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EDITORIAL ESSAY

My Theological Reflection with Karl Rahner: Rupture, Discontinuity . . . Incomprehensible Mystery

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In this essay, the author reflects on the personal experience of the loss of his spouse, a reflection inspired and informed by the faith and theology of Karl Rahner. With death, it is not that a "new" time has begun, but that time itself has ended. And yet that mutual love as spouses continues. Life following the death of a spouse presents itself as an empty nothingness. But God, incomprehensible mystery, is our beginning. Our lives are filled with rupture and discontinuity not as evidence of a missing or absent God, but that we are not God.

Keywords: Karl Rahner, death, love, bodily existence, soul, resurrection

> Every theology must necessarily work with images, and within these images we grasp in faith and hope reality itself, that is the freely wrought definitiveness of my existence, which was given to me in time but does not continue in time, but turns before and with God into the definitiveness of my history.
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> —Karl Rahner, "What Do I Mean When I Say: Life after Death?," television interview with Marietta Peitz and Klaus Breuning on West Germany's Channel 2 (ZDF), Mainz, February 20, 1972

This essay is rooted in my own personal and local experience. My wife, Ángeles Pla Sánchez, struggled for six years after being diagnosed with breast cancer, and died in 2009. The death of a spouse is not an uncommon experience, but it is my experience, and it is from this context

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that my own theological reflection takes place. My faith affirmation is centered in my belief and experience that the mutual love that my wife and I shared for many years continues to be supported and nourished by God's own love. And my own theological reflection draws insight and perspective from the theology of Karl Rahner. He asks the rhetorical question, "Can you love and while actually loving think of the beloved person as somebody who vanishes in death? . . . Where you love, where you carry responsibility that is absolute, from which you cannot run away, that you cannot shake off, there deep down you realize the statement: Here definitiveness occurs which death cannot take away, but only make really definitive. . . . Only those who love understand that loving makes sense."[1]

In his 1954 essay, "Reflections on the Experience of Grace," Rahner stresses the distinction between our experience of the spirit, on the one hand, and the speaking and philosophizing about the transcendence of the spirit, which is a derived and secondary experience, on the other.[2] And he goes on to narrate an extensive set of experiences that emphasize this point: "The experience here is the experience of eternity; it is the experience that the spirit is more than merely a part of this temporal world; the experience that man's meaning is not exhausted by the meaning and fortune of this world; the experience of the adventure and confidence of taking the plunge, an experience which no longer has any reason which can be demonstrated or which is

[1] Karl Rahner, "What Do I Mean When I Say: Life after Death?," trans. Joseph Donceel, SJ, in *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews, 1965–1982*, ed. Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 85–92. For the wide range of Rahner's writings, see the introduction to Karl Rahner, *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life: Sermons, Prayers and Essays*, trans. and ed. Annemarie S. Kidder (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), xi. See also Gerard Mannion, "The End of the Beginning: Discerning Fundamental Themes in Rahner's Theology of Death," *Louvain Studies* 29 (2004): 166–86, especially his note that, in reaction to Rahner while developing a university-level teaching module, he "was informed by many thoughts and reflections *following the death of my mother*," (185 n. 90 [my emphasis]).

[2] Karl Rahner, "Reflections on the Experience of Grace," in *Theological Investigations* [hereafter *TI*], vol. 3, *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, trans. Karl H. and Boniface Kruger (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 86–90, at 87. See also Terrance W. Tilley, "What Kind of Faith Is Possible in Our Contexts?," *Philosophy & Theology* 17 (2005): 271: "I have summarized my own view in two mottoes: 'All religion is popular. All theology is local.'" Tilley then goes on to say that "the theologian who tries to synthesize it all into a universal theology—that is, a local theology that can travel angelically anywhere and everywhere at any time—has a task doomed to failure by the varieties of time and place in which the Gospel is lived in and lived out. And no one gets it fully right, since we all, at our best, refract rather than reflect the Light."

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taken from the success of this world." These experiences, Rahner states, are "destructive and, at the same time, vivifying" experiences.[3]

"Rupture, Discontinuity . . . Incomprehensible Mystery" takes on a particular meaning for me based on the experience of my wife, Ángeles, as she valiantly lived out a six-year struggle against breast cancer, up to the moment of her death, and my experience of accompanying her. Also within that six-year period Hurricane Katrina (August 29, 2005) forcibly interrupted a new session of chemotherapy and other treatments that had been initiated days before we had to evacuate from home. The aftermath of this human/natural disaster in the weeks and months that followed resulted in a complete break and discontinuity with both her doctors and treatment options.

We are tempted to describe cancer as a disease of the body that sometimes can be halted or controlled, but at other times grows relentlessly. But for both my wife and me, our experience of the disease was one that cannot be accurately or adequately described as a bodily struggle; rather, it was a struggle that involved the entire person. A popular description of the human person that is sometimes (erroneously) ascribed to Christianity views the human person as made up of "body" and "soul." But Rahner is vehement in emphasizing that Christians reject any hint of Platonic dualism in describing ourselves as human persons:

> Bodily existence is not, therefore, something which is added to spirituality; it is the concrete existence of the spirit itself in space and time. Physical nature or the nature of the human body is not something already existing in itself. It is the self-expression of the spirit reaching out into space and time. If we want to be sure whether we have understood the point at issue here, we only have to ask whether we find it self-evident to say that the body can be seen, but not the soul. If the answer is, "Yes—of course this is so," then we have not understood exactly what the point at issue is. I am naturally assuming that the answer to our question is, "No—that is not the case." If we wanted to give a Thomist answer, we should have to say, "Yes, the soul can be seen, but only in part" (though "part" does

[3] Rahner, "Reflections on the Experience of Grace," 88–89. Leo O'Donovan points to the rich and expansive vocabulary that Rahner uses to speak of "this experience of self-donation. . . . He spoke of our giving ourselves over to God (*sich übergeben*), of surrendering ourselves (*sich hingeben*), of giving or risking ourselves away (*sich weggeben, sich wegwagen*), of denying ourselves (*sich werleugnen*), of no longer really disposing of ourselves (*nicht mehr über sich selbst verfügen*), of letting oneself go (*sich loslassen*), of no longer belonging to oneself (*nicht mehr sich selbst gehören*). And he spoke of the moment when *'alles und wir selbst wie in eine unendliche Ferne von uns weg gerückt ist'* ('when everything including our very selves is torn away from us as if into an infinite distance')." Leo O'Donovan, "Memories before the Mystery: In Tribute to Karl Rahner (1904–1984)," *Philosophy & Theology* 17 (2005): 300.

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> not here mean a quantitative section); in an ambiguous sense, I can see the human person's spirit. What I see the spirit of the human person in space and time to be is, in an ambiguous sense, precisely what I call body.[4]

For Rahner the biblical term that most forcefully speaks of the fundamental unity of the whole person is the New Testament term *sarx*, that is, "flesh," which some might conceive of as referring to the body alone. But Rahner stresses that "flesh means *that* person who is on the one hand the frailty, the threatenedness, the inexplicableness, the weakness, the obscurity of this individual, concrete specific entity, and who at the same time knows this and is afraid."[5] For both the person with cancer and all those who accompany him or her, the term "flesh" powerfully emphasizes both of these aspects.

Similarly, the body is not something negative, accidental, or secondary.[6] And a passage from "The Body in the Order of Salvation," first published in 1967, expresses the fundamental mutuality of body and spirit that itself echoes the Chalcedonian language of the divinity and humanity of Jesus:

> But what I call the body is the outgoing of the spirit itself into the emptiness of space and time, which we call "first matter," in which this spirituality now itself appears; so that outgoing into its bodily form is the condition which makes spiritual and personal self-discovery possible, not an obstacle in its way. There is no coming to oneself except by way of exit into the bodily reality into which the spirit first reaches out and finds itself, forming itself and going out of itself. And it is only this which makes personal, spiritual freedom possible. Of course this bodily nature, as the spatial and temporal existence of the spirit itself, is always an entering in the truly Other.[7]
>
> In other words, the human person utters oneself and constitutes himself or herself in one's concrete nature and thereby opens oneself by that very fact to the break-through from outside. In one's bodily nature, one enters into a sphere which does not belong to him or her alone.[8]

[4] Karl Rahner, "The Body in the Order of Salvation," in *TI,* vol. 17*, Jesus, Man, and the Church*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 71–89, at 84; translation modified.

[5] Rahner, "The Body in the Order of Salvation," 77.

[6] Rahner, "The Intermediate State," in *TI*, 114–24, at 119.

[7] Rahner, "The Body in the Order of Salvation," 85; translation modified.

[8] Ibid., 86; translation modified. See also Karl Rahner, "On the Theology of the Incarnation" (hereafter "Incarnation"), in *TI,* vol. 4*, More Recent Writing*, trans. Kevin Smyth (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 105–20. In "Incarnation" Rahner forcefully notes that "the unbridgeable difference" between who Jesus is and who we are as human beings is that in God's case "the 'what' is uttered as his self-expression, which it is not in our case" (116). Regarding key aspects of Rahner's Christology, see my earlier work, Jerry T. Farmer, "Four Christological Themes of the Theology of Karl Rahner," in *The Myriad Christ: Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology*, ed. Terrance Merrigan and Jacques Haers (Leuven: University Press, 2000), 433–62.

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Three days before she died, Ángeles indicated to me clearly that she would not take any more pills because she could no longer drink water. Her decision made me more anxious and worried, because during her six years as a breast cancer patient, taking the medications that were prescribed for her was a major part of fighting this disease. Now she was receiving hospice care, and we all knew that the disease could no longer be stopped or controlled. As I look back and reflect on that experience, it seems to me that this was a moment, perhaps *the* moment, of her letting go of everything. It marked a time of transition when she no longer was able to express her feelings and thoughts in words, but only through gestures, which took on an ever more powerful expression in themselves. Three days later the enduring silence would begin.

Why did this happen? What is the meaning of all of this? These are my questions, and questions that have been voiced by others for untold generations, and will continue to be voiced anew each day. Fewer than four years before his own death, Rahner responded with what he called a "legitimate Christian skepticism"—that is, a skepticism that is "acceptable for a Christian":

> We do not have answers for everything, but we entrust ourselves in hope and love to the incomprehensibility of God, knowing precisely that this act of ultimate capitulation to God's incomprehensibility is precisely the last thing that is asked of us.[9]

> I do not share the opinion you mention and others have defended that, at the moment of biological death there occurs something very special, grandiose, decisive, when people once more turn their whole life upside down and reverse its direction. I do not believe that this is true. . . . But somewhere within our lives there happens—or there may at least happen—an absolute letting go, an absolute yielding of everything. This may constitute death in the theological sense, which may ultimately consist in the unconditional, quiet, yet trustful capitulation before the incomprehensibility of one's own existence, and thus also before God's

[9] Karl Rahner, "Old Age and Death," an interview with Erika Ahlbrecht-Meditz, Radio Saarland Saarbrücken, October 21, 1980, trans. Joseph Donceel, SJ, in Imhof and Biallowons, *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, 241–47, at 244. See also Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (New York: Continuum, 2007). Boeve points to the fact that "'interruption' can be made productive not only as a contextual category but also, and in line with Metz, as a theological category. . . . God's interruption constitutes the theological foundation for a continuous and radical hermeneutic of the context and the tradition. . . . In this instance, a theology of interruption tends to develop a hermeneutic of contingency, which aims to maintain the radical historical and specific, particular character of the Christian tradition without, however, closing in on itself. Such a hermeneutics of contingency, when correctly understood, includes a hermeneutics of *suspicion*" (205–6 [my emphasis]).

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> incomprehensibility. . . . But I believe that in life taken as a whole and at some particularly special blessed moments a decision is reached about one's own life. Let me describe it as follows: One gives up everything, one lets everything go. And precisely in this seemingly dumb, dreadful, and frightening emptiness there dawns the arrival of the infinite God and his eternal life.[10]

In a television interview that took place some eight years earlier, the interviewer said to Rahner: "If I understand you correctly you say that after death everything cannot be over." And Rahner responded: "Right. But the statement 'it cannot be' is a statement of my hope, an assertion of my free existence. Therefore, we have to do with a statement that is freely made." And then he posed a question: "How do things go on after death?" Rahner himself answered by saying: "Things do not go on! With death, history, understood as the flow of time, is truly over. What follows is the definitiveness of human existence as decided on earth and in time."[11]

Rahner speaks of death as a "freedom-decision," a term that seems to be the ultimate absurdity to those who would emphasize death as fatality, over which one has no ultimate control. But for Rahner, death is that fundamental moment or act in which one surrenders all of oneself. It is more than those frequent and regularly occurring decisions to "give up my time" or to "lend a hand" to another. Those decisions are relative and are followed by subsequent opportunities. But this absolute surrender is made with an awareness that there are no more opportunities that will come. In this way, it is a definitive decision that accepts and affirms, *in faith and hope*, all those previous decisions of love, with an awareness also of those decisions that were made lacking love in some way. "I would say that you have no certitude except through hope. . . . In the act of trusting in the meaningfulness of life, I hope."[12] But this "freedom-decision" is not simply one that is cumulative of all of one's previous decisions; it is definitive:

> All human beings die in such a way that everything is taken away from them, and Christians are convinced, while they live and when they die, that the ensuing emptiness is filled to the brim by what we call God. And basically we have understood God—as the incomprehensible, of course—only when we say: God is the one who belongs in this ultimate existential void created by our death, as the fulfillment; as the fulfillment that is definitive; as the fulfillment that is incomprehensible; as the

[10] Rahner, "Old Age and Death," 245.

[11] Rahner, "What Do I Mean When I Say: Life after Death?," 87, 86.

[12] Ibid., 89.

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> fulfillment that, as incomprehensible, we hope is our blessed salvation. We know very little about the beyond. We have in this respect become more discreet than former times, which painted grandiose pictures of the beyond . . . Rather, human life has to pass through this apparent nullity, if it is to be fulfilled not by this or that, but by God.[13]

It was several weeks earlier, when Ángeles met in the classroom with a group of her students for the last time, that she told them that the doctors had stated that there were no further treatments that would be effective in combating the disease. But, nevertheless, she insisted to her students that she was freely deciding and choosing to keep going as long as she could. Several days earlier my wife had asked me to help her send an e-mail to her students about the course work that they still had to do. I wrote what she wanted to tell the students, and then I asked, "How do you want to sign the e-mail?" She responded with two words, "Love, Ángeles."

But perhaps the most challenging experience for me focuses not simply on the end of life for my wife, but on how our relationship itself is included in that "rupture, discontinuity . . . incomprehensible mystery." What one experiences with the death of a spouse, or other family member or friend, is a profound silence. One continues to speak to the other, but encounters silence. Where one could before, in some sense, control, direct, or influence the relationship, now one has no control to do so. Just as none of us have control over God, now that same experience becomes a reality for me in our relationship as a couple. It is a completely new and jolting aspect to one's relationship. God interrupts time.[14] The everyday relative decisions that have given direction

[13] Rahner, "Old Age and Death," 247.

[14] See Boeve, *God Interrupts History*. Boeve indicates that Johann Baptist Metz "deserves credit for having reintroduced apocalypticism as a conceptual strategy in his fundamental-theological reflections on Christian faith. . . . For Metz, apocalypticism establishes a firm claim to the intrinsic relationship between God and time: God interrupts time. . . . Against cultural apocalypticism, Christian apocalypticism calls for a shift from catastrophe thinking to crisis thinking. It is not simply a matter of devastation, catastrophe and chaos, it is also one of perspective, revelation and disclosure (which immediately reminds us of the original significance of the Greek *apokalypsis*). In short, the apocalyptic conceptual strategy perceives the boundaries of time as determined and restricted by God. Within this limited time crisis (persecution, destruction, loss, suffering, and pain [*which can accurately describe the experience of the death of a spouse*; my supplement and emphasis]) is the precise location in which God reveals Godself as the boundary, as the one who interrupts time, the one who judges it. At the same time, revelation as interruption implies its own demands and calls for engagement. A neutral attitude at this juncture is no longer appropriate. Interruption, as the revelation of God, provokes us to assume a position; we can no longer maintain an indifferent stance to what is going on. What is called for is a critical praxis of hope. Etymologically speaking, the word 'crisis' also implies 'judgment.' A Christian perspective on time thus requires

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and life to one's relationship are ended. What has become definitive for one's partner must now be accepted as definitive for oneself; one must now make that same surrender. But it is precisely out of and from the context of that ruptured relationship that one is called to focus ever more intently on one's own freedom, one's own freedom-decision.[15] In a prayer entitled, "God of Knowledge," Rahner focuses on experience:

> I know something about you through experience. I have met you in joy and suffering. For you are the first and the last experience of my life. . . . Then you will be the final Word, the only one that remains. Then at last, everything will be quiet in death; then I shall have finished with all my learning and suffering. Then will begin the great silence, in which no other sound will be heard but you, O Word resounding from eternity to eternity.[16]

Ultimately, it is hope that brings one to resurrection.

Here we must start from the assumption that the hope that a person's history of freedom will be conclusive in nature (a hope that is given in the act of responsible freedom and that is transcendentally necessary) already includes what we mean by the hope of "resurrection." But hope for the conclusive nature of one's own history of freedom, because of its absolute responsibility, also includes the idea of "the resurrection of the body," because the hoping person as such basically affirms his own unity and his own history in space and time; consequently, he is prevented from

submission to God's judgment and God's promise for the world and for humanity as revealed in Jesus Christ" (195–96).

[15] See Boeve, *God Interrupts History*, 197–98: "Apocalypticism calls for the *radical temporalization* of the world, with a radical awareness of the irreducible seriousness of what occurs in the here and now. . . . Time is seen as discontinuity, interruption, finality, the end. . . . The future becomes a real future, not to be identified with seamless continuation and endless infinity. Apocalyptic awareness runs counter to evolutionary awareness in which the here and now lacks uniqueness, individuality, and particularity, and is remorselessly integrated into a dynamic movement toward a projected goal. . . . A Christian apocalyptic awareness urges us to become conscious of the irreconcilability of history, to pay attention to the victims of suffering and injustice, to recognize the fear of God and the appeal for reconciliation and justice. It is at this point that catastrophic thinking becomes *crisis thinking*: submission to the interruptive judgment of God over history. . . . For Christians, the apocalyptic awareness of time underlines the fact that God is not only other than time, the other of time, but that God is also and simultaneously the boundary of time, the end of time and thus the guarantee of its possibility."

[16] Karl Rahner, "God of Knowledge," in *Prayers for a Lifetime*, ed. Albert Raffelt (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 17–19.

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the outset from confining his hope merely to one part or excerpt of his reality.[17]

It is my own "believing hope and hopeful faith"[18] that my wife's love for me and for all with whom she shared life continues. But the everyday and routine ways that love is shared have ended. It is normally through words and gestures and images that love is offered and received. At the end of the workday, spouses who have been apart for the day spend time with each other preparing an evening meal, and talking about the people and activities that have taken place. Hearing the details of the other person's day, with its joys and struggles, provides an opportunity to become closer. A hug, a kiss, a simple touch, expresses one's affirmation of the other. Facing the daily tasks of life together brings one together with the other. But those shared words, images, and gestures are gone. Now one faces a deep silence, coming from the very silence of God, that calls for a surrender, a letting go, an opening up. It is an experience of death and emptiness, but "with the silent glimmer of God's Spirit" within.[19] One becomes more alert to all that one encounters, waiting with hope for moments of grace, not knowing when and how that grace will appear. It is a call to prayer, to a deepening

[17] Karl Rahner, "Jesus' Resurrection," in *TI*, 17: 16–17.

[18] Rahner, "What Do I Mean When I Say: Life after Death?," 89: "There is no need to separate hope and faith. Faith is hopeful faith, else it would not be faith. And hope is believing hope, else there would be no hope."

[19] See Lambert Leijssen, *With the Silent Glimmer of God's Spirit: A Postmodern Look at the Sacraments* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006). In referring to marriage, Leijssen notes: "Marriage, as the sacrament that sanctifies a relationship, unites the couple as having been given to each other with the most profound divine bond: their yes to each other often is anchored in the promise of God's covenant with humanity. . . . They sanctify each other in their love because they accomplish their human love in the bosom and power of divine love. This commitment marks them for life as eternally bound to each other in God's love and fidelity" (22). Leijssen stresses that "given the existential uncertainty and ambivalences of postmodernity, a simple transparency is no longer recognizable. The sacred (divine) can only be discovered in the experience of incompleteness and the contingency of the human race. The space of emptiness and distance is the place to find God again. . . . Then it is possible to conceive of sacramentality *reflexively-rationally* as a 'present absence' of the divine, as a continuous glimpse (*glimmer,* not *glitter*), a soft, silent splendor, a mild illumination of the withdrawing Mystery" (25–26). And Leijssen further adds, "Marriage is an enduring task that requires the will to overcome a lack of belief in its own possibilities. The disposition to forgive and the realization that one is always growing are there when the ideal is not always attained. When the married couple dares continuously to let go of the image of the perfect partner and the ideal marriage, choosing with all their heart their actual partner in the changing circumstances of life, then each day is a new beginning in which Christians glimpse God's creative power and nearness with the silent glimmer of the gift of the Spirit" (103–4).

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of one's relationship and life with God, but a life with God that now includes the person with whom one has walked, talked, and journeyed together. She, in a sacramental way, expresses both her absence and her presence, embodying without a body God's incomprehensible love.

Space and time exist for me, but not for her. Space and time provide normativity for me, but not for her. And yet, in the final weeks of her life, space and time were paramount for Ángeles. She was born and raised in Spain. Her family, her friends, her culture, her language, formed her identity. When her health worsened, we returned to Spain so that she could be in that place and share that time with so many. It turned out to be a very short time, but one that both she and I valued. When we reached our destination in Spain, she said, "Now I'm home." My memories want to take me to what has been,[20] to provide the rich images and remembered words that I seek. But I am called forward into an incomprehensible future. And it is similar for others who experience the loss of her presence. They wait for a phone call or a letter or an e-mail, with a word of encouragement, advice, and at times, reproach. But there is only silence. This is the new normativity that exists, but the norms of space and time are not simply altered: they have ended. It is not that a new time has begun, but that time itself has ended. And yet, there is still for me a certitude that comes forth, out of hope and faith, that love continues. The words, images, and gestures all fail to express this new reality adequately, which I believe in and hope for with all my heart.[21]

[20] See Karl Rahner and Johannes Baptist Metz, *The Courage to Pray*, trans. Sarah O'Brien Twohig (New York: Crossroads, 1981), 84–85: "We cannot freely commemorate the dead if we are merely holding on to the past with combined compulsion and curiosity. True remembrance of the dead enables us to protect the deepest reality of our existence (which cannot be thought of in individualistic terms), and carry it into the future as our legacy and duty. . . . First, we should remember those who have been close to us, who have loved us, whom we loved ourselves, and towards whom we perhaps still feel terribly guilty (despite the fact that the dead can no longer enforce this guilt), so that we have to live with their silent, constantly reiterated forgiveness. . . . We should not see them as dead, but as living beings who have taken their relationship to us with them into eternity. . . . Second, we should remember all those who have faded into the oblivion of history."

[21] See Leijssen, *With the Silent Glimmer of God's Spirit*, 37–38: "The divine Other cannot simply absorb humans into itself. For that reason, participation in the divine must also maintain this distinction; but it must also confirm the connection via the mediation of language and symbols. . . . He or she lives on in this mystery as a 'new person.' The divine is simultaneously present yet also hidden, invisible in the human form of appearance. . . . This divinity can be seen only by the inner eye; it can be experienced only from this inner connection with reverence and thankfulness. For that reason, we speak of the *silent glimmer* of the Holy Spirit."

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In addition to all of this, there is often a tension, a seeking to describe the continuing existence of one who has died. And this tension frequently expresses itself in terms of fear or worry or the question of what will happen now to the person who has died, where "now" seems to lead one to affirm the existence of a continuing temporal state, referred to by Rahner as "the intermediate state."[22] But Rahner finds an immediate difficulty in positing such a state. He reaches the conclusion that "the genesis of the idea of an intermediate state in the Middle Ages was a stage in the history of theology, but no more than that." Additional "difficulties [in positing such a state] are above all those which are related to the question of 'time' 'after' death," which Rahner argues can be eliminated if one affirms that "the one and total person is removed from empirical time through his/her death."[23] Also, Rahner points to the positing of such an intermediate state as ignoring or blurring "the radical difference between, on the one hand, a temporal state which is not merely our experience of time in the sense of physics, but which has freedom as its very essence; and, on the other hand, the final consummation of the history of freedom which can then no longer be thought of in terms of time at all."[24] Finally, there is the question of affirming the substantial unity of body and soul that constitutes the human person. Rahner poses the question in this way: "Can the soul lose something [the body] *with which it is identical*, without itself ceasing to exist?"[25] For Rahner the more satisfying response to this question is to affirm that the "perfected spiritual soul" is the enduring "informedness" of the glorified body. Thus, the "free spiritual subject" (for Rahner, in corporeality in temporal existence) is identical with the "free spiritual subject" of the glorified body.

[22] Rahner, "The Intermediate State," 114: "What is meant by the doctrine of the intermediate state is that between the death of any individual person, if it takes place before the general eschatological perfecting of all men, and the final consummation of all history (which we generally call 'the resurrection of the flesh' and 'the Last Judgment') there is an intermediate temporal state." And Rahner further comments: "My intention here is not to deny the doctrine of the intermediate state. I should only like to point out that it is not a dogma, and can therefore remain open to the free discussion of theologians."

[23] Rahner, "The Intermediate State," 118; translation modified.

[24] Ibid., 119.

[25] Ibid., 119 (my emphasis). Rahner adds: "Earlier, I myself tried to avoid this dilemma by postulating a cosmic relation between the finite human spirit and matter, that is to say, the *one* matter of *the world*. This relation would then still remain and would be preserved even when the precise way in which, during its earthly life, the body is formed through this relation between matter and spirit ceased to exist." See also Peter C. Phan, *Eternity in Time: A Study of Karl Rahner's Eschatology* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1988), 236 n. 102.

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Emphasizing his point, Rahner states, "That is why even empirical experience of the corpse in the grave can no longer provide an argument for there having been no 'resurrection.'"[26] On the day of my wife's burial, the same point was made by Ángeles' sister, who said that even though we bury her body in the cemetery, that body is not Ángeles.

For Rahner, God is the end and the beginning:

> The beginning in general is not empty nothingness, insignificance, hollow indefiniteness, the subordinate and the undefined. However, that is how people mostly look at it. . . . To say that we have been created out of "nothing" means we are not God; it does not mean that our origin is emptiness and an indifferent indefiniteness, but rather that it is God. And it is God who creates the beginning, which is not the first moment of our time but the basic ground of all of history within the flow of time. That is why the beginning is made only by God; why God is our beginning's mystery that acts on us but cannot be acted upon; why God reveals Godself slowly in the course of our history; why God has to be accepted in God's own hidden darkness in a trusting, hoping, daring way. . . . Only when we have arrived will we fully know what our origin is. . . . Yet we can say without negating this mystery that part of our beginning is the earth that God created, our forebears in whose history God acted with wisdom and mercy. . . . Everything is contained there, everything that exists is silently gathered there in the origin of our own existence, and everything else—everything that is unique to each person and characterizes the person as the unique and non-repeatable beginning set by God—is penetrated by it. . . . The more we accept what enfolds us and what belongs to our origin amidst the pain of life and in life-giving death and the more the original can come to light and show itself and is permitted to work its way throughout our life, the more this gap [between the divine and the human will] is closed and the original contradiction is resolved. . . . Everything, then, belongs to everyone, and the differences, though still present, will have become transfigured and will be part of the blessedness of a unifying love, not of separation.[27]

Life following the death of a spouse presents itself as an empty nothingness. But God, incomprehensible mystery, is our beginning. Our lives are filled with rupture and discontinuity not as evidence of a missing or absent God, but that we are not God. And so, Ángeles, who has definitively consummated her history of freedom, is both inseparable, but also distinct, from God. I, and all of us who experience that rupture and discontinuity,

[26] Rahner, "The Intermediate State," 119–20.

[27] Rahner, *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life*, 117–22; translation modified.

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can no more control our relationship with them any more than we can control our relationship with God.[28] God is the one who enfolds us as creatures, united with all of creation, into God's own existence, the Incomprehensible Mystery.

[28] See the comment by Rahner regarding our call to solidarity with the dead and the African tradition of ancestor worship, in Rahner and Metz, *The Courage to Pray,* 45: "It is perhaps conceivable that Christian theology in Africa, if it wishes to become truly African, will introduce a new, independent form of ancestor worship, and that from there it might be imported into Christian theology in the rest of the world. It would be extremely regrettable and ominous for the future of Christian theology as a whole if this African contribution were to meet with nothing but indifference from the rest of the Christian world."

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