

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

Karl Rahner's Insights for Spiritual Direction

ALTHOUGH KARL RAHNER, a contemporary German Jesuit theologian, did not write about spiritual guidance as such, his work reflects the Ignatian tradition of spiritual guidance which formed him and provides insights which can influence the practice of spiritual direction today. In this article I discuss the following insights which Karl Rahner's theology can contribute to spiritual direction: God as the mystery in human experience, the Christian life as a mysticism of everyday faith, prayer as surrender of the heart and love of neighbour as love of God.¹

God as the mystery in human experience

Rahner asserts that to speak of the human is to speak of the divine and vice versa. He describes God as the mystery in human experience. For him, then, God is the depth dimension in experiences such as solitude, friendship, community, death, hope and, as such, is the orientation toward the future. Rahner goes so far as to say that loneliness, disappointment and the ingratitude of others can be graced moments because they open us to the transcendent. The silence of God, the toughness of life and the darkness of death can be graced events. This mystery of grace discloses itself as a forgiving nearness, a hidden closeness, our real home, a love which shares itself, something familiar which we can turn to from the alienation of our own empty and perilous lives. When we are in touch with ourselves authentically, we experience God.²

This insight has practical implications for spiritual guidance. First, it suggests to us that we get in touch with human events and experiences because speaking of the human is a way of speaking of the divine. To describe a moment of deep joy or deep pain is already to be talking about the depth that God is. Second, it explains why the description of formal prayer cannot be the sole content of spiritual direction. If God is not only the mystery we meet in our prayer but also the mystery we experience in our life, then we need to live and reflect on the details of our daily lives in faith in order to know how God is acting. Third, it implies that we cannot limit God's presence to experiences that are tangibly filled with consolation. We need to recognize the experience of the Spirit in life's search and struggles. Fourth, it allows us to trust our experience of God as the touchstone as to how we interpret our lives and beliefs. We deepen our belief in God by articulating and celebrating God's presence in simple ways.

Christian life as a mysticism of everyday faith

For Rahner, every Christian is called to a mysticism of everyday faith, hope and love that differs not in kind but in degree from the extraordinary experiences of recognized mystics. We can discover and respond to God in ordinary situations like drinking a cup of tea or taking a walk. Our everyday faith is a faith that loves the earth. With this understanding of mysticism, Rahner predicts that 'the devout Christian of the future will either be a "mystic" . . . or will cease to be anything at all'.³

Mystical experience includes a going out of the self and a return to the self which may at times be expressed in visions, ecstasies, raptures and locutions. Rahner reminds us that it is important to distinguish between the divine initiative and human subjectivity. A person's core religious experience is more fundamental than phenomena which may accompany this experience. That is to say, the description and interpretation of these phenomena may reflect 'historical inaccuracy, theological distortions and errors, partiality, or bad taste'.⁴

Rahner's broad approach to mysticism can shed light on certain aspects of spiritual guidance. First, it helps us to describe religious experiences not in terms of how unusual or colourful they may be, but rather in terms of how they inspire and strengthen us to live with greater faith, hope and love.

Second, his approach urges us to distinguish between people's core religious experience and phenomena which may accompany an experience. For example, people may describe or edit their description of an experience of God in which they claim to have been given a locution or a vision. It is more difficult to assess the authenticity of a particular locution or vision than to affirm the authenticity of a person's basic holiness and religious experience. It may not be necessary to do the former but it is to do the latter. This broad approach may help to urge people to focus on the fruits of their encounter with God, not the phenomena that may accompany it.

Third, Rahner's clarification invites us to affirm, express and celebrate our experiences of the mystery of God in our daily lives. Mysticism is not limited to those technically called mystics in Christian tradition. It is possible for every one. We live in a world of grace. We are invited to discover and reveal God's presence in the simple deeds of life.

Fourth, such an approach expands the notion of spiritual guidance beyond the practice of spiritual direction and the study of the history of Christian spirituality. It can also be experienced by reading a novel, watching a play or listening to a moving homily. It can happen in a conversation with a friend, a lecture on a social issue or on a holiday.

Prayer as surrender of the heart

Rahner points us to the mystery of the heart, which, for him, is the symbol of the centre of the person. It is the place where our freedom,

consciousness and affectivity most intimately dwell in an embodied way. Animals do not have a heart in this sense because they do not have the capacities of affectivity, consciousness and freedom that we have. God does not have a heart in this sense because God does not have a body. Only the human person has a heart.⁵

As the centre of freedom, the heart is the place of our surrender to the mystery of God. By the same token, the heart of Christ is the centre of his freedom, the place of his surrender to the mystery of God. As we surrender ourselves in adoration of God and compassion for others, we become women and men of the pierced heart.⁶

The heart is the place of our need for God, our encounter with God, our 'encounters with silence'. Prayer is the opening of the heart to God. Loving prayer is the surrender of the heart to the incomprehensible mystery of God. Our relationship with God is nourished by our formal prayer and by our daily lives: 'We are to pray in everyday life, and we are to make everyday life our prayer.'⁷

Rahner asks whether people praying today talk to themselves. He grants the personal involvement of God, but wonders about God's obscurity and silence. To the question of whether God actually says something to us in prayer, he answers that God speaks the word of our real self to us. So we do not hear something in addition to ourselves, but we hear ourselves as the word God speaks. In this context, our prayer of concrete petitions may be our way of mediating the openness in which we experience ourselves as God's word in promise. This prayer of petition can be viewed as symbolic of our surrender to God's will in our concreteness.⁸

Can we know God's will for us in a particular circumstance? Rahner's Ignatian tradition of spiritual guidance enables him to respond in the affirmative.⁹ For example, can we know that it is God's will for all people to be saved? Rahner proposes his theory of the anonymous Christian, or what he called later in his life the anonymous graced one, as a way of describing how all of us experience God's forgiving nearness. This theory enables him to believe that it is possible for all people to be saved.¹⁰

Rahner calls prayer the fundamental act of human existence. He reminds us that prayer cannot be analyzed like an object of functional, working knowledge. Nor is it reserved thereby to the realm of dreams, emotions and aggressions. He makes a distinction between the technical, analytical knowledge of the scientist and the intuitive, contemplative knowledge of the poet and the mystic. Prayer for him is an intuitive, contemplative knowledge of ourselves, God, others and the world.¹¹

Prayer opens our heart to the mystery of the human condition. Rahner proposes two ways to develop openness of heart. One is to surrender without fear of the loneliness and powerlessness within. The other is to notice God's presence in one's despair, in the silence of one's heart.

Rahner is careful to distinguish that self-doubt is not despair. It is to God that our heart speaks. In response to the question of why God allows us to suffer, Rahner reviews the pious, trite answers usually given and then admits he does not know: he only knows that our surrender to the incomprehensible mystery of suffering is a form of surrender to the incomprehensible mystery of God.¹²

Prayer invites us to surrender our hearts to God. One of Rahner's most powerful insights is that the more dependent we become on God the more autonomous we become. That is to say, the more we turn to God who is the source of our freedom and identity, the more we become freely who we really are. In fact, Rahner calls the heart the centre of freedom and of surrender, since it is the place where we turn to God and choose in faith to give ourselves to God. All real prayer is for him the prayer of the heart in the sense that the heart is the place of our yearning for God, the place of our dependence on God, the place of our need for God.¹³

Rahner's view of prayer can influence the way we engage in spiritual direction. First, it suggests that the heart is the centre of freedom and not only the centre of affectivity, and that then we need to make choices of the heart based on gospel values. Through the support and challenge of spiritual guidance, we can become interiorly free to respond in the light of our call to be ourselves and to follow Jesus, rather than mechanically react to people and to situations.

Second, it invites us to view God's will not as a pre-structured plan in the mind of God, but rather as God's deep desire that we become our real selves through the process of relating to ourselves, others, the world and God. This means that our way of getting in touch with what God wants is getting in touch with what we most deeply want. A consequence of this attitude is that we view providence as a dialogue between two freedoms, human and divine. Spiritual directors ought to caution religious enthusiasts against a too facile interpretation of God's will, and at the same time encourage sceptics to view events as revelatory of God's presence and guidance.

Third, it suggests that if the heart is the place of our surrender to God, then it is important to be in touch with its movements. The Ignatian tradition of spiritual guidance emphasizes the place of discernment of spirits in enabling one to become contemplative in action. Spiritual direction, then, cannot consist only of a summary of lights received during formal prayer or a review of scriptural texts on which one has prayed. It involves discussing the attractions and resistances which constitute the dynamics of a person's relationship with God, the hallmarks of our affective conversion.¹⁴

Fourth, it shapes our notion of dialogue with God. This dialogue is not chatter with God, the ritual of saying rote prayers to God, the routine

of reading scriptures at God. Rather, it is our listening to the revelation of who we really are and of who God really is.

Fifth, it helps us to see that spiritual counselling can help us get to know and accept ourselves, God, others and the world. In fact, the integrity and authenticity of our prayer reflect our self-knowledge and self-acceptance. And it is in prayer that we can let go of our need to understand and analyze. It is in prayer that we can surrender to the mystery of the human condition, trusting that God is acting.

Sixth, if the more dependent we become on God the more independent we become, then prayer and spiritual direction can help free us to know our total need for God and people. This trust in God springs from a healthy self-confidence which relies on inner resources rather than the approval of others.

Love of neighbour as love of God

Rahner wrote a ground-breaking essay on the unity of the love of neighbour and the love of God. His conviction is that God is not one object of our love next to other objects of our love, but rather the horizon of our loving. God is not a concrete 'you' among others.¹⁵

This unity is so intimate that we can call the love of neighbour truly mystical. Rahner insists that the love of neighbour and the love of God mutually condition each other. Our daily, humdrum love of others is our way of growing closer to God. The emptying of self is not 'accomplished by practising pure inwardness, but by the real activity which is called humility, service, love of our neighbour, the cross and death'.¹⁶ The experience of love is for Rahner an experience of God. By love, he means not only responding to others' needs but also being valued and valuing the other. In God's gift of self to us and in our gift of self to others, we experience our unconditional worth.¹⁷

Rahner approaches Jesus as the neighbour par excellence. He affirms the centrality and significance of a personal relationship with Jesus. He asserts boldly that we are dealing with Jesus only when we throw our arms around him. When we love Jesus, we love an actual human being: 'We seek him, think about him, speak with him, we feel his nearness'.¹⁸ In loving Jesus, we identify with his destiny and commitment to God. We seek to meet Jesus in our neighbour and in the whole of our lives.¹⁹ There is a mystical component and a societal component in following Jesus: a personal experience of God and efforts toward progress at the societal level in the name of human development.²⁰ I call Rahner's description of the love of neighbour a contemporary form of devotion to the Sacred Heart. Assuming this devotion has a future, he perceives that the unity of the love of neighbour and the love of God is the essence of a post-Vatican II theology of devotion to the Sacred Heart.²¹

Rahner urges us to love the Church, to view the Church not only as the Church of saints, but also as the Church of sinners who know their

need for God's forgiving nearness. He sketches his vision of the shape of the Church to come with faith and hope, with a loyal affection for the Church and a critical realism about its structures. He urges systemic change that begins with a conversion of the heart from a narrow, introspective, individualistic kind of Christianity to a broad, ecumenical, communitarian kind of Christianity that is open to the Spirit at all levels of Church life and practice. He sees that the situation of a global humanity today calls for a world Church and new opportunities for intercommunication leading to genuine Christian communion. He realizes that the call to participate in the Church's mission to the world implies the call to take political responsibility. He supports the efforts of basic Christian communities to build communion.²²

How can our prayer life influence our response? Rahner tells us that our life of prayer makes us more open and freer, but not necessarily enlightened about how to solve the problems of our world. Second, he warns that turning to God can seem to reduce religion to the opium of the people, but in truth it does not take away our helplessness nor our secular problems. In other words, surrender to God does not guarantee that everything will work out well in our lives. Here he is a helpful spiritual guide urging us to a radical realism about our life with God in the world.²³

A conviction about the unity of the love of neighbour and the love of God can affect attitudes in spiritual guidance. If God is not an object of our love next to other objects, then the love of neighbour is not in conflict or competition with the love of God: they are one love. We need not set up a false dichotomy between formal prayer and service. If we are striving to do God's will, we only need to ask ourselves: what is the loving response to make in this situation? This question becomes more complex in view of the many social concerns which demand decisions based on both faith and justice. Second, if love has to do with self-emptying, then we need to stay in touch with how loving our heart is, especially in responding to people we may find it hard to love. As we empty ourselves of our expectations, disappointments and prejudices, we become open to receive the other as other. Third, in order to love others, we need to love ourselves, to value ourselves, and to find our self-esteem in our relationship with God and with others. Fourth, prayer and spiritual direction together can foster our personal love for Jesus by inviting us to share more and more of ourselves with him, needing him totally and trusting him radically. Fifth, spiritual counselling can enable people to have a realistic acceptance of the Church of sinners and saints. Disillusionment about Church hierarchy, for example, need not mean leaving the Church, but rather living within limits and acting assertively with hope in the future.

Conclusion

Rahner is not only a renowned Roman Catholic theologian, but also a spiritual guide for today. His spirituality and theology are based on the

primacy of religious experience. He is convinced that we are given experiences of the Spirit in our lives, in the paschal mystery of our hopes and disappointments, of our tastes of the presence and absence of God. His enthusiastic realism about the following of Jesus includes for him not only a personal relationship with Jesus, but also a social dimension, and in fact, a sociopolitical dimension. Over and over again, he urges simple fidelity to duty and daily humdrum love.

Some of his insights are relevant for the practice of spiritual direction. His contemplative approach to the mystery of God in human experiences can enable us who are convinced that we live in a world of grace to speak of God in secular terms. His understanding of the Christian life as a mysticism of everyday faith can free us to seek and find God not only in times of formal prayer, but also in times of suffering, celebration, service and self-emptying, which we can view as opportunities for faith. His experience of prayer as surrender of the heart can help us to concentrate on its fruits, the ways we let go of all that can keep us from being open to the mystery of God in our lives. His conviction about the unity of the love of neighbour and the love of God can validate our earnest search for faith and justice. This search stretches our love of neighbour beyond local and national boundaries to include global concerns.

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NOTES

¹ See Rahner, Karl: *The practice of faith: a handbook of contemporary spirituality*, ed Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt (New York: Crossroad, 1986); and *Prayers for a lifetime*, ed Albert Raffelt (New York: Crossroad, 1984). Cf Bacik, James C.: 'A spirituality for the future: situational and systematic', in Daly, Robert J., (ed): *Rising from history: U.S. Catholic theology looks to the future* (New York: University Press of America, 1987), pp 184-191.

² See Rahner: 'Experience of self and experience of God', *Theological investigations* (= *TI*), vol 13, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1975), pp 122-132; 'Experience of the Holy Spirit', *TI* 18, pp 189-210; *Foundations of Christian faith: an introduction to the idea of Christianity*, (New York: Seabury, Crossroad Book, 1978), p 131; 'Glaubensmitte—lebensmitte', *Geist und leben*, 46 (1973), pp 241-6; 'Reflections on the experience of grace', *TI* 3, pp 86-90; and 'Theology and anthropology', *TI* 9, 28-45.

³ Rahner: 'Christian living formerly and today', *TI* 7, p 15. See also *Everyday faith*, tr W. J. O'Hara (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968); and 'The spirituality of the church of the future', *TI* 20, pp 143-153.

⁴ Rahner: *Visions and prophecies*, vol 10 of *Quaestiones disputatae*, tr Charles Henkey and Richard Strachan (London: Burns & Oates, Ltd., 1966), p 64.

⁵ See Rahner: 'Priest and poet', *TI* 3, pp 294-317; 'The theology of the symbol', *TI* 4, pp 221-252. Cf Callahan, Annicc: *Karl Rahner's spirituality of the pierced heart: a reinterpretation of devotion to the Sacred Heart* (New York: University Press of America, 1985), pp 35-37, 43-46, 90-96.

⁶ See Rahner: 'The eternal significance of the humanity of Jesus for our relationship with God', *TI* 3, pp 35-46; "'Behold this heart!': preliminaries to a theology of devotion to

the Sacred Heart', *TI* 3, pp 321-330; 'Some theses for a theology of devotion to the Sacred Heart', *TI* 3, pp 331-352; and 'The man with the pierced heart', *Servants of the Lord*, tr Richard Strachan (New York: Herder & Herder 1968), pp 107-119.

⁷ Rahner, *On prayer* (Toronto: Paulist, Deus Book, 1968), p 45. See also Rahner, *Encounters with silence*, tr James M. Demske, (Westminster: Newman Press, 1963).

⁸ See Rahner: 'The possibility and necessity of prayer', and 'Is prayer dialogue with God?' *Christian at the crossroads*, tr V. Green (New York: Seabury, Crossroad Book, 1975), pp 48-69.

⁹ See Rahner: 'Ignatian spirituality and devotion to the Sacred Heart', *Mission and grace*, vol 3, tr Cecily Hastings (London: Sheed & Ward, 1966), pp 177-210; 'The logic of the concrete individual knowledge of God', *The dynamic element of the Church*, tr W. J. O'Hara (London: Burns & Oates, 1964), pp 84-170; *Meditations on priestly life* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1973); *The priesthood*, tr Edward Quinn (New York: Seabury, Crossroad Book, 1973); and *Spiritual exercises*, tr Kenneth Baker (New York: Herder & Herder, 1965).

¹⁰ See Rahner: 'The one Christ and the universality of salvation', *TI* 16, pp 199-224; and 'The abiding significance of Vatican II', *TI* 20, pp 90-102.

¹¹ See Rahner: 'Ueber das beten', *Geist und leben*, 45 (1972), pp 84-98.

¹² See Rahner: 'Why does God allow us to suffer?' *TI* 19, pp 194-208; 'Oeffnung des herzens', *Frau und beruf*, 4 (1955), p 5.

¹³ See Rahner: *Foundations of Christian faith*, pp 75-81; and 'Geheimnis des Herzens', *Geist und Leben*, 20 (1947), pp 161-5.

¹⁴ See Robb, Paul V., S.J.: 'Conversion as a human experience', *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits*, 14 (1982), pp 1-50.

¹⁵ See Rahner: 'Reflections on the unity of the love of neighbour and the love of God', *TI* 6, pp 231-249; 'On prayer today', *Opportunities for faith: elements of a modern spirituality*, tr Edward Quinn (London: The Catholic Book Club, 1974), pp 62-73.

¹⁶ Rahner, *Visions and prophecies*, p 14, n 12.

¹⁷ See Rahner, *The love of Jesus and the love of neighbour*, tr Robert Barr (New York: Crossroad, 1983), pp 69-104.

¹⁸ Rahner: *The love of Jesus*, p 39; see also p 15. Cf Rahner: *Foundations of Christian faith*, pp 203-206.

¹⁹ See Rahner: *Prayers for a lifetime*, pp 77-82.

²⁰ See Imhof, Paul, and Biallowons, Hubert, eds: *Karl Rahner in dialogue: conversations and interviews (1965-1982)*, tr and ed Harvey Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1985), pp 184-185. Cf Rahner, *The love of Jesus*, pp 65-104.

²¹ See Rahner: 'Foreword', in Arrupe, Pedro: *In him alone is our hope: texts on the heart of Christ 1965-1983*, ed Jerome Aixala, S.J. (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1984), pp xiii. Cf Callahan, pp 112, 130-133.

²² See Rahner: 'The future of the church and the church of the future', *TI* 20, pp 103-114; *The love of Jesus*, pp 75-104; and *The shape of the church to come*, tr Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

²³ See Rahner: *The shape of the Church to come*, pp 69-70; and *Is Christian life possible today?* tr Salvator Attanasio (Denville, New Jersey: Dimension Book, 1984).