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Notes and Comments

THE EXPERIENCES OF A CATHOLIC THEOLOGIAN

*At a conference of the Catholic Academy of the Archdiocese of Freiburg, in February, 1984, whose theme was "Understanding Man in the Context of the Mystery of God" and which was held in anticipation of Karl Rahner's 80th birthday, Fr. Rahner spoke of "The Experiences of a Catholic Theologian." This is not a summary of his theology, nor even of his life, but simply a testimony of a theologian about himself and especially about his faith. With the kind permission of the publisher, we are printing here a translation of the text which has since appeared in book form, *Vor dem Geheimnis Gottes den Menschen verstehen. Karl Rahner zum 80. Geburtstag*, ed. Karl Lehmann (Munich: Schnell and Steiner, 1984). As is well known, Rahner died not long after the time of this conference. We therefore offer the article in his memory.—Editor*

By the title, "The Experiences of a Catholic Theologian," I do not mean very personal and intimate experiences, which belong in a

real biography, a biography that will never be written. Nor do I mean, at least not primarily, the experiences of church politics and clerical life, experiences which appear to me too unimportant because they are mine and should therefore not be reported today. I do mean, however, the experiences of a theologian or, better said, of a person who was given the assignment to be a theologian but who does not know all that well whether he has done justice to the assignment. This doubt feeds not so much on a general human inadequacy as on the impossible demand that belongs essentially to every theological enterprise in that it must speak of the incomprehensible—God. If I now speak here of "experiences," it should be observed from the outset that one is, of course, dealing with theological statements that are intended to be professional. Nevertheless, no one would deny the subjectivity behind the selection of those statements; rather, one would rather admit it freely.

The first experience of which I wish to speak is the experience that all theological statements are *analogous statements*, even if in very different ways and to various degrees. In itself this is obvious for every Catholic theologian. On some page of every theological text it is stated expressly. And since Erich Przywara it has become still more obvious for the theologian. Nevertheless, I feel that this statement is practically forgotten again and again in connection with individual theological statements. It is

the fright at this forgetting that is the experience of which I want to speak. I will begin quite simply. According to an utterly unsophisticated understanding of the concept of analogy as learned in the schools, it is characteristic of an analogous concept that a statement about any specific reality made with the aid of such a concept is indeed legitimate and unavoidable, but it must always in a certain sense be retracted at the same time because the simple attribution of this concept to the intended subject alone and without simultaneous retraction, without this unique and strange swinging between Yes and No, would distort the subject that is really intended and would end up false. But this mysterious and strange retraction that is necessary for the truth of an analogous statement is usually not made clearly and is forgotten. It is not possible to develop here a true metaphysics of knowledge through analogous statements and thereby to ward off the naive idea of the schools that an analogous concept is a hybrid between a normal univocal concept and an equivocal one: on a true understanding analogy must be on the contrary considered a fundamental structure of human knowledge.

Here I am only concerned with what belongs to the essence of analogy and is only too often forgotten and very often not even considered in particular cases—the retraction of the attribution of a conceptual content when the attribution is made. The Fourth Lateran Council says expressly that from the viewpoint of the world, that is, from any conceivable start-

ing point of knowledge, one can say nothing about God with the character of positive content without indicating at the same time a *radical lack of proportion* between this positive statement and the intended reality itself. But in the practical business of theology we forget this time and again. We speak of God, his existence, his nature as person, the three persons in God, his freedom, his will that binds us, and of similar topics. Of course, we must do this—we cannot simply remain silent about God, for one can do that, really do it, only after one has already spoken. But in all this speaking we usually forget that every such attribution can be predicated of God only to some degree legitimately when we are constantly retracting it at the same time; when we retain as the true and only secure point of our knowledge the mysterious swinging between Yes and No, and so always let our statements also fall into that inconceivability of God that remains silent; when our theoretical statements also once again share together with us our existential fate of a loving, trusting offering of ourselves up to God's own disposal which we cannot penetrate, to the judgment of his grace, to his holy inconceivability.

I think, I hope, that no theologian would seriously take issue with what has just been said. And yet at the same time how often does such a view represent only a single, formal sentence that is *also* expressed somewhere in our theology. How little is this theological commonplace something like an entelechy that permeates our whole theology in a really radical

and inexorable way in all its statements. How much do our statements from the university podiums and from the pulpits and from the holy tribunals of the Church have such a ring that one does not perceive clearly that these statements are virtually trembling with the last bit of a creature's modesty that knows how one can really only speak of God, that knows that all speech can be only the last moment before that holy silence that fills also even the heaven itself with the clear vision of God face to face.

Certainly one cannot expressly add to every theological proposition that it is simply intended in an analogous sense and that there is, in connection with such a proposition, actually a greater inequality to be pointed out in addition to the expressly stated equality. But in theology one should still attend more clearly to whether in his individual statements the author has not time and again forgotten what he asserts somewhere generally and abstractly about the analogous character of all theological concepts. If one would really put into practice this fundamental principle of theology, this basic axiom of theology, then it would have to become clear to the hearer of these theological statements what immense dimensions between divine and created reality are not filled up by the content of such statements but which rather remain empty.

We say, for example, that with death the human being comes to the definitive point of his ethical nature, of his relation to God, comes before the judgment of God. That is all true, but it says of

the intended reality in a partly very formal and abstract idiom and a partly moving, naive image, infinitely little about the concreteness of what is intended. Certainly one should not fill these empty spaces in our knowledge and faith with the naïvetés of modern spiritism, if simply because such fillers are in the end extremely uninteresting. But one should understand that with such statements we are both informed of something and simultaneously made to forget something, that in many respects such statements open up for us empty spaces and at the same time draw the curtain before our eyes, even though those spaces are filled, and we remain uninformed about them. What does it really mean, for example, that the Son of Man will come again on the clouds of heaven, that under the appearances of the Eucharist he truly gives himself to us with flesh and blood, that the pope is infallible in his *ex cathedra* pronouncements, that there is an eternal hell—that above and beyond all the infinite distances the human being in his ridiculously small creatureliness should have any serious dealings with the boundless, ineffable reality of God himself? In theology one says many things and then stops and, contrary to his own basic convictions, thinks that he is now really at the end and can stop, that the few statements that have been made are statements which quench the existential and metaphysical thirst of man and are not—as they are in truth—the challenge to realize that with all these statements ultimately one should only reach that dead end that is without

answers—the situation which according to Paul in 2 Cor. 4:8 constitutes human existence.

Here I would gladly, but cannot, speak more fully about the inconceivability of God and so about the true subject of theology. I would only like to testify to the experience that the theologian is only truly a theologian when he does not think complacently that he is speaking with transparent clarity but is frightened at the swinging of the analogy between Yes and No over the abyss of the inconceivability of God and at the same time experiences it as holy and testifies to it. And I would like only to confess that I, as one poor theologian, think in all my theology too little of this analogous character in all my statements. We talk too much about the subject and ultimately forget in all this talking the subject itself of the discussion.

A second experience, which follows naturally from the one just mentioned, is the experience that, practically speaking, we often or almost always forget in our theology the real center of that about which we really ought to speak. Since the Second Vatican Council there has indeed been much talk about the *hierarchy of truths* of the Christian gospel. And lazy and short-sighted theologians, when they fall into difficulties with a particular question in their theologies, will readily seek an escape by saying that what really matters in this or that particular question is not so much what is true or false. But what is really the *true center of the Christian gospel*—about this we reflect much too little. One can naturally and rightly say that this center is Jesus

of Nazareth, the one crucified and risen again, from whom we Christians take our name. But if that is true and is to be helpful, then we must still say why and how this Jesus is the one on whom alone one can rely in life and death.

How, then, are we to answer this question? If this answer were not the confession that the actual self-communication of the eternal God beyond all creaturely reality and the finite gift of God are that which is promised, offered and guaranteed to us through Jesus and him alone, then the reality of Jesus, because it indeed in itself and in its message remains in the finite and the contingent, would found perhaps *one* religion, perhaps the best, precisely the “Jesus religion” [*jesuanische religion*] but not the absolute religion intended for all men in all seriousness. The one, real center of Christianity and its gospel is therefore for me *the real self-communication of God in his own most personal reality and glory to the creature*. It is the confession of the most unlikely truth that God himself with his infinite reality and glory, his holiness, his freedom and love can truly and without reduction reach us ourselves in the creatureliness of our existence. All else that Christianity offers or expects from us is with respect to this only an introduction or “secondary consequence.”

One can also express in other ways what I have in mind here. Were I to deny that, I would be contradicting what I have just said about the analogous character of all theological statements. But for me all religion of Jesus, regardless how pious, all commitment to justice and love in the world, all

humanism that wants to use God for man and does not hurl man into the abyss of God—all this would be a religion of an incomprehensibly modest humanism, of one that is quite simply denied us by the immense power of God's love, by which God himself is truly beside himself. Our only choice is either to desire all—that is, God himself in his pure divinity—or to be damned—that is, buried in the prison of our finiteness. In a Catholic theology one can speculate whether a "pure nature" in itself would not be happy and perfected in itself under the distant sovereignty of God. In truth, however, and precisely because of the inexorability of grace, the reality is such that we either remain stuck in our finiteness or come to that place where God is himself as such. One might well feel the need to make the sober observation that, aside perhaps from a few saints, this thirst for the absolute, the inexorability of the unconditional, the ecstasy of the finite spirit into God, is not to be found in the common person at all. But even if our theology usually reflects only on how those entrusted to the Church and her sacraments come before the face of God himself, it should reflect much more on how to think of the odyssey of all people, including the most primitive living a million years ago, including the non-Christians and even the atheists, such that it leads to God himself. Of course, one can say—although I find it a bit cheap and facile—that this really divine salvation which is possible everywhere for all people and in all times takes place in ways that God alone

knows.

This is true, and I too, along with all Christian theologians, must ultimately leave matters to the inscrutable workings of God, through which he succeeds in penetrating with his liberating love the detestable concrete bunker of egoism. But when Christianity can and must really be concretely conceived such that it can be offered to people in all cultures and at all times, such that it should truly be capable of becoming their religion, one must then reflect specifically on the "anonymous" Christian everywhere and at all times, even if the importance of the controversial word as such does not matter to me. Who knows, it might be an act of incredible arrogance on the part of the created being if an individual does not want to let himself be saved without seeing how his neighbor will be saved. But it can also be a sublime act of brotherly love, one that is demanded of each Christian in the end, if it is really only in his hope for all that he hopes for himself and so reflects on how God's grace, which is in the end God himself in his self-communication, is really poured out over all flesh and not only over a few who have been marked sacramentally.

I do not think that it is forbidden for a Christian theologian to find the topic of man's sinfulness and the forgiveness of guilt out of pure grace in a certain sense somewhat secondary to the topic of the radical self-communication of God. It is not as if in our egoism we were not sinners who time and again become stuck in our ways; not as if we didn't need God's forgiving

grace, which is to be received without claim and as pure grace; not as if it were not evident that the self-communication of God occurs practically as always forgiving self-communication; not as if the fundamental experience of our hopelessly sinful condition in which we first experience concretely our freedom were not according to the witness of Christian experience of all times always the concrete situation in which the person really begins to long for God.

But when we see with what difficulty people today receive the message of justification as only the forgiveness of sins; when, moreover, for a Catholic theologian God and his promise of himself to mankind—however that promise is to be understood more precisely—is, already prior to sin, pure grace, an unexpected miracle of God who disappears and makes into his own history the adventure of such a love, then, I think, one may safely find the self-communication of God to the creature to be a topic more central than sin and the forgiveness of sin.

I know that such a statement is highly problematic, especially if placed before the tribunal of the Scriptures. But if indeed we can really not reflect about sin in any other way than in the context of divine love for the sinner, there is also at least the danger of hybris, that we take our sins too seriously, that we forget that perhaps what exactly frightens us most in mankind's terrible history is, in spite of everything, more the result of the human being's creatureliness in his guiltless stupidity, weakness and instinctive behavior than the

real sin for which we must really answer before God's tribunal. For this reason I am thinking still from a thoroughly Christian viewpoint and not from any smug humanism that faith in God's self-communication in free grace may be set somewhat before the confession of the human being's sinfulness.

The history of our conscious awareness of our faith testifies unambiguously that in this consciousness there is a history, there are changes and variations in emphasis. If, since the time of historical consciousness, we know this explicitly and do not in our practice simply engage and endure such changes, then indeed today we can exercise our claim on the right to such shifts of emphasis. We can then think that the Christian gospel can be conveyed today more plausibly and effectively by means of such shifts of emphasis. In the context of our considerations today it is not really a question of naming and describing the Christian reality as such but of saying something about the experience that one has had of this reality—in his own very subjective way, of course. And so let it be admitted here, even if with some anxiety, that in my theology the topic of sin and the forgiveness of sins stands, in what is certainly a problematic way, somewhat in the background with respect to the topic of the self-communication of God. But when one admits in this way that he cannot realize equally all conceivable experiences of the Christian in his own limited subjectivity, then he can still ask the one who counts this against him whether he too must not take a loss in the bargain, for his own

theology must be subjective in order to be able to express clearly enough what really matters to him.

A third experience should be listed, one chosen just as arbitrarily as the others. Previously when a theologian pursued his theology as the member of a religious order, as one belonging to a definite family formed by a spirituality distinct from other religious orders, his theology was very directly and noticeably marked by a very definite theology of his order. The great orders, such as the Benedictines, the Dominicans, the Franciscans and the Jesuits, had each its own theology. They cultivated it, distinguished it from others, and had the leaders of their schools approved by the Church and named doctors of the Church. They were proud of their own theology. Against all this one can raise basically no objection, provided that the differences do not—as was often the case earlier—lead to frozen, partisan disputes among the schools.

Today, I think, it is no longer as it was earlier. According to the laws of my order I would, for example, have to be a supporter of the so called "*scientia media*" and would have to reject and oppose the Thomistic doctrine on grace of the Baroque Period. There are today no longer such clearly identifiable theologies of the orders nor can there be. The formulation of the questions, the theological material with which one must work, the importance of a modern biblical theology, the results of a more professional history of dogma and of theology—all this makes it simply impossible for a reasonable person simply to follow the clear and

traditional school theology of the order to which he belongs.

The real differences in theology today cut across the orders. That is obviously far from meaning, however, that the theology of a religious has nothing to do with the uniqueness of the life and spirituality of his order. I hope, for example, that the great father of my order, Ignatius of Loyola, has granted me that some small portion of his spirit and of his unique spirituality is noticeable in my theology. Such is at least my hope! I am even of the somewhat immodest opinion that in this or that point I stand closer to Ignatius than the great Jesuit theology of the Baroque Period, which did not always, and then not in unimportant points, do sufficient justice to what one might term a legitimate existentialism of Ignatius. If the communist Ignatius Silone personally dedicated one of his books to me on a previous birthday with the motto "*Unum in una spe: libertas*" (one in one hope: liberty), then perhaps I as Jesuit can indeed remember that in that part of the soberly powerful closing prayer of the Exercises where Ignatius gives himself over completely and totally to God, freedom ranks before the Augustinian triad of conscience, understanding and will. I do not think that this order was just the coincidence of diction and rhetoric. Nevertheless, I do not think that the traditional Jesuit theology has taken this completely seriously either. Nor do I know whether this has really been done better in my theology, although I have still tried a little. In any case, as a Jesuit I do not feel bound to a narrow school the-

ology, still less to a specific school philosophy.

I have on the whole valued more highly the Thomistic philosophy as interpreted by Maréchal than the Suarezianism in which I grew up in the first place. One can, of course, level the criticism against such modern philosophy and theology as I tried to pursue them that one has not gone beyond an eclecticism. But where in the world is there a systematic philosophy and theology about which one could not raise the suspicions of eclecticism because it has identifiable sources of various origins? And how could one today pursue theology differently than in the broadest possible confrontation and dialogue with all the terribly differentiated variety of today's anthropological sciences? Then how can such a theology that tries to listen on all sides and wants to learn from everywhere avoid the criticism of eclecticism? I know, of course, that in my theology there are perhaps many statements that do not fit together absolutely unambiguously and clearly because, given the original plurality of the sources of one's knowledge, one is hardly in the position of carrying out an adequate and comprehensive reflection on the coherence of all his statements. A theologian can therefore only ask his friends and the critics of his theology to meet his theology with gracious benevolence, to consider the starting points, the basic tendencies, the formulations of the questions more important than the "results," which indeed in the end can never be really final.

A fourth and final experience

remains to be mentioned, even if perhaps it is already hidden in the previously mentioned experiences and is certainly not the most important for theology as such. I refer to the incongruence of theology with the other sciences. I am not referring here to any sophisticated question about a theological epistemology, or to a general philosophy of science. I refer rather to the simple fact that I have experienced and actually know only a terribly small part of that which can be experienced and can be known about man from all the sciences in addition to the expressions of poetry, music and the plastic arts as well as even the history of mankind, even though as a theologian I would really have to know all that. If as theologian I do not really inquire abstractly but reach for God himself, then I may consider uninteresting absolutely nothing of that through which he reveals himself as creator of the world, as lord of history.

Indeed, one can claim quite piously that everything important for my salvation stands in Scripture and that one need not know anything beyond that. But if in order to find God at all, I must love him for himself and not only for myself as my salvation, then I can in no way restrict my interest to Scripture alone. Then everything through which God lets himself be perceived in the world of creatures is of interest to me, and moreover precisely for the theologian as such who should undertake in his study intellectually to explode a false egoism of salvation. But of all that which I would for this reason gladly know, I know practically nothing. All human experiences in

all the sciences, arts and events of history speak for the theologian of God, and the individual theologian knows practically nothing of these. It is for this reason that his theology, with all that commitment to human existence to which one gladly calls attention, is so abstract and pale, so far from that which shows what the world and human beings are.

Certainly, the theologian has ultimately only one thing to say. But this one word would have to be filled with the mysterious essence of all reality. And yet each time I open some work of whatever modern science, I fall as theologian into no slight panic. The greater part of what stands written there I do not know, and usually I am not even in the position to understand more exactly what it is that I could be reading about. And so I feel as a theologian that I am somehow repudiated.

The colorless abstraction and emptiness of my theological concepts frightens me. I say that the world has been created by God. But what is the world—about that I know virtually nothing, and as a result the concept of creation also remains unusually empty. I say as theologian that Jesus is as man also Lord of the whole creation. And then I read that the cosmos stretches for billions of light years, and then I ask myself, terrified, what the statement that I have just said really means. Paul still knew in which sphere of the cosmos he wanted to locate the angels; I do not.

Frightened, I ask myself whether the eternal kingdom of God is not at least half filled with souls that never arrived to a per-

sonal life history: for according to the general Church teaching the personal-spiritual and immortal soul is present already with the first fertilization of the ovum by the sperm. Yet I cannot imagine how the countless numbers of natural abortions can be consistent with even such an elementary history of personal freedom. I ask myself how one should think more precisely about primitive mankind 2 million years ago as the first subject of a history of salvation and revelation. I am taught by secular anthropology that the distinction between body and soul must be made with more care and that it remains problematic. I am, therefore, no longer able to interpret so dualistically the teaching of *Humani Generis* that the human body stems from the animal kingdom while the soul is created by God—as the text indeed seems to be teaching upon first reading. Because it could have a thoroughly practical meaning, I ask myself whether a pope could cease to be pope through an incapacitating sickness. I could go on in this way still further, with problems that the modern sciences create for theology, problems which theology has still as yet not answered very clearly.

How does it stand with the unambiguous stability of human nature, a stability presupposed by the teaching on the natural laws of morality, if one situates the human being in the history of evolution with his gene pool that has after all come about and is subject to change still? Does not then the tone of the Church's moral proclamation sometimes frighten one through its lack of ambiguity and

its immutability, characteristics not even so easily found in the human being himself? The theologian can and must be careful and modest in this situation. On the other hand, he must, of course, have the courage to utter his message and to stand by his conviction.

The theologian can perhaps console himself a bit with the observation that natural scientists themselves have not either reached an unambiguous synthesis between what they as natural scientists themselves postulate methodically for their work and that which they still experience in themselves, secretly, beyond the isolation of their fields, as freedom, responsibility and questioning beyond everything particular. If the theologian experiences in this discomforting way his own ignorance, then he could—if courageously and without fear he accepts this experience—be for the rest of the scientists an example and inspiration to pursue their sciences out of the same stance of modesty and self-imposed limits. The tensions between the sciences would in this way not be put to the side but rather sharpened because they are admitted. The inevitable dispute, however, of the sciences among themselves and with theology would still be surrounded with a peace that can rule among all those who, each in his own way, sense and endure the mystery that we call God.

There would still be many experiences to report, and those I have reported may not be of the greatest importance. I could tell of my experiences with my colleagues at the universities of Innsbruck,

Munich, and Münster. I could speak of the experiences of my 62 years in the Jesuit Order. I could dig up some friendly and some less happy memories of my experiences in Rome. And I could go on. A life is indeed rich, even when in old age it disappears behind the clouds of forgetfulness.

But I want to try to say something about still one more experience, about an experience that cuts straight across everything said up to this point and which for that reason cannot be counted along with them—about the experience of the expectation of “that which is to come.” If as Christians we confess our belief in an eternal life in which we should share, this expectation of what is to come is first of all not anything especially unusual. One speaks, of course, with a certain comforting pathos about the hope of eternal life, and far be it from me to criticize such a thing if it is meant sincerely. But as for myself, when I hear such talk it strikes me as a bit strange. It would seem to me generally that the imaginative models in terms of which one tries to clarify his idea of eternal life hardly fit the radical break that is after all posited with death.

One conceives of an eternal life, which is already strangely enough described as “the beyond” and as continuing “after” death, in such a way that it is too heavily burdened with the realities we are accustomed to here, such as continuation of life, meeting with those with whom we were close here, joy and peace, banqueting and rejoicing and all such, never coming to an end but ever continuing. I am afraid that the radical

inconceivability of what is really meant by eternal life is rendered harmless, and what we call the direct vision of God in this eternal life is reduced to a joyful occupation next to the others that fill up our present life. The ineffable mystery that plunges the absolute Godhead himself, naked and plain, into our narrow creatureliness is not truly recognized.

I admit that I find it a distressing task of today's theologian, one that has not yet been mastered, to discover a better imaginative model for this eternal life such that, from the very beginning, the tendencies to render the idea harmless are ruled out. But how? How? If the angels of death have cleared away from the rooms of our spirit all the worthless rubbish that we call our history (although of course the true essence of our freedom as we have exercised it will remain); if all our starry ideals with which we ourselves had presumptuously draped the heaven of our existence burn up and fade away; if death has set up an enormous, silent emptiness and we have accepted this silently in faith and hope as our true essence; if then our life, however long, up to death appears as a single, short burst of our freedom, one that appears to us to be stretched out in the loop of time, one in which question translates itself into answer, possibility into reality, the offer of freedom into its actualization; and if it then becomes manifest in an enormous fright of an ineffable joy that this enormous silent emptiness that we experience as death is in truth filled with the ultimate mystery which we call God, filled with his pure light and

with his love that receives everything and gives all; and if then also out of this inscrutable mystery the face of Jesus, the Blessed One, appears to us and looks at us, and in this concrete face God *surpasses* all our true assumptions about the incomprehensible and inscrutable God, then, then I suppose I would not like really to describe what comes but still in my stammering to point out how one can in the meantime await that which is to come, in that he experiences the passing away of death itself as already the beginning of that which is coming. Eighty years are a long time. But for everyone the lifetime that is measured out to him is the short moment in which what should does happen.—*Translated by Peter Verhalen, O. Cist.*

Karl Rahner

TOWARD A CHRISTIAN CULTURE

It may appear strange to make reference in the same brief note to a biography of Christopher Dawson and a book subtitled "A Science Supplement for Catholic Elementary Schools." The link between the two lies in their common concern to penetrate intellectual inquiry with religious sensibility and vision. The central point of Dawson's immense learning was to engage the study of culture from within the religious context which alone he believed gave