

Karl Rahner on the Eucharist:

The Eucharist as God's Transcendent Self-Communication Fully Actualized

“Before You, all multiplicity becomes one; in You, all that has been scattered is reunited; in Your Love all that has been merely external is made again true and genuine. In Your Love all the diffusion of the day's chores comes home again to the evening of Your unity, which is eternal life” (Rahner 1938, 52).

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how, according to the Eucharistic Theology of Karl Rahner, the Eucharist is God's transcendent self-communication fully actualized. In exploring Rahner's position accordingly, I begin with the position he articulates in *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, which entails a unity of philosophy and theology. By *philosophy* he means “reflecting upon the concrete whole of the human self-realization of a Christian,” and by *theology* he means “reflecting upon a Christian existence and upon the intellectual foundation of a Christian self-realization” (Rahner 1976, 10). His insistence on maintaining unity with these disciplines is due to his conviction that we are “justified in philosophizing here within theology itself, and this ‘philosophy’ need not have any scruple about the fact that it is constantly stepping over into areas that are properly theological” (Rahner 1976, 10-11). The point of working from this perspective is to provide confidence from the actual content of Christian dogma that can be believed with intellectual honesty (Rahner 1976, 12).

This unity of philosophy and theology as such directly leading into an assurance that dogma and intellectual honesty are likewise inseparable leads to a further connection that unifies theology and *anthropology*. What he means here is, because the word *God* exists in our “intellectual and spiritual existence” (Rahner 1976, 45) as an

anthropologically inherent concept, the continual possibility of being grasped by the mystery that God is always the objective other to whom human beings are necessarily subject, itself exemplifies *transcendence*; which is “the holy mystery as absolute being, or as the existent existing in an absolute fullness of being and possession of being” (Rahner 1976, 54, 68).¹

Further development of his position results in the understanding that whenever God specially intervenes in the world, through the Eucharist or otherwise, it always occurs from “out of the fundamental openness of finite matter and of a biological system towards spirit and its history,” and also “from out of the openness of the spirit towards the history of the transcendental relationship between God and the created person in their mutual freedom” (Rahner 1976, 87). The profound consequence of this position is that whenever God intervenes through self-communication, although it is free and impossible to deduce, it is “always only the becoming historical and becoming concrete of that ‘intervention’ in which God as the transcendental ground of the world has from the outset embedded himself in this world as its self-communicating ground” (Rahner 1976, 87). Flowing from this unity of philosophy, theology, dogma, intellectual honesty, anthropology, and God’s transcendent communication that finds immemorial and permanent grounding in creation, the aforementioned conclusion arises – the Eucharist itself most fully actualizes God’s transcendent self-communication.

It is given that the church springs from the very essence of Christianity as the supernatural self-communication of God to humanity, manifesting in history, and finding “its final and definitive historical climax in Jesus Christ” as the fullest expression of

¹ In referring to God as an anthropologically inherent concept, I am not dismissing the extent to which he may be known or sought after in varying capacities. I am simply acknowledging that there are those to whom God will remain purely conceptual.

creation itself (Rahner 1976, 343). But this transcendent self-communication, albeit from a necessarily Christian context, is best expressed through the Eucharist due to the fact that:

Insofar as the Eucharist is the sacrament of the most radical and most real presence of the Lord in this celebration in the form of a meal, the Eucharist is also the fullest actualization of the essence of the church. For the church neither is nor wants to be anything else but the presence of Christ in time and space. And insofar as everyone participates in the same meal of Christ, who is the giver and the gift at the same time, the Eucharist is also the sign, the manifestation and most real actualization of the church insofar as the church is and makes manifest the ultimate unity of all men in the Spirit, a unity which has been founded by God in grace. (Rahner 1976, 427)

For Rahner, while the above passage speaks volumes about the efficacy of the Eucharist insofar as it essentially actualizes the church, and is “the sacrament of salvation for the world when its confessing members make salvation manifest sacramentally to the world,” personal salvation is not the entire picture (Pekarske 2016).² Rather this is a correlative expression of the fact that grace and divine life are “present everywhere, brought about and made manifest in the concrete conditions of history” (Pekarske 2016).³

While sacraments are “specific events of God’s grace (such) as forgiving, sanctifying, and imparting the divine nature,” they do not encroach on the world from outside, for the world is constantly possessed by grace from its foundations, even from the deepest personal center of the spiritual subject (Pekarske 2016).⁴ This “Copernican” theology of grace to the sacraments (in particular the Eucharist) demonstrates their true significance and renders them intelligible to a contemporary world,” for sacramental grace exists in the intellectual and spiritual movements of sacramental events outwards,

² Cf. OF.3.2. “On Prayer Today” From *Opportunities for Faith* (62-73). December 6, 1968, notes for a lecture to Benedictine nuns, Holy Cross Abbey, Herstelle.

³ Cf. *Opportunities for Faith*, *ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

only to become effected in the world in a spiritual movement that leads back again from the world to the sacrament (Pekarske 2016).⁵

With the church as the *Ur-sakrament* into and out of which grace is actualized through all creation as the ultimate depths and radical dimension of all that the spiritual creature experiences, which finds its most authentic fulfillment in the silent endlessness of God, grace's "clearest manifestation and irrevocable victory is Jesus Christ" (Pekarske 2016)⁶. All persons who believe in him are united in divine love, their lives permeated by God's self-communication as an unlimited presence of divine grace, that in terms of the Eucharist transcendently manifests a broader *liturgy of the world*:

"The world and its history are the terrible and sublime liturgy...which God celebrates and causes to be celebrated in and through human history in its freedom." This history has the cross of Christ as its sustaining center. One only genuinely reenacts Christ's liturgy by drawing strength from the liturgy of the world. (Pekarske 2016)⁷

In theologizing from a unity of philosophy and theology where dogma is intellectually honest and anthropologically congruent, with creation itself as transcendently receptive to God's self-communication as a vast world liturgy inherent in our very history, Rahner's universal position inescapably contextualizes the Eucharist as the communicative medium of the unlimited presence of divine grace that is most reflective of "the divine depths inherent in real life" (Pekarske 2016).⁸

Obviously nothing could be more significant than God in our very midst, and we actualize this reality every time we celebrate mass:

The Lord's Supper becomes His presence among us and for us in the Church's celebration of the Eucharist. The Church fulfills the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

fundamental order of the Lord: “Do this (what He Himself had done on the night He was betrayed) in remembrance of Me.” The Church does what the Lord had done, with the words which He Himself spoke when he gave His body and His blood in the form of bread and wine to His disciples as a pledge of eternal life. The Church celebrates the Anamnesis, the “remembrance” of the meal that instituted the new covenant. The Church recalls what once happened but does not bring about a repetition of the actual event which happened once and for all on Calvary. Rather, what happened then enters into our place and our time, and acquires presence and redemptive power within our own being. (Rahner 1977, 32)

Acquiring divine presence and power through the sacrament of the eternal encounter with God is even the “sacrament of the everyday” (Pekarske 2002, 225).⁹ This is the case because Trent solemnly taught that the Eucharist: “i) is to be regarded as our daily bread; ii) has a remedial function which cleanses and preserves us from everyday sin;” and “iii) is the supreme sacrament of sacred fellowship with God and the neighbors we meet each day and to whom we are bound by bonds of faith, hope, and love” (Pekarske 2002, 225).¹⁰ Therefore, “the most holy sacrament of the altar, is manifestly the sacrament of our everyday lives” (Pekarske 2002, 225).¹¹

Accordingly, the assembly at the Eucharist essentially expresses Christian everyday identity: “humanity called together by God in Christ” to “hear and embody God’s Word in Christ, to be sent out as his apostles into the world to continue his salvation of assembling all of God’s children to himself” (Laurance 2012, 74). All of this reveals the typologically salvific power of Christ’s crucifixion through which he universally unites himself with all of humanity (Laurance 2012, 74). This is even revealed in our church buildings, with our major architectural styles and even components such as domes and ambos metaphorically manifesting the mystery of Christ,

⁹ Cf. VII. Further Theology of the Spiritual Life I (7.21: 216-217).

¹⁰ Cf. Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

while metonymically doing so with the ecclesial communion in time and space (Laurance 2012, 80).

So we see the Eucharist reflected throughout all reality, which is transcendently pervaded by God in a sacramental manner. Even outside of mass *per se*, the whole world is to be understood as a vast liturgy, with the cross itself standing as the pole upon which the universe is suspended, and around which it rotates in a Copernican manner. The *Ur-sakrament* founded by our God-man is also the everyday provider of the nourishment that intimately demonstrates the extent to which God loves us, and nothing could be more self-communicative than a God who not only lavishes grace and answers prayers, and speaks to us through his Word especially when it is proclaimed at mass, but even feeds us with sustenance from the very hands of his ordained representatives. This eternal occurrence represents the very pinnacle of salvation history, and everywhere, everyday, at any given moment the mass is being celebrated and the Eucharist distributed, God is doing everything possible to make himself understood loud and clear.

Reference List

- Laurance, SJ, Ph.D., John D. 2012. *The Sacrament of the Eucharist*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.
- Pekarske, SDS, Daniel. 2002. *Abstracts of Karl Rahner's Theological Investigations 1-23*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press.
- Pekarske, SDS, Daniel. 2016. *Pekarske on Rahner*. Joint History and Charism Committee, Society of the Divine Savior United States Province. Milwaukee, WI.
- Rahner, SJ, Karl. 1938. *Encounters with Silence*. Translated by James M. Demske, SJ. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press.
- Rahner, SJ, Karl. 1976. *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. Translated by William V. Dych. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company.
- Rahner, SJ, Karl. 1977. *Meditations on the Sacraments*. New York: The Seabury Press.