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Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Karl Rahner and Vatican II: A Sacramental Vision of the Church

By Geoffrey Watson

Abstract: This paper is an exploration of Karl Rahner’s theology, his relationship to Vatican II, and the legacy of the council. In it, I examine not only Rahner’s role in the council but also the way in which his thinking has helped move the church from a Eurocentric, hierarchical institution, concerned mainly with its own sense of authority and holiness, to a more collegial, global church that embraced its identity as a community of sinners. First, I examine the sources behind the council texts, specifically Rahner’s transcendental Thomist background, as well as his specific understanding of grace and the role of Jesus Christ. Next, I explain Rahner’s role in the council, as well as the myriad ways his theology permeates and influences the documents *Lumen Gentium*, *Dei Verbum*, and *Gaudium et Spes*. Finally, I examine how Pope Francis’ leadership style and his embrace of subsidiarity and synodality are the direct legacies of Rahner and the Vatican II council’s influence on the modern church.

Keywords: Karl Rahner, Vatican II, Pope Francis, subsidiarity, synod

Introduction

Since handing in his doctoral thesis in 1936, Karl Rahner’s theology has walked that precarious tight rope between the boundaries of Catholic doctrine and a rigorous vocation to articulate the nature of an unfathomable, transcendent God in meaningful, relevant ways. Born March 5, 1904 in Freiburg, Karl Rahner received a classical education in a German Gymnasium “before following his brother into the Society of Jesus in 1922.”¹ During his Jesuit formation, Rahner was exposed not just to the Church Fathers, but also to the transcendental Thomism of Jesuits Joseph Maréchal and Pierre Rousselot, who, along with the philosophical underpinnings of Martin Heidegger, molded his ontology and provided the

¹ Michael McDermott, “Karl Rahner,” in *The Student’s Companion to the Theologians*, ed. Ian S. Markham (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 502.

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prism through which he would interpret not only his own reality, but also the mandates of Vatican II—mandates which, as Rahner himself wrote, “explored the growing understanding in faith of the dogmas of the Church while remaining equally loyal to the already accepted faith of the Church.”²

Although Karl Rahner did not directly write any of the sixteen Vatican II documents, he worked tirelessly behind the scenes, and the fingerprints of his theology influenced the Church in three vital ways. First, he helped shepherd the ecclesial body from a monarchical hierarchy to a collegial structure. Second, he contributed to the Church’s transition from an institution of eminent holiness to a “church of sinners,” and finally, he helped broaden the Church’s scope from a narrow, Eurocentric institution toward a wider, global community. Beyond Vatican II, Rahner’s spirit still guides the Church into the next millennium as Pope Francis continues to incorporate these same ideas of collegiality, humility, and subsidiarity into his leadership style and thinking.

Inhabiting a “Both/And” Approach

From 1936 until his death in 1984, Karl Rahner served among various theology departments in several German universities. From Innsbruck to Pullack, Munster back to Munich, the world of the academy shaped how Rahner saw the world and communicated his ideas about God, the Trinity, and humanity’s relationship to those realities. At the same time, Rahner is both priest and theologian, doctor and reverend, and his pastoral heart beats beneath even his most philosophically dense writings. He is a member of the academy as well as the clergy, a mystic and an intellectual, and this theological approach embodies a distinctly Catholic “both/and” perspective. Rahner’s language is at once sophisticated and contemporary, “confronting the difficulties posed by modern philosophy and science,” while at the same time remaining grounded in and “at the service of the larger concerns of Christian faith and life.”³

To unpack the theology of Karl Rahner, one must begin with the transcendental Thomism of Maréchal and Rousselot, as well as the philosophy of Heidegger that lie at the center of his ontology. Maréchal’s and Rousselot’s essential project was to merge the theology of Thomas Aquinas with

² Karl Rahner, *The Church After the Council* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 13.

³ William Dych, “Theology in a New Key,” in *A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner’s Theology*, ed. Leo J. O’Donovan (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1995), 11.

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Immanuel Kant's notion of the transcendent, as a way both to contemporize and retrieve "certain possibilities"⁴ and relevant applications in Aquinas' thinking. Heidegger, meanwhile, was primarily "concerned with human knowing and understanding Being."⁵ It was this merging of philosophy and theology, as well as a desire to articulate the relationship between finite human experience and an infinite, transcendent God that form the matrix in which Rahner's perspective is embedded.

Man, according to Rahner, is, by nature, a transcendent being, "ordered to knowing and loving God,"⁶ or to put it another way, we are wired for the Divine. It is a defining orientation that Rahner calls "a pervasion of our psyche."⁷ At the same time, God, in Rahner's view, is "the incomprehensible ground of man's transcendent existence."⁸ God is, therefore, both our innermost identity as well as the unthematic horizon against which we live, move, and attempt to make sense of our lives. So the question becomes, how does a Christian resolve this paradox between a transcendent God and our own limited human understanding? How can we conceive of God's will, interpret God's language, or discern the paths toward which we are being called if we are, by definition, oriented toward something we can't understand? The answer to these questions lies in Rahner's ideas about grace, the intimate, yet cosmic nature of God, and most importantly, his understanding of Jesus Christ's mediating role between humanity and the invisible, sacred realm.

According to Rahner, our God is not just a God of "infinite distance," but also a God of "absolute closeness in a true self-communication."⁹ This impossibly intimate and inconceivably infinite God remains in a constantly unfolding relationship with humanity, disclosing God's self to us in a history that stretches far beyond the limited scope of the Bible, encompassing instead the "very history of the world rooted in and completed by God's Word made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth."¹⁰ For Rahner, the

⁴ Thomas Sheehan, "Pierre Rousselot and the Dynamism of Spirit," *Gregorianum* 66, no. 2 (1985): 241.

⁵ Nikolaus Knoepffler and Martin J. O'Malley, "Karl Rahner and Pope Francis on Papal Ministry: Towards an Ecumenical Ecclesiology of Communion and Subsidiarity," *Ecclesiology* 13, no. 1 (2017): 58-59.

⁶ Nikolaus Knoepffler and Martin J. O'Malley, "Karl Rahner and Pope Francis," 57.

⁷ Thomas F. O'Meara, "A History of Grace," in *World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology*, ed. Leo J. Donovan (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1995), 84.

⁸ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 137.

⁹ Thomas F. O'Meara, "A History of Grace," 77.

¹⁰ O'Meara, 77.

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person of Jesus Christ is the summary, climax, and ultimate resolution between the limitless and the bounded. It is in and through Christ's historical life, ministry, death, and resurrection that God bridges the space between eternity and history, transcendence and finitude.

Grace, in Rahner's thinking, is God's means of self-communication and self-disclosure to humanity, and to help further bridge the gap between the cosmic and finite, Rahner drew the distinction between uncreated and created grace. Uncreated grace "provides the condition for the possibility of all human knowledge and acts of freedom,"¹¹ while created grace, also a divine gift, is "other than God but above our natural powers, freely given to us by God."¹² Created grace is experienced "on a personal level, not in the objectified manner."¹³ In other words, created grace is uncreated grace filtered to us through our limited human capacity and understanding. So that as humans evolve toward God, we enlarge our "capacity for the eternal"¹⁴ through grace—learning to better discern, intuit, and follow God's subtle nudges in our unique historical reality.

Thus, we "see through a glass darkly," as Saint Paul writes in First Corinthians (1 Cor 13:12). We are imperfect creatures, tainted by sin and locked within the restrictions of our particular genetics, historical moment, and consciousness. Humans are free to respond to the inner tuggings and disclosures of created grace and thus move in the direction toward God, and it is again Jesus of Nazareth, who for Rahner, represents the completion and resolution of God's inconceivable being in our finite, human history. If Karl Rahner's theology could be boiled down to one core idea, it is that that the absolute mystery of God's revelation to our world finds its pinnacle, climax, and completion in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. For "it is only in Christ," writes Rahner, "that we Christians have the possibility of making a radical distinction between the categorical history of revelation in its full sense, and the formation of human substitutes for it, human misinterpretations of it."¹⁵

Part of what makes Rahner so difficult to interpret at times is that he is always attempting to resolve the unsayable in a language that is not just thematically cogent and doctrinally correct, but also

¹¹ Nikolaus Knoepffler and Martin J. O'Malley, "Karl Rahner and Pope Francis," 59.

¹² John Galvin, "The Invitation of Grace," in *World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology*, ed. Leo J. Donovan (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1995), 66.

¹³ John Galvin, "The Invitation of Grace," 66.

¹⁴ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 96.

¹⁵ Rahner, 157.

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engages the reader in a way that tries “to identify and engage with people’s faith struggles,”¹⁶ and it is this “both/and” perspective that makes his such a risky, yet ultimately indispensable contribution to the proceedings, resolutions, and vision of the Vatican II Council.

Entering the Council

At first blush, Karl Rahner appears to have been a potentially problematic choice to participate in Vatican II. While Pope John XXIII had initially appointed him to a consultant role prior to the proceedings, there had been some previous issues between Rahner and Church authorities—to the point that all of his writings were to be submitted first to Rome for censorship before publication. He was forbidden, for example, to discuss an article he’d written about concelebration, or the saying of the Mass with two or more officiating priests, and he was further prohibited from publishing a manuscript that attempted “to tease out the precise theological content of the doctrine”¹⁷ of Mary’s virginity. Despite these controversies, however, Rahner served as a *peritus*, or theological advisor, to Cardinal König of Austria and in this capacity, helped to prepare, edit, and shape many documents in preparation for and throughout the course of Vatican II.

As mentioned, Rahner did not contribute directly to the writing of the Vatican II documents, nor could he speak or vote on the issues before the group. He did, however, possess “a great ability for teamwork and theological collaboration.”¹⁸ Along with several other theology experts, most notably Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, and Joseph Ratzinger, Rahner helped guide and shape the revitalizing spirit of the council, holding “at least twenty-three public lectures on various topics,”¹⁹ while drafting and revising speeches, improving texts and working to sway theological opinions. For many of the bishops, Vatican II thus became “an extended seminar in theology”²⁰ with many important discussions taking place in pubs, plazas, and coffee shops.

¹⁶ Declan Marmion, “Karl Rahner, Vatican II, and the Shape of the Church,” *Theological Studies* 78 (2017): 29.

¹⁷ Declan Marmion, “Karl Rahner, Vatican II, and the Shape of the Church,” 28.

¹⁸ Marmion, 26.

¹⁹ Marmion, 31.

²⁰ John O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 126.

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One particular document that Rahner deeply influenced was the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, or *Lumen Gentium*, which was one of the main documents of the council. In preparation for Vatican II, Rahner had been heavily involved in the German Bishops' preliminary draft texts on the Church. The core idea of their collective position was a push for the Church to be reimagined as "the fundamental, universal, and eschatological sacrament of salvation in the world."²¹ But what, exactly, does this idea of a sacramental Church mean, and how was it a different way of envisioning the Church's role in the world?

During what John O'Malley terms the 'long 19th century,' the Church had succeeded in closing in on itself, seeking to centralize power and defend its teachings from outside threats that came from both the political left and right. The papacy, in essence, "became the initiator and definer of orthodox teaching, which it then imposed from above."²² Rahner and the German bishops wanted to move the Church away from this defensive and hierarchical, neo-scholastic vision of itself toward a more universal and relevant one. What this shift means, in Rahner's own language, is that the Church would begin to see itself as "the concrete historical appearance in the dimension of history become eschatological . . . for the unique salvation which occurs, through God's grace, across the length and breadth of mankind."²³ No longer would the Church, in other words, simply be an institution charged with proper definitions and legitimizing its own authority. Instead, through the voices of Vatican II, it was being called to become a more mystical, radical body "informed by 'the spiritual [uniqueness] of each person'"²⁴ and infused with the divine.

Rahner's theology permeates this rediscovery of the Church as a sacramental symbol of God's saving grace, working throughout the history of the world, constantly evolving and disclosing God's self to all of humanity through the mediation and example of Christ. Throughout *Lumen Gentium*, the text makes several references to this larger, more all-encompassing sense of God's presence, permeating the *entire* community, not just the centralized Church hierarchy. The document acknowledges, for example, God's being "in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful" (LG 26). "The holy people of God," it

²¹ Declan Marmion, "Karl Rahner, Vatican II, and the Shape of the Church," 31.

²² Jeffrey Von Arx, "A Post-Traumatic Church: Vatican I and the 'long 19th century,'" *America* 212, no. 20 (June 2015): 24.

²³ Karl Rahner, *The Church After the Council*, 54.

²⁴ Nikolaus Knoepffler and Martin J. O'Malley, "Karl Rahner and Pope Francis," 57.

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states earlier, “shares . . . in Christ's prophetic office . . . The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief” (LG 12). In these examples, the emphasis has shifted from understanding the papacy as the ultimate, infallible arbiter of God’s will toward a more communal, inclusive definition of the Church body, and this expansion would have significant ramifications for how the Church would organize itself moving forward.

In terms of restructuring Church leadership, this image of a more decentralized, sacramental Church manifests itself in two ways—First, in the shift from seeing the Pope as the absolute monarch over the entire ecclesial body toward “a more collegial vision of a united episcopate with and under the pope.”²⁵ To that end, Rahner advocated for an understanding of the bishops’ role not as subservient to the Pope’s divine-right authority but as a “true shepherd called to feed and guide the flock entrusted to him.”²⁶ A second change in Church structure for which Rahner fought was the establishment of a permanent diaconate that could be “restored as a particular and permanent rank of the hierarchy” (LG 29). Expanding the liturgical and pastoral responsibilities to non-ordained members of the Church was an important way for the ecclesial body both to reconceive and broaden its own organization and power structures.

In *Lumen Gentium*, writes Rahner, the Church tries to reconcile “the misconception that the distinction between clergy and laity . . . automatically implies a difference in man’s nearness to God.”²⁷ With the institution of the permanent diaconate, his aim was not to introduce a new office, but rather to shepherd “the restoration of the sacramental conferring of an office that basically already exists.”²⁸ Here, Rahner is not imposing new definitions or enforcing structural changes. He is instead searching for a renewed understanding of what the Church body is and how it can relate more deeply to people’s lives.

Again and again, his role as a theology expert is informed by his role as a pastor. Grace and sacrament are present not in definitions and titles but when one is working to serve the Church’s mission in tangible, meaningful ways. To that end, he strives to widen and reimagine the Church’s self-

²⁵ Declan Marmion, “Karl Rahner, Vatican II, and the Shape of the Church,” 35.

²⁶ Marmion, 36.

²⁷ Karl Rahner, *The Church After the Council*, 71.

²⁸ Karl Rahner, “The Theology of the Restoration of the Diaconate,” in *Foundations for the Renewal of the Diaconate*, trans. David Bourke, Karl Kruger, and William Schmitz, 139-181. (Washington D.C.: Office for Publishing and Promotion Services United States Catholic Conference, 1993), 154.



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understanding, seeking to language and vision a more authentic ecclesial community—one less concerned with defending itself and more reflective of the spirit and the real-life experiences and challenges faced by the entire faith body.

A second way that *Lumen Gentium* reflects Karl Rahner’s theology is in its development of “the concept of the sinful church,”²⁹ which is a theme that also runs throughout the document. Vatican I imposes an emphasis on the ecclesial body’s sanctity. That previous council viewed the Church as a holy institution, hovering above sinners, demanding their repentance, and guiding them toward sanctity. The Church, as defined by Vatican I, was a body of “eminent holiness, and inexhaustible fruitfulness in everything that is good” (DS 3013).

Rahner, on the other hand, along with many of the Vatican II *periti*, viewed the Church not as an infallible institution that existed apart from a community of sinners but rather, he writes, “she *is* the community of these sinners.”³⁰ In *Foundations of Christian Faith*, he expands on this idea, adding that “we ourselves are the Church, we poor, primitive, cowardly people, and together we represent the Church.”³¹ For Rahner, the Church and the community of sinners it embodies are inseparable, uniquely bound together in our shared journey toward salvation—holy and imperfect, eternal and temporal. We are, as Henri de Lubac puts it, “a paradox of a Church, made for paradoxical mankind.”³²

“The Church,” states *Lumen Gentium*, “embracing in its bosom sinners, at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, always follows the way of penance and renewal” (LG 8). The document, while still maintaining the church’s holiness, evolves toward a fuller, more “both/and” understanding of itself. The Church acknowledges its humility and need for restoration without losing its place as a visible sign of God’s holy presence in the world. The Church is no longer “some immobile institution,”³³ as Rahner calls it, charged with regulations and endless bureaucracy. It is a pilgrim community—spontaneous, creative, and human, wandering like the rest of us toward an eschatological vision of history and salvation.

²⁹ Declan Marmion, “Karl Rahner, Vatican II, and the Shape of the Church,” 38.

³⁰ Marmion, 38.

³¹ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 390.

³² Henri de Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2021), 11.

³³ Karl Rahner, *The Church After the Council*, 63.

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While Karl Rahner's influence was also indirectly supported in other Vatican II documents like *Ad Gentes* and *Nostra Aetate*, it was in the language of revelation, offered in the Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, or *Dei Verbum*, that further reflects an important aspect of Rahner's theology, namely the idea that Scripture and tradition are not separate sources of revelation, but rather "two modes of transmission of the one truth emanating from the one source."³⁴ The teaching of the Church, therefore, does not stand "above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on" (DV 10). This passage from *Dei Verbum* again reflects Rahner's understanding of humanity as both transcendent and finite and places revelation "not primarily in a text but in the interpretation of the tradition . . . reaching its fullness in Christ who perfected revelation in his words and deeds."³⁵ Scripture, in Rahner's view, must therefore be read in conversation with the living tradition, and one is not privileged over the other. As always, humans, when interpreting God's word, exist in that creative tension between the transcendent reality and historical limitations.

Nowhere are these ideas more embodied in the modern era than in the tenure and ideology of the Church's current bishop of Rome, Pope Francis. His philosophy of subsidiarity, his faith in the living tradition of the Church, and his inclusive, expansive vision of the community's *sensus fidei* continue to inform his theology, decision-making, and leadership style as he guides the Church deeper into the twenty-first century.

Pope Francis: Embodying Rahner's Legacy

One of Karl Rahner's greatest fears about Vatican II was that the contributions, insights, and renewals of the proceedings would become "smothered and the Council rendered 'harmless.'"³⁶ Fifty years after the Council, however, when Pope Francis was asked, "Who is Jose Mario Bergoglio?", he replied simply, "I am a sinner."³⁷ This humble response spoke volumes about Francis' personal

³⁴ Declan Marmion, "Karl Rahner, Vatican II, and the Shape of the Church," 40.

³⁵ Thomas P. Rausch, *Systematic Theology: A Roman Catholic Approach* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016), 113.

³⁶ Declan Marmion, "Karl Rahner, Vatican II, and the Shape of the Church," 43.

³⁷ Stephen Bullivant, "I Am a Sinner": The Deep Humility of Pope Francis," *America Magazine*, September 25, 2013, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/25/i-am-sinner-deep-humility-pope-francis>.

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spirituality. It also demonstrates the extent to which the strides and accomplishments of Vatican II have been embodied in the very DNA of the Church's current leadership.

Francis' acknowledgment of himself as a sinner is a far cry from a Vatican I definition of the papacy, and it reflects how deeply Vatican II's renewed understanding of the Church has seeped into the institution itself. What's more compelling is how Pope Francis continues to embody the theology of Karl Rahner and Vatican II in his deep commitment to subsidiarity, his broad, inclusive understanding of the Church, and his willingness to open the lines of communication between both clergy and laity.

"The subsidiarity hermeneutic," writes Nikolaus Knoepffler, "supported by Rahner's ecclesiology, is the most powerful . . . lens for interpreting Francis' ministry with respect to his exercise of authority."³⁸ From the individual, up to pastors, bishops, and cardinals, the Church is, by its very nature, a tiered structure, yet for both Rahner and Francis these differences "are not only tolerated but celebrated."³⁹ In the document *Evangelii Gaudium*, for example, Pope Francis warns against the dangers of "excessive centralization [which] complicates the Church's life and her missionary outreach" (EG 32), and in preparation of his encyclical, *Laudato si'*, Francis worked in dialogue with clergy, social scientists, and environmental activists to create "a wide-ranging document that addresses myriad issues at the intersection of human dignity, social justice, environmental degradation, and political economic orders."⁴⁰

What's more, *Laudato si'* "cites documents published by sixteen episcopal conferences from around the world,"⁴¹ and Francis has appointed "a council of eight cardinal archbishops drawn from every continent" to aid him in his decision-making process.⁴² In these examples and countless others, Francis is not only engaging more deeply with the entire Church, but he is also continuing to draw more heavily from across the globe, incorporating the vast experiences of the episcopate as well as the world community into his research, communications, and pastoral care.

³⁸ Nikolaus Knoepffler and Martin J. O'Malley, "Karl Rahner and Pope Francis," 80.

³⁹ Knoepffler and O'Malley, 80.

⁴⁰ Christina Zenner Peppard, "Commentary on *Laudato Si'*," in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth Himes (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 525.

⁴¹ Gerald O'Collins, "Pope Francis and the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965)," *The Australasian Catholic Record* 93, vol 2 (April 2016): 212.

⁴² Gerald O'Collins, "Pope Francis and the Second Vatican Council," 212.



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Francis' strategy to draw on the different levels and locations of the Church has helped him not only discern where the Church is headed politically, but it is also helping shift the ecclesial body from a European-dominated, centralized institution to a more global community. "What seems normal for a bishop on one continent," states Pope Francis, "is considered strange and almost scandalous—almost!—for a bishop from another."⁴³ Here, he acknowledges not just the varied cultural and socio-economic entry points that exist among the faithful, but he understands and respects the ways in which these differing points of view enhance and enrich the community itself rather than challenge its legitimacy. These varied perspectives make up the mystical body of the Church and are therefore to be embraced and encountered, in Francis' view, rather than delineated and defended against.

Beyond the emphasis on synodality, Francis has also placed a greater emphasis on "the extensive consultation of the baptized faithful."⁴⁴ In preparation for the upcoming 2023 Synod, for example, the Pope has painstakingly made efforts to hear from the entire community, not just the leadership. A quick browse through the Synod 2023 website offers social media links, "models for synodal listening and discernment, methods for conducting the consultations, reflection questions for participants, templates and other suggested materials."⁴⁵ The synodal path is moving beyond information gathering and extensive outreach, working instead to encourage the faithful to engage more deeply with one another.

This global consultation process leading up to the 2023 Synod is, in Francis' own words, a call to "look others in the eye and listen to what they have to say," and he advises that Catholics taking part in the synodal path strive to "become experts in the art of encounter."⁴⁶ In this process, the Church becomes more sacramental as it more deeply reflects, engages, and inspires the diverse people who embody it.

Conclusion

⁴³ Pope Francis, "Concluding speech of the 2015 Family Synod," October 24, 2015.

⁴⁴ Massimo Faggioli, "Synod and Synodality in Pope Francis' Words," *The Way* (October 2020): 95.

⁴⁵ "Travelling the Synodal Path in Dioceses," Synod 2021-2023, accessed April 14, 2022, <https://www.synod.va/en/synodal-process/diocesan-phase.html>.

⁴⁶ Pope Francis, "Mass at St. Peter's Basilica," Vatican, October 10, 2021.

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Karl Rahner understood very well what his role was at Vatican II. A brilliant editor, expert theologian, experienced pastor, and loyal teammate, he served the Council and the texts it generated with insight, precision, and selflessness. At the core of his efforts, however, Rahner strove to free the Church from the constraints of a dogmatic, centralized, and legalistic self-understanding and breathe new life into a more creative, challenging, and life-giving theology—one capable of speaking to and meeting the actual needs of the community. Rahner supported the Council and the Church in this journey toward a more sacramental self-understanding, one characterized by humility, inclusivity, and deeper engagement. As the Church continues to stumble forth into the 21st-century, the fruits of both Rahner’s thinking and the Vatican II Council’s efforts are embodied by the Church’s current leader, Pope Francis.

Like Rahner, Francis sees himself and the Church as a community of sinners, and he is determined to engage with that entire community as he leads it along the path toward renewal. Like Rahner, Francis continues to walk that fine line between the transcendent and finite, embodying a distinctly “both/and” approach to his administrative and pastoral role, and like Rahner, his theology remains always grounded in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus—the nexus, climax, meeting point of eternity and history.

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