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MODERN SPIRITUAL MASTERS SERIES

KARL
RAHNER

Spiritual Writings



Edited with an Introduction by

PHILIP ENDEAN

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God and Human Experience



“I encountered God; I experienced God’s own self.” This was the insistent, passionate refrain of an extraordinary piece of writing published by Rahner in 1978. Rahner was here adopting the persona of Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556), founder of the Society of Jesus, speaking from heaven to one of his modern followers. Nevertheless, he was really expressing his own central convictions. In an interview shortly before his death he confirmed that this piece could be seen as his “spiritual testament— if one may use such sentimental terms.”¹

*Rahner here reads the life of Ignatius in terms of his own theology. For Rahner, Ignatius discovered a dimension of the gospel message that had never previously been articulated clearly, and the book entitled *Spiritual Exercises* represented Ignatius’s attempt at enabling others to make the same discovery for themselves. Rahner presents Ignatius’s conversion experiences, on his sickbed at Loyola and then in the solitude of Manresa, as the unfolding of a potential latent in all human beings: the capacity to find God’s own self in experience. This reality of God is communicated in what theology calls grace and invites us to a*

1. *Bekenntnisse: Rückblick auf 80 Jahre*, ed. Georg Sporschill (Vienna: Herold, 1984), 58.

total trustful surrender of our own being — a surrender most obviously apparent in how we regard our own inevitable death.

The frustration Ignatius experienced at the hands of the Inquisition in Spain led him to study liberal arts and theology in Paris, an experience that for Rahner underlines the ecclesiastical tensions implicit in how Ignatius understood human experience of God. Such experience at once fosters a closer relationship with the Church, and yet also relativizes its authority; for us, nearly half a millennium later, the Ignatian experience of God can help us see the present decline in the Church's external prestige and influence not as disaster but as purification.

ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

The Immediate Experience of God

As you know, I wanted — as I used to say then — to “help souls”: in other words, to say something to people about God and God's grace, and about Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen one, that would open up and redeem their freedom into God's. I wanted to say this just as it had always been said in the Church, and yet I thought — and this opinion was true — that I could say what was old in a new way. Why? I was convinced that I had encountered God, at first incipiently during my sickness at Loyola and then decisively during my time as a hermit at Manresa; and I wanted to communicate such experience to others as best one could.

When I make this sort of claim to have experienced God immediately, this assertion does not need to be linked to a theological disquisition on the essence of this kind of immediate experience of God. Nor do I want to talk about all the phenomena that accompany such experiences — phenomena that of course have their own histories and their own distinctive

characteristics. I'm not talking about pictorial visions, symbols, words heard; I'm not talking about the gift of tears and the like. I'm just saying that I experienced God, the nameless and unsearchable one, silent yet near, in the Trinity that is His turning to me. I have also experienced God — and indeed principally — beyond all pictorial imagining. God, who, when He comes to us out of His own self in grace, just cannot be mistaken for anything else.

Such a conviction perhaps sounds innocuous in your pious trade, working as it does with the most elevated words available. But fundamentally it is outrageous: outrageous for me from where I am, in the past-all-graspness² of God that is experienced here in a quite different way again; outrageous for the godlessness of your own time, a godlessness that is actually in the end only doing away with the idols — idols that the previous age, with an innocence that was at the same time appalling, equated with the ineffable God. Why shouldn't I say that this godlessness extends right into the Church? After all, the Church throughout its history, in union with the crucified one, is meant to be what happens when the gods are abolished.

Were you never actually shocked by what I said in my *Reminiscences*: that my mysticism had given me such certainty in my faith that it would remain unshaken even were there no Holy Scripture?³ Wouldn't it be easy enough here to make accusations of subjectivist mysticism, and of disloyalty to the Church? For me, actually, it wasn't so surprising that people in Alcalá, Salamanca, and elsewhere suspected me of being an illuminist,

2. *Unbegreiflich* and its cognates are generally translated in this selection with expressions centered on "past all grasp." Rahner is drawing on the vocabulary here of the German mystics; it seems appropriate for an English translator to use a phrase of Hopkins: "past all/Grasp God" — ("The Wreck of the *Deutschland*," stanza 32).

3. Ignatius, *Reminiscences* (Autobiography), n. 28: "if there weren't Scripture to teach us these matters of the faith, he would be resolved to die for them solely on the basis of what he has seen."

or *alumbrado*. I really encountered God, the true and living one, the one who merits this name that destroys all names. Whether you call this kind of experience mysticism or something else doesn't matter here. Your theologians might like to speculate how it can be somehow explained in human concepts that something like this is possible at all. Why such immediacy doesn't take away a relationship to Jesus and hence to the Church is something I'll talk about later.

But first: I encountered God; I experienced God's self. Even then, I could already distinguish between God's self and the words, the images, the particular limited experiences that somehow point to God. This experience of mine obviously had its own history. It began in a small and modest way. I spoke and wrote about it in a way that now I too, obviously, find endearingly childish, and that conveys what is really meant only very indirectly and from a distance. But the truth remains: from Manresa onward I experienced in increasing measure and ever more purely the modeless⁴ past-all-graspness of God.

[...]⁵

Godself. Godself I experienced — not human words about God. God, and the sovereign freedom that is proper to God, the freedom that can only be experienced as coming from God, not from the intersection of earthly realities and calculations. [...] That's what it was, I say. Indeed, I would say this: you can have the same experience too, if you allow your skepticism — driven as it is by an underlying atheism — about such a claim to reach its limit, not just in eloquently expressed theory but also in actual bitter experience. For then something happens. Death, for all that we carry on living biologically, is experienced as *either* a radical hope *or* as absolute despair. And in this moment, God

4. Another technical term from German mysticism: God is beyond all categories of being.

5. Ellipses enclosed in brackets represent the editor's omissions; those without brackets represent ellipses in the original.

offers God's own self. (No wonder I stood just at the edge of suicide at Manresa.)⁶

A Pedagogy toward a Distinctive, Personal Experience

This experience may be grace, but that does not mean that anyone is in principle excluded from it. Of that I was just convinced. I certainly didn't think that the grace of Manresa in my subsequent life up to the loneliness of my death, when I was quite on my own,⁷ was a special privilege for a chosen, elite individual. That was why I gave Exercises whenever this kind of offer of spiritual help looked as if it might be accepted. I even gave Exercises before I'd studied your theology and had managed with some effort (I laugh) a master's degree from Paris. And also before I had received priestly and sacramental power from the Church. And why not? The director of the Exercises (as you called him or her later) is not, if you bear in mind what these Exercises are ultimately about, passing on the word of the Church as such in an official fashion — for all that these Exercises are linked to the Church. They are just giving (when they can) support from a distance, very circumspectly, so that God and humanity can really meet immediately. The first companions I had can only be described as very varied in their gift for this; and before Paris all those I wanted to win for my plans through the Exercises ran away even from me. I put the question again. Is it so obvious that something like this exists, legitimately exists? Was it obvious for the church culture

6. Ignatius, *Reminiscences*, n. 24: "there often used to come over him, with great impetus, temptations to throw himself out of a large opening that the room he was in had."

7. Hugo Rahner had written a striking meditation on the fact that Ignatius died alone, without the sacraments of the dying: "The Death of Ignatius: 1556" (1956), in *Ignatius: The Man and the Priest*, trans. John V. Coyne (Rome: CIS, 1982), 107–23.

of my time? Is it obvious for the atheism of yours? Obvious enough for it not to have been rejected in the old days as an anti-Church subjectivism and in your modernity as illusion and ideology?

In Paris I added the Rules for Thinking with the Church to the Exercises. I contested successfully all the canonical processes that people kept burdening me with. I subjected my work and that of my companions directly to the wishes of the pope. About this I must speak more fully later. But the truth remains: God is able and willing to deal immediately with His creature; the fact that this occurs is something that human beings can experience happening; they can apprehend the sovereign disposing of God's freedom over their lives and appropriate it—a disposing that objective argument “from below” cannot predict as a law of human reason, neither philosophically, theologically, nor arguing from experience.

Ignatian Spirituality

This quite simple-minded, and yet in fact quite outrageous conviction seems to me (together with what I'm going to talk about) the heart of what you tend to call my spirituality. If we look at it in terms of the history of church devotion, is it old or new? Obvious or shocking? Does it mark the beginning of “modernity” in the Church? Does it perhaps have more in common with the foundational experiences of Luther and Descartes than you Jesuits for centuries have wanted to admit? Is it something that is going to recede again from the Church of today and tomorrow, a Church in which, almost, people can no longer bear silent solitude before God and instead seek to flee into an ecclesiastical collectivity— even though in fact a Church community can only be built up from spiritually aware people who have really met God, not from those who use the Church in order ultimately to have nothing to do with God and God's free

past-all-graspness? My friend, for me questions like this have now ceased, and therefore need no answer. Where I am now, I am no prophet of the Church's future history. But you must ask yourselves these questions, and answer them, at once in clear theology and in decisions about your own history.

The fact, however, remains: humanity can experience God's own self. And your pastoral care must have this goal in sight always, at every step, remorselessly. If you just fill up the storehouses of people's consciousnesses with your theology, however learned and up-to-date it is, in a way that ultimately engenders nothing but a fearful torrent of words; if you just train people for devotion to the Church, as enthusiastic subjects of the ecclesiastical establishment; if you just make the people in the Church obedient subjects of a distant God represented by an ecclesiastical hierarchy; if you don't help people get beyond all this; if you don't help them finally to abandon all tangible assurances and isolated insights and go with confidence into that past-all-graspness where there are no more paths, accomplishing this in a love and joy beyond measure, first in life's situations of ultimate, inescapable terror, and then — radically and ultimately — also in death, in company with the Jesus who died in Godforsakenness — if you don't do this, then, in what you call your pastoral care and missionary vocation, you'll have either forgotten or betrayed my "spirituality."

All human beings are sinners and short-sighted. Not infrequently, therefore, you Jesuits have, in my opinion, sinned through such forgetfulness and betrayal. Not infrequently, you have defended the Church as if it were the ultimate, as if ultimately it were not, where it is true to its own essence, an event — an event of human beings giving themselves to God, and in the end no longer needing to know what they are doing. For God is indeed the mystery past all grasp, and only as such can be our goal and our blessedness.

I should now say more expressly — particularly for you repressed, covert atheists of today — how a person can meet God immediately like this, up to the full development of this experience, where God then meets a person in everything, and not just in special “mystical” moments, and when everything, without getting submerged, becomes transparent toward God. I also really need to talk about situations that are particularly helpful for fostering such experiences (i.e., when such experiences are had clearly for the first time). In your time, these do not necessarily have to look like what I tried to set up through the hints in my Exercises, even though I’m also convinced that these Exercises in your time too, taken pretty literally, can still be more successful than some fashionable “improved versions” that people here and there put forward. I also need to make it clearer that the awakening of such divine experience is not in fact indoctrination with something previously not present in the human person, but rather a more explicit self-appropriation, the free acceptance of a reality of the human constitution that is always there, normally buried and repressed, but nevertheless there inevitably. Its name is grace, and God’s own self is there, immediately.

Perhaps I need to tell you (this is a funny business) that you have no need to run off like people desperately thirsty to Eastern sources of meditation, as if the sources of living water were no longer to be found among us — though neither may you say in your arrogance that it is only human wisdom about the depth of things that can come from these sources, not the real grace of God. But I can’t talk further about all that now. What is actually at stake in the experience that I’m talking about is the heart — the heart that surrenders itself in faith and hope, and that loves its neighbor.

— “Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit,” 11–15

Rahner's late spiritual writing draws on ideas he developed at the very beginning of his career. Encounters with Silence is a collection of prayers initially published in a magazine for Austrian priests in 1937; they appeared as a book as a means of meeting the losses anticipated by the publishers of Rahner's failed philosophical dissertation, Spirit in the World. In one of the prayers, "God of Knowledge," Rahner writes movingly of God's direct presence within himself even as a small baby. "Your Word" — the word that is Christ — "has become my experience."

GOD'S WORD AND A BABY'S EXPERIENCE

Thanks be to your mercy, you infinite God, that I don't just know *about* you with concepts and words, but have experienced *you*, lived *you*, suffered *you*. Because the first and last experience of my life is you. Yes, really you yourself, not the concept of you, not your name that we give you. For you have come over me in the water and the Spirit of baptism. Then there was nothing that I thought out or excogitated about you. Then my reason with its flip cleverness was still silent. Then you became, without asking me, the fate of my heart. You took hold of me — it wasn't that I "comprehended" you;⁸ you transformed my being right down to its ultimate roots and origins, you made me a sharer in your being and life, you gave yourself to me — you yourself, not just a distant, fuzzy report about you in human words.

So I can never forget you because you have become the most intimate center of my being. If you are living in me, it is not just pale and empty words about anything and everything that haunt my spirit, which, in their profusion and confusion only

8. Du hast mich ergriffen — nicht ich dich "begriffen."

fuddle my heart and make my mind tired. In baptism, you, Father, have spoken your Word into my being through and through, the Word that was before all things, more real than they, the Word in which alone all reality and all life first comes to be. . . . This Word, in which alone there is life, has become through your action, God of grace, my experience. [. . .]

Admittedly this Word that, having been born consubstantially from your heart, has been spoken into my heart — admittedly this Word still needs to be interpreted for me by the external word that is appropriated in faith through hearing. As yet your living Word is dark for me; as yet it is only softly, like a distant echo from the utmost depths of my heart into which you have spoken it, that it reverberates into the forefront of my conscious living — the forefront where my knowledge parades itself, the knowledge that brings about discontent and mental exhaustion, the knowledge that becomes nothing more than the bitter experience of being forgotten and deserving to be forgotten, because in itself it will never become union and life. And yet, behind this fatigue and mental exhaustion another “knowledge” in me is already, now, grace-filled reality: your Word and your eternal light.

— “God of Knowledge,” in *Encounters with Silence*, 30–32

When Rahner’s Ignatius says that he encountered God, he is not, ultimately, reporting some privileged particular experience of encounter, but rather an “experiential discovery that humanity is always in a state of having already encountered God, and continues to encounter God.” Rahner is locating the holy in human experience as a whole. Two points are important here. First, Rahner is insisting that God’s self in grace is present throughout creation. Jesus, the Church, and Christian tradition obviously have a particular importance, but they are not the only places where God’s grace can be found. This conviction has far-reaching theological and practical implications,

and we will explore these in later chapters of this book. Second, Rahner is challenging a widespread tendency for Christians to regard the holy as somehow distant from us. Because this tendency is so rampant, Rahner needs to challenge it by finding a new way of speaking, but the message is as old as the Hebrew Scriptures:

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. (Deut. 30:11–14)

The remaining passages in this chapter illustrate how Rahner's vision leads him to challenge some rooted Christian habits. The next, from another prayer in Encounters with Silence, speaks of how God is to be found not in special practices, but in daily routine: our life feels distant from God, not because God is distant, but because our hearts need to be awakened and converted.

GOD OF MY DAILY DRUDGE⁹

I should like to bring my daily drudge before you, O Lord — the long hours and days crammed with everything else but you. Look at this daily drudge, my gentle God, you who are merciful to us men and women for whom daily drudge is virtually all we are. Look at my soul, which is virtually nothing but a street on

9. This word is the general translation adopted for *Alltag* — which is more negative than "everyday."

which the world's baggage-cart rolls along with its innumerable trivialities, with its gossip and fuss, with its nosiness and empty pretension. In face of you and your incorruptible truth, isn't my soul like a market, where junk dealers from every direction come together and sell the wretched riches of this world, a market where I, and indeed the world and his wife, are spreading sheer nothings in permanent, benumbing restlessness? [...]

But how am I meant to convert this daily drudge of my neediness, how am I to convert myself to the one thing needful that you are? How am I supposed to get away from daily drudge? Isn't it you who has pushed me into this daily drudge. When I first began to realize that my true life, ordered to you, mustn't suffocate in the daily drudge, wasn't I already lost amid the world and within my daily drudge? Isn't it as a human being that you have made me? [...]

And look, my God, if I did want to run away from my daily drudge, if I did want to become a Carthusian so as to have nothing else to do but remain in silent adoration before your holy face, would I then really be raised beyond the daily drudge? When I think of the hours that I spend at your altar or saying your Church's office, then I realize that it's not worldly business that make my days a drudge, but me — I can change even these sacred actions into hours of drudgery. It's *me* who makes my days drudgery, not the other way round. And thus I realize that if there can ever be a way for me to you, then it leads through my daily drudge. To get away to you without my daily drudge is something I could do only if, in this holy escape, I could leave myself behind.

But is there a route through the drudge to you? Doesn't this kind of route lead me ever further away from you, ever deeper into the noisy void of busyness, where you, silent God, do not have your dwelling? I am well aware that eventually we get fed up with the business that fills our lives and our hearts. I am well aware of the tiredness of life that philosophers talk about, and

of the sense of satiety that your word tells us was your patriarchs' final experience. I am well aware that this will be more and more my lot, and indeed that drudgery becomes in the end of its own accord a massive depression about life in general. But surely pagans experience this as well? Can we really say we have arrived in your presence when the daily drudge finally shows its true colors, when it proclaims that all is vanity and a chasing after wind, when I have the same experience as your preacher in Ecclesiastes? Is it in this simple sense that daily drudge is the way to you? Or isn't this rather the drudge's final victory, when a burnt out heart ends up seeing the things of its own daily drudge as all the same, things that can so easily otherwise help people to overcome the heart's boredom and monotony? Is it really the case that a tired and disappointed heart is closer to you than a fresh and joyful one?

So then, where are you to be found, if the enjoyment of the everyday makes us forget you, and if the disappointments of the everyday have not yet found you? Indeed when they've made the heart so bitter and sick that it's even less able to find you? My God, if we can lose you in everything — if neither prayer, nor a sacred celebration, nor the silence of the cloister, nor disillusionment about everything in general can of themselves forestall this danger, then even these holy, non-everyday things still belong to the daily drudge. Indeed, it's not that the daily round is a part of my life, or even the largest part of my life. It's always daily drudge, everything is daily drudge, because everything can ruin for me the one reality that is necessary, and deprive me of it: the reality that is you, my God.

But — if there is nowhere where you have given me a place to which we can just flee away in order to find you, and if everything can be the loss of you, the One, then I must also be able to find you in everything. Otherwise, humanity couldn't find you at all — humanity that cannot exist without you. Therefore I

must seek you in everything. Each day is daily drudge, *and* each day is your day, the hour of your grace.

So, my God, I come to understand again what in fact I've known for ages. What my mind has so often told me is now coming to life again in my heart. But what's the point of the mind's truth if it isn't also the life of the heart? I must keep on taking out the little note I made many years ago, copied out of Ruusbroec, and reading it again, since the heart is also continually taking it on board. I'm always consoled to read how this spiritual man imagined his life; and the fact that I still love these words after so much daily drudge in my life is like a promise that you will eventually bless my daily drudge too.

God comes without cease in us, with intermediary and without intermediary, and demands of us enjoyment and activity — and demanding that they should not constrain, but confirm each other. Thus inward persons possess their life in these two modes: rest and activity. And they are present wholly and undividedly in both. For they are completely in God — they are resting in enjoyment — and they are completely in themselves — they are serving in loving activity. And at all times they are charged and urged by God to be renewing both, rest and activity. This is what it is for a human person to be just, to be on the way to God with inward love and constant activity. Persons move into God through their enjoying desire in eternal rest. And they remain in God, yet nevertheless move out to all creatures in all-embracing love, in virtues and in justice. And this is the highest stage of the interior life. All those who don't have rest and activity as one reality have not yet reached this justice. This just person cannot be constrained through their recollection, since they turn inward both in enjoyment and in activity. Rather, they are like a two-sided mirror, picking up images on both sides. For with

the highest part of their spirit, people receive God together with all His gifts; and with the lower parts, they pick up bodily images through the senses. . . .¹⁰

I must live out the daily drudge and the day that is yours as *one* reality. As I turn outward to the world, I must turn inward toward you, and possess you, the only One, in everything. But how does my daily drudge become the day that is yours? My God, only through you. Only through you can I be an “inward” person. Only through you am I with you within myself even as I am turning outward in order to be among things. Neither *Angst* nor nothingness nor death free me from being lost in the things of the world — to use ideas from modern philosophy — but only your love, love for you, you who are the goal drawing all things, you who satisfy, you who are sufficient to yourself. Your love, my infinite God, the love for you that passes through their heart and extends out beyond them into your infinite expanses, your love that can still take in everything that is lost as the song of praise to your infinity. For you, all multiplicity is one; all that is dispersed is gathered into you; everything outside becomes in your love something still interior. In your love, all turning outward to the daily drudge becomes a retreat into your unity, which is eternal life.

But this love that lets the daily drudge be the daily drudge and yet transforms it into a day of recollection with you — this love only you can give me. What then am I to say to you now, as I am bringing myself, the bedrugged, into your presence? I can only stammer a request for your most commonplace of gifts, which is also your greatest: the gift of your love. Touch my heart with your grace. Let me, as I grasp after the things of

10. Ruusbroec, *Spiritual Espousals*, b 1932–1960. Rahner has cut the text. The translation here comes from Rahner’s German rather than the middle Dutch original. A translation from the original can be found in Jan van Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals*, trans. Helen Rolfson (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1995), 107.

this world in joy or in pain grasp and love *you* through them, the primordial ground of them all. You who are love, give me love, give me yourself, so that all my days may eventually flow into the one day of your eternal life.

— “God of My Daily Routine,”
in *Encounters with Silence*, 45–52

Another way in which we are tempted to confine the holy is by identifying it with the soul, and hence despising the body. The passage that follows was written by Rahner in the form of a sermon by the medieval German mystic Johannes Tauler: Rahner used to tease his Innsbruck students by reading it out during a lecture on grace, and then challenging them to guess the author. Rahner here insists on what we would now call a holistic spirituality of the body. As in the prayer about the daily drudge, Rahner insists that the problem of sin is not to be resolved by escape from our humanness or by marginalizing some aspect of our daily existence. Rather, we have to rely on God’s healing power, a power that works through the whole of our complex reality, through our bodies as well as through our souls and spirits.

A SPIRITUAL DISCOURSE ON DESIRE AND CONCUPISCENCE in the Style of Master Johannes Tauler

St. Paul begins and speaks thus: “The flesh desires against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh.” This is a dark word, and many people have not grasped it rightly — and so it has become a problem for them. They’ve thought: “One must hate the body, because it’s said here that the flesh kicks against the spirit.” Mark what I say, and I speak it with confidence, even if

one without understanding believes I am contradicting St. Paul. This is what I say to you:

You must love the body. Why am I saying “body”? You must love yourselves. But that always includes the body. When, therefore, I say you must love the body, I am not thereby saying, “You must love yourself and then in addition yet another thing, something which is as such not part of you.” What I’m saying, rather, is a command for only the one thing: love yourselves just as God, in His pure wisdom and fathomless love, has willed to create you, namely, as human beings. See, my children, you are always fully involved in everything that occurs in you, both outwardly and inwardly. As you rejoice in God our Savior, so your heart and your flesh rejoice, as the prophet says. Do not believe the secret heretics, who in their wickedness or ignorance speak to you like this: “If you want to find your God, then you must go far away from your body.” Wickedness and ignorance! Hasn’t the Word become flesh, then? Isn’t that the reason why she who carried him in her motherly womb is blessed among women? Wasn’t this why she received him in her pure heart?

Now, of course, our flesh can certainly, on its pilgrim way to our God, become dry, as the psalmist says. But when that happens, it doesn’t mean that our spirit is enraptured. No — both are yearning, the body and the spirit, as in a purgatory for the waters of grace. Again I say — and this is the other side of the coin — as long as you are burning with sinful passion, don’t say, “This is my body, and my spirit has nothing to do with it.” That’s what the covert heretics of our day say. No, you yourselves with body and spirit have given occasion to evil desires, and God will visit you, body and soul together, with His judgment.

But then, against my word, you say this within your heart: “I’ve not provided any occasion for it, and yet it has come into me. I haven’t lit nor fanned the fire, and yet sinful lust burns

in me.” You’re right. But understand rightly what you are saying. When this kind of contradiction happens in you, it’s not that the body is at war with the spirit, but rather that your whole humanity is divided against itself, and at odds. Hear what St. Augustine says: “It is not the flesh, that you [he is praying to God] have created, but the corruption, the pressures and temptations of the flesh that are a prison for me” (*Ennarationes in Psalmos*, 141:17). So speaks the holy doctor. And I say in addition: “Don’t the pressures and temptations affect body and spirit alike? Yes, the spirit as well?” So then, the body is divided from the body and at war with itself, but also the soul from the soul. The whole man is divided in two, ever since we all sinned in Adam. See, for him everything was still one and undivided. When he was good, he was good with all his powers of body and spirit in pure unity. When he was evil, he was evil in just the same way, in other words completely. His whole essence and all his powers spoke in him: *non serviam* — I won’t be a servant of God. And therefore his sin was greater than all sins, and nothing else like it has ever been heard of in this sinful world.

But the faculty with which God endowed Adam in Paradise is called by the masters the gift of integrity. This is a power and a faculty that make a person skilful and nimble in doing the good and in desiring God — doing this in a manner so powerful and integrated that they do what they do, they love and serve God, without division, doubt, or doubleness. Nothing in them remains dark; nothing remains that is not inflamed by the bright fire of their love; no desire still resists, sluggishly and maliciously, the design of such integrated love.

Ah, beloved brother: just as Adam was once endowed inwardly, so are we once again to become. We are not yet like this. For in us the flesh still desires against the spirit, as St. Paul says (and now you grasp what he means by this). But there already burns in the innermost citadel of our spirit the light that

the Holy Spirit has inflamed. And in as much as good and honest persons, amid all pressure and temptation, remain true all their life long, so they will become ever more undivided and integrated in body and soul in the love and service of God, just as it was for Adam. Their spirit and flesh will bear in peace the sweet yoke of the Lord and rejoice in the Savior.

Hear this too, I dare to say: were persons to become so integrated and undivided in themselves as Adam was, and therefore have their love and service fixed not on themselves but on God, such persons could not but die the blessed death that Mary did (which is no death at all). And they could beget many children of grace, as Adam could have done. So then, let us become again one and integrated in the inner person. The more integrated we are in ourselves, the more we are at one with God, who is nothing but pure unity, far beyond all division or dispersion. May our Lord, who is mighty and good, grant us to be capable of this. Amen.

— *Sehnsucht nach dem geheimnisvollen Gott*, 82–85

To be human is to change, to be moving. Given what philosophy tells us of God's unchangeableness, we can easily imagine that to become holy is to become a radically different sort of being, a changeless being. In the next passage, from a whimsical yet profound collection first published in 1964 and called Everyday Things, Rahner challenges this idea. To be human is to be on the move; and we encounter God only because God moves toward us in the Word. Indeed God is the secret principle behind even our constant movement: not only the goal but also the way.

ON MOVEMENT

Movement is one of the most everyday things in our daily round. We only think about it when we can't move any more,

when we're shut in or paralyzed. Then we suddenly experience being able to move as a grace and a miracle. We're not plants, tied down to just one setting determined for us; we search out our setting for ourselves, we change it, we make a choice — to move. And as we change, we experience ourselves as beings who change ourselves, as searchers, as those who are still on the way. We recognize that we want to move toward a goal, and that we don't want to wander into a mere vacuum. When we are moving toward something difficult and unavoidable, we still experience ourselves as free, even if we can only move toward accepting it as something imposed.

We talk about a way of life, and the first description of Christians was as “those who belonged to the way” (Acts 9:2). When Scripture tells us that we are not to be hearers of the word but also doers of the word, it is thereby also saying that we don't just live in the Spirit, but should move in the Spirit. We talk about the *course* of events, from the good *outcome* of an undertaking, about the *approach* to understanding, of how a deceitful person *goes behind one's back*, of something happening as an *occurrence* (from the Latin for “runs across”), of a change as a *transition*, of the end as a *passing away*. A king *ascends* to a throne; our life is a *pilgrimage*; history *moves forward*; something we understand we call *accessible*; a decision can appear as a *step*. Both in the sacred and the secular spheres, great celebrations are marked by processions and parades.

These few, quite tiny indications are enough to show how we are constantly interpreting our whole life in terms of the utterly basic experience of everyday movement. We move, and this simple physiological movement is already enough to say that we have here no abiding city, that we are on the way, that our real arrival is still ahead of us, that we are still seeking the goal, that we are really pilgrims, wanderers between two worlds, humanity in transition, moved and being moved, steering a movement already imposed on us, and also discovering,

as we plan our moves, that we don't always end up where we planned to.

In the simplest act of movement — for acts presuppose knowledge and freedom — what it is to be human is in fact fully present, and we are faced with our own existence. A Christian's faith reveals what the goal of this existence is and promises that it is coming. We exist as an unending movement, conscious of itself and of its unfinishedness, a movement that searches, and that believes it finds, because (and again we cannot speak otherwise) God's own self *comes* in the descent and return of the Lord, who is our future to come.

We move; we cannot but be seeking. But the Real and the Ultimate is coming to us, and seeking us out — obviously only as we are moving, as we are coming-toward. And when the time comes that we have found — found because we have been found — we will discover that our very coming-toward was already being carried (this is what we call grace) by the power of the movement that is coming upon us, by God's movement toward us.

— *Everyday Things*, 9–11

As the previous passage shows through its discussion of “movement,” a term with roots in Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, Rahner’s spirituality is often cast in an idiom influenced by his philosophy. We can, obviously, explain the changing reality of our being human in any number of ways: through history, psychology, genetics, sociology, ethnography, and so on. Whenever we do this, however, we have a consciousness of something more: a consciousness that we are doing this, a consciousness of self that somehow transcends all these explanations (Rahner calls this level of self-awareness simply “transcendence”). Thus we are in the world, and the product of indefinitely many causal forces; equally, we are not confined to the world in the way a material object is. Our awareness transcends the networks of causality that make us what we are, and involves a permanent

questioning about what makes things be — a question whose answer we can never grasp, but can nevertheless call “God.” Rahner’s spiritual vision depends primarily on Christian revelation — a revelation that Rahner interprets as saying that God is not simply a distant “term of transcendence,” but rather one who, without ceasing to be wholly Other, wholly beyond our comprehension, has come near to us, and through Christ and the Spirit invested himself in us.

The next passage comes from a set of retreat conferences that Rahner gave to students at Innsbruck immediately before their ordination to the priesthood. It reflects on the “Contemplation to Attain Love,” which Ignatius puts at the end of his Spiritual Exercises, in particular on why it is that we can “find God in all things” and “in all things love and serve the Divine Majesty.” Christianity’s talk of human beings in intimacy with God makes sense only as a consequence of the Incarnation: the assertion that one who is of our flesh is also divine. It follows that we must be careful how we understand the idea of the mind and heart ascending to God. For God’s own self in Christ is permanently present to the lost of this world, and we find union with God, therefore, primarily through sharing in his self-emptying descent. It is worth noting that one of the students who first heard this retreat conference was Ignacio Ellacuría, the distinguished philosopher who was to be martyred in El Salvador in 1989.

LOVE

Theologically it is all well and good that we talk of creatures returning to God. Quite true though this is, there is still something more to be said. The reason we can really find God is that God has not just created the world — rather, God’s own self — for all that God is the God of inaccessible light — has, in

His eternal Word, eternally descended into the world. In other words, we find God because God, by Himself with His own reality “descending,” has lost himself as love into His creation, never again to leave it.

Always remember that it is probably — to put it carefully — only in and through the Incarnation of the Word that the immediacy of the beatific vision is possible. For, if that were not the case, how could the sheer immediacy of the vision, its lack of anything to mediate it, not be the sort of immediacy that would just burn up the whole creature as it came to know. Don't we necessarily vanish to the extent that we draw near to God? If that's not so, why can we settle ourselves, so to speak, in the absolute, infinite, incomprehensible, searing light of God's own self — we who are creatures? How come that this creature, which is radically finite, is yet *capax infiniti*, itself receptive to the infinite as such? Of course we know that God is past all grasp, infinite mystery — but to *live* and *experience* God in His past-all-graspness, as this immediacy: how can anything like this occur at all?

In the last analysis, a minimal condition for this to be possible is that God as such, without ceasing to be God, can make a gift of self to the world. This means, again as a minimal condition, that the Incarnation of the eternal Word amounts to God becoming worldly, God stepping out of Godself as love — the fundamental truth of God's own self, of what God's own self actually does, of what God's own self can do. But this means that immediate love for God, love so immediate that God in God's own life and glory becomes the content of our creaturely lives — that love is possible only because God has descended into the world. From that it follows that our “ascending” love to God is always a participation in God's descent to the world.

If love, therefore, is possible only with and within the self-emptying of divine love into the world, and if this is the real structure of our love for God, than all this is possible only

through the kingdom of Christ, in discipleship of Christ, who is precisely the Word who descends into the world. It can only be a participation in his fate, and hence, specifically, also only a participation in his passion; it can only be his love, his love that must go right through the Third Week.¹¹ But if such love is a participation in the movement of divine love into the world in Christ, then for this reason it must be a love of God within the world and within the Church. For this reason it becomes — as we are told in the meditations on love — service.

This does not mean simply that we have to prove our love in a crude sense — as if God was able to read off the truth and reality of our attitude only from what we did exteriorly and was unable also to look into our hearts. It is rather that our love is, as Ignatius says,¹² essentially our appropriation of this divine love (for, of course, this love of ours for God is the yes to his love for us). But this love of God is precisely the descending love, the love that communicates itself to the world, the love that, as it were, loses itself in the world, the love that brings about the becoming-flesh of the Word, the love that means the abiding of the eternal Word in his creature, and that therefore also means a divinized world and Church.

But whoever is participating in the action of the divine love for us, this action of descent into the world — participating because their own love is appropriating this divine love — must therefore be serving: they must be seeking to make their love real in this objective way, in the world. Then this service is not some external proof of something that, in itself, is independent of this proof; rather, this love is service-with-God-in-descent, descent into the otherness, the lostness, the sinfulness of this world. For this reason, the *amor* of which Ignatius speaks is really in the characteristically New Testament sense *agape*, not

11. The part of the *Spiritual Exercises* devoted to Christ's passion.

12. In the "Contemplation to Attain Love," our prayer of love ("Take, Lord, receive...") is presented as a response to the active, creative love of God.

eros.¹³ It is not an expression of craving poverty, reaching from below to above, but rather a love that has, along with the divine glory and life and strength, already been given. It is only this love that gives the proper theological grounding for this “finding God in all things.”

Why can we find God in all things? Because God — precisely as the eternal glory and vitality that can never be confused with the world — this God as such has made a gift of self to the world. This “seeking and finding God in all things” is not a philosophical truth, nor a spiritualization of the mind’s simply experiencing its transcendence through the necessary mediation of finite objects. Were that so, our task would simply be to transcend, simply to be indifferent. Then we would need, as it were, permanently to be keeping our distance, maintaining a stand-offish attitude to the world, so as to be, as it were, philosophers wanting to find God. Or else we would have to say that we know only indirectly something about God, that we can sense the creator only as we sense His finite gifts and take them to ourselves. God would only ever be the one who was silently worshiped as a distant horizon and from a distance, without anyone actually being able to speak religiously about Him.

But the Christian, who participates in God’s action of descent to the world and of love for this world — a love in which God has accepted the world definitively, for all eternity, as his ownmost reality, as the expression of himself — can, in this love, love with a radicality that would not otherwise be possible or imaginable for a human being. Christians can do this despite all indifference, despite all reserve, despite all crucifying death in Christ. No one can turn themselves so radically in love toward the world as the one who does it in this descent of God’s —

13. Rahner is here picking up on different Greek words meaning “love,” discussed by such authors as Anders Nygren (*Agape and Eros*) and C. S. Lewis (*The Four Loves*). *Eros* is seen as somehow less disinterested, more driven by our own needs, that the Pauline term, *agape*.

God who has, in Jesus Christ, accepted for always and for eternity the flesh of humanity and thus of the world (all, obviously, in its proper place and order).

Therefore this love, as Ignatius describes it, moves out into the world through work and service, just as the Exercises demand of us. The question keeps coming up; we are constantly being called to labor with Christ. This love, therefore, is always looking away from itself. It does not lose self-awareness, but neither is it an awareness marked by sublime spiritual introversion; rather people find their own selves by serving, laboring, going outward — losing oneself in the service of others. Since this love seeks not self but God, and God's world into which God has loved Himself and lost Himself, it can always be transformed by God. Since this love does not seek self, and since therefore this love does not make itself the measure of all things (for it forgets itself in the giving), it can always let God be greater than everything else, greater indeed than itself. Thus it can be and remain reverence, praise and service,¹⁴ a love used as an instrument of service in the redemption of the world. Thus this love knows that closeness to God increases the more the sense of difference grows, and that the paradoxical mystery of our relationship to God is this: that humility and love, distance and closeness, being totally at God's disposal and acting oneself — these grow not in inverse but in direct proportion.

— from “Love,” in *Meditations on Priestly Life*, 270–74

The final extract in this chapter is taken from what seems to be a transcript of a tape-recording made in 1978. Spontaneously, without self-censorship, Rahner is differentiating his own understanding of God's presence in all human experience from other accounts of faith and mysticism. If the mystical is

14. An allusion to Ignatius, *Exercises*, no. 23.

a reality of all human experience, then a theology of the mystical is in the end unconcerned with spectacular phenomena and skeptical about divine “intervention.” It is also radically anti-elitist; the mystical is located not in unusual deeds, but simply in the reality of the self, created by God and sustained by God’s self-giving grace. Once again, Rahner makes reference to Ignatius’s Spiritual Exercises — the recording is roughly contemporary with “Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit.”

THE MYSTICAL: THE WAY OF FAITH TO GOD

Are visionary experiences really what we mean by the mystical and by experience of God, or are they rather phenomena (however much they are to be taken seriously) accompanying a more fundamental kind of experience of God? If we go for the latter, how are we to understand this experience of God? Actually — in my opinion — it’s quite obvious that with Ignatius’s mystical experiences, which lasted even into his later years, this pictorial, visionary stuff was not for him what it was really about, nor could it have been. Persons with a visual imagination can bring themselves — or can be brought by others — to see Jesus in the flesh, painting in the details one way or another. This happens in the Exercises in the so-called Application of the Senses, and to a certain extent you can train yourself in the skill. Whether this is still possible for us today, and what we should make of all this — that’s another question. But, conversely, this also goes to show that the real religious and existential heart of visionary experiences like this is in no way to be sought in these pictorial, visual phenomena. The old, classical mystical theology was well aware of this. When a shining, rosy-cheeked Jesus

appeared to Teresa of Avila, adorned with pearls, this theology used to say that it wasn't actually Jesus coming down from heaven and appearing as he actually is in himself. What's going on here, rather, is that God is bringing about an imaginary reality. Here theology was faced with a simple question: What's happening when Baby Jesus appears to St. Anthony of Padua, given that objectively Baby Jesus has simply ceased to exist? In the end this can only be an imaginary vision; in the end too, the imaginary and pictorial can also be brought about by purely natural means.

With the genuinely mystical, the decisive, central thing is not the imaginative reality: rather something more radical, something deeper is going on in the core of the person — deeper than the things we can more easily describe but that in the end are only imaginative and are thus freighted with all the marks of the visionary's personality. To put it crudely, Jesus hasn't got a heart surrounded by the crown of thorns. When St. Margaret Mary Alacoque nevertheless sees this, and Jesus appears to her showing his heart, then we've clearly got an imaginative vision. The mystics also note that the real and central mystical reality is the miracle that lies *behind* this kind of imaginative thing. If this central reality isn't there, then the imaginative of itself is simply natural and of no religious interest.

Rahner goes on to discuss the great Carmelites Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, and then Ignatius. He alludes to the so-called "Principle and Foundation" of the Spiritual Exercises (no. 23): the statement that humanity is created "for the praise, reverence, and service of God," and hence that all else is of secondary importance. Thus we need to be "indifferent to all created things . . . so that, on our part, we want not health rather than sickness, riches rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, long rather than short life . . . desiring and choosing only

what is most conducive for us to the end for which we are created."

Rahner links this teaching to the claim that Ignatius speaks of a "consolation without object." As an interpretation of Ignatius, this statement is controversial and questionable. Be that as it may, Rahner uses this claim, in combination with his philosophical concept of "transcendence," to make important points about how the mystical is an element simply in the experience of everyday faith, indeed of being human.

... Perhaps we need to see indifference far, far less (this hasn't, I don't think, been done yet at all) as simply a moral task, and still less as a reasoned moral decision, articulated in words, to be indifferent here and now to all things on the face of the earth. Such a decision indicates, naturally, a good intention to be indifferent, but it isn't indifference. It's when individuals, so to speak, set aside the particular realities that make up their existence — at every level of their being and their personality — that indifference begins. In the Principle and Foundation, Ignatius has his eye on this just as a goal. But the full reality is attained only through the whole process of the Weeks of the Exercises. . . . It's the same when I find another person repulsive, with every fiber of my being, and then decide: no, I want to behave kindly toward this person, I want to like this person. This is perhaps a useful resolution; perhaps I'm setting a worthwhile goal. But it's still a long way from the point where my whole being has changed into spontaneous sympathy for this wretch whom, humanly speaking, I've hated up till then.

It's like this with indifference. Putting a distance, existentially withdrawing from the individual reality of my being — this isn't something about which I can just say the word and it's done. It's rather a difficult, slow mystical development. When this at least slowly begins, when there's death, renunciation, when the taken-for-grantedness of the world crumbles in a night of the

senses and of the spirit, it's then that a person slowly — now we can use philosophical language again — senses and experiences what human transcendence oriented to God really is, experiences it as something more than the inevitable condition that makes possible our everyday dealings with the world.

[...] This is the real, mystical, fundamental experience of God. And this account of the matter, of course, evades the basic difficulty: namely, that we can't suppose anymore — or at least can't convincingly show — that God intervenes at a particular point in space and time in the stream of consciousness. Mystical experience is not the product of a divine intervention in space and time. Rather it's the becoming ever more radically self-aware — a process obviously directed by God's providence — of human transcendence as absolute openness to reality as such, to the personal God, to the absolute mystery.

One mustn't think that this understanding of the mystical — as a point where the experience of transcendence becomes self-aware — makes the really mystical experience of God something natural. Quite the contrary: obviously this experience of transcendence is always in fact sustained by God's *self*-imparting. Through what we call the Holy Spirit, grace, the supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and love, this transcendence is radicalized: it becomes something that can really approach God. Through grace, human transcendence ceases to be just what makes everyday intercourse with the world possible; it also ceases to be directed just to an ever-receding goal that we never attain called God. Rather, this transcendence receives a promise from God, in God's gracious, Spirit-laden self-communication, that it will reach this goal. And wherever individuals, — what I'm saying now is basically outrageous — can dare, as wretched creatures, to speak with God in person, tap God on the shoulder as it were and expect that there will be a response, then they're asserting their transcendence as a transcendence radicalized by God's anticipating grace, a grace permanently present

at least in the form of an offer to our freedom, and in which God is experienced “from within,” beyond images. Obviously this experience of God isn’t yet the beatific vision; at that point there’s a qualitatively different immediacy in the encounter with God. Nevertheless, the New Testament itself speaks of grace as the “first fruits of the spirit,” a kind of down payment of the infinitely close and just unsurpassable encounter with God in the “beatific vision.”

What can a person of the future, a young person today, do in order to arrive at this basic experience, this insight? To start with, there will have to be change in the Church’s attitude to the question of how extraordinary the mystical is. Of course there are visions and levitations and insights — even in the mysticism of those who first expressed the Church’s tradition itself — that are evidently not part of the normal mental furniture of the average Christian. Seventy or eighty years ago, there were fierce arguments in the Catholic theology of mysticism as to whether the real essence of the mystical was a special grace, accessible only to particular individuals — one that could be absent even when individuals dedicated themselves, in the language of the time, to the way of perfection and made a lot of progress along it by the exercise of “heroic” virtue. In other words, people argued whether the mystical was an extraordinary way of salvation, intended only for a few, or was invariably, and more or less consciously, an essential element of Christian life and Christian perfection. Our Jesuit, Fr. Poulain, declared that the mystical was something quite extraordinary, not experienced by ordinary mortals. Against him were Dominicans and various theologians who thought differently on this question. I think that a sensible person has to be against Poulain, on biblical grounds and because of the theology of grace and of faith. It’s not that the mystics are one step higher than those who believe; rather, the mystical at its actual theological heart is an intrinsic, essential aspect of faith (not the other way round).

If you think about these things, then you have to say that initiation into Christianity is ultimately initiation into the mystical — to use biblical language, from Galatians for example, initiation into the experience of God’s Spirit. The mystical is not a special event. When Paul says “you foolish Galatians” (Gal. 3:1), he’s taking it for granted that the experience of the Spirit should make it clear to them that they are justified by Jesus Christ and not by the works of the Law. This reference to the experience of the Spirit must also be something that can still exist today.

What answers, however, do we get from exegetes, preachers, teachers about the question of how we experience the Spirit? Even today, we surely need some reasonable account of where and how this experience of the Spirit can be had among us — even if only with difficulty and after a lot of mental rubbish has been cleared out. About a year ago I heard a lecture by a Protestant exegete. He was using biblical language quite naively, talking about the Spirit and the experience of the Spirit in Luke. And he never asked himself the question in this lecture where something like this was to be found among us. I can’t today carry on, just because I’m a follower of Christ, interpreting every vaguely benevolent feeling as an experience of the Spirit.

Nevertheless, a theology of the experience of the Spirit is absolutely necessary, whether or not one develops it as a theology of the mystical. I’ve got to be able to say to people today: it can happen and it does happen, in you — perhaps repressed, unnoticed, perhaps not really accepted by you in existential freedom. But you can have it, and with it you have an experience of God — an experience in which God is present in your consciousness not just because a verbal word about God is there, indoctrinated from outside. Rather something else is there, something more fundamental.

— from “Mystik — Weg des Glaubens zu Gott,”
in *Horizonte der Religiosität*, 19–24