

KARL RAHNER SOCIETY – CONSULTATION

Topic: Grace, Freedom, and the Church
 Convener: Brandon R. Peterson, University of Utah
 Moderator: Michael Rubbelke, St. John’s School of Theology, Collegeville
 Panelists: Richard Lennan Boston College School of Theology and Ministry
 Michael Canaris, Loyola University Chicago
 Mary Beth Yount, Neumann University

The Rahner Consultation focused its attention on Richard Lennan’s recent volume concerning ecclesiology, *Tilling the Church: Theology for an Unfinished Project* (2022). The panel opened with introductory remarks from Lennan, who framed the book in terms of Pope Francis’s call for an integral ecology and the interdependence of creation. *Tilling the Church*, Lennan explained, aims at an integral ecclesiology, which insists that we cannot hope to fix one bit of the church without considering it as an interconnected whole. That whole, Lennan continued, must be understood both in terms of the givenness of God’s revelation as well as our particular human contexts; against some trends he sees operative today, the church cannot be reduced to one or the other. Turning to Rahner, Lennan summarized three themes from *Tilling the Church* that draw on this influential German theologian’s work. First, the church is an expression of the relationship between grace and freedom. That is, as the fruit of grace, the church is from God, but as the fruit of human freedom, it is also irreducibly complex, indeed, “messy.” God’s grace, according to Rahner, has an “incarnational tendency,” and so we find the Mystery of God amidst the messiness and ambiguity of human life. Second, Lennan considered Rahner’s vision of the church as sacrament. Such a category, which styles the church as an expression and means of grace, can be misconstrued so as to idealize the church. Accordingly, Lennan warned, we must remember that God’s abundant offer of grace is not always met with our right response, and so the category of ecclesial sacramentality must be paired with the need for ongoing conversion. Finally, the church has an eschatological orientation. Lennan follows Rahner by insisting that eschatology is more than the “last part” of a dogmatics volume, but a structural principle (which informs the book’s subtitle, the church as an “unfinished project.”)

Michael Canaris then offered his response. In addition to drawing on Rahner, he observed, *Tilling the Church* is written in a context deeply shaped by another Jesuit, Pope Francis, who is calling the church to operate synodally. Both of these influential figures are deeply formed by Ignatius of Loyola and his *Spiritual Exercises*. Accordingly, Canaris’s response proceeded by using Ignatius as a lens to draw out several additional Rahner-inflected themes in *Tilling the Church*, with the goal of showing the church to be “incomplete”—not in the sense of being “half-baked,” but rather as on a lifelong journey into inexhaustible Mystery. Quoting from Ignatius about the need to appreciate God’s many created gifts without centering our lives on them and thus displacing God, Canaris lauded Lennan’s (Rahnerian) description of faith as an “activity” rather than “possession” and his insistence that the church, holy as it is, stands in profound need of ongoing purification, especially in light of the abuse crisis.

Subsequent themes considered included the pilgrim church, the church as future-oriented, and ecclesial reception.

Next, Mary Beth Yount offered her own response to *Tilling the Church*, praising its hope-filled vision of the church as an unfinished project and exploring the tension Lennan raises between the Holy Spirit's movement forward and structures within the church that can stifle needed growth. Lennan remarks in *Tilling the Church* that church structures are not all good or all bad, but their complexity testifies to an "abiding need for tilling." How can we, as theologians, best participate in this "tilling" work? Rahner has remarked that the church often prioritizes the calm over the storm and the old over the new. Proper "cultivation," Yount proposed, requires better understanding structural resistance, particularly when it obstructs God's work. To do so, Yount explored the sociological work of Kate Manne, especially on "backlash" by those in positions of power. While Manne focuses specifically on misogyny, Yount suggested that some of her insights have broader applications, particularly when it comes to reception in the church.

In his concluding response, Lennan reflected on the role of theologians in the church today. Though they are not in the limelight as so many were at Second Vatican Council, and while it is not particularly clear who is listening to them (even during a synodal process), Lennan warned theologians against taking themselves out of the conversation. After all, as Rahner once remarked, hope that sets limits belies its own essence.

A spirited discussion followed, moderated by Michael Rubbelke. One topic of conversation concerned the implications of "tilling." Does the cultivation process sometimes include pruning or even leveling? Who is responsible for the work of tilling? After Lennan responded that "all" need to till, the conversation turned to the ongoing synodal process, including the role of theologians in it—not only as contributors but also as listeners, particularly in our institutional and parish communities.

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