

KARL RAHNER

FINDING GOD IN DAILY LIFE

James Bacik

The poet Rilke suggested that if our daily round seems unrewarding, we should not blame it but rather ourselves for failing to evoke the riches found in it. We sense wisdom in this statement, but we also know all too well the problems of daily life: boredom with routine, doubts about meaning, impatience with progress, and temptations to escape. Certain cultural trends intensify the problem. Science and technology tend to become idols which replace a religious sense of life. Our language is impoverished, and it is difficult to speak in depth about the great human realities such as death, love, freedom and sexuality.

When the mysterious depths of ordinary experience are eclipsed, then the human spirit cries out for something more. The current interest in the occult and in extraordinary religious experience is not surprising in our culture. This is, however, simply another way of denigrating the ordinary and escaping from the everyday. In this situation, many of us sense the need for guidance if we are to evoke the riches hidden in our daily lives.

My mind instinctively turns to the great German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1904-1984) to serve as our guide in this effort to discern the divine presence in our ordinary experience. Karl Rahner was well-suited for this task by virtue of his natural instincts as well as his professional training. He was born March 5, 1904, in Freiburg, Germany, the second son of a German professor and his dutiful wife. His family life, steeped in traditional Catholic piety, helped him develop his intuitive sense that all human beings are essentially oriented to the ever mysterious God. In 1922, Karl, following in the footsteps of his older brother Hugo, entered the Jesuit novitiate in Feldkirch, Austria. Through his Jesuit training, especially the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius, he sharpened his sense of finding God in all things. During his seminary training, he recognized the limitations of his required courses in Thomistic philosophy and, therefore, spent a good deal of time assimilating the thought of more modern authors, especially Immanuel Kant, the 18th-century philosopher who accomplished a “Copernican revolution” by placing the human knower in the center of his philosophy, and Joseph Marechal, a 20th-century Belgian Jesuit who tried to overcome the limitations of Kant’s approach by emphasizing that human beings are dynamic seekers after knowledge.

After being ordained a priest in 1932, Rahner did graduate studies in philosophy at Freiburg from 1934 to 1936. His doctoral dissertation, which interpreted the Thomistic analysis of human knowing in light of the more contemporary approaches indicated by Kant and Marechal, was rejected by his teacher Martin Honecker because it strayed too far from traditional Thomism. Fortunately, Rahner later published this work in 1939 as *Geist in Welt* (English translation, *Spirit in the World*), and it was recognized by many scholars as a genuine contribution to a philosophical understanding of human knowing. During his Freiburg years, Rahner had the opportunity to participate in the seminars conducted by Martin Heidegger, the German existentialist philosopher. Rahner usually played down the influence of Heidegger on his

thought. Once when I questioned him about this, he responded sharply by asking me how much Heidegger had ever written on God, Christ, church and the sacraments. He then sat back in his chair as though the question was settled. Actually, Rahner did assimilate Heidegger's key understanding of human beings as infinite questioners as well as important aspects of his analysis of death. Furthermore, the vivid descriptions of common human experience which appear throughout Rahner's writings reflect Heidegger's philosophical method commonly called "phenomenology."

After failing to get his doctorate in philosophy, Rahner went to the University of Innsbruck in Austria where he completed a doctorate in theology in one year. His dissertation was "On the Origins of the Church from the Side of Christ" and included a discussion of the Sacred Heart of Jesus---a theme which appears periodically in his writings. In 1937, Rahner began teaching theology at the University of Innsbruck, but the following year the Nazis suppressed the theology faculty. Some of the professors, including his brother Hugo, went to Switzerland, but Karl remained in Innsbruck. On August 15, 1939, he made his final vows as a Jesuit. Later that year, when the Nazis ordered him out of the Tyrol, the Archbishop of Vienna invited him to come to Vienna to work in their Diocesan Pastoral Institute. He was comparatively safe there and periodically went off to lecture in other cities. In the summer of 1944, the Gestapo became more active in Vienna and Rahner left for rural Bavaria where he stayed until August of 1945 when he went to Munich to do pastoral work. In 1948, he returned to Innsbruck where he taught theology until 1964. During this time, he was incredibly productive. He lectured before large audiences and wrote ground-breaking articles. He participated in scholarly discussion groups on important topics such as religion and science, and edited major projects, including the encyclopedia *Sacramentum Mundi*. Much of his time and energy was expended at the Second Vatican Council where he served as a peritus, giving lectures to the bishops and helping to draft some of the major documents.

"If there is any path at all on which I can approach You, it must lead through the very middle of my ordinary daily life. If You have given me no single place to which I can flee and be sure of finding You, then I must be able to find You in every place in each and every thing I do. In your love all the diffusion of the day's chores comes home again to the evening of Your unity, which is eternal life."

----- Meditations and Prayers

His work during this period also brought him into conflict with the Roman Curia. He was denied permission to publish a book on Mary, forbidden to speak on the topic of concelebration, and was directed in 1962 to submit everything he wrote to preliminary censorship in Rome. This ban was effectively lifted when Pope John XXIII appointed him as an official peritus for the council. In 1964, Rahner left Innsbruck for the University of Munich to take over the chair of philosophy and religion, formerly held by Romano Guardini. This move, greatly desired by Rahner, did not work out very well. When the theology faculty refused to allow him to work directly with

theology students, he decided to go to the University of Munster to serve as professor of dogmatics---a position held from 1967 until his retirement in 1971. During his retirement years he remained very active, lecturing around the world and continuing his prolific writing. His eightieth birthday brought a great outpouring of affection and praise from friends and colleagues. He died shortly afterward on May 30, 1984. His final hours were peaceful as this energetic man who knew well the darkness and anxiety of life prepared to hand himself over to the Gracious Mystery.

While Rahner was clearly one of the great speculative theologians in Christian history, I am convinced that he is an excellent practical guide for our spiritual journey through daily life. There is no doubt that he was a theologian's theologian, but he also has a valuable message for the average person. It is true that his academic articles are often difficult to decipher, but he has also written popular pieces and preached simpler sermons which speak directly to the heart of ordinary people. Although he treated a wide range of esoteric theological questions, he also consistently responded to the real problems of the contemporary world. To me, Karl Rahner appears, in the midst of all his speculative brilliance, as a theologian for the average person. He is an insightful interpreter of common human experience and a resourceful guide in the struggle to discover meaning in our ordinary activities and purpose in our daily routine. He shows us how the Christian tradition can illumine our common journey and offer us practical advice on how to respond faithfully to the call of the great God. Let us further explore the ways he helps us appreciate the ordinary by examining his personal and pastoral approach to theology.

I first met Karl Rahner in September of 1974 in Munich, when I sought his advice on a book I was writing about his theology. There was clearly an aura of greatness around the man, but he also struck me as very ordinary. There was a simple, straightforward, down-to-earth side to him which I found very attractive. His emotions surfaced easily. He began our first conversation by reminding me sternly that we didn't have much time to talk and declaring, jokingly, that books on his theology were like the sands of the seashore. During our conversations he became warmer and even shared with me some off-the-record personal opinions about other theologians. By the end of this first visit, he put his arm around me and asked that I pray for his happy death.

As I learned in subsequent visits, Rahner was like an old shoe in his Jesuit residence. He was seldom the center of attention and preferred to withdraw into the background. The common ordinary things of life fascinated him. One day on a walk we stopped into a gathering place for young people and he immediately began asking about how they prepared and served the food. His piety was basic and traditional. He said private masses and prayed the Rosary regularly. I heard him preach on Holy Thursday in his own Jesuit house. He read a short homily which was both simple and inspiring. My impression of him was that he liked earthy people and avoided individuals who tended to be pompous. I once asked him what his own greatest religious experience was and he replied, "immersion in the incomprehensibility of God and the death of Christ." I then asked whether this occurred in prayer and meditation. He answered quickly and pointedly, "No, in life, in the ordinary things."

“The depths in us are not pools of stagnant bitterness but the waters of infinity springing up into eternal life. It is easy to stir up the slime; but it needs faith to see behind and through all these dark forces a much more powerful force---the power of the presence of the Holy Spirit.”

---- On Prayer

Thus, my own limited contacts with Rahner convinced me that he has a message for ordinary persons because he himself retained the common touch despite his brilliance and fame. His writings, often subtly autobiographical, can illumine our daily lives because he habitually saw the hand of God in his own life. He is a theologian for the average person because he never forgot that we all make the journey of life together in response to the call of God.

Rahner continues to be such a helpful guide for our spiritual quest because of his consistent emphasis on the pastoral side of theology. He was a professional theologian of the highest order. His unpublished lecture notes for the theology classes he taught early in his career reveal a wide-ranging grasp of the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as a keen sense of the biblical basis for church teaching. His later writings often assumed this background without explicitly mentioning it. He wrote scholarly articles on an amazing variety of dogmatic questions, and he participated in the great dialogues between East and West, religion and science, Christianity and Marxism, theology and philosophy. David Tracy has described him as one of the four or five most influential theologians in the history of Catholic thought. The list of his books and articles, including translations and various editions, runs to over four thousand items. His influence on current theologians is vast and deep.

Yet throughout this whole prodigious theological project, Rahner's concern was always pastoral. Theology for him was not a speculative exercise but a means of relating the Christian tradition to real life. His guiding principle, often repeated, was that the more scientific theology is, the more pastoral it will be. The more it searches out the real questions of the current age and explores the rich resources of the Christian tradition, the more practical it becomes. The more truly competent a theologian is, the better spiritual guide he or she will prove to be. Rahner serves our needs so well because he was extremely good at his craft. He is helpful in discerning meaning in ordinary experience because he possessed a vast knowledge of the theological tradition. In his hands, theology became a way of opening up the mysterious depths of human existence and of pointing to a God who makes all of our knowing and loving possible and meaningful.

The last time I saw Karl Rahner was in December of 1977. He had graciously written the introduction to my book, *Apologetics and the Eclipse of Mystery* (Notre Dame Press, 1980), which makes use of his seminal ideas on promoting dialogue with the secular world. I wrote him a note the day I left Munich, thanking him for enabling me to be a Catholic with intellectual honesty and for showing me a way to achieve greater personal integration in my life. He has performed a similar service for countless others, including those who have never heard his name but have benefitted indirectly from his pastoral approach to theology. His thought is in the air and permeates the writings of other theologians. It filters into religious education programs,

homilies and lectures. The essential message, derived from Rahner, is that theology must be pastoral. This means that it must help us understand the depth dimension of our common experiences and enable us to live our everyday lives more responsibly.

From the very beginning of his career, Rahner was interested in religious experience as the basis for theological reflection. In his earliest articles, he examined the notion of the spiritual senses in Origen and Bonaventure in order to learn more about our inner capacities for discerning the workings of the Spirit. Already in 1937, he published an inspiring collection of simple prayers (*Encounters with Silence*, Newman Press, 1960) which reflected both his original intuition that we are all oriented to an inexhaustible mystery, and his personal struggles with the incomprehensible ways of this mystery which we call "God." His doctoral dissertation which, as we saw, was rejected but later published in English as *Spirit in the World* (Herder and Herder, 1968), argued that all of our questioning and knowing demands an infinite horizon as a condition of its possibility. In other words, our ordinary activities of learning and growing in self-knowledge already involve the presence of God, who enables, guides, and fulfills them.

"We are all pilgrims on the wearisome roads of our life. There is always something ahead of us that we have not yet overtaken. When we do catch up with something it immediately becomes an injunction to leave it behind us and to go onwards. Every end becomes a beginning."

----- Meditations and Prayers

In his next book, *Hearers of the Word* (Herder and Herder, 1969), he argued that we need to be on alert for a word from the Lord; and that any divine communication would occur, not through abstract ideas, but in our concrete history---or, as we would say today, our daily experience. These seminal ideas on religious experience were then played out in numerous articles, lectures and homilies which have been collected in his 21 volumes of *Theological Investigations* and in more popular books such as *The Eternal Year*, (Helicon, 1964), *Opportunities for Faith* (Seabury, 1974), and *Christian at the Crossroads* (Burns and Oates, 1975). Finally, in his great masterwork, *The Foundations of Christian Faith* (Seabury, 1978), he brought together in one volume his organic approach to the major theological questions, beginning with the human experience of orientation to the inexhaustible mystery addressed by Jesus as "Father." Thus we see that in his whole theological project, Rahner has always been concerned with uncovering the depth dimension of human existence and relating it to various aspects of the Christian tradition. He has done so in stimulating homilies which shed the light of the Gospel on common concerns, in popular talks which manifest the relevance of Christian doctrines for real life, and in technical articles which often contain vivid descriptions of the graced condition of human existence. Rahner speaks to us today precisely because he remained attuned to the changing questions posed by life in the contemporary world and analyzed them from a theological viewpoint solidly rooted in the Christian tradition.

With some sense of Rahner's general contribution to the spiritual quest of ordinary people, let us now examine some of his particular insights which can guide us in evoking the riches present in our daily lives. My experience in teaching Rahner's theology suggests that the best way of doing this is by analyzing and applying his systematically developed thought in *Foundations of Christian Faith*. While this book is difficult reading, especially in the early chapters, it deserves careful study because it provides such a helpful overview of how Christian doctrines can illumine ordinary experience. Serious readers will find helpful guidance in *A World of Grace*, edited by Leo O'Donovan, in which various Rahnerian scholars provide a chapter-by-chapter commentary on *Foundations*.

THE EXPERIENCE OF MYSTERY

Rahner's starting point and the consistent foundation for his whole theology is an analysis of human beings as positively oriented to mystery. All of our knowing and loving are only intelligible on the condition that we are sustained and drawn by a source and goal which always exceeds our grasp. For example, there is a longing in the human heart for a love which is both totally satisfying and finally imperishable. This desire, however, is constantly frustrated. There are no perfect lovers. Our desires exceed all possible fulfillment on this earth. This raises the question of meaning and absurdity. Is there a final fulfillment for our longings, or are we doomed to eternal frustration? Believers claim that there is a goal for our strivings which will totally satisfy our desires.

We can call this goal the "Holy or Gracious Mystery." The word "mystery" suggests that while we know something of this goal, it remains ultimately beyond our comprehension and control. Problems can be analyzed and solved. Mystery, even when revealed, is finally inexhaustible, ultimately incomprehensible, and essentially unsolvable. The terms "gracious" and "holy" suggest that the mystery is trustworthy and well-disposed toward us. It brings to imagination a sense of tenderness, care, and love. All human beings are in the hands of the gracious mystery. Believers call this mystery "God," and Christians address this God as "Father."

This experience of mystery is common to all people, and it forms a deep bond of solidarity within the whole human family. Our essential interdependence as human beings is revealed in our common quest for knowledge and love. Teamwork makes sense because we face the common task of extending and deepening our knowledge. Love, which involves mutual giving and receiving, draws us out of our selfishness and into life-giving relationships. We do not make the journey alone; we search out the mystery in the company of others. We seek love and treasure friendship. In short, we are oriented to mystery, but always as social creatures and interdependent persons.

"Almighty God can it be that You are my true home? Are You the One who will release me from my narrow little dungeon? Are you merely unrest for the restless soul? Must every question fall dumb before You, unanswered?"

----- Encounters with Silence

This theological anthropology, developed in detail by Rahner, puts us on solid ground in our effort to find meaning in our ordinary experience. His careful philosophical analysis, which supports his intuitive sense of our orientation to mystery, guards us against simplistic and faddish approaches to religious experience. For example, Rahner's anthropology enabled him to recognize quickly the essential fallacies of the Death-of-God movement. Those steeped in his theology also have a perspective for assessing the claims of individuals who speak about direct and unambiguous messages from God. Rahner's insistence on the interdependent character of human existence prevents us from thinking of ourselves as isolated individuals seeking after privileged messages from the deity. Positively, it reminds us of the commonness of human experience and the need for communication with fellow searchers. Dialogue based on our participation in the human adventure is a great tool for sharpening our awareness of our final goal. Thus, our interdependence enables us to explore together our common human experience for intimations of the gracious mystery.

Rahner's notion of the incomprehensibility of God, which echoes the best of the Christian tradition, including Aquinas, rules out any effort to control God or to program religious experience. Since God's ways are finally inscrutable, it is impossible to claim that our particular way of approaching the deity is the only way. When we realize that the mystery is beyond all of our images, the folly of erecting idols and of turning finite realities into absolutes becomes more obvious. For example, participating in a prayer group, walking in the woods, or making a Marriage Encounter may bring some individuals closer to God, but none of these activities can claim to be the answer for everyone. The sacraments have a great power to focus the joys and sorrows of our daily lives, but they remain only one of many vehicles of God's grace. The Bible has a remarkable capacity to illumine and guide human existence, but it only partially reveals the source of all truth. Rahner's insistence on the incomprehensibility of the gracious mystery frees us to find God in the most ordinary of situations, and at the same time it guards us against setting up our own perceptions as the final word.

DIMENSIONS OF SIN

In our daily lives, we come to know the ambiguous character of our search for God. We live in a world that is a mixture of grace and sin. The human situation is flawed, and the evil tendencies of our hearts are real. As Rahner says, we are radically threatened by sin and guilt. Thus we must deal with systems which oppress people and with unjust structures which render whole groups powerless. We know the temptation to live for self rather than for God; and, at times, we choose the self-contradictory stance of saying "no" to the very source of our being. Sin is an abiding dimension of human existence, and we must take it into account as we probe our ordinary experience. Subtle manipulation can enter into the most intimate relationships. Family life can breed its own brand of insensitivity. Work can inspire a destructive competitive attitude. Leisure can devolve into culpable escapism. In short, the everyday world knows its share of sin and vice.

Rahner's analysis of the dark side of human existence suggests that the search for God in ordinary life cannot be pursued in a spirit of naive optimism. We need, rather, a sober realism which recognizes the power of the dehumanizing forces which threaten us. Thus we are called to find meaning in a daily routine which can indeed be deadening. Our charity must be exercised in family situations which try our patience. Our task is to fight injustice even in the face of powerful systems of oppression. We have to learn to maintain a prayerful, reflective spirit despite the demands and frustrations of our daily work. In all our ordinary activities, grace and sin contend. Our hope is based on the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, who energizes us for our daily tasks and guarantees the final meaning and triumph of all our good efforts.

UNCREATED GRACE

In *Foundations*, Rahner develops a theology of grace and revelation. Christianity affirms our hope that the rule of mystery over our lives is both gracious and personal. The great God wills the salvation of all people (1 Timothy 2:4), and to this end has entered a process of self-communication to the whole of creation and to all human beings. Retrieving elements of the scholastic tradition, Rahner calls this totally gratuitous divine self-giving "uncreated grace." This self-communication as offered produces our positive orientation to the mystery. It also causes a universal revelation which can be described as an inner word echoing in the call of conscience and as an interior light illuminating our intellect. When we heed this call and accept God's self-giving, we are transformed or divinized. This justifying grace brings us into a new relationship with the Father, initiates the process of putting on the mind of Christ, and makes us responsive to the promptings of the Spirit.

From this perspective, grace, though free, is not rare. We live and move and have our being in one graced world. God's grace permeates the whole of the cosmos and all dimensions and aspects of human existence. Only sin, personal and social, can screen out the power of God's self-giving. Thus all things are potentially revelatory. Personal relationships, the beauties of nature, the burden of our own freedom, being in love, falling into sin, belonging to a community, fighting injustice---these and all the elements which make up our daily lives can serve as catalysts for a deeper understanding and appreciation of our relationship to the deity. At the same time, it is clear that no particular created reality can exhaust or control the gracious mystery which has communicated itself to us. We come to know God in and through the experiences of life and are called to respond to the divine in our daily activities. As Rahner summarizes it, the experience of self is the experience of God.

This theology of grace and revelation has prompted Rahner to examine the depth dimension of many common activities, such as laughing, working, playing, eating, sleeping, moving about, and sitting down. For example, in *Everyday Faith* (Herder and Herder, 1968) he points out that wholesome laughter flows from a proper perspective on life as well as from a sense of empathy and affection for others. He then relates this to the biblical suggestion that God laughs because he recognizes the ultimately successful outcome of an historical process currently filled with darkness and chaos. A careful reading of Rahner's vast writings reveals his amazing capacity to probe the depths of ordinary human experience. He, in turn, inspires us to take a closer look at our own daily routine which seems so mundane and yet contains surprising depths.

THE FINAL WORD

In his theology, Rahner emphasizes that divine grace seeks visibility and a full human response. The inner word of universal revelation strains toward an outer word which makes it concrete and particular. God's self-communication, which has created the world and divinized human beings, strives for full expression in history. Christians claim that divine self-giving and human receptivity have met completely, definitively and irrevocably, in Jesus of Nazareth. He is God's final word to us and, at the same time, the most obedient and responsive of all human beings. He is the greatest prophet and the best example of complete humanity. He is the absolute Savior and the wisest of teachers. In his death, he definitively surrendered himself to the mystery he addressed as "Abba." Through his Resurrection, God has vindicated his claim and guaranteed the ultimate triumph of his cause.

Rahner's Christology, which forms the core of his *Foundations*, helps to illumine and transform our experience. The historical Jesus portrayed in the gospels reveals the true nature of human existence. His parables enable us to perceive the hidden depths of ordinary life and call us to live more fully in accord with the surprising ways of God. His miracles remind us that healing is available and transformation possible, even in the face of the dark and demonic forces which threaten us on the common journey. The Scriptures, which witness to Christ, provide us with ideals which guide us in discerning the truth and encourage us in seeking the good. Finally, through the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are able to believe what we desperately hope to be true---that love is stronger than death, that our ordinary activities have ultimate meaning, and that there is a final purpose to our lives.

Thus, brief examination of *Foundations* suggests the power of Rahner's theology to help us understand and transform our ordinary experiences. He, of course, has much more to say to ordinary people; and we will continue to learn from him in the years ahead. Other religious thinkers may have more extensive analyses of aspects of human experience. We think of Martin Buber on personal relationships, Gustavo Gutierrez on the experience of liberation, and Paul Tillich on cultural trends. Karl Rahner, however, remains the great interpreter of ordinary experience. His organic and comprehensive theology keeps calling us back to the task of evoking the riches found in our daily life, which is always sustained and guided by the Gracious Mystery.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the most troublesome obstacles for you in relating your belief to ordinary life?
2. How do you understand Rahner's statement that his greatest religious experience was "immersion in the incomprehensibility of God and the death of Christ"?
3. What are the main components of Rahner's thought and how do they affect his theology of the ordinary?
4. How could Rahner's insights help enrich your everyday life?

SUGGESTED READINGS

Prayers for a Lifetime (Crossroad, 1984). A simple way to enter into Rahner's complex thought which contains the twelve prayers originally published in *Encounters in Silence* (now out of print).

Foundations of Christian Faith (Crossroad, 1978). Difficult reading but the best single-source summary of Rahner's comprehensive and organic thought.

A World of Grace, edited by Leo O'Donovan (Seabury, 1980). A valuable chapter-by-chapter commentary on Rahner's *Foundations*.

The Rahner Reader, edited by Gerald McCool (Seabury, 1975). A fine selection with a helpful introduction by the editor.