

KARL RAHNER CONSULTATION

Topic:	Rahner and Ecumenism Today: Is Unity Still an “Actual Possibility?”
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Presenters:	Catherine Clifford, St. Paul University, Ottawa Richard Lennan, Boston College School of Theology and Ministry Jill Raitt, University of Missouri

Rahner’s achievements in theology were so various and influential that his ecumenical passion is often forgotten. Yet, at the end of his life, he was still arguing that “The unity of the Church . . . is a matter of life or death for Christendom . . . Christianity can no longer afford to encounter peoples and cultures to whom it still wishes to convey its message—so far almost in vain—in its splintered and ruptured state.” In 1985, *Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility*, co-authored with Heinrich Fries, appeared in English. Fries and Rahner show how major obstacles to unity, such as the papacy and ordained ministry, need not be such, provided that they be understood in new but still faithful and orthodox ways. *Unity* garnered attention, but Rahner’s death and Cardinal Ratzinger’s hostility pushed it off the ecumenical radar. Since then, new obstacles have arisen; e.g., disputes over moral issues. Also, ecumenism has been largely Eurocentric; today’s Christianity is not. Thus, the question addressed by each presenter was “What, if anything, does Rahner still have to contribute to the cause of Church unity?”

Richard Lennan focused on Ratzinger’s allegation that *Unity*—and in particular its second thesis—ignored the issue of truth. What is truth, according to Rahner? Lennan distilled ten principles from articles written by Rahner between the end of Vatican II and the appearance of *Unity*. A proposition may be true but lack existential meaning. Propositional truths are never independent of their historical context. Ecumenical discussions must attend to faith as it actually is lived in the churches. The quest for ecclesial unity is hampered by its being confused with uniformity. The ecumenical goal is not some future “third church,” neither Protestant nor Roman Catholic. The faith of the Church has boundaries; it is not a home for any opinion whatsoever. Unity is essential for the effectiveness of the Church’s mission. No single denomination captures and embodies the whole of the faith; expressed faith is like an iceberg, just one part of much larger whole. A fundamental unity in grace unites all dialogue partners and, finally, the Reformation disputes will look quite different if they are considered from this perspective. Then we may discover new expressions of the Christian faith that will speak to people today.

Catherine Clifford recalled how J.-M. Tillard and Lukas Vischer thought that church unity was imminent in the wake of Vatican II. Now, however, recalling *Unity’s* Thesis I, “The fundamental truths of Christianity, as they are expressed in Holy Scripture, in the Apostles’ Creed, and in that of Nicaea and Constantinople are binding on all partner churches of the one Church to be,” she asked whether these still express Christianity’s formal content. She pointed out that mainline churches are downplaying, if not abandoning, the Creeds. Some of these churches practice an

“open table;” i.e., inviting any and all to receive the Eucharist. The post-conciliar growth of non-creedal and non-liturgical Christian communities has been stunning—and they do not see Christian unity as important, much less essential. Dialogue between the mainline churches and the Pentecostal communities is crucial, but how will this come about? The Roman Catholic Church would facilitate such dialogue by clarifying the meaning of the “hierarchy of truths” highlighted by *Unitatis Redintegratio* and putting it into practice, but so far it has not done so.

Jill Raitt contrasted the ecumenical pessimism of Michael Kinnamon, past Executive Secretary of the World Council of Churches and from 2007–11 the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in the USA, with the optimism for the long run of Walter Kasper. Yet Kasper argues that “the Church is wherever the Eucharist is celebrated” and that Reformation churches are 1) churches of the Word, not of the Eucharist, and 2) that their Eucharistic theologies do not support a substantial presence. Does not, however, the Gospel preached draw them to the Lord’s Supper, just as the Roman Catholic Church gathers its people to celebrate the Eucharist as the Word proclaimed that calls Christians to share in the Body and Blood of Christ? Are these two emphases mutually exclusive or may we honor both without finding these different accents church-dividing? Furthermore, Reformation churches rejected transubstantiation, but not the union of communicants with the risen Lord, the *res* of all the sacraments, but preeminently of the Eucharist. If union with Christ is accepted by these churches as the *res* of the sacrament of the Eucharist, must Roman Catholics insist further on transubstantiation?

These presentations provoked the vigorous discussion that followed.

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