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**Karl Rahner's ecclesiology**  
**An evaluation from the perspective of orthodox theology**  
**Father Dumitru Stăniloae**

**SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS**

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## SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

**Key words:** ecclesiology, Karl Rahner, Church, Roman-Catholic Church, catholic, theology, dialogue, transcendent, transcendental, selfcommunication, selftranscending, anthropology, triadology, christology, grace, "Diaspora situation", "anonymous Christians", event, institution, the Pope, primacy, infallibility, episcopate, local church, universal church, synod, Father Dumitru Stăniloae, orthodox, communion, love.

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### 1. THEME

Two major events made the twentieth century to be considered the "century of the Church": conducting the Second Vatican Synod (event with a significant echo in the other two major Christian denominations) and the emergence of the ecumenical movement. The central topic of the dialogue was and remains Interchristian Church. The Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches not only have met as churches in the bilateral dialogue (since 1980), but also in dialogue about the Church with the wish to become the undivided Church again. This desire also animated the great theologians of both Churches.

Karl Rahner and Father Stăniloae have often been compared and called the greatest theologians of the twentieth century. Both were men of honest and fruitful dialogue and true theologians to their church. This work aims not only to expose the ecclesiology of Karl Rahner in terms of its most relevant issues for the dialogue with the Orthodox world, but in its final part, also an evaluation of this ecclesiology in terms of Father Stăniloae's theology.

Even since my theological studies I have been interested in the Catholic theology. I ended my university studies with a Bachelor's degree thesis in which I evaluated the "Trinitarian doctrine in the New Catholic Catechism". During my academic training in theology, passionate of Father Stăniloae's theology, I read, not without some surprise, that his critical theology regarding Catholicism would become approbatory and even eulogistic for a Catholic theologian: Karl Rahner.

During my studies at the Institute of Oriental Churches in Regensburg, I read the "Portrait" Cardinal Karl Lehmann made to Karl Rahner, reading after which I decided to investigate more closely the theology of this famous Catholic theologian. In a dialogue I had with father Prof. Vasile Răducă later, there appeared the topic I am presenting in this dissertation.

## 2. STRUCTURE

The **introduction** of this paper exposes the many and varied studies on Karl Rahner's ecclesiology published between 1966-2010, so as to reveal the ecclesiology research stage, as well as the special interest aroused by this topic in the theological circles. The perception of Rahner's thinking in the Romanian theology concludes the introductory part of this study.

Part One ("Life's work and work's life of Karl Rahner") widely exhibits the life and work of the famous theologian, his theological unique style - by revealing the complexity of his language and anthropological transcendental method - springs of his thought and the legacy left to theology and contemporary culture. Without understanding the style of Karl Rahner, the access to his complex and complicated thinking is almost blocked. As L. Roberts observed, Rahner's style and method provides the key that opens access to his theology and only together are a true "Sesam, open up". The language of the famous theologian - imbued with Kantian and Heideggerian philosophical terms, particularly the "Teutonic" complex sentence, rich in subordinates, the dense meditation, in "spiral", open simultaneously on several levels - also requests a time for familiarization and initiation. Rahner's style and language then materialized in its anthropological transcendental method. And the method is inseparably united with the content of his theology (K. Lehman). Therefore, Karl Rahner's complex personality is revealed both in his life, work and his style, which is why I chose such a presentation.

The next chapter investigates the sources of Karl Rahner's thinking: the Jesuit Spirituality, Fathers of the Church and spiritual theology, Thomas Aquinas and the neoscholastic theology, Heidegger and modern philosophy. Spirituality, theology and philosophy intertwine in the melting pot of the German theologian's thinking in a similar way to those of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, which is why he was called "a classic of the Catholic theology."

In the next chapter of this first part of the paper, are presented the major theological topics of Rahner's thinking (philosophy, triadology, Christology, anthropology, pneumatology and visio beatifica), topics that extend to a large extent, in ecclesiology and which outline its background.

With the second part of the study ("Essential ecclesiology"), there starts the presentation of Karl Rahner systematic dogmatic ecclesiology. The presentation is

preceded, however, by a "localization" and a description of the content of Rahner's ecclesiological work. "Work's Geography" was conceived as a "Prolegomena", as an initiation into the rich universe of the famous theologian's ecclesiology.

Since the Church has its ultimate foundation in the oikonomic Trinity, which is one with the immanent Trinity in the Jesuit theologian's apprehension, the next chapter of this section shows how life of the Holy Trinity extends in the life of the Church, with emphasis on the conformity between the intratrinitarian processions and the work of the Holy Trinity in the Church. Karl Rahner has the merit of having identified the irrelevance of the transcendent Trinity for the Church life - due to its deist isolation from the world in the scholastic period - and of having accomplished the return to an oikonomic Trinity, which founds and "fills" the Church with its presence and work. By Revelation, "God in His divinity" is present in the Church for the man's salvation. The Church thus becomes the space of the redeeming meeting of the Holy Trinity and the man. This "triadologic rotary" of Rahner was achieved by the identification of the oikonomic Trinity with the immanent Trinity, the Trinity in Itself with the Trinity for us.

In Church, the Trinity is shared to us both in the Son and in the Holy Spirit, as well as in the uncreated divine grace. Father offers himself to us in the Son as absolute and eschatological truth Son and as Love in the Spirit. To God's self sharing (*Selbstmitteilung Gottes*), man is called to answer by his own self-dedication (*Selbsgegebenheit*) to become, thereby, an accessory to the life of the Holy Trinity.

According to the order of divine processions, that are its ontological basis, the Church is equally the presence of God's Truth in the Son and the presence of His Love in the Holy Ghost. This presence of God in Truth and Love founds the Church, but also brings it to self-fulfillment (*Selbsvollzug der Kirche*). In the fulfillment work of the Church, Truth and Love work together, although in a specific way, for with God there is no opposition between truth and mercy.

In the following two subsections, the Church is shown both in its historical dimension as well as in its eschatological dimension.

Church not only lives in history, but it itself is history. And since it has a history, the Church lives also a permanent existential identity and a accomplishing evolution in its human constitution. Church's self-accomplishment is done to its own being, seeks compliance with the Church evolution with its own being, namely the man's fulfillment in God.

Because God revealed Himself fully in the Son and because the Son is the final and irrevocable Word addressed by God to world, Christianity is an "eschatological moment in the body of this world", the plenary religion that cannot be exceeded. Being a reality in the eschatological stage of the history, the Church always remains the "traditional" "primordial sacrament", which does not allow any revolution, since Christ has risen and conquered death. But although it lives eschatologically in history, the Church does not live in the eschaton. In fact, in the eschaton the intercessory function and the sign function of the Church will cease, although there will still be Christ's humanity, unity of love and grace created.

Christianity understood as Church is the subject of the next chapter. Human nature itself anticipates and expects the Church and, therefore, man is an ecclesial being. Christianity is also ecclesial because requires a history of people's faith communion with Jesus Christ. However, Rahner believed that the doctrine of faith about the Church, in its social, militant structure, does not occupy a central place in the "hierarchy of truths" of faith. By such a warning, he wanted to avoid a superconfessionalization of the ecclesial feeling and an ideologization of the Church membership.

In the human nature of Jesus Christ, revised in Itself through the Incarnation, the Church's foundation is laid. From amongst the words and deeds by which the Lord founded the Church, German theologian will mention the calling and gathering of His Apostles around Him (as a symbolic representation of the eschatological Israel), words addressed to Simon (by which Jesus explicitly expressed a desire to found the Church), the Crucifixion and, especially, the Resurrection.

The truth that the Church is founded by Jesus is then reinforced by the New Testament images and analogies by which the church describes itself in the apostolic era.

The salvation event was taught by the Savior and the Holy Apostles of the Church and resulted in Tradition and Scripture. Tradition is not a sum of expressions of faith, of documents, but the communication of the Son of God incarnated in the constantly renewed event of the liturgical celebration and especially in the Eucharistic celebration. Thus, the tradition finds its Christ-Eucharist "nature" and its "mission" to transmit the event of Christ's death and resurrection of Christ to the "humanity of all people." This event, which was the heart of the Christian faith, was settled in the Scripture.

The living faith of the early church was recorded in the Scripture, that is why the Scripture is the book of the Church, "Traditio divina in a pure state".

Both in the Old and in the New Testament there was an evolution of the doctrine and even a dogmatic development. Dogmas, born and interpreted in the Church, are also ecclesial. In their essence, dogmas convey the saving words and deeds of Lord Christ. Although in the "substance" the dogmatic evolution is no longer possible after the absolute disclosure of God in Jesus Christ, in the "form", as deepening in living the ultimate mystery, the dogmatic evolution is vital and redeeming at the personal level.

The sacramental relationship between Jesus Christ, the original sacrament (*Ursakrament*), the Church, the fundamental sacrament (*Grundsakrament*) and the particular Sacraments (*Einzelsakramenten*) has been developed in Chapter IV of this part. From the original sacrament, Christ, the Church takes its holiness which then transmits to its believers through the 7 particular sacraments, by which the Church fulfills itself, working salvation and sanctification of men.

In the final chapter of this section are investigated "ecclesiological controversial issues", such as the true Church, the relationship between the Pope and episcopate, between the local and the universal Church, "the new dogmas" and the role of the laity in the Church.

The third part of this study ("existential ecclesiology") exemplifies in two chapters ("The face of the Church in the twentieth century" and the "Church in Dialogue") Karl Rahner's special interest shown to the pastoral theology as a science of souls guiding to salvation, as a "normative science of building the Church toward the future" and Church self-fulfillment. Implanted in the body of this world, the Church lives in the immediate history and in a world it does not choose, as it is given to it. And today's Church is given a world marked by the pluralism of knowledge, sciences, theologies and beliefs. A world with a more obvious trend of secularization and de-Christianization, but a world of dialogue and globalization. In front of this world in decline - where the Christianity lives in a "Diaspora situation" - defined by the diminishing number of Christians and by the loss of their influence on the secular life - the famous German theologian strongly reflects on the issue of men's salvation (either Christians or non-Christians) and on the efficiency of Church's work efficiency for achieving this target. Today's world and the situation of the Church in this world were realistically presented by Rahner, although some people noticed bleak accents in the description of the Catholic theologian. The church needs strategic changes, "appeasements" and "adjustments" up to "changing the shape of the Church's form", so that to actually become what it is in its being and thus to be able to continue its redeeming work effectively.

When Rahner found that the Church was no longer fully meeting its pastorate and redeeming souls work, he would become very critical. In fact, the German theologian was always on man's side and always concerned about man's salvation. This way, he would concretely and critically defend, if needed, his young age's belief according to which "not the man is for the Church, but the Church is for the man."

"The Diaspora Situation" of Christianity and of the Church must not be answered by defeatism, by withdrawing from the secular life, with a ghetto mentality, but by deepening the spiritual life and by mystic apostolate.

The image of God in man, the universal salvation will of God, the brotherhood of all men in the mankind assumed by Christ, the universally redeeming death of the Lord and the overflowing grace of salvation over "every man that cometh into the world" are all prerequisites for dialogue. The Yes of salvation was uttered by God finally and for all. Starting from such findings, Rahner concludes that the history salvation is coextensive not only to the history of the biblical revelation, but to the world history in general, and, respectively, that also the believers of other religions can be saved. In the theory of the "anonymous Christians", the issue of the salvation of non-Christians and even unbelievers will be exposed extensively.

The Interchristian dialogue, with the presentation of the ecumenical vision and of Eastern churches ends this section.

The fourth part of this study exhibits "The evaluation of Karl Rahner's ecclesiology" from the perspective of Father Dumitru Stăniloae's theology. The first chapter of this section is dedicated to Father Stăniloae's personality and writings about Catholicism and the Church. The second chapter concretely and punctually evaluates Karl Rahner's ecclesiology under its fundamental ground, the triadologic one, his vision on salvation and ends with the exposure of differences and convergences between the two famous theologians, on the following topics: Christology, triadology anthropology, pneumatology and ecclesiology. The circle opened in the first part of the thesis with the presentation of these theological themes closes with their evaluation at its end.

In assessing Rahner's triadology, as the basis of his ecclesiology, are exposed those elements that reveal an "imbalance" in Karl Rahner triadology, imbalance that reflects then in its ecclesiology. The assessment, although done especially in terms of Father Stăniloae's theology, every time took into account also the objections brought to Karl Rahner's theology by western theologians (U. v. Balthasar, J. Moltmann, W. Kasper, L. Ladaria et.).



### **3. PURPOSE**

The main purpose of this paper is to expose Karl Rahner's ecclesiology and evaluate it, especially under its triadologic ground, from the perspective of Father Stăniloae's theology. At a secondary level, however, the study aimed at a researched presentation of life, work and thinking of the famous German theologian and an assessment of the greatness and weakness of his theology. In the text of the paper are included topics that were discussed or are still debated in the dialogue between the two Christian denominations which may be relevant to the bilateral dialogue.

To achieve its purpose, we used both direct sources, as well as extensive secondary research literature.

### **4. SUMMARY**

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 stiff and ossified theology, closed and refractory to the world - as the neo-scholastic theology was at the time of its training - a live theology, open to philosophy and to culture in general, and to the concrete problems of the contemporary man in particular.

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 of not teaching almost any topic of theology in the same way he had been taught and of having offered "a new beginning" to the "reclused" Catholic theology. A parallel between what Karl Rahner received and what he taught later on, between the theology inherited by him and the theology he left, can suggestively highlight the renewing elements of his theology:

- he was given answers that were in catechisms and manuals. / He placed the questioning man in the foreground.
- It was taught to beware of philosophy. / He said he had "a pagan respect for it."
- He was told that the theological answers are final and came from above. / He said that "every answer is always the beginning of a whole new

question" 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 "mystery by excellence".
- He was taught the priority of the Divine Being 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." / He wrote that "the oikonomic Trinity is immanent and mutual Trinity", to present an oikonomic-immanent Trinity that works "the mystery of salvation."
- He inherited a universe-centered religious vision. / He bequeathed an anthropo-Christo-centered vision.
- He had learned that sin brought Incarnation. / He taught that the Incarnation had been ordained before the fall and that all had been built to the Incarnation.
- He had been taught that God gives us grace created for beatification. / He taught that God shares Himself to man's happy sight.
- He had been talked about a temporal precedence of theology to oikonomy. / He spoke of a soteriological primacy of oikonomy to 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 legal theory of redemption of Anselm of Canterbury / He emphasized the ontological aspect of salvation;
- He had been taught a christomonistic and pneumatomonistic theology / He taught the work together of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in the work of salvation;
- He had been told that grace is created, over added to nature / He was convinced that grace is uncreated and "constitutional" to nature;
- He had been told that the spirit and matter are separated / He spoke instead all his lifetime about the "Spirit in the world" and about the unity of body, soul and of the entire creation in the Spirit;
- 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 claiming voice of conscienceness;

- He had been taught a negative and defensive attitude of the Church toward the world. / He was the promoter and supporter of a benevolent, open and positive attitude toward the world.
- The newscholastic 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 Ascension to heaven of Mary was a dogma. / She said it had been better if Pope Pius IX did not proclaim this dogma and secretly expressed his Marian piety.
- 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 was supposed to fully obey the Church / He said that the Church should leave 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".
- He lived in a Church dominated by an "exorbitant Roman centralism" (Cardinal Ratzinger J.). / He proclaimed that in the Roman Catholic Church of the future there will be no such a centralism.
- He was told in 1870 that the Pope was infallible, dogmatic speaking. / He said that papal infallibility acquired an excessive glow and allowed an absolutist style of church government that is not identical with its being.
- 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 Vatican Council I, "He would have probably wondered" and "would not have understood a thing."
- He lived in a triumphant 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.

- He served in a Church that had given up to diaconal ministry. / He had a major contribution to the re-establishment 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 Church. / He spoke of the Church "democratization" by emphasizing the freedom of expression and 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.
- He lived in a Roman Church that attached a particular importance to the Pope, to the universal Church and to hierarchy. / He claimed the revival of the local Church, the episcopate and the laity.
- He had seen how his Church lived in "bondage statistics" / He warned that in the future, statistics would turn against Christians if it was invoked, with foolish sufficiency, when and where not applicable.

By all these daring teachings, Karl Rahner made "a great revolution against a philosophy and a theology that had become dry and fade" (Karl Lehmann) and thus became the "architect of the new theology" (Jürgen Moltmann).

Although in the "hierarchy of truths" the Papal primacy and infallibility hold, according to Rahner, a secondary place, the visible unity of the Church is given, however, in his opinion, in the Pope, and the union of all the bishops with the Pope is the specific note of the true Church. Rahner does not tell us, however, how a secondary truth as the one regarding the Papal primacy and infallibility can influence an essential truth as the one regarding the uniqueness of Christ's Church. The German theologian repeatedly criticized the excessive centralism born from the exercise of papal primacy and infallibility, but showed faithfulness, even if inconsistent, to papal dogmas.

Because he separated the mystical, charismatic issue of the church from its institutional, community aspect, more precisely the unseen Church of the seen one, Rahner could state that the "doctrine regarding the Church is not the central statement of Christianity".

With respect to the issue of female priesthood, the Jesuit theologian was influenced by the modern thinking and by the liberal Protestantism. For him, the ordination of women is an issue similar to that of the introduction of a national language in worship and only some time is needed for it to be accepted.

Although he was a brave, innovative and uncomfortable spirit to the point that the Congregation for the Faith Doctrine forbade him to publish in 1962, Rahner wanted and remained a simple and devoted believer of the Catholic Church until the end of his life.

As far as he really assumed the spirit of the patristic tradition, the German theologian stimulated the Catholic thinking of the twentieth century and contributed to the retrieval of the Orthodox roots of the West and to a greater proximity of the Catholicism to Orthodoxy. He revealed suggestively - and by the example of his own destiny – the turmoil in which the West is living.

Although sincere in his desire to search and service to the contemporary man, Rahner's theology sometimes wanders on ways opened by "the wisdom of this century".

As with other significant Catholic theologians of the twentieth century, one can notice with Rahner too, on one hand the desire to return to the undivided sources of the Church, and on the other hand, a vain endeavor to harmonize the teaching and particularly the ecclesiology of the Holy Fathers of the first Christian millennium with the Western authoritarian-centralist ecclesiology developed after the eleventh century and which is dominant until present.

Although he was among the theologians who insisted on the revalorization of the local Church and on "changing the Church structure" from the excessive centralism to communion and from the legal to the sacramental, Rahner remained, in the end, within the ecclesiological ambiguity that culminated in the Second Vatican Council, ambiguity which consists of, as noticed by G. Wassilowsky and Deacon John I. Ica jr., in the overlapping, is the coexistence of two irreducible and irreconcilable types of ecclesiology: the ecclesiology of communion and the universalistic ecclesiology, in other words the sacramental-eucharistic ecclesiology, (of the Holy Apostles and of the Holy Fathers of the undivided Church) and the legal- centralist ecclesiology (of the "Holy Pope" of the Roman Church).

Karl Rahner was the " theologian of the Second Vatican Council " and permanently remained the defender of innovations and openings brought by him. Any deviation from the path opened by the Council and any stagnation or blockage of his renewing directions were promptly and harshly criticized by the indefatigable scholar. The fact that not even a

third of the decisions made by the Second Vatican Council had not been implemented was the bitterness of his life. The more so as, just concluded, the Second Vatican Council was only a "new beginning" for the German theologian.

Like other today's Catholic theologians, Rahner was convinced that the decentralization of the Catholic Church, despite what had been achieved starting from the Second Vatican, was an emergency of the present and a certainty of the future.

Not lacking internal contradictions and containing too personal opinions and criticism, Karl Rahner's theology is still an evidence that the ecclesiastical edifice of the Catholic theology is seriously shaking and that the Church of Rome is, with all the resistance of its conservative circles, at the end of the Constantinian era (of the mystical, political and hierarchical One). His work witnesses, at the same time, that between the Vatican and the great Catholic theologians of the twentieth century a growing abyss was created and that "the hour of anguish" of the Roman Catholic Church continues.

By its opening to the patristic thinking and to the kerygmatic, to the diversity of the theological language to and to the symbolical, to the local Church and to Synodality, towards the other denominations and religions, and by the effort to imagine not only the today's Church, but also tomorrow's Church, the theology of Karl Rahner, as a "theology of passage" (Cardinal K. Lehmann) is undoubtedly an important step towards a "new ecclesiological appearance " of the Catholic Church, that of the Church as a structural communion.

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