

# An Approach to Conversion in the Thought of Karl Rahner<sup>1</sup>

James O. Englert

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Intent of the Study

Conversion has become a central category in what Claude Geffré has termed our “new age in theology.”<sup>2</sup> And while this is, of course, especially true among theologians who have been influenced by Bernard Lonergan, recent works on the theology of conversion demonstrate also the considerable influence of Karl Rahner.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Rahner himself has referred to conversion as a “theologically important and indeed central concept.”<sup>4</sup>

Explicit extended treatment of the topic of conversion, however, is relatively rare in Rahner’s writings, as reference to various bibliographical tools indicates.<sup>5</sup> But the concerns which surface in his explicit essay in the *Sacramentum Mundi* on this topic are clearly the very concerns which surface continually in his work: the need for transcendental reflection on fundamental human experience, the centrality of human freedom as disposition of human life in its entirety, the always-already present offer of God’s self-communication to which one must respond, the immediacy of that offer in the person of Jesus Christ, and the final nature of

---

<sup>1</sup> Prepared for the course, The Theology of Karl Rahner (SMT 5575F), Professor Daniel Donovan, University of St. Michael’s College, Toronto, Fall, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Claude Geffré, *A New Age in Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> Two notable recent works by students of Lonergan who make significant use of Rahner in developing positions on conversion are Walter Conn, *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), and Stephen Happel and James J. Walter, *Conversion and Discipleship: A Christian Foundation for Ethics and Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986). It is also possible, I think, to understand James Bacik’s interpretation of Rahner’s mystagogy as an attempt to develop a Rahnerian position on conversion. James J. Bacik, *Apologetics and the Eclipse of Mystery: Mystagogy According to Karl Rahner* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> Karl Rahner, “Conversion,” *Sacramentum Mundi* 2 (New York: Herder and herder, 1968), p. 4. Further references to this article in the present essay will be given in brackets [SM] in the text.

<sup>5</sup> C.J. Pedley’s “An English Bibliographical Aid to Karl Rahner” in *Heythrop Journal* 25 (1984) lists only one brief essay, the focus of which is on the sacrament of penance: “Penance and Confession,” in *Christian at the Crossroads* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975). Further, no references to *Bekehrung* were noticed in my initial consultation of *Bibliographie Karl Rahner 1924-1969* (Freiburg, Basel, Wien, 1969), edited by R. Bleistein and E. Klinger, and *Bibliographie Karl Rahner 1969-1974* (Freiburg, Basel, Wien, 1974), edited by R. Bleistein. There are, of course, essays on many related topics, most notably on justification. The scarcity of work explicitly on conversion (*Bekehrung*) as such, however, seemed to suggest some value to the present study.

conversion as hopeful openness to God's incalculable future. The coalescence of these fundamental themes in a frustratingly brief essay on conversion makes it clear that much of Rahner's theology can be understood as attempting to be in service of the authentic Christian conversion of persons in our contemporary situation.

It seems warranted to suspect, accordingly, that, while little explicit attention is given to conversion as an isolated theme in the Rahnerian corpus, concern for conversion is present throughout. This essay is an initial attempt to discern that concern in one key work, *Foundations of Christian Faith*.<sup>6</sup> The initial step will be an outline of the major issues raised in the *Sacramentum Mundi* article. The body of the essay will then attempt a reading of *Foundations* in light of those issues, with the hope that such reading will make possible a more explicit and extensive grasp of Karl Rahner's understanding of this theologically important and central concept.

## 1.2 The *Sacramentum Mundi* Article

In my reading, there are four key notions which surface in Rahner's explicit consideration of conversion.<sup>7</sup>

First, as the biblical vocabulary makes clear, μετανοια involves more than simply a change of intellectual opinion or moral attitude with regard to a particular object; rather, it regards the fundamental direction of one's *entire life*. Precisely as such, it "is not wholly accessible to analytical reflection" [*SM*, 4]. Progress in the degree of adequacy on one's reflection remains always possible; the reality, however, always inevitably exceeds reflective grasp.

Secondly, the direction/redirection of one's entire life, which conversion is, has about it the character of a *response*. There is a givenness recognized by the professing Christian as the call of God in Christ and in the Spirit. But this is always mediated "in the actual situation of the

---

<sup>6</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978). Further references to this work in the present essay will be given in brackets [*F*] in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Rahner begins the essay by noting the close relationship between conversion and other theological concepts, on which he has written extensively.

person to whom the call is addressed" [SM, 4]. The reality of Christ and Spirit in that situation may be more or less explicitly recognized, or it may remain 'anonymous.' In either case, it is experienced as a call beyond both finitude and guilt.

Thirdly, not only the call but one's response to it is experienced as *gift*, enabling a real hope, "as trusting oneself to the unexpected, uncharted way into the open and incalculable future" [SM, 5]. Again, this hope regards not only particular situations in life, but rather life-in-its-totality.

Fourthly, developing "the art of spiritual initiation into. . . [the] personal experience of conversion" should be among the central concerns of the Church's "*pastoral* practice and theology" [SM, 6].

The question guiding the present inquiry concerns possibilities for deeper understanding of these four key assertions.

## 2. THE FREEDOM OF FUNDAMENTAL DECISION

At the heart of Rahner's theology lies a profound concern for the very real difficulties which stand as obstacles to faith in our contemporary situation. This concern leads him to face directly a twofold problematic. On the one hand, within Rahner's Catholic religious tradition, there had emerged an objectivism, in which the referents of religious language were posited as radically separate from human subjectivity. The 'supernatural' came to be regarded as perfecting the 'natural' order, but as doing so by coming to it from 'without.' As such, the 'supernatural' realm was not, strictly speaking, a matter of human experience at all. On the other hand, Enlightenment suspicion of traditions regarded as heteronomous has rendered such religious objectivism highly problematic. If the religious realm is regarded as radically disjunct from the experience of human existence, then nothing can be known of that realm. In this situation, a pluralism of interpretations of what it means to be human have emerged as 'regional' anthropologies; each approaches the human from a definitive standpoint, "reducing [man] to his elements and then reconstructing him back together again from this particular data" [F, 28]. Valid as each such approach is in its own sphere, the overall cultural impact can

easily become a tendency toward reductionism, in which the human phenomenon is regarded as having been utterly ‘explained.’

If religious objectivism discourses on the ‘supernatural’ without intrinsic reference to the ‘natural,’ reductionist anthropologies discourse on the ‘natural’ without advertence to any ‘supernatural’ realm. In both tendencies, the religious sensibility of human subjects can easily atrophy, in that neither posits the inner possibility of real human experience of transcendence. In this situation, even professing Christians find themselves possessing “a faith which today must ever be won anew” [F, 5].

To meet this twofold problematic, Rahner’s method is a theological anthropology with a corresponding twofold aim: as *theological*, it insists on recognizing a radical, intrinsic human openness that is not explained by any reductionist interpretation of the human; as *anthropology*, it locates this radical openness in the human subject’s most fundamental experience of the self.<sup>8</sup> Truly to understand the human is to understand being-human as being-radically-open, beyond any particular determinations, to a “mysterious infinity” [F, 32]. This radical openness is intrinsic to the concrete existence of human subjects, and gives rise to the key notion of transcendental experience.

In the most significant acts of human subjects – acts of knowing and freedom – particular determinations do result: when questioning comes to term in correct understanding, I know *something*; when I act freely, I do *something*. But in either case, that ‘something’ is never exhaustive of my-self as questioning and acting subject. Any particular act of knowing does bring a particular question to term, but an infinity of possible further questions always emerges. Any given free action does determine my world and my self in a particular way, but in freedom I am always-already beyond any such determination in the demands of further responsibility. In short, “we are never finished in finite time and every end is merely a beginning.”<sup>9</sup> Beyond every answer and every action lie further questions and further responsibility. It is in the sense of always *going-beyond* any and all particular achievements

---

<sup>8</sup> The classic statement of this method is given in the article “Theology and Anthropology,” *Theological Investigations IX* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1972), pp. 28-45.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Rahner, *Christian at the Crossroads* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 14.

that such experience is *transcendental*; and this very going-beyond is not extrinsic to human *experience*, but is, rather, constitutive of it. The *transcendent* is experienced precisely as *transcending* of the human subject.

Of the two privileged general modes of this experience – knowledge and freedom – Rahner's earliest concern was clearly with uncovering the conditions that make our knowing possible, and recognizing a radical and infinite openness as the fundamental condition. Especially indicative of this openness is the human ability to call one's very self into question. "A finite system cannot confront itself in its totality" [F, 30], Rahner insists, and yet this is precisely what the human person does. Beyond any particular definition of the human lies the *defining* subject, who transcends the definition by the very act of defining. "Personhood and subjectivity always eludes definition" [F, 31]. Every categorical result of my questioning can itself be questioned; every 'known' remains open to further 'knowing.' The experience of that ever-remaining-open is a transcendental experience of one's self as questioner.

But the questioning of one's self in its totality goes beyond knowing to acting, and this is the transcendental experience of freedom. Beyond the question as to how I am to understand myself lies the fundamental existential question of what I am to make of myself. The key realization is that my acting not only effects the world, it effects my self. I am not only a practical subject making the world; I am also an existential subject making my-self. The human person has "the power to decide about oneself and to actualize oneself" [F, 38]. The fundamental question always confronting me is, 'What am I to be?'

Parallel to our knowing, that question does come to a certain rest in particular determinations; there is something definitive and irreversible about any human action. Once I have done 'x' I will forever remain a person who did 'x;' that doing remains always partially constitutive of my selfhood. But also constitutive of that selfhood is my responsible freedom that is not exhaustively determined by that or any other particular action. At any moment, I must adopt an attitude in memory toward the history of my action. It remains always possible to reaffirm that history, to repent of it, or to ignore it; but whatever stance I adopt involves

going-beyond the particular determinations of that history. Thus, my free choosing of what I am to be always transcends any determinate choice and any history of determinate choices.

And besides the self-determinations of my acting history, there are also the very real determinations of the situation in which I find myself. "Man certainly experiences himself in a great variety of ways as the product of that which is not himself" [F, 27]. Biologically, psychologically, sociologically, human freedom is situated freedom. Those scientific perspectives offer possibilities for insight into very real determinations. But the fact remains that I am able to gain insight into those determinations and that I must adopt an attitude toward them; in that, I am always-already transcending them in freedom, for my stance toward those determinations is not determined.

The present of any human subject, as a historical being, has inevitably resulted from the past that was simply given and from the past of one's own action. But the possibility of adopting a stance toward that past is also constitutive of the subject's present, and that remains a free possibility which transcends the past. By that very transcendence, it also reveals the openness of the future, which continually poses the question as to what one is to make of oneself. That ever-present question leading one into the future is the transcendental experience of human spirit as freedom. As a present question it demands a free stance toward the past in memory, and toward the future in anticipation. The adoption of that stance is an expression of the whole person, who comes to actualization only in concrete and particular acts but who is never exhausted by those acts. That 'inexhaustibility' is an experience of the infinite openness of the human subject.

Most fundamentally, we are subjects who must take up an attitude toward that very openness, which is radically a decision for or against our selves-as-transcendent. The question of what I am to make of myself addresses me only in and through concrete situations, but it goes beyond those situations to be a question of my constitutive attitude toward the infinity that extends always-already beyond my achieved-self. Rahner poses the question with a poignant image: Which do I love more, the small island of my already-determined self or the infinite sea that extends every beyond any and all determinations [F, 22]? And the way in

which one lives with that question will result largely from one's feeling toward, and understanding of, that mysterious sea. My fundamental free choice is to decide how I am related to the Holy Mystery. But that relationship is not extrinsic to my-self; it is, rather, the most fundamental dimension of my-self. The question concerns the nature of the source and term of our ability to transcend our achieved-selves. It is the question whether the 'sea' is an invitation or a threat, whether my transcendentality is ultimately meaningful or absurd. My fundamental, free disposition of my-self is my ongoing response to that question. It is a response that I make only in and through the particular choices of my everyday life; but it is the question that always continues to address me beyond any particular response.

It is the question recognized by professing Christians, of course, as being the question of 'God.' For "this word confronts us with ourselves and with reality as a whole, at least as a question" [F, 51], inviting our reflection on the orientation of our own personal transcendence. Such reflection is accessible to anyone, but the articulations which result from reflection on our experience of transcendence never adequately grasp that experience. The reflection itself involves a further transcendental experience; thus, in any reflective articulation the articulating-subject is already *beyond* the achieved-articulation. And the question always emerges as to whether that particular act of articulating is itself a clinging to the island or a casting off into the sea.

To say that conversion concerns "the whole human being in his fundamental relation to God" [SM, 4] is to say that it regards the underlying openness or closedness of the human person becoming actualized in the choices of everyday life. It is not first a matter of reflective articulation, of how one names the source and term of transcendence;<sup>10</sup> it is primarily a question of one's acceptance or rejection of the responsibility of human freedom. To accept the transcending thrust of my subjectivity toward ever new, free actualizations, is to relate trustingly to the source and term of that transcendence.

---

<sup>10</sup> This is certainly not to deny the importance of such reflection, but only to stress the necessity for this reflection to be grounded in transcendental experience. The positive role of reflection in 'opening up' transcendental experience will be stressed later in this essay.

Conversion, then, is not a matter of a relationship to a reality extrinsic to myself, but a matter of the acceptance of the most fundamental dimension of myself; that dimension is itself a relatedness to the Holy Mystery from which and toward which human freedom lives. Thus understood as the trusting orientation of the subject into Mystery, the experience of conversion would reveal the inadequacy of both theological extrinsicism and reductionist anthropology.

### 3. THE RESPONSE CHARACTER OF CONVERSION

From a Catholic dogmatic perspective, this acceptance of one's relatedness to the Holy Mystery is understood as a free turning to God, which "has always to be seen as a response made possible by God's grace, to a call from God" [SM, 4]. As always, Rahner's concern is to understand the nature of this call from within fundamental human experience, not extrinsic to it; at the same time, he is equally concerned to affirm its reality as a true call addressed to each person from a Mysterious Beyond.

The initial experience of this call is in the basic fact that our freedom is simply given. I achieve any particular determination of myself in and through free action, but the freedom which makes that determining action possible is not itself achieved; it is 'there' prior to any free act, as the condition of possibility for that act. The power of self-transcendence, of always going-beyond particular realizations of ourselves, is experienced as a power not-from-ourselves.

"[Man's] transcendentalty cannot be understood as that of an absolute subject which experiences and possesses what opens before it as something subject to its own power. His transcendentalty is rather a relationship which does not establish itself by its own power, but is experienced as something which was established by and is at the disposal of another, and which is grounded in the abyss of ineffable mystery [F, 42].

This is the experience of dependence, of having the source of one's transcendence in another. But beyond this initial fact is the further experience of being addressed by this Source; this 'address' is the call for human response. It is what Christians call grace, the self-communication of God. Beyond the fact of our openness in freedom, there is a certain inchoate fulfillment of that openness.

One way of understanding this is to consider the relationship between being-loved, freedom, and loving.<sup>11</sup> The human sciences have made it more and more clear that persons develop an attitude of fundamental trust only if they themselves have been loved and cared for in life. It is that basic trust which calls forth the person's freedom to live without paralyzing fear or *ressentiment*, thus enabling a person truly to love. Authentic freedom issues forth in loving, but it is first the fruit of being-loved. Not only is our openness-in-freedom experienced as coming from beyond ourselves, the fulfillment of that openness in the very exercise of freedom is dependent on the experience of being-loved.

The potential of human freedom, however, is infinite, beyond any particular realization of its exercise. To exercise that freedom, not simply in particular choices, but as a fundamental orientation of one's whole life in and beyond all choices, can result only from a fundamental trust that the Infinite Source and Term of one's very openness to transcendence is gracious and loving. Such trust emerges only from the pre-reflective experience of being-loved infinitely, without restriction. To have experienced such love – with whatever degree of reflective thematization – is to have received the self-communication of Loving Mystery. And like any experience of love, the fruit of this experience is its impact on the constitution of one's very self.

The central conviction of Christian faith is that "God in his own proper reality makes himself the innermost constitutive element of man" [F, 116]. Human being exist always and only as already graced. This is the underlying enabling condition of human self-transcendence. Whatever the brokenness and failures of my life, I am sustained by an unbreakable Love. At surprising moments, I can break through the various determinations of my life, doing something new and making myself new.

A marvelous illustration of this kind of breakthrough is given near the end of the Catholic novelist Mary Gordon's first work, *Final Payments*. The story revolves around Isabel Moore, who had spent eleven years of her life home alone, caring for her invalid father. She

---

<sup>11</sup> The following thoughts are dependent on Brian McDermott, "The Bonds of Freedom," in *A World of Grace* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980), edited by Leo J. O'Donovan, pp. 56-58.

grew resentful of her father, but her entire life was wound up with his. She had little contact with other persons, and no other real purpose in life. When her father died, her life was shattered. Remembering her resentment of him now occasioned guilt; failure to have developed friendships resulted in loneliness. And her sole explicit purpose in life was gone.

In the midst of it all Isabel falls in love with a married man, and is terrified of her feelings. She resolves to return to her father's house as a place of shelter from the world, and to live there safe from the terrors of love. In a gripping scene, she has an intense argument with Margaret, a bitter old woman who had helped care for Isabel's father. In the midst of their argument, Margaret bemoans her poverty and Isabel spontaneously shouts, "The poor you have always with you." And she turns to run upstairs, the entire gospel story from which that line is taken comes to her. She sees Mary anointing Jesus' feet, and Judas rebuking her. She realizes that the words which she had spoken were the words of Judas, who had objected to Mary's extravagant affection.

And it came to me, fumbling in the hallway for the light, that I had been a thief. Like Judas, I had wanted to hide gold, to count it in the dead of night, to parlay it into some safe and murderous investment. It was Margaret's poverty I wanted to steal, the safety of her inability to inspire love. So that never again would I be found weeping, like Mary, at the tombstone at the break of dawn. . . .

I knew now that I must open the jar of ointment. I must open my life. I knew now that I must leave.<sup>12</sup>

Isabel's intention to return to the shelter of her father's home, to withdraw into herself, emerged naturally from the history of what she had made of herself and from the situation in which she found herself. Her fear, resentment, and guilt were real determinations; their grip, however, was not total. She broke through their hold on her, doing something new and making herself anew. But the power of this freedom was experienced as not-from-herself: ". . . it came to me. . ." What enables this kind of breakthrough is the reality which Christians name grace. Bold steps into an unknown future become possible because the Mystery which that future is has become the very heart of one's life.

---

<sup>12</sup> Mary Gordon, *Final Payments* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), pp. 298-299

This is clearly the key to Rahner's theology: the Mystery that we experience as the Infinite Beyond of our transcending in knowing and freedom is not simply a distant goal always withdrawing from us as we step toward it; this Mystery has drawn near to us and embraces us. Anyone who, like Isabel Moore, has opened himself in transcendence to an experience of this Mystery knows

that this holy mystery is a hidden closeness, a forgiving intimacy, his real home, that it is a love which shares itself, something familiar which he can approach and turn to from the estrangement of his own perilous and empty life [F, 131].

This experience of being infinitely loved enables a fundamental trust, which empowers our transcendence in freedom.

In Gordon's story, it is significant that Isabel's breakthrough accompanies remembrance of a Gospel story. In Christian faith, Jesus Christ is the visibility both of God's definitive offer of grace and of human response to that offer. Jesus is the avowal of Infinite Love for all human persons; he is the embodiment of the fundamental trust and transcending freedom enabled by that Love. The doctrine of Incarnation asserts that the Source and Term of our transcendence has drawn radically near to us. The Infinite has entered the finite, and "the finite itself has received infinite depths" [F, 226]. The God-Man manifests both the drawing near of the Infinite, and the consequent infinite depths of the finite.

The conversion of Isabel Moore is essentially a matter of coming to trust that, despite the inevitability of failures and ultimately of death, it is possible – indeed necessary – to move beyond oneself in love. That trust was facilitated by the explicit illumination of the Jesus story. Once it becomes the effective center of her living, "infinite depths" become manifest in the new choices of a new self.

Explicitly Christian conversion occurs "if a person really believes with regard to Jesus, his cross and his death that there the living God has spoken to him the final, decisive, comprehensive and irrevocable word" [F, 227]. But this outer word of address is effective because of its resonance with the prior 'anonymous' presence of this word in the innermost depths of the human person as a hoped-for reality. This is Rahner's notion of a "searching

Christology" [F, 295-298]; one key implication of this notion is that a Christian can recognize the authenticity of another person's conversion, even if it is not experienced and/or expressed explicitly in terms of the Christian message.

In *Foundations*, Rahner offers three appeals to such a searching Christology. First, any concrete human love which risks unconditional surrender to another finite, limited person, hopes for a guarantee of absolute love which no finite person can offer; this is to hope for infinite depths in the finite which are definitively promised in Jesus. Secondly, acting meaningfully in life while facing the inevitability of death, is to hope for an ultimate negation of death's negative power; in Christian faith, the resurrection of Jesus is "the historical mediation and confirmation" [F, 269] of that hope. Thirdly, freely attempting through one's self-constituting action to overcome the alienation between what-one-is and what-one-wants-to-be, despite the unpredictability of a dark future, is to hope that this absolute reconciliation is an ultimately attainable goal; this is to hope for what Christian faith professes to be definitively guaranteed in the Incarnation as the appearance in our time of God's absolute future.

One who risks authentic love and fidelity to the demands of conscience despite the inevitability of death and the unpredictability of the future surrenders to the Absolute Mystery as if it were gracious and sustaining. In this surrender, one's orientation in life becomes that of "a person who accepts without reservations the whole of concrete human life with all of its adventures, its absurdities, and its incomprehensibilities" [F, 402]. Such surrender and acceptance is a real conversion, involving a liberation from real determinations; it has about it the character of response to a call, however dimly perceived.

The call is *to* free and hopeful transcendence; it is "*from* mere finitude and *from* sinfulness" [SM, 4]. In other words, the fundamentally decisive choices in one's life are made only in the highly particular context of one's past choices and present situation. The surrender to Mystery is a concrete letting-go of *something*. That to-be-surrendered 'something' has about it a twofold character: (1) the inevitable limitation of any particular moment, situation, or reality; and (2) the cumulative impact of a history of refusals of transcendence.

There will always be a tension between the self-as-transcending and the self-as-transcended. Even my best self-realizations are particular and limited, and stand to be surrendered to new demands in new situations. But beyond this is the further fact that my own self-constitution and the constitution of the situation in which I find myself are the objectifications of refusals of the call to transcendence. These form a psychic undertow of resistance to transcendence. For an orientation of openness in freedom to the call of Mystery to become the effective center of one's conscious living, the drag of that undertow must be broken; one's own guilt and the sedimentations of social guilt that one has internalized must be forgiven.

Effective conversion involves the acceptance – implicit or explicit – of such forgiveness, and of the love that enables trusting surrender. This surrender becomes the basic orientation of an entire life. But the forgiving love which enables it is received only in “the actual situation of the person to whom the call is addressed” [SM, 4]; and while it becomes an underlying transcendental orientation, it is operative only in and through highly concrete choices in that situation.

#### 4. CONVERSION OF LIFE-IN-ITS-TOTALITY

Rahner indicates that a person's actual situation is “the precise particular embodiment of the call of Christ and the Spirit” [SM, 4]; that same situation, however, also embodies the finitude and sin beyond which one is called. What this means is that the cultural, social, and interpersonal contexts in which we live out our freedom have themselves resulted as the objectification of an entire history of free human acts. This is “the concrete, historical actualization of the acceptance or rejection of God's self-communication” [F, 143]. That history – in both its aspects – becomes an inner constitutive dimension of every person's freedom.

The ‘sin of the world’ – its fear, despair, closedness-to-transcendence – enters even into the very development of one's affectivity and appropriation of language. The symbolic foundations of conscious life are given and/or shaped by a familial situation which is partially determined by this ‘sin.’ Accordingly, the sinfulness beyond which one is called is more

fundamental than the guilt of one's own free refusals of transcendence; it is a call beyond a sinfulness that has partially grounded these refusals.

But that history is also the embodiment of openness and acceptance. Whenever persons respond in transcending hope and love to the call of Mystery, their free action becomes partially constitutive of the objective situation. Such "freedom, risk, hope, reaching out to the future" [F, 154] becomes the mediation of Mystery in history. Thus objectified, it confronts the freedom of all who share that history as invitation and challenge; this is the 'call,' mediated in concrete historical situations. A brother letting go of a successful career to work in a poor urban parish, a married couple 'hanging in there' against all odds and despite the cynical advice of friends, the irrepressible smile of a dying child – these, and countless other persons, are a present revelation for me of the real possibility of transcending limitation and sin. As such, they constitute a call that I can understand as the call of Christ and the Spirit. But before any such interpretation, they address me in the immediacy of my pre-reflective subjectivity. They disclose real possibilities for living that go beyond the present limits of my imagination; that disclosure challenges me to live in freedom the revelation that has been given. That proffered life is salvation, mediated to me in and through a very concrete history; my acceptance or rejection of that life becomes a mediation for others "of salvation and its opposite" [F, 144].

As the call comes in a determinate context, so too is one's response made in a determinate context. Any particular exercise of freedom can be understood in some sense as response to the divine self-communication. But there are also privileged moments in human life which confront one with a decision which will become a fundamentally constitutive dimension of one's basic orientation in life: open or closed to the mysterious depths which call. In *Final Payments*, Isabel Moore's decision "to leave" her father's house was, in fact, a decision "to leave" an entire way of living; it constituted an initial transformation of fear into trust as the underlying reality of her self. That transformation would have to be confirmed and strengthened, as Isabel knew:

I knew now that I must leave. But I was not ready. I would have to build my strength.<sup>13</sup>

The reconstitution of one's fundamental orientation will itself have a history, an ongoing dialectic of the transcending-self and the transcended-self. But there are moments when decisive steps are taken. They may be recognized only in hindsight, but, once recognized, can be understood as moments of having let oneself go 'into the sea.' Dag Hammarskjöld's journal entry for Whitsunday, 1961, narrates such a retrospective recognition:

I don't know Who – or what – put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at that moment I did answer Yes to Someone – or Something – and from that hour I was certain that existence was meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.

From that moment I have known what it means 'not to look back,' and 'to take no thought for the morrow.'<sup>14</sup>

Such is the nature of the profound moments of conversion, "experienced. . . as radical, fundamental decision which concerns a human life in its entirety" [SM, 5]. The form taken by such moments will be different for each person, but, in whatever form, they will present themselves to each person. When one finds oneself able to forgive, without personal benefit; when one makes a personal sacrifice to fulfill a duty for which no one will be grateful; when one experiences profound loneliness, and, rather than running from it, accepts it with inexplicable hope; when one risks surrendering oneself to another in love, with no guarantees against pain and betrayal. In these<sup>15</sup> and as many other ways as there are persons, possibilities for transcendence-of-limitation and liberation-from-sin are offered; in such moments, our freedom is faced with the question of whether to open ourselves to those possibilities or to close ourselves against them. Acceptance and openness at such pivotal moments can be much more than particular choices; they can be the foundation of a way of living. Such foundational moments are the experience of conversion. That experience is possible for all persons, but in the unique situation of each person's life.

For every man makes that experience in accordance with the particular and historical and individual situation of his particular life. Every man? But he has so to speak to dig it out from

---

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299.

<sup>14</sup> Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), translated by Leif Sjöberg and W.H. Auden, p. 169.

<sup>15</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Spirit in the Church* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 18-22.

under the rubbish of everyday experience, and must not run from it where it begins to become legible.<sup>16</sup>

## 5. PASTORAL PRACTICE AND CONVERSION

The “frankly pastoral” concern of Rahner’s theology is evident in the fact that almost half of his explicit essay on conversion is devoted to “pastoral aspects.”<sup>17</sup> But, as always, his contribution to pastoral practice here is precisely through careful and consistent theological insight. Concerning conversion, that insight begins with a basic epistemological position on the relationship of experience and reflection.

As I understand it, this position has two essential poles. First, there is “an inescapable unity in difference” [F, 15] between self-experience and reflection. Reflection, symbolization, language and conceptualization are not *post factum* additions to the experience from ‘outside.’ The tendency towards language and towards intersubjective communication is intrinsic to human self-experience. But secondly, no objectification is adequate as “expression of what has already been experienced and lived through more originally in the depths of existence” [F, 17]. However essential, reflective expression is in some sense derived. There is always ‘more’ to one’s self than one has ever ‘grasped;’ it is to this ‘more’ that one must always return in reflection if already achieved objectifications are to be transcended.

Recognition of this unity-in-tension between experience and reflective expression is key for a pastoral understanding of the dynamics of conversion. At the heart of the church’s pastoral practice should be “the art of spiritual initiation into. . . [the] personal *experience* of conversion” [SM, 6]. Reflection and expression are essential, but the experience itself is the pivotal reality which reflection and expression must serve. Language can serve both to evoke the experience and to deepen it; but language can also be used to evade that experience.

It must always be remembered that the experience in question is not merely a matter of the evocation of feelings of awe, not of incitement to particular patterns of ethical behavior. Both may well be involved. But the experience itself is what Rahner terms transcendental. It

---

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> The pastoral nature of Rahner’s *Foundations of Christian Faith* is stressed in Daniel Donovan’s review of the book, “Rahner’s *Grundkurs*: Frankly Pastoral,” *The Ecumenist* 16 (1978), pp. 65-70.

involves the disposition of one's life-in-its-entirety, transcending the particular concerns of everyday living; there is an attitude of fundamental trust in that transcending, enabled by the experience of the Source and Term of that transcendence as gracious; this trust then becomes the effective center of one's free living in hopeful love.

The Christian is convinced that the definitive revelation of this graciousness and of response to it is given in Jesus. The experience, accordingly, can find its most adequate expression in explicit Christian faith. Expressions of Christian convictions about Jesus can be profoundly evocative of an experience of gracious love. But pastoral practice must always remember the centrality of the experience of grace. And it must further remember that the possibilities for that experience are given in the concrete circumstances of a person's situation.

Part of the general contemporary situation is a relative inattentiveness to the dimensions of living in which this experience occurs. This inattentiveness can easily inhibit movement into any reflection which could 'dig the experience out' from under our everyday preoccupations. For many of us Eliot's lament holds true:

We had the experience  
But missed the meaning.<sup>18</sup>

And beyond this inattentiveness, there may well be a personal unwillingness, as well. There is a dark side in transcendental experience which confronts us with "the hardness and darkness and death in our existence" [F, 404]. Rahner clearly posits no 'cheap grace;' letting-go into death ultimately and throughout life "is the only passage to the life which really does not die anymore and which does not experience death as its innermost core" [F, 404]. Pastoral practice must concern itself with providing contexts in which this darkness can be faced, with the conviction that gracious light can appear.

It is impossible for me to write these words without remembering the concrete situation of my life, seven years ago this very week. Over the course of the previous year I had experienced the disintegration of a treasured friendship, the collapse of a pastoral project in which I had invested great energy, a series of counseling misjudgments on my part which had

---

<sup>18</sup> T.S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages," line 93, *The Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), p. 34.

seriously destructive consequences in another person's life, and a host of other minor disappointments. There was a real darkness which I did not dare face; everyday preoccupations enabled avoidance. In retrospect, it is possible to see that there had been a vague mood of emptiness setting in for some time, but everyday busy-ness kept it from opening-up fully. One day in the first week of Advent, however, I found myself alone in the midst of a fullscale Dakota blizzard, after having left the country home of friends who had just told me that they were leaving the Catholic Church to join a fundamentalist evangelical movement. I was devastated, but soon realized that my 'devastation' went far beyond this particular moment. The darkness of failure and loneliness emerged fully alongside the physical cold and isolation; but there emerged as well an uncanny peace. When I returned home, I tried to reflect on what had happened.

december's gusting wind  
gives stark reminder of an absent warmth  
whose return seems so distant  
as daily the pilgrimage of fire  
continues across the skies  
with its promise of tropic heat  
while I am chilled to the marrow of my bones.  
and the whitened horizon  
which extends in seemingly endless expanse  
leaving me at the center – isolated  
and alone –  
gives me pause to question:  
what deeper chill  
what greater distance  
and what wider expanse  
afflict my soul?  
the passionate embrace of life  
with its flames of committed love  
and wondrous delight  
in the simple existence of everything  
and everyone  
eludes my feebly grasping efforts.  
but must it elude me forever?  
i wait  
how long  
and the halting steps of growing friendship  
which seek the unity of spirit

yield painfully the human truth  
of eternal distance  
and the radical aloneness of my deepest self.  
but must the distance be eternal,  
and the frustration of unity be forever?  
i wait  
how long  
i so desperately need the coming of Someone  
who would fulfill the passionate yearning  
and the frustrated searching of my life.  
i need. i wait. how long?  
come, Lord Jesus!

The impact of that ‘moment’ has been as fundamental as any in my life. It was an experience for me of “exceeding darkness and undeserved light.”<sup>19</sup> Busy-ness, preoccupation, and avoidance continue to be part of my life; but there is also a willingness to face loneliness, weakness, and failure in a way that had not previously been true. There has been an abiding confidence in a sustaining love, to which my response remains always inadequate, but which has never been broken.

Two dimensions especially of Rahner’s thought have helped me to ‘unpack’ this experience, and to understand more clearly at least one instance of the personal experience of conversion.

The first is his “‘pessimistic’ Christian realism” [F, 403]. The centrality of the cross and resurrection of Jesus in Christian faith affirms a profound truth of human life: everyone whom we love, everything to which we commit our lives, and we ourselves must pass through death. This recognition removes the ultimate anchor of our hope from finite persons and realities which may – indeed, will – disappoint us; our hope, rather, becomes grounded in the Mystery which is beyond all finite reality. But precisely this mysterious grounding enables a love-for and commitment-to the finite even in the face of disappointment and death.

Secondly, Rahner’s emphasis on the relatedness of experience and reflective expression opens up a perspective leading to and from the experience. There are “primordial words”

---

<sup>19</sup> The phrase is John Shea’s, *Stories of God* (Chicago: The Thomas More Press, 1978), p. 39.

through which “a door is mysteriously opened for us into the unfathomable depths.”<sup>20</sup> In retrospect it becomes clear that it was the Advent context which evoked my response. Μαράναθα was a prayer pregnant with meaning, because its focus on a future fulfillment definitely promised enabled acceptance of an unfulfilled present. The Advent context enabled a confident recognition that the Absolute Future has appeared to ground hope.

Such primordial words which evoke transcendental experience can also carry it into reflection, and into symbolic linguistic embodiments which shape consciousness. Everyday living then comes to be experienced precisely in this transformed consciousness. Everything is the same, and yet everything is transformed precisely because the self is transformed. This is the conversion of fundamental orientation.

The pastoral practice of the church can provide a context conducive to such reorientation of living. The “concrete interpersonal relations between believing and hoping Christians” [F, 399] can be the embodiment of the mysterious invitation to transcendence, and can mediate the promise of love which can ground trusting and open response. The church also possesses a treasury of those “primordial words” with which to address persons in the varied moments of life. Biblical narratives and sacramental rituals can be profound moments of such address. They can serve as invitation and challenge to persons to truly let themselves “fall into the abyss of the mystery of existence with ultimate resolve and ultimate trust” because they bring them more and more into

a circle of believers . . . really and ultimately profess only one thing in faith, hope and love, namely, that the absolute and living God is victorious in his self-giving love throughout the whole length and breadth of his creation [F, 401].

---

<sup>20</sup> Karl Rahner, “Priest and Poet,” *Theological Investigations* III (Baltimore: The Helicon Press, 1967), p. 298.