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An overview of Karl Rahner's Ecclesiology

Abstract

Karl Rahner (1904-1984) regularly concerned himself with the life of the Church. His writings on the Church are very numerous and highly varied. His scholarly work, spanning half a century, tackled all significant topics of Catholic ecclesiology, from essential ecclesiology (*essentielle Ekklesiologie*) to the existential one (*existentielle Ekklesiologie*). Although he was not an ecclesiologist – as he did not produce any exhaustive monograph, nor did he run an academic course on ecclesiology – Rahner always made the Church the core concern of his life, and a central pursuit of his



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theological inquiry in the realms of systematic and practical theology. Adhering to the *sentire cum Ecclesia* principle, Rahner was a lifelong, loyal and passionate servant of his Church, and at the same time its “critical advocate”. Using the historical-systematic method, I aim to provide an overview of the significant themes and tenets in the ecclesiology put forward by the renowned Jesuit theologian.

Keywords

Karl Rahner, Church, ecclesiology, Second Vatican Council, ecumenism

1 Introduction

Rahner's studies of ecclesiology should be understood as profound thoughts connected to concrete events he experienced and which the Church was facing. His ecclesiology is not an analysis of some abstract topics, debated in treaties or theoretical monographs. Almost each volume of *Schriften zur Theologie / Theological Investigations* (published in 16 volumes between 1954-1984) contains studies of ecclesiology. The 2nd and the 14th volumes, for instance, are entirely dedicated to ecclesiology. In a century dubbed “the century of the Church”, the dogmatic thought was heading towards ecclesiology. Standpoints of the ecclesial magisterium (Enciclica *Mystici Corporis Christi* of the Pope Pius XII, for instance), prompted Rahner to give thought and to write about the members of the Church and about the conditions of belonging to the Church. As well, the Second Vatican Council, through its dogmatic

constitution “Lumen gentium”, increased the theologians’ concern for the ecclesiological issues.

In 1961, Rahner published *The Church and the Sacraments*¹ in „Quaestiones disputatae” collection, a work in which he discussed in detail the idea of a Church as an original Sacrament from which all the other particular Sacraments emanate. Some other monographs, which bring together previous studies, debate ecclesiological topics: *The Meaning of Ecclesiastical Office*²; *The Shape of the Church to Come*³; *Questions regarding an ecumenic understanding of service*⁴. Then the Jesuit theologian wrote numerous articles about the Church in encyclopedias, thesauri, and dictionaries⁵. However, an exceptional ecclesiological relevance has his contribution to the *Theology of Pastoral Action*⁶, published in four volumes. The 19th volume of

¹ K. Rahner, *Kirche und Sakramente*, (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1961); *Sämtliche Werke (SW)*, Bd. 18, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 2003), pp. 3-73.

² Idem, *Vom Sinn des kirchlichen Amtes*, (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1966); *SW 20*, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 2010), pp. 3-25.

³ K. Rahner, *Strukturwandel der Kirche als Aufgabe und Chance*, (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1972); *SW 24/1*, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 2011), pp. 490-579.

⁴ K. Rahner, *Vorfragen zu einem ökumenischen Amtsverständnis*, (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1974); *SW 27*, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 2002), pp. 223-285.

⁵ See K. Rahner, *Enzyklopädische Theologie*, in: *SW 17/1* and *2*, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 2002).

⁶ K. Rahner, *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie I*, F. X. Arnold, K. Rahner, V. Schurr, L. M. Weber (eds.), (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1964); *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie II*, F. X. Arnold, K. Rahner, V. Schurr, L. M. Weber

Sämtliche Werke / Complete Work summarizes this contribution under the title *Selbstvollzug der Kirche. Ekklesiologische Grundlegung praktischer Theologie*.

Studies about the Church of the famous German theologian culminated in *Foundations of Christian Faith. An introduction to the Idea of Christianity*⁷ (1976), where the ecclesiology, carefully systematized and re-elaborated, appeared under the title "Christianity as Church". The editors of the *Complete Work* regrouped Rahner's studies about the Church in nine of the 32 volumes of the collection⁸.

(eds.), (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1966); *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie* III, F. X. Arnold, K. Rahner, V. Schurr, L. M. Weber (eds.), (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder 1968); *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie* IV, F. X. Arnold, K. Rahner, V. Schurr, L. M. Weber (eds.), (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1969).

⁷ K. Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums*, (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1976); SW 26, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 1999), pp. 1-442.

⁸ K. Rahner, SW 10: *Kirche in den Herausforderungen der Zeit*, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 2003); SW 16: *Kirchliche Erneuerung*, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 2005); SW 19: *Selbstvollzug der Kirche*, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 1995); SW 20: *Priesterliche Existenz* Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 2010); SW 24/1: *Das Konzil in der Ortskirche* I and SW 24/2: *Das Konzil in der Ortskirche* II, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 2011); SW 26: *Grundkurs des Glaubens*, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 1999); SW 27: *Einheit*

2 A Systematic Presentation of Rahner's Ecclesiology

Exegetes of Karl Rahner's theology have identified three periods⁹ of his ecclesiological creation: 1. before the Second Vatican Council (1936-1962); 2. during the Council (1962-1965); 3. after the Second Vatican Council (1965-1984).

2.1 Before the Second Vatican Council (1936-1962)

Rahner's first study about the Church is entitled "*E latere Christi*" – *Origin of the Church, as Second Eve, from the side of Christ, the second Adam. An examination of the typological meaning of John 19, 34*¹⁰. This work is Karl Rahner's doctoral

in Vielfalt, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 2002); SW 31: *Im Gespräch über Kirche und Gesellschaft*, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 2007). For information on edition, see C. Schickendantz, «Karl Rahner: Obras Completas». Una nueva situación en la investigación sobre Rahner, in: *Teología y Vida* XL (1999), pp. 416-438.

⁹ See G. Wassilovsky, *Kirchenlehrer der Moderne: Ekklesiologie*, in: *Der Denkweg Karl Rahners. Quellen – Entwicklungen – Perspektiven*, (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 2003), p. 224. L. J. O'Donovan (ed.), *A changing ecclesiology in a changing Church: A symposium on development in the ecclesiology of Karl Rahner*, in: *Theological studies*, 38 (1977), pp. 737, 746, 736-762 - a slightly changed periodization is proposed. The conciliar period includes in this case also the preparatory period of the great event (1960-1965). In presenting the "geography" of Rahner's ecclesiological work, I will follow the periodization proposed by Wassilowsky, but I will take as reference point the content structure offered by the symposium mentioned above.

¹⁰ It is published posthumously in: K. Rahner, *SW 3*, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 1999), pp. 1-84. For the genesis of this work, see K. Rahner, *SW 3*, XVII-XLIII; K. H. Neufeld, *Die Brüder Rahner. Eine Biographie*, (Frei-

dissertation in theology, defended in 1936 at College of Theology of the University of Innsbruck. Using an interdisciplinary methodology (exegetical, patristic and dogmatic), the dissertation diachronically presents the origin of the Church in the pierced side of the crucified Saviour. Although he started from the interpretation of the text of John 19, 34 – “But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out.” –, Rahner did no longer see the foundation of the Church in a legal act or in a founding word of Jesus (the way it happened after the Trident Council), but in John’s metaphor, interpreted mainly from the perspective of the writings of Origen, Evagrius Ponticus and Bonaventura¹¹.

From the wound of the Crucified Christ springs the life-giving water of the Spirit, the source of the new life. This source transfigures all the people who are baptized and thus become a mystical community, a Body, the Church. The Church is then depicted as the Bride of Christ, as the real mother of all the living, and, in this respect, as a second Eve from Christ, the second Adam¹². At the end of his study, the author insisted on the idea that Eve’s procession from Adam is the real prototype of the emergence of the Church from the pierced side of Christ.

burg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1994), pp. 130-137; H. Vorgrimler, *Karl Rahner verstehen. Eine Einführung in sein Leben und Denken*, (Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1985), pp. 83-85. Preceded by an introduction, the work contains five chapters: 1. The biblical substantiation (according to John and Paul); 2. The Patristic literature until the middle of the third century; 3. The first exceptional witnesses of the third century; 4. As of the flowering period of the patristic literature until the end of the patristic period; 5. The Middle Ages and the modern age.

¹¹ See A. R. Batlogg, *Kirche als Gegenwart Christi: Die theologische Dissertation*, in: *Der Denkweg Karl Rahners...*, pp. 49-50; G. Wassilowsky, *Kirchenlehrer der Moderne: Ekklesiologie*, p. 227.

¹² See K. Rahner, *SW* 3, p. 9.

Also, Rahner sees as a real type the spurt of water and blood from Christ's body. The water and the blood are "symbols" with a real sacramental function, prefigurations of the Baptism and the Eucharist. J. Kittel sees in the blood and water the grace outpoured from the Saviour's heart towards the eternal life¹³. Through these "real symbols", Christ's life is transferred into our life, "the Christ event" makes our life an event¹⁴.

Karl Rahner wanted to make from the presentation of Church's origin in the pierced side of the Lord also a part of the history of patristic piety toward Jesus' heart. For the people of the early Church, the pierced side of the Lord was "the sign of their salvation, of all the grace and strength, until martyrdom", "a fountain of life that flows through Baptism and unites them with Christ", the fountain of Christ's blood that we drink in the Eucharist¹⁵. In this first work of patristic ecclesiology¹⁶, Rahner's tapping into the patristic and Ignatian spirituality is quite obvious.

Since the first year of his teaching activity in Innsbruck, Rahner delivered lectures about Christ's grace (*De Gratia Christi*,

¹³ J. Kittel, *Kirche als Ereignis: Ein Beitrag zur Grundlegung des sakramentalen Kirchenbegriffs im ekklesiologischen Entwurf von Karl Rahner*, (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 2010), p. 45.

¹⁴ See K. Rahner, *SW* 3, pp. 82-83.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 83.

¹⁶ On the occasion of his 70th anniversary, Karl Rahner remembered that he had to "fabricate" this work he would qualify as "petty, poor, but sufficient, according to the standards of that time". K. Rahner, *SW* 25, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 2008), p. 6; Hugo Rahner, on the contrary, enumerate this work among the writings "about which we laugh" and which are part of the "prehistory of our science". (H. Rahner, „Eucharisticon fraternitatis”, in: *Gott in Welt: Festgabe für Karl Rahner*, A. Darlap, W. Kern, J. B. Metz, H. Vorgrimler (eds.), (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 1964), pp. 896, 895-899.

1937/38), in which he outlined the notion of Church Sacrament¹⁷. James J. Woolever points out that the first ecclesiological writings of the Jesuit theologian particularly examine the relationship between the divine grace and the Church¹⁸.

However, except for these lectures, unpublished for a long time, Rahner's first theological essays which intersect the ecclesiology domain are: "The meaning of frequent confession of devotion"¹⁹ (1934) and "Priestly existence"²⁰ (1942). Referring to these essays, G. Wassilowsky noted that Rahner was the first theologian who, as early as the 1930s, started to apply and to revalorize the ecclesial dimension of the Sacraments as *visibilis forma invisibilis gratiae*²¹. Moreover, he related this with the teaching about the divine grace historically mediated through Jesus Christ and, sacramentally, through the Church. Since it comes from Christ and is transmitted to the world for salvation through the work of the Church, the grace works "in the form of Christ" and in „the form of the Church". God's saving "act", as sanctifying divine grace, does not remain solely in God's history, in the Incarnation, but also passes in man's history. By concretely "touching" Christ – which is

¹⁷ See J. Kittel, *Kirche als Ereignis...*, p. 311; H. Vorgrimler, *Karl Rahner. Gotteserfahrung in Leben und Denken*, (Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2004), p. 223.

¹⁸ J. J. Woolever, *A critical evaluation of the suitability of Karl Rahner's sacramental ecclesiology for a world church*, Distinguished dissertation series. 25, (San Francisco: Ph.D. Syracuse N.Y., 1992), p. 125.

¹⁹ K. Rahner, Vom Sinn der häufigen Andachtsbeichte, in: *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. 3, (Einsiedeln-Zürich-Köln: Benziger, 1956), pp. 211-225; Idem, *SW 11*, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 2005), pp. 401-411.

²⁰ Idem, Priesterliche Existenz, in: *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. 3, (Einsiedeln-Zürich-Köln: Benziger, 1956), pp. 285-312; *SW 20*, pp. 196-216.

²¹ See G. Wassilowsky, *Kirchenlehrer der Moderne: Ekklesiologie*, p. 228.

achieved by the communication of the Church's grace transmitted through the Sacraments – the man „becomes aware of the entire depth of this spiritual life”²².

In the *Freiburg Memorandum* of 1943, which is, in many respects, a sort of a theological programme for the future, Rahner announced the change of ecclesiological perspective he would adopt. It is high time, he observed, that the Church no longer be seen as a “confessional organization” , but as a mystical Body of Christ, as the environment where we unite in the most intimate way with God²³. Thus, Church's office of interceding man's encounter with God in Jesus Christ becomes essential. The ecclesiological studies that however significantly marked this first period are: “The Individual in the Church”²⁴ (1946); “Membership of the Church according to the teaching of Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*”²⁵ (1946) and “The Church of Sinners”²⁶ (1947). These studies have been seen as the first heartbeat of Rahner's ecclesiology, for at least three reasons. Firstly, they are the first actual ecclesiological writings, which debate specific specific issues, to which Rahner felt the need to answer. Secondly, they form the foundation of subsequent developments, far beyond Vatican II. Thirdly, some of the opinions set out now, as well as the conclusions drawn,

²² Idem, *Universales Heilssakrament Kirche: Karl Rahners Beitrag zur Ekklesiologie des II. Vatikanums*, (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2001), p. 139.

²³ See K. Rahner, *SW 4*, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 1997), p. 527.

²⁴ K. Rahner, Der Einzelne in der Kirche, in: *Stimmen der Zeit*, 139 (1946), pp. 260-276; *SW 10*, pp. 100-117.

²⁵ Idem, Die Gliedschaft in der Kirche nach der Lehre der Enzyklika Pius XII *Mystici Corporis Christi*, in: *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. 2, (Einsiedeln-Zürich-Köln: Benziger, 1955), pp. 7-94; *SW 10*, pp. 3-71.

²⁶ Idem, „Die Kirche der Sünder”, in: *Stimmen der Zeit*, 140 (1947), pp. 163-177; K. Rahner, *SW 10*, pp. 82-95. For the genesis of these studies, see „Editionsbericht”, in: K. Rahner, *SW 10*, pp. IX-XXV, XIV-XVI.

have become extremely important for the post-conciliar ecclesiology²⁷.

In "The Individual in the Church", Rahner debated the delicate issue of freedom and responsibility. To avoid confusions, the German theologian specified from the beginning that by "individual" he did not understand an individualized case of the human race, but a „man in his super-specific individuality", an "absolutely unique spiritual person". Rahner uses the notion of "supreme individual" even for God²⁸. However, this after having specified that "individuality" is a transcendental term, synonymous with "person"²⁹. The Trinity is the supreme individuality in which the human individuality participates through the uncreated grace³⁰.

By this study, Rahner wished to examine and to defend the real rights and wishes an individual may have as an ecclesial being. He does this, resorting, however, more to arguments borrowed from the philosophical anthropology rather than from the Scripture and Tradition.

The Church is visible and invisible at the same time. The unilateral emphasis on one of the two aspects of the Church led, more than once, to tensions that troubled the Church. When the invisible side is emphasized, the outcome is the heretical notion of the Mysterious Church of the predestined, and when its attribute of juridically organized community is stressed, the result is an inevitable fall in a sort of nestorianism or ecclesiological naturalism³¹. Although it is a visible institution,

²⁷ See J. P. Schineller, The early foundations, in: „A changing ecclesiology in a changing church", p. 739, 738-745.

²⁸ K. Rahner, *SW* 10, p. 104.

²⁹ Individuality "in its strictly qualitative meaning (and not just numerical), is only an attribute of the person" (*SW* 17/1, p. 642).

³⁰ K. Rahner, *SW* 10, p. 105.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 108.

hierarchically constituted and endowed with authority, the Church is, before anything else, the community of free persons. That is why, it must allow the human person the right and the duty of decision-making, the freedom of initiative and the responsibility for the decisions made in the private life, "because the individual ethics may not be regulated directly by the Church"³². The author warns concerning the gregarious ecclesial conformity, which cannot characterize a mature Christian. Conformity is not only against the purpose of the Church but is even contrary to the human nature.

Evidently, the Christian lives in the natural tension provoked by his/her historical belonging to a visible community, organized according to precise rules, as well as by his/her concrete, but mysterious affiliation to the community of the redeemed in Christ. This tension is then deepened by the fact that the Church does not guide the individual only as a single subject, but guides him also in his capacity of a member of the more significant human family, a family that is governed by universal rules and laws, that are not always the rules and laws of the individuals that are part of it³³.

Extremely interesting are also Rahner's observations about collectivism. That was the era of an incredible confusion caused by the conflict between secular individualism and a collectivism that has gained the upper hand in the recent history. However, for the theology professor at Innsbruck, more dangerous than the social collectivism is the inner collectivism, of the heart, which means giving up the responsibility of the decision. The great docility towards the Church, towards its prescriptions and servants, may be the expression of a childish tenderness of the heart, that leads to the inner collectivism. Briefly, the inner

³² *Ibidem*, p. 112.

³³ *Ibidem*, pp. 109-110.

collectivism is giving up one's own conscious decision and transferring this decision to an external authority³⁴.

In full honesty, Rahner admitted that the Church has not always acted by respecting the individual freedom but even evinced a tendency towards a religious dictatorship and ecclesiastical totalitarianism. To eliminate such imperfections, the Church must promote a mature and responsible attitude towards God. The Church must endeavour to create an atmosphere in which God may talk to the person directly. That is why, it would be good that the Church host movements or free groups and even charismatic individuals, free from determinations and strict ecclesiastical supervision, "like the prophets of the Didache, the spiritual monks of the old Greek Church, a Benedict and a Francisc, who were not priests. Such people could not act authoritatively by a task entrusted by the Church"³⁵. These people are the bearers of the love of the future aeon – already working in Church time –, of that love that encourages and promotes freedom and personality.

In conclusion, the principle for promoting the individual rights and responsibilities in the Church should be, according to Rahner, the following: *The Church is for the people, and not people for the Church* (my italics, J.N.). By emphasizing the dynamic and charismatic element in the Church, of the freedom of expression, the Jesuit theologian laid the foundations, by this study, of the principle of Church "democratization"³⁶.

"Membership of the Church according to the teaching of Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*" is a study of high dogmatic and ecumenical relevance. The encyclical *Mystici corporis Christi*, issued in 1943, grants a special place to Paul's

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 113.

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 117.

³⁶ See J. P. Schineller, *The early foundations*, p. 741.

view of the Church, as Body of Christ. This view was subsequently borrowed also by the Second Vatican Council, which developed and changed the perspectives presented by *Mystici corporis Christi*. Many of the discussions that followed the publication of this encyclical were centred on the identification of the mystical Body of Christ with the Roman-Catholic Church. However, Rahner analyzed the encyclical in a very open ecumenical horizon. To investigate it, he started from three questions: 1. - which people belong to the Church as full members?; 2. - what consequences entails this membership regarding justifying the state of grace and man's relationship with Christ?; 3. - finally, what truths can be concluded from this doctrine regarding the very being of Church?³⁷.

The Jesuit theologian regards the membership in the Church not as a "mere canonical subtlety", but as a "vital issue for all those who love Christ's Church and who admit God's will as compulsory for themselves *so that all become one*"³⁸.

Who are the Church members, according to the encyclical above? Rahner answers those who are baptized, confess the true faith and have not excluded or have not been excluded from the Church by the ecclesial authority. Therefore, it follows that are not members of the Church those that are not baptized and those who oppose the Church, either by departing from its faith, or by rejecting the authority of its hierarchy, namely either through heresy or through schism. However, this does not mean that all the baptized are in a state of grace and that they will gain salvation. However, even when the Church is a Church of the sinners, it remains a real presence of God in the world and, in this respect, is a primordial Sacrament. As a primordial Sacrament, the Church is a real token of God's will of

³⁷ K. Rahner, *SW* 10, p. 3.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

salvation and Christ's sanctifying grace. It appears, therefore, both in its visible body, as well as in its dimension of a sign of the invisible, but victorious grace.

For Rahner not being a member of the Catholic Church was not tantamount to not being a Christian. He offered as an example of extra-catholic Christianity – “before all” – the Eastern Churches, where there exist both an apostolic succession, up to today's bishops, as well as faith, even though it lacks absolute accuracy³⁹.

Then, in this context, essential topics are analyzed, such as the baptism of desire, the possibility of an invincible innocent ignorance and the universal divine will of salvation, topics which were resumed and deepened in the volume *The Church and the Sacraments*.

In this study, we already glimpse an open, universal and optimistic ecclesiology, which is founded on the unity of origin and of nature of the human race, on the belief that all the people are created by God and called to the likeness with Him. However, Rahner did not emphasize here only anthropological foundations of the ecclesiology, but also Christological foundations. God's Incarnation has essentially determined the entire human nature from the ontological point of view. By the Incarnation, the light of the eternal plan of salvation is concretely fulfilled in man and history⁴⁰. The ecclesiology thus occurs in the natural continuity of the seeking and receptive anthropology (man hearer of the Word) and as a concrete expression of Christology.

In the same study, the young theologian cultivated, without fear, the paradox that the Church is a means of salvation, but salvation is possible also for someone who is outside the

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 21.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 69.

Church. For him, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* was not an exclusive adage, to threaten those outside the Church, but a warning addressed to those inside it.

The study “The Church of sinners” was first published in 1947. In his analysis, Rahner started from the reality that man, as an ecclesial being, is, inevitably, a mundane, limited creature, subject to sin. However, he did not assert this based on immediate, factual observations, but based on tradition and Church dogma⁴¹. The Church itself, even having the attribute of holiness, admitted its sinfulness.

However, a Catholic, Rahner believed, still belongs to the Church even when he is not in a state of grace. This membership to the visible Church, however, does not guarantee the mysterious membership to the spiritual community. The sinner often offers the lie as a sign of what it claims to be, but the lie excludes him from the community of the chosen ones.

When we look towards the history of the Church, and towards its ecclesiastical evolution, we cannot help noting that the Church itself is sinful. We live daily in a Church made of sinners, either non-specialists or members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Not to admit this obvious issue means to suffer from what Rahner called ecclesiastical docetism.

It is more natural to honestly admit the sinfulness of the Church in its human dimension than to idealize the Church and life in the Church, as once did the Messalians, the Cathars, and more recently the Protestant reformers:

“Aren’t there always scandals even within the Orders whose task is to strive to get holiness and perfection? Is bad popes a catchword or a historical reality? And haven’t things, here and there, always been used towards sin:

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 82.

especially the confessional and the Sacraments, popedom's claims for obvious political purposes?"⁴².

Once this reality is admitted, there occurs the necessity of a change in the Church, of a real "revolution", a task to rediscover the Church as the mystical body of Christ.

The emphasis put by Rahner, in this study of his youth period, on the human element even sinful in the Church invites, on one hand, to sincere repentance and to embracing the spiritual path, and, on the other hand, to an objective admittance of its own weaknesses in the dialogue with people of other denominations, beliefs or convictions. Any real and re-forming dialogue – with itself and with the others – starts, as Rahner already suggests, from the awareness of its limitations and sins.

Peter Schineller remarked that Rahner did not bring significant changes in his subsequent ecclesiological studies compared to these initial positions, but only positive developments and deepening motivated by the new challenges faced by the Church. His thoughts about freedom, individuality and the charismatic element in the Church will be found in the discussions of the councils fathers and will significantly stimulate the theological thinking beyond the council period.

Rahner's ecclesiology of this first period⁴³ was extremely important so that the analytical solutions offered by the famous

⁴² Ibidem.

⁴³ In addition to the studies presented, Rahner also wrote in this period: *Die alleinseligmachende Kirche* (1943); *Gefahren im heutigen Katholizismus* (1946); *Über den der Kirche schuldigen Gehorsam des Christen* (1947-1948); *Das freie Wort in der Kirche* (1951); *Die Chancen des Christentums* (1952); *Freiheit in der Kirche* (1953); *Ich glaube die Kirche* (1954); *Dogmatische Randbemerkungen zur Kirchenfrömmigkeit* (1961); *Das Christentum und die nichtchristlichen Religionen* (1961). Because the date of their writing in paranthesis does not coincide with the date of publishing, see for the genesis of these studies „Editionsbericht“, in: K. Rahner, *SW* 10, pp. XIV-XXIV. For the order and relevance of the studies in this period, see W. Schmolly, *Eschatolo-*

theologian have been assumed in the life and mission of the Catholic Church⁴⁴.

2.2 During the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965)

In 1960, Karl Rahner was appointed a consultant in the preparatory Commission of the Council. The German theologian would bring with him a significant ecclesiological contribution to the Council, consisting of his thoughts about the Church, expressed in studies well appreciated. The most competent exegete of Karl Rahner's contribution to the Second Vatican Council, G. Wassilowsky observed that, in his capacity as council expert, Rahner worked "up to exhaustion". However, nevertheless, according to the Council archives, not even a single text was drafted solely by Rahner⁴⁵.

Wassilowsky also systematizes the concrete conciliar thematic palette with which Rahner worked. The Church was always the main concern because he worked in various commissions and subcommissions for the elaboration of the texts *De Ecclesia*. However, he also dealt with other particular ecclesiological topics: the diaconate and its reintroduction in the life of the Church; the integration of Mariology in the conciliar ecclesiology; episcopal collegiality and the local Church; the Church and today's world; the revelation; monastic orders. This leads to the conclusion that Rahner influenced the following

gische Hoffnung in Geschichte: Karl Rahners dogmatisches Grundverständnis der Kirche als theologische Begleitung von deren Selbstvollzug, (Innsbruck/Wien: Tyrolia-Verlag, 2001), pp. 13-28; 335-341, and, especially, J. Kittel, *Kirche als Ereignis...*, a volume dedicated exclusively to this first period of Rahner's ecclesiological creation. Relevant for this period remain also the articles in the volume of pastoral theology *Sendung und Gnade*, (Innsbruck: Tyrolia-Verlag, 1959).

⁴⁴ See J. P. Schineller, *The early foundations*, p. 745.

⁴⁵ See G. Wassilowsky, *Kirchenlehrer der Moderne: Ekklesiologie*, p. 229.

conciliar documents: *Lumen gentium*, *Dei verbum*, *Gaudium et spes* and *Perfectae caritatis*⁴⁶. Karl H. Neufeld asserted that only four conciliar texts are free from any influence of Rahner: „Decree on the media of social communication” (*Inter mirifica*), “Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite” (*Orientalium ecclesiarum*), “Declaration on christian education” (*Gravissimum educationis*) and that declaration regarding the religious freedom (*Dignitatis humanae*)⁴⁷.

Rahner saw in the revalorization of the local Church, of laity and episcopacy the most precious achievements of the Council⁴⁸.

However, although he contributed with his entire energy to this great event of the Church – the first moment in the history of Catholicism in which the Roman-Catholic Church becomes a global Church –, Rahner was not an enthusiast of the Second Vatican Council either before, during, or after it⁴⁹. For him, the Council was necessary particularly in its transitory capacity, as “beginning of the beginning” (*Anfang eines Anfangs*)⁵⁰.

⁴⁶ Idem, *Als die Kirche Weltkirche wurde. Karl Rahners Beitrag zum II. Vatikanischen Konzil und seiner Deutung*, Rahner lecture 2012, (München/Freiburg i.Br., 2012), pp. 22-23; A detailed presentation of the entire of K. Rahner's contribution to the Second Vatican Council, offers the same G. Wassilowsky, in *Universales Heilssakrament Kirche...*, pp. 86-99.

⁴⁷ K. Neufeld, *Theologen und Konzil. Karl Rahners Beitrag zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, in: *Stimmen der Zeit*, 202 (1984), p. 161, 156-166.

⁴⁸ See Y. Congar, *Erinnerungen an Karl Rahner auf dem Zweiten Vatikanum*, in: *Karl Rahner – Bilder eines Lebens*, P. Imhof, H. Bialowons (eds.), (Freiburg i.Br., Zürich: Benzinger/Herder, 1985), p. 66; *Karl Rahner – Erinnerungen im Gespräch mit Mainold Krauss*, (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1984), pp. 98-100.

⁴⁹ See G. Wassilowsky, *Kirchenlehrer der Moderne: Ekklesiologie*, p. 240.

⁵⁰ K. Rahner, *Das Konzil – ein neuer Beginn*, (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1966), p. 14.

As we mentioned above, a significant ecclesiological contribution offers the *Theology of Pastoral Action*, whose first volume was published in 1964. A simple enumeration of the topics treated here highlights a significant contribution: “Fundamental nature of the church”; “The Church as presence of God’s truth and love”; “Characteristics of the church”; “Differentiation in the church: Laity and Hierarchy”. All these topics prove Rahner’s concern for the existential, practical ecclesiology and for the self-fulfilment of the Church in the period in which it exists. For him, the activity by which the Church serves its believers, on one hand, and the world, on the other hand, is a joint activity of all its members, not a sole mission of the hierarchy. It was Rahner’s constant concern to involve, through the exercise of practical theology and the actual deed, in the immediate problems the Church of his time was facing.

In his presentation of Rahner’s ecclesiology of this period, John P. Galvina deemed necessary, from a methodological perspective, to analyse three original and recurrent topics: the Church’s being, the service in the Church and the limits of the Church⁵¹. For this analysis, he used particularly the following studies: *The Episcopate and the Primacy*⁵²; “The Church and the Parousia of Christ”⁵³; “The Episcopal Office”⁵⁴; “Foundation of

⁵¹ J. P. Galvina, Questions centered on Vatican Council II, in: „A changing ecclesiology in a changing church”, pp. 746-754.

⁵² K. Rahner, *Episkopat und Primat*, co-author along with J. Ratzinger, (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1961); K. Rahner, *SW* 16, pp. 292-356.

⁵³ Idem, Kirche und Parusie Christi, in: *Catholica*, 17 (1963), pp. 113-128; K. Rahner, *SW* 10, pp. 626-640.

⁵⁴ Idem, Über den Episkopat, in: *Stimmen der Zeit*, 173 (1963), pp. 161-195; K. Rahner, *SW* 21/1, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 2013), pp. 425-464.

pastoral theology as a practical theology”⁵⁵; “Reflection on the concept of ‘Jus divinum’ in catholic thought”⁵⁶ and *Servants of the Lord*⁵⁷.

2.3 After the Second Vatican Council (1966-1984)

Shortly after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, Rahner delivered a lecture in which he concisely exposed his ecclesiology, a lecture which was later published with the title “The New Image of the Church”⁵⁸. Here he indicated the special ecclesiological elements of the Second Vatican Council, to which he assented: 1. The Church exists concretely in the local communities and the regional churches; 2. The Church is the universal Sacrament of people’s salvation; 3. Since it is made of sinful people, to call the Church „The Church of sinners” or even “The sinful Church” is not inappropriate; 4. The Church is a community of faith, hope, and love; 5. The Church is a charismatic community; 6. The Church is the gathering of the poor and oppressed; 7. The Church is in the eschatological stage of salvation history⁵⁹.

⁵⁵ Idem, Grundlegung der Pastoraltheologie als praktische Theologie, in: *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie I/2*, pp. 117-118; K. Rahner, *SW* 19, pp. 47-48.

⁵⁶ Idem, Über den Begriff des *Jus divinum* im katholischen Verständnis, in: *Existenz und Ordnung*, Festschrift für E. Wolf, (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1962), pp. 62-86; K. Rahner, *SW* 10, pp. 605-625.

⁵⁷ Idem, *Vom Sinn des kirchlichen Amtes*, (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1966); *SW* 20, pp. 3-25.

⁵⁸ Idem, Das neue Bild der Kirche, in: *Geist und Leben*, 39 (1966), pp. 4-24; K. Rahner, *SW* 21/2, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ, (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 2013), pp. 807-825.

⁵⁹ M. A. Fahey, The Decade After Council, in: „A changing ecclesiology in a changing church”, p. 755.

In the decade after the Council, Rahner was very active within the Pastoral Council in the Federal Germany. The fruit of this activity was his work *Strukturwandel der Kirche als Aufgabe und Chance / The Shape of the Church to Come* (1972). After a realistic analysis of the Catholic Church in Germany, that kept its topicality for a long time, in this work Rahner presented his views on the Roman-Catholic Church of the future. This Church should be: universal, but without centralism; declericalized; full of concern for the world, but without any kind of triumphalism; moral, but not moralistic; ecumenical; spiritual, but without shallow cultic and parochial practices; undetermined from the top, respectively the hierarchy, but from the bottom, from the base, i.e. “democratic”; critical with regard to society “depravities”⁶⁰.

In the ecclesiological studies of this period, Rahner focused on the concrete Church, on the need to change the Church structures and on the mission of the Church in the world⁶¹. As remarked by J. Woolever, the ecclesiology of this period is

⁶⁰ Cf. K. Rahner, *Strukturwandel der Kirche...*, p. 9.

⁶¹ Idem, Über das Ja zur konkreten Kirche, in: *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. 9, (Einsiedeln-Zürich-Köln: Benziger, 1970), pp. 479-497; K. Rahner, *SW* 24, pp. 189-202; Bemerkungen über das Charismatische in der Kirche, in: *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. 9, pp. 415-431; K. Rahner, *SW* 24, pp. 203-215; Anonymes Christentum und Missionsauftrag der Kirche, in: *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. 9, pp. 498-515; K. Rahner, *SW* 22/2, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 2008), pp. 312-325; Zur Struktur des Kirchenvolkes heute, in: *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. 9, pp. 558-568; K. Rahner, *SW* 24, pp. 327-334; Die gesellschaftskritische Funktion der Kirche, in: *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. 9, pp. 569-590; *SW* 24, pp. 216-232; Das kirchliche Lehramt in der heutigen Autoritätskrise, in: K. Rahner, *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. 9, pp. 339-365; *SW* 22/2, pp. 435-454. Highly important are also his chapters of practical ecclesiology in *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie* (*SW* 19).

preferably an orthopraxy than orthodoxy⁶², namely more an existential, practical ecclesiology, than an essential, theoretical ecclesiology.

The Jesuit theologian noticed that the Church of modern and post-modern times lives, more and more acutely, in "situation of diaspora", namely in a decline of the influence exercised on the society and a decrease in the number of its members. In a secular world, "the little flock" becomes smaller and smaller and more devoid of social influence. However, even before such pessimistic findings, Rahner refused the defeatist or ghettoizing attitude, calling to spiritual apostolate. In this period, the criticism addressed by him to a dull Church, devoid of soul and spirituality, sometimes takes virulent forms⁶³.

In the *Foundations of Christian Faith*, the seventh and the eighth part, Rahner presents "Christianity as Church"⁶⁴. In this work of synthesis, he resumed the entire ecclesiology previously elaborated. In the overview he did, he followed an original method, that harmonizes, against an apparent ecumenic background, the biblical theology, the fundamental theology, and the dogmatics.

For the author of the *Foundations*, the Church is "the historical continuation of Christ in and through the community of those

⁶² J. J. Woolever, *A critical evaluation...*, p. 152.

⁶³ See M. A. Fahey, *The Decade After Council*, p. 761.

⁶⁴ This chapter comprises the following subchapters: „The Church as founded by Jesus Christ“; „The Church in the New Testament“; „Fundamentals of the ecclesial nature of Christianity“; „An indirect method for showing the legitimacy of the Catholic Church as the Church of Christ“; „Scripture as the Church’s Book“; „On the Church’s Teaching Office“; „The christian in the life of the Church“. In chapter 8, the *Foundations* points out the „General characteristics of christian life“ and „The sacramental life“. See K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christians Faith*, translated by W. Dych, (New York: Crossroad, 1978), pp. 468-469.

who believe in him, and who recognize him explicitly as the mediator of salvation in a profession of faith”⁶⁵. In the definition he gives to the Church, Rahner pointed out both its Christological, historical-institutional and communitarian dimension. Christianity exists ecclesially, “in the form of the Church”, because it reunites God’s Self-giving to mankind and man’s self-transcendence, through faith and love, towards God and his neighbours. The Church lives, therefore, where God communicates Himself in a vivid and saving way to the inter-humanity (*Zwischenmenschlichkeit*), namely to the human community animated by the faith in Jesus Christ. Moreover, salvation – fulfilled in Christ in a historical, irrevocable, irreversible and eschatological way – is the gift God offered, through the Church, to the complete man, and the entire humanity. Which means that religiousness cannot be deemed only an internal and private issue. However, when faith and religiousness are no longer seen in their social and ecclesial dimension, we become captive of a “bourgeois conception”⁶⁶.

However, for Rahner not the Church, but Christ is “the core of the ultimate truth of Christianity”. Because before the Church preached Christ, Jesus founded the Church – through His life, death, and resurrection. In fact, the faith of the Church is the faith in Christ as an absolute Saviour, and the Christian community has this faith through the Apostles, from Christ Himself. Then, Lord Christ offers us the essential and fundamental structures of the Church, when He gives to the apostolic community, in addition to faith, the Petrine ministry, and the episcopate.

The first community, the Judeo-Christian one, gathered around Christ, will call itself “God’s community”, “God’s Church”, names

⁶⁵ K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christians Faith*, p. 322.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 323.

that will then designate the Christian communities founded by Apostle Paul and, later, the entire Christianity. By the descent of the Holy Spirit, the early Christian community discovers itself “as the eschatological community of salvation”⁶⁷.

To the challenge of the Lutheran theologian Ernst Käsemann, according to whom “the diversity of the ecclesiologies of the early communities implied divergences that could go up to breaking the communion”⁶⁸, Rahner answered, relying on the outcome of the researches of the famous Catholic biblical scholar Rudolf Schnackenburg, that the New Testament theology (of Mathew, Luke, Paul, etc.) features an ecclesiology of unity in diversity. Actually, “there is the one church which was founded by Christ and was won by Christ and is united with Christ. It is at the same time a visible and an invisible church, it has an earthly and a heavenly mode of existence, and it possesses both an exterior form and an interior, Spirit-filled and mysterious essence”⁶⁹.

Rahner answered then also to the allegation according to which Catholicism would be a religion of authority, deeply marked by the institutional dimension. For him, if Christianity exists and lasts historically in ecclesial form— as man himself is a social being and, more than that, ecclesial being — then the institutional dimension and its authoritarian nature are part of Church's being. Salvation itself is historically and socially mediated. The human subjectivity needs a normative objectivity, given, par excellence, in Jesus Christ and His Church.

“The concreteness or Jesus Christ as something which challenges me must confront me in what we call the church. It is a church which I do not form and which is not constituted only through my wishes and religious needs, but rather

⁶⁷ Ibidem, p. 336.

⁶⁸ B. Sesboüé, *Karl Rahner*, (Paris: Cerf, 2001), p. 157.

⁶⁹ K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 341.

it is a church which confronts me in a mission, a mandate and a proclamation which really make the reality of salvation present for me"⁷⁰.

To identify the Catholic Church with Christ's Church – referring, in particular, to the Christianity emerged from the Reformation – Rahner brought as a first argument the oneness of the Church. However, the Church remains one when it preserves "the fundamental substance of Christianity" unspoiled and when it is in uninterrupted connection and organic continuity with the original Christianity. Moreover, this uninterrupted continuity with the early Christianity exists, to a higher and more visible extent, in the Catholic Church than in the evangelical Christianity or the other ecclesial communities. Moreover, this, first of all, because in the Catholic Church there exist the Petrine ministry and an episcopate through which a constant connection with the apostolic community is kept⁷¹.

After presenting the Catholic meaning of the three "sola" (*gratia, fide, scriptura*) of the Reformation, Rahner attempted to discover a meaning to the Christians' split through the irenic exercise of an ecumenic theology. In his opinion, among the Christian churches, there is a unity beyond the divisions between them. For the split in the bosom of Western Christianity are guilty both the Catholics and the Protestants, the share of guilt being reserved to the divine court⁷².

However, since today the disunity can no longer be attributed directly to some or the others of the Christians, it is good to ask ourselves which is the "providential salvific meaning of the disunity". Firstly, the disunity puts forward the issue of diversity and of the unity among Christians, then the issue of the essence of the Christian message and its authenticity. The

⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 344.

⁷¹ Ibidem, pp. 357-358.

⁷² Ibidem, p. 368.

Christians, however, despite their disunity, should not forget that they are called to engage in retrieving the faith unity, even when they manage to offer a standard answer to the severe problems the contemporary world is facing⁷³.

The constant connection of today's Church with the apostolic Church is also given in "the Church's Book", in the Holy Scripture. Because "the Scripture, we are saying, is the objectification of the church of the apostolic age which is normative for us"⁷⁴. In the Catholic theology, the interpretation of the Scripture is incumbent on an authoritative instance, called Magisterium, consisting of the universal episcopate together with the Pope. Magisterium does not offer new revelations, but an accurate and right understanding of the revelation contained in the Scripture and the Tradition. Post-tridentine dogmas proclaimed by the Catholic Magisterium (the papal primacy and infallibility, the Immaculate conception and the bodily Ascension to heaven of Virgin Mary), for instance, are not actually "new dogmas", as they existed previously, although not explicitly, it is true, but were only theologically implicit⁷⁵.

Throughout his life, Rahner was pretty dilemmatic and inconsistent concerning the papal prerogatives. He wavered from „outrageous“ statements about the papal dogmas to heated arguments in their favour (such as, for instance, the famous dispute with Hans Küng on the papal infallibility⁷⁶). However, the Jesuit theologian constantly kept a critical fidelity towards the popedom and towards the way the latter knew to apply the prerogatives conferred upon it.

⁷³ Ibidem, p. 369.

⁷⁴ Ibidem, p. 371.

⁷⁵ Ibidem, p. 384.

⁷⁶ The disputes with H. Küng were published in K. Rahner, *SW* 22/2, pp. 687-786.

In the hierarchy of the truths, deemed Rahner, Pope's service does not occupy the central place. This place is occupied by the fundamental truths of faith about the Person and the work of Lord Christ, about His Death and Resurrection⁷⁷.

Asked about the papal infallibility, Rahner admitted that:

“In the practice of the Catholic Church of the last centuries, the dogma of papal infallibility had an emphasis which is not at all identical with the proper meaning of the dogma. An absolutist style of leadership has often been developed, that is not identical with the Church's being”⁷⁸.

⁷⁷ K. Rahner, Die unvergängliche Aktualität des Papstums, in: *SW* 28, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 2010), pp. 237-238.

⁷⁸ P. Imhof, H. Bialowons (eds.), *Karl Rahner im Gespräch*, Bd. I, (München: Kösel-Verlag, 1982), p. 187. In a lecture delivered in February 2000, as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, also Cardinal Ratzinger, who subsequently became the Pope Benedict XVI, admitted that “naturally, an exorbitant roman centralism can be checked, which must be indicated as such and then purified”. Exactly for this reason, The Catholic Synod of 1985 – but also the contemporary catholic theological thought in general – brought in the centre of the thought the concept of *communio*. But the Cardinal expressed his dissatisfaction that this notion became a “cheap slogan”, a “flattened and deformed” word and that the “Ecclesiology of communion started to be reduced to the topic of the relationship between the local Church and the universal Church which, at its turn, fell again and deeper in the issue of the distribution of competences incumbent on one or on the other. In a natural way, the topic of equality spread again, according to which only in *communio* full equality could exist. This way, the discussion of the disciples about whoever of them be greater has been reached again, which, obviously, does not want to cease in any generation. [...] While the Lord is heading to his passions, while the Church suffers and, in it, He Himself suffers, we are concerned about our dear topic, discussing about our preference rights. And if he came among us and ask us about what we talked, how we should blush and remain silent” (Cardinalul J. Ratzinger, Despre ecleziologia Constituției *Lumen Gentium*, in: *Dialog Teologic*, 7/2001, p. 20, 14-31).

But Rahner's most striking and provocative statement with respect to the papal dogmas remained this one:

"If I hypothetically imagined, unreally hypothetically, that I would have read to Jesus, during His life, the definitions of the First Vatican Council of 1870, He would have only wondered, probably, in his human empirical conscience and would not have understood a thing"⁷⁹.

Rahner told to H. Vorgrimler that the "Pope should reduce his role, should withdraw his claim of supremacy and should play, in exchange, the role of an arbitrator, in case of disagreements"⁸⁰.

By all these "tough" statements, Rahner justified both the primacy as well as the papal infallibility from the theological point of view in the *Foundations*. The Pope's magisterial authority is not a different one than the authority of the Councils before the proclamation of the papal dogmas. What was attributed to the Church before the Reformation, was also attributed to the Pope at the First Vatican Council? In fact, the difficulties raised by the papal infallibility are identical with those raised by the infallibility of the universal episcopacy, as here there is no place for the "so-called democratic perplexities". Because it is not the higher number of bishops that offers the guarantee of infallibility, but the Spirit of Christ, who blows wherever he wants and inspires whoever he wishes.

"From a human point of view, of course, it is always a great risk for the Pope to have this kind of authority, situated at the cutting edge, as it were, between human fallibility, finiteness and historicity on the one hand, and on the other

⁷⁹ P. Imhof, H. Bialowons (eds.), *Karl Rahner im Gespräch*, p. 191.

⁸⁰ A. R. Batlogg & M. E. Michalski (eds. & transl.), *Encounters with Karl Rahner: remembrances of Rahner by those who knew him*, by (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2009), p. 182.

hand the power of the Spirit of Christ who preserves the church in its truth, in and in spite of its humanity”⁸¹. Without insisting on the papal primacy, Rahner deemed he was not in conflict, however, with the Christianity being⁸². Rahner pronounced himself on the pertinence of proclaiming the dogma of the bodily Ascension to heaven of the Virgin Mary, in 1950, when he wrote a voluminous treaty about *Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis*⁸³. Then he categorically stated his opposition against the dogmatic proclamation of this truth of faith, saying that Pope Pius XII should have asserted his piety for Virgin Mary secretly, and not to impose it as a dogma⁸⁴. However, he clarified his views in the *Foundations of Christian Faith*:

“Further theological reflection is possible about whether and why it was opportune for Pius XII to define this dogma, and on this point, a Catholic is quite certainly not obliged by the dogma to hold one particular opinion. But in any case, we see that nothing is said here which would basically contradict the real substance of the faith”⁸⁵.

⁸¹ K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christians Faith*, p. 385.

⁸² Ibidem, pp. 386-387.

⁸³ Published posthumously in K. Rahner, *SW 9*, Karl-Rahner-Stiftung unter Leitung von K. Lehmann, J. B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler und A. R. Baltogg SJ., (Freiburg i.Br./Basel/Wien: Benzinger-Herder, 2004), pp. 3-394. This work could not be published anonymously due to the ban imposed by the superiors of the „Society of Jesus”.

⁸⁴ See H. Vorgrimler, *Karl Rahner verstehen...*, pp. 111–112. Since he deemed the proclamation of this dogma totally inappropriate, Rahner was not afraid to call the “messengers of God’s truth” imposed this way “suspectly pious sheep or zealous hotheads” (*verdächtig fromme Schafe oder hitzige Eiferer*), terms that must have been a shock for the Roman censorship, undoubtedly. As a mere mention, the Jesuit Ordre appointed his brother, the famous patrologist Hugo Rahner, among the censors of the work.

⁸⁵ K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christians Faith*, p. 388.

The eighth part of the *Foundations* is dedicated to the Christian existence and the sacramental life. When it is genuine, the Christian existence requires a realistic and non-idealized perception of the Church. The concrete, historical Church is not free from burdens, from delays and even from an erroneous evolution, yet it should be loved despite all its burdens. Moreover, we are called to strive to bear even the burdens of our Church, and not to add to it “the weakness of our own witness”⁸⁶. Although “a critical counsel” of its Church, Rahner always proved a profound *sentire cum Ecclesia*, as show these memorable words:

“we ourselves are the church, we poor, primitive, cowardly people, and together we represent the church. If we look at the church from outside, as it were, then we have not grasped that we are the church, and basically it is only our own inadequacies which are looking at us from the church. Not only does a Christian not have a right to idealize his church in a false way. He is also obliged by his faith to recognize the church of God and the assembly of Jesus Christ in this concrete church with its inadequacies, with its historical dangers, with its historical refusals, and with its false historical developments”⁸⁶.

The Christian existence, in its realism, does not compel the Christian to an optimistic outlook concerning life and the world. On the contrary, “the pessimistic realism” that characterize Christianity requests us “to see this existence as dark and bitter and hard, and as an unfathomable and radical risk”⁸⁷. Alternatively, the dangerous and terrible aspect of Christian life is given by our crucifixion and our death, as well as by the fact that our eternal destiny depends on our free choice.

⁸⁶ Ibidem.

⁸⁷ Ibidem, p. 403.

Only the Christianity frees us from the life “painkillers” and from the “opium” which would make us not be partakers of Christ’s death – indeed and in full freedom.

“In living out its Christian existence Christianity is required to say in an absolute and sober realism: yes, this existence is incomprehensible, for it passes through something incomprehensible in which all of our comprehending is taken from us. It passes through death. (...) Only when we live out this pessimistic realism and renounce every ideology which absolutizes a particular sector of human existence and makes it an idol, it is only then that it is possible for us to allow God to give us the hope which really makes us free”⁸⁸.

Since it extends Christ’s work of salvation in time and space, the Church is the fundamental Sacrament (*Grundsakrament*) from which the particular Sacraments spring. If the universal salvation work has been finally and eschatologically fulfilled by Christ and is continued by the Church until the end of time – through the Sacraments, the personal salvation is achieved by each Christian in faith, in hope, and love; in the first case we speak about *opus operatum*, and in the second about *opus operantis*⁸⁹.

In *Einigung der Kirchen – reale Möglichkeit*⁹⁰ / *Unity of the Churches: an actual possibility*, a book written together with Catholic theologian Heinrich Fries, Rahner drafts a project for the Churches unity. This work is the sole where the ecumenical dialogue⁹¹ is addressed not only to Protestantism but also to the Orthodoxy.

⁸⁸ Ibidem, p. 404.

⁸⁹ Ibidem, pp. 414-415.

⁹⁰ Published by Herder Verlag, Freiburg i.Br., 1984; K. Rahner, *SW 27*, pp. 286-396.

⁹¹ Karl Rahner’s ecumenical work has been gathered in *SW 27: Einheit in Vielfalt. Schriften zur ökumenischen Theologie*. Detailed information

The authors intended to present a project for the Churches' union, in eight points widely commented⁹², being animated by the belief that the "ecumenical task has become an urgent existential issue for the Christianity and the Churches" and that "this unity is a matter of life and death for the Christians of our time, a time in which the faith in God and His Christ is threatened by a militant and global atheism and by a relativist skepticism even in countries where the atheism is not a state religion"⁹³.

Few books about the Christian unity have stirred such a keen interest among the ecumenists, the theologians and the people

about Karl Rahner's ecumenical involvement is offered by K. Lehmann and A. Raffelt, in „Editionsbericht“, *SW* 27, pp. IX-XXV. Among Rahner's studies about the ecumenical theology we mention: R. C. Ryan, *The quest for the unity of the Christian churches: A study of Karl Rahner's writings on Christian ecumenism*, (Diss. Washington DC, 1992); K. Lehmann, *Karl Rahner als Pionier der Ökumene*, Hg. von der Karl Rahner Akademie Köln, (Köln, 2003) (an excellent chronological presentation of Rahner's ecumenical writings!); B. Kleinswärzer-Meister: 'Katholisch und (deswegen) ökumenisch': Karl Rahner und die Ökumene, in: *Una sancta*, 60 (2005), pp. 164-177; H.-J. Schulz, Karl Rahners Sakramententheologie: Zugang zu Ostkirche und Ökumene, in: *Wagnis Theologie: Erfahrungen mit der Theologie Karl Rahners*. Karl Rahner zum 75. Geburtstag am 5. März 1979, (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1979), pp. 402-416; A. Nicols, Einigung der Kirchen: An Ecumenical Controversy, in: *One in Christ* 21 (1985), pp. 139-66; A. Vögel, H. Fries and K. Rahner's «The Unity of the Churches»: Three Responses, in: *Ecumenical Trends*, 14 (1985), pp. 97-102.

⁹² Ideas I, IV, V, VI and VIII are commented by H. Fries, and ideas II, III, IVb and VII by K. Rahner (*SW* 17, p. 291). Since the work is done in collaboration, each of the authors subscribed to the others' interpretations. For the presentation and commentary on the 8 ideas, see R. C. Ryan, *The quest for the unity of the Christian churches...*, pp. 351-391.

⁹³ K. Rahner, Einigung der Kirchen – reale Möglichkeit, in: idem, *SW* 27, p. 287.

in charge with the Church⁹⁴ as did this work of Fries and Rahner. The rich literature of response to this project proves it abundantly⁹⁵.

Rahner and Fries propose a relativist and diplomatic ecumenical project which is founded on an absolute doctrinal relativism. That is precisely why, the unionist future to which this project refers remain very uncertain. In fact, in this project, none of the three major Christian denominations essentially found its spirit and ideas, although, as expected, there have been some theologians who appreciated this ecumenic vision⁹⁶.

3 A conclusive synthesis

Undoubtedly Karl Rahner remains one of the most prolific and innovative Catholic theologians of the twentieth century. His theology has made the transition from a rigid and ossified theology, closed and refractory to the world – as the neo-scholastic theology was at the time of his training – to a living theology, open to philosophy and culture in general, and to the concrete issues of the contemporary man in particular.

⁹⁴ In 1984, while he was a prefect of the Congregation for faith, Cardinal J. Ratzinger stated that the ecumenical project proposed by Fries and Rahner, although masterful, “remains an artificial exploit of theological acrobatics which, unfortunately, does not live up to reality” and, that is why, it must unequivocally be rejected: Luther and the Unity of the Churches: An Interview with Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, in: *Communio*, 11 (1984), p. 216, 210-226.

⁹⁵ Cf. P. J. Cogan, S.A., H. Fries and K. Rahner’s The Unity of the Churches: Three Responses, in: *Ecumenical Trends* 14 (1985), p. 97, apud R. C. Ryan, *The quest for the unity of the Christian churches...*, p. 392.

⁹⁶ R. C. Ryan presents the critical and positive evaluation of Fries’ and Rahner’s ecumenical project in: *The quest for the unity of the Christian churches...*, pp. 395-403.

The great merit of the Jesuit theologian, that became for many a true classic of the Catholic theology (he was compared and found similar to Augustine and Thomas Aquinas!), is that he taught almost any topic of theology differently from the way he had been taught, and offered “a new beginning” to the “reclusive” Catholic theology. A comparison between what Karl Rahner received and what he taught later on, between the theology inherited by him and the theology he bequeathed, can suggestively highlight *the innovative elements of his theology and ecclesiology*:

He was given answers that were in catechisms and manuals. / *He placed the questioning man in the foreground.*

He was told that the theological answers are final and came from above. / *He said that “every answer is always just the beginning of a new question”⁹⁷ and that the answer exists if there exists a questioning being, first of all.*

He was taught that God can be understood rationally. / *He taught that God is “the absolute mystery”.⁹⁸*

He was taught the priority of the Divine essence to the persons of the Holy Trinity. / *He spoke about the monarchy of the Father.* He had been presented a Trinity “locked in a deep isolation” (Dumitru Popescu). / *He wrote that “Die ‘ökonomische’ Trinität ist die ‘immanente’ Trinität und umgekehrt - the ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and vice versa”⁹⁹, to present an economic-immanent Trinity that works “the mystery of salvation”¹⁰⁰.* He inherited a cosmocentric spiritual vision. / *He bequeathed an anthropo-christocentric vision.*

⁹⁷ K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 32.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

⁹⁹ K. Rahner, *SW 22/1b*, (2013), pp. 534, 535;

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*.

He had learned that sin brought about Incarnation. / *He taught that the Incarnation had been ordained before the fall and that all had been intended for the Incarnation.*

He had been taught that God gives us created grace for beatification. / *He taught that God allows man to partake of Him by revelation.*

He had been talked about a temporal precedence of theology to economy. / *He spoke of a soteriological primacy of economy over theology.*

He inherited a theology which emphasized the importance of the Cross and Crucifixion / *He bequeathed a theology that emphasized the Incarnation and the Resurrection.*

He had been taught the juridical theory of redemption of Anselm of Canterbury / *He emphasized the ontological issue of salvation.*¹⁰¹

He had been taught a christomonistic, and pneumatomonistic theology / *He taught the joint works of the Son and the Holy Spirit in the work of salvation.*

He had been told that grace is created, superimposed to nature / *He was convinced that grace is uncreated and “constitutional” to nature.*¹⁰²

He had been told that the spirit and matter are separated / *He spoke instead all his lifetime about the “Spirit in the world” and the unity of body, soul and of the entire creation in the Spirit.*

¹⁰¹ D. Munteanu, *Was ist der Mensch? Grundzüge und gesellschaftliche Relevanz einer ökumenischen Anthropologie anhand der Theologie von K. Rahner, W. Pannenberg und J. Zizioulas, mit einem Vorwort von Jürgen Moltmann*, (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag 2010), p. 425f.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*, p. 78f; *idem*, *Grundzüge und gesellschaftliche Relevanz eines ökumenischen Menschenbildes*, in: *International Journal of Orthodox Theology*, 2:4 (2011), pp. 125-146.

He was warned that grace is only in the Roman Catholic Church and that only Catholics will be saved / *He proclaimed that grace is present in every religion "even if muffled" and that also non-Christians can be saved if "they follow the guiding voice of conscience"*.¹⁰³

He had been taught a negative and defensive attitude of the Church toward the world. / *He was the promoter and supporter of a helpful, open and positive attitude toward the world.*

The neo-scholastic theology taught him that revelation is coextensive with the history of salvation. / *He taught that revelation is coextensive with world history.*

He had been told that Mary's Assumption into heaven was a dogma. / *He said it had been better if Pope Pius XII did not proclaim this dogma, but privately expressed his Marian piety*¹⁰⁴.

As a Jesuit monk, he gave the vote of obedience and fidelity to the Pope. / *He exercised, however, like no other, the critical function of theology in the Roman Church.*

He had been told that we were supposed to fully obey the Church / *He said that the Church should let the human person the right to decide freely, on one hand, and the responsibility for the decisions made in the private life, on the other hand, as the gregarious conformity does not define the true faith.*

He had been taught in the Catholic schools a correct but lifeless dogmatic doctrine. / *He openly said in a Jesuit school that he had come there „to throw stones in stagnant waters and to cause ripples in that too quiet lake"*¹⁰⁵.

¹⁰³ K. Rahner, *SW 22/2*, (2008), p. 310.

¹⁰⁴ See H. Vorgrimler, *Karl Rahner verstehen...*, p. 112.

¹⁰⁵ B. Sesboüé, *Karl Rahner*, p. 32.

He lived in a Church dominated by an “exorbitant Roman centralism”¹⁰⁶. / *He proclaimed that in the Roman Catholic Church of the future there will be no such centralism.*

He was told in 1870 that the Pope was infallible, dogmatically speaking. / *He said that papal infallibility had acquired an excessive credit and allowed an absolutist style of church government that is not identical with its being*¹⁰⁷.

Although he wrote and defended the primacy and papal infallibility, / *He confessed, however, that if he had read to Lord Christ the decisions of the First Vatican Council, “He would have probably wondered” and „would not have understood a thing”*¹⁰⁸.

He lived in a triumphalist Church, where the Christians were in the majority. / *He announced that the Church of the future will live in the “Diaspora situation”, as a “little flock” in an increasingly secularized world*¹⁰⁹.

He served in a Church that had given up diaconate. / *He had a significant contribution to the restoration of the diaconate.*

He learned in a theological school that was repugnant to science. / *He designed a transcendental Christology within the framework offered by the evolutionary vision on life and was always in dialogue with science.*

He permanently heard talks about the papal-monarchical and hierarchical dimension of the Church. / *He spoke of the Church “democratization” by emphasizing the freedom of expression and the charismatic and dynamic element.*

He had been told that the Church was holy and without blemish. / *He said that in its human dimension, the Church is of the sinners and even sinful.*

¹⁰⁶ J. Ratzinger, Despre ecleziologia Constituției „Lumen Gentium”, p. 20.

¹⁰⁷ P. Imhof, H. Bialowons (eds.), *Karl Rahner im Gespräch*, Bd. I, p. 187.

¹⁰⁸ Ibidem, p. 191.

¹⁰⁹ See K. Rahner, *SW* 10, (2003), pp. 264-266.

He lived in a Roman Church that attached particular importance to the Pope, to the universal Church and hierarchy. / *He claimed the revival of the local Church, of the episcopate and the laity.*