to those who are not Christian as an image of what it means to be human. A disciple of Jesus has to be open to talk about Jesus as a missionary task. Even though the first intention is not to convert the others, a conversion can happen. Before saying "yes" to Jesus what any person needs is to know Jesus, and that can be the task of a disciple of Jesus, to present Jesus to those who have not heard about him.

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 371.

Nowadays Jesus is still admired by many. People from different cultures, professing different faiths or none, consider Jesus as a model of humanity, but they have a strong resistance to accepting the Church. It is contradictory, but the biggest obstacle that many people have to belief in Jesus Christ is the Church. "I can believe in Jesus, but not in the Church" is the statement of many. And the reality of our institutions and the bad example of many seem to give them enough reasons to keep thinking this way. "Yes" to Jesus, not to the Church. But even though we acknowledge that the fullness of the Christian experience of faith can only be received within the Church, we should not forget as well that we do not follow the Church; we follow Jesus.

Can we say that those who admire Jesus are his true disciples? I claim that a disciple of Jesus is the one who has accepted explicitly Jesus in his life, and that acceptance goes beyond the level of admiration or the desire of imitation. I can admire Gandhi, or Martin Luther King, or Mother Theresa. But there is not any parallel with the way I follow Jesus. Even if I am engaged in a radical way with the way of thinking and the way of action proposed by any of these exemplary people, we do not follow them in the same way that we follow Jesus. Not if we claim that our following of Jesus makes us his disciples.

We have then a big responsibility as disciples of Jesus. Many people already admire Jesus. At that point in their lives, our actions will not add anything new. However, what we can do is to show in our deeds and words how way our following of Jesus is different from following anybody else. My choice for Jesus is an existential one. It defines my own life and constitutes my humanity. Therefore, my actions have to show that Jesus defines my life in a

way nobody else can do it. That is the best way we can show others what Jesus means to me.

There is a story about Father Pedro Arrupe that can be a good example of this. He was working in Japan, and one day a woman came to him and told him that she wanted to know that person on the cross, referring to Jesus, because she was moved by the way Arrupe talked and acted. She understood that everything Arrupe did was connected to Jesus. This is why she wanted to know more about Jesus. The outcome of the story is that she finally became Christian. Therefore, what we have to do, Rahner claims, is to make “Christ, his gospel and his grace present among all peoples... achieving a quite new incarnational presence of Christ himself in the world.”<sup>268</sup>

### ***III. In our contemporary world***

If we believe that we can find God everywhere in the world, we must therefore have a positive regard towards the world. A positive approach does not mean a naïve approach. Nor does it mean that we have to see the world as a negative place that we Christians have to convert to avoid humankind’s damnation. It is true that we believe that salvation comes through the Church and we have a mission to accomplish, to proclaim Jesus to the world. But we do not have to impose our beliefs on others. We should find the way to establish a dialogue with the culture that surrounds us. That is our work as disciples of Jesus. I have to be able to listen and to talk, to engage in a dialogue with the world where Jesus’ Spirit is present. Thus, I have to listen to know what Jesus Christ is telling me through the culture I am in. Jesus himself did that. Even

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<sup>268</sup> Karl Rahner, “Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church”, *Theological Investigations 12* (D. Bourke; New York: Crossroad, 1974), 176.

though he was convinced that he was sent only to save his people, the encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7: 25-30) opens his eyes to a new reality. Jesus was able to listen to others and to change his understanding of salvation. His disciples today can do the same.

Rahner's own experience is helpful to understand how it is possible to dialogue with culture. He understood very early in his life that he had to dialogue with the world of his time. If he wanted to communicate his experience of faith, his way of being a disciple of Jesus, he had to find new ways, new words, new languages that could resonate with the dominant culture. Rahner was not afraid of being creative and he learned how to use his own language to write theology and to enter into a dialogue with his contemporary world. That is what a disciple of Jesus should be able to do, not to be afraid to dialogue with the culture, with the world.

#### **A. Post-Christian**

Western culture was in the past associated with Christianity. But Christendom does not exist anymore. And this has been true for a long time. However, many people in the Church still live in the illusion that we are part of Christendom or worst, some want to go back to those times when religion and politics were so unified that it was not possible to make any difference. That is not true anymore. Globalization has shown us that Western culture is neither the only nor the most important culture in the world. We live in a Post-Christian world. There are some places in the world where Christianity is still an important religion, but there are other places where Christianity is almost disappearing, or is not even known as such. This is a secular age. The question

is how can we be disciples of Jesus in a secular world? I claim that a disciple of Jesus has to be able to find a new way to talk about his or her faith.

We have to leave aside the idea of recovering what we have lost. Christendom is over and it will not be anymore. Secular time has to be seen positively; it is not bad. Times are different and we have to learn how to live in the present. Besides, this is our time. We are part of this age and we have to find the way to live our discipleship, our own style, our own language. For the first disciples, to follow Jesus meant to live in a new way within Judaism. To be a Christian meant to have a new style of life and a new language to express it. Rahner applied this to his own reality and time, finding in the process his own way to say things using a new language, the language of the culture of his time. His language, qualified by some as too philosophical and difficult to understand, is an attempt to dialogue with the philosophical and academic culture of his time.

Rahner was worried about the theological reflection of his time. He acknowledged that times had changed and that we have to respond to these new times in new ways. He based his openness to theological creativity on the fact that "Christianity has never been merely a doctrinal system of eternal ideas."<sup>269</sup> On the contrary, he emphasized that Christianity has to be understood as the proclamation of a saving history "in which the true absolute which is significant for man is the historically concrete."<sup>270</sup> Therefore, it is important and

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<sup>269</sup> Karl Rahner, "Christology in the Setting of Modern Man's Understanding of Himself and His World", *Theological Investigations 11* (trans. D. Bourke; New York: Crossroad, 1982), 222.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

necessary to rethink the traditional dogmatic teaching in the light of the perspectives brought by new times.<sup>271</sup>

And that is what Rahner did. Influenced by Aquinas, Maréchal and Heidegger, Rahner adapts a philosophical language to talk about God. He does not quote biblical passages or the Fathers of the Church, at least not in an explicit way. In his writings, Rahner acknowledges, I claim, that he is part of a modern culture and he embraces this culture, being always critical of its excess and the dangers of a misunderstood idea of progress, to establish a dialogue, a discussion, a debate.

As disciples of Jesus today we have to learn how to dialogue with a secular world in a secular age. We have to find a new language to speak about God. We have to find new ways of communicate the Christian truths. A disciple of Jesus has to recognize the good and the bad in the secular world, and to take them into the discussion. A disciple of Jesus has to discern what elements of our society can be helpful in our own reflection about our faith and what elements of the culture allow me to dialogue with this contemporary world.

## **B. Post-Ideology**

We are living in a time of new, non-traditional ways of doing politics. We are disciples of Jesus in a world where many young people perceive politics in a different way: there is no more ideology. We are not in the 70's anymore. People today do not engage in politics as it used to be done in the past. It is not necessary to be a part of a political party to do politics. Nevertheless the non-traditional ways of doing politics today should not be understood as a lack of

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 226.

social and political compromise. On the contrary, many young people are active in different organizations trying to reflect on and to enact new ways of having influence in the political, social, economical, ecological and cultural arenas of the world.

A disciple of Jesus cannot be outside of this movement. A disciple of Jesus has to be able to care about politics because political decisions have influence on the well being of our neighbors. We do not have to mix religion and politics, but we can participate and be interested in politics because overall we are human beings and we care about other human beings, and if I care, I have to act. That is what Jesus himself did; he healed people when it was forbidden to do so. He cared about others, and as a consequence of this, his acts were statements for the lesser in society. And sometimes, such those statements by Jesus were considered political, even if politics and religion were understood in a different way in his time.

Therefore, it is in the life of Jesus that we can root our political and social engagement in a society post-ideology. The biblical text of Mathew 25 is a good example of what a disciple of Jesus should ask himself of his way of responding to the needs expressed in that text because being a Christian is about being able to recognize Christ in the poor, the immigrant, the inmate and the sick.

When we see what is happening in the world, we have to accept that capitalism has demonstrated that it does not have all the answers, as Marxism that shaped communism also has shown. Economics and politics have to be approached in a new way, going further than this opposition and beyond any demonization of these philosophical and political theories. Economics and politics are important in the way our societies evolve. Therefore, a disciple of

Jesus cannot stay away from these problematics. It is our responsibility to think about the well-being of our community. For Rahner, it was important to understand that our discipleship is not an individualistic experience: it has to be lived with others; we cannot forget the social dimension of our experience of faith. If we are open to the social dimension of our faith, we must therefore be open to the political dimension of our being a disciple of Jesus.

It is true that we cannot transform our faith in Jesus into a political statement. But, at the same time, we cannot deny the political consequences of our decision to follow Jesus. Rahner's theology has been criticized as too individualistic because the accent is put on the subject. However, it is interesting how some of the scholars of the liberation theology acknowledge the influence of Rahner on their own reflections.

I claim that Liberation Theology is necessary now. I understand Liberation Theology is an attempt to recognize how we need to be liberated from all that imprisons us. The poor and the weak have to be the first to be liberated, and we all have to work for this reality. But liberation is offered to each of us, within the Church, as well as outside it. We all need to be free to follow Jesus. A disciple of Jesus has to be part of this liberation enterprise that finds its source in the fullness of liberation that Jesus came to proclaim.

### **C. Post-Modern**

There is a big discussion about what post-modernity means. Are we really in a post-modern time or are we still living in a continuation of the modern era? Are we moderns or post-moderns? Rahner himself felt that he was part of the modern times, and he dialogues with modernity. We can consider



ourselves as living in a time when modernity and post-modernity subsist together. This is a time of pluralism. The development of communications has made us aware that we live in the same world with others who are different from me in so many ways, and whom I can communicate with through the Internet. Therefore, pluralism and the development of communication are related. We are part of this world, and as disciples of Jesus we have to learn how to participate in this World Wide Web conversation. We can find in the categories inherited from modernity and those that are in vogue from so-called post-modernity our own way to communicate our experience of Jesus. I will discuss pluralism, small narratives as well as the way communication has developed as categories that will allow any disciple of Jesus dialogue with the contemporary world.

We cannot say that the values and categories inherited from modernity are obsolete or anachronistic. The place of the subject is still important and reason as the privileged tool of any reflection cannot be denied. But the world has evolved and pluralism is one of the post-modern categories that we might embrace in our dialogue with the different cultures that surround us. The defense of the rights of the minorities, as well as the rights of women and the rights of gay people, indeed any claim for equality, is rooted in the fact that we are not just parts of a metanarrative; we are just small narratives that live each one next to each other. We can say then that we live in a fragmented world. In this world, metanarratives have been broken, sometimes from within, giving space to small narratives.

Metanarratives like Christendom, a world unified by one only faith, or Capitalism or Marxism as dominant concepts that guarantee progress, cannot

be accepted anymore, even though many people still think that way. We live in a world with small narratives, with different small stories that interact with each other. This is like the stories that we find in the Gospels, different small stories about Jesus that we have to read and to understand them in their own context. Our own lives as disciples of Jesus are small stories that interact with each other in a world that is neither Christian nor modern anymore.

What does it mean then to follow Jesus in a world where everything seems to be relative, where everything seems to be in a constant change, where there are no absolute truths, where institutions are not as strong as they used to be, where individuals fight for their rights, where there are so many different ways of understanding humanity and divinity?

Post-modernity is not our enemy. We Christians are not ahistorical beings: we are disciples of Jesus in a concrete history. And, this is our history: this is our time, as this is our world. Therefore, post-modernity is not alien to us. We live in a post-modern time and the post-modern time lives through us. We should not be afraid then of the categories from post-modernity that I highlighted above: pluralism and communication. The Church's beginning is marked by a plurality of charisms and vocations. We can also understand different ways of being a disciple of Jesus in our days. The Church's diversity is a treasure that a disciple has to take care of. Communication today has also become a challenge for a disciple of Jesus. We have to participate in the ongoing conversation on the Internet and through the social networks. At the same time, we have to reflect on what we communicate and the way we do it.

#### ***IV. Conclusion***

In this chapter I have attempted to offer a practical theology for discipleship today. I have made an effort to apply the theological foundations, the anthropological approach and Ignatian spirituality to the challenge that a disciple of Jesus has in our present time. The general question to which I tried to respond to is: "How can a disciple of Jesus live out fully his following of Jesus in our contemporary world?" As an answer, I discussed the way a disciple can experience his commitment to Jesus within the Church, outside the Church and in our contemporary society.

I am a disciple of Jesus if I say "yes" in an explicit way to Jesus. I say "yes" to God when I say "yes" to what is authentically human in myself. To be a disciple of Jesus is therefore to acknowledge that it is possible to have a personal and intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. If I do that it is because I believe that Jesus' Spirit is present everywhere.

If I have a positive view of humanity and creation, I can feel in touch with the most important questions of our generation: equality of rights, social justice in the economic field, and care of our environment. A Rahnerian theology of discipleship of today has to be in contact with the questions of today. To be a disciple of Jesus signifies that I do not reject the contemporary world and the different cultures present in it. On the contrary, I am open to find God in all things, to find God within the Church, in the people of God and in the hierarchy, as well to find God present in those who are not part of the Church, because they can also have access to God's grace. To be open to the contemporary and globalized world does not mean that I accept everything without reflection. It is discernment that will help me to find where and how God is present.

## Conclusion

A Rahnerian theology of discipleship is what I have tried to propose through this STL thesis. The reading, study and reflection of Rahner's theological work have allowed me to develop a practical theology of discipleship for today. A pastoral concern is at the origin of this theological proposal. I have experienced that we Christians do not take enough time to reflect on what it means to follow Jesus. I think that we take our Christian vocation for granted. We must be aware of our responsibility as disciples of Jesus in the world of today.

To follow Jesus is about being able to have a personal relationship with Jesus today. Even though our encounter with Jesus is nourished by our meditation on the mysteries of his life in the Gospel, this relationship cannot be understood or experienced as with someone from the past. Our relationship with Jesus is real, here and now. Through his Spirit, Jesus is present in our lives, in our time, in our world. And we have in our own humanity the possibility to know Jesus and to say "yes" to him. To follow Jesus is different from our admiration of people like Gandhi and Luther King, Jr. or our desire to imitate the example of the saints. To follow Jesus is different from everything else because saying "yes" to Jesus means that we accept him as our Lord.

In the three chapters of this thesis I have attempted to shape a Rahnerian theology of discipleship that could be meaningful for us today. I hope the theological and the anthropological foundations, as well as the Ignatian

discernment approach and the practical theology proposed, in this project could help people to reflect about their lives as disciples of Jesus.

As a conclusion of this work I would like to propose in a summarized way three attitudes of the disciple, three practical points that are the result of this practical theology that could help us to live our discipleship in our world today.

### ***a. Dialogue***

Dialogue is the key word to understand what Rahner tried to do with his theology engaging in dialogue with his culture. Dialogue is also the key to understand our own theological project. A practical theology of discipleship has to be done in dialogue with the world. A disciple of Jesus has to be able to dialogue with his fellow Christians, with those outside the Church and with his culture. Within the Church, we have to be able to dialogue with those who share our faith. Even if sometimes it is not possible, that is the attitude that we have to keep in our lives, to seek the dialogue no matter what are the differences in our ways of understanding discipleship in the Church. Our belonging to a world that goes beyond the structures of the Church obliges a capacity to dialogue with those who are not Christian and non-believers. As part of this world, we participate in globalization with its positive and negative outcomes. We are in the midst of a world where different cultures interact with each other and we have to learn how to communicate and dialogue with all of them.

We should be aware that if we engage in a dialogue, we have to accept that the other has something important to tell us. If we want to dialogue and not to impose, we have to respect the rules of the game: in a dialogue every

participant can talk and we have to learn how to listen. And if we actually listen, we will be able to learn something new about the other, and what is most important is that we may learn something new about ourselves.

### ***b. Creativity***

Rahner was creative not only because he knew how to assemble the different influences he had, but also because he could write in a variety of styles, which his long essays, short articles, homilies and prayers attest. A disciple of Jesus today has to be creative. To dialogue with others within the Church and outside of it, a disciple has to be creative. To communicate his faith to others who share the same beliefs or with those who do not have any idea of the Christian faith, a disciple has to be creative. To speak about God in a culture where God is unknown, where communication is fast, diverse and sometimes superfluous, a disciple has to be creative. A disciple of Jesus has to be able to create a new way to do theology, a new way to understand his discipleship in a secular world. A disciple of Jesus has to be able to create with others a new world.

### ***c. Jesus and the Gospel***

If a disciple engages in dialogue with the contemporary world, it is because he has something to say, because he has something to share. A disciple is the one who has a personal and intimate relationship with Jesus. And this intimacy is at the same time openness to the others in the world. A disciple is the one who accepts Jesus as his Lord and is free enough to proclaim his faith in Jesus because Jesus can be important to everyone in the world. Jesus of Nazareth, the one we encounter through the Gospels, is the one who is present

through the Spirit of God in the midst of our world. His figure can be meaningful for every human being. Jesus fulfills our humanity and I claim that the humankind needs to know Jesus. And that is our task as disciples of Jesus, to make him known in our world.

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