

KARL RAHNER—CONSULTATION

Coordinator: Mark F. Fischer, St. John's Seminary, Camarillo
Convener: Peter Joseph Fritz, College of the Holy Cross
Presenters: Michael Canaris, Loyola University Chicago
Howard Ebert, St. Norbert College

The Friday afternoon Karl Rahner Consultation featured two papers: “A Rahnerian Reading of *Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church” by Michael Canaris, and “Locating the *Sensus Fidelium*: A Rahnerian Perspective” by Howard Ebert. Both papers engaged the International Theological Commission’s 2014 document on the *sensus fidei*.

Canaris supplemented the ITC’s document with Rahnerian ideas. He focused on three areas: (1) the relationship between the Magisterium, theologians, and the faithful at large; (2) popular religion, religiosity, and piety; and (3) the *sensus fidei* in relation to statistical majorities.

First, the ITC equates *sensus fidei* with *sensus ecclesiae*, which leads to an emphasis on the incompatibility between the *sensus fidei* and theologians’ resistance toward Magisterial teachings. Canaris recalled Rahner’s reaction to Paul VI’s declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973). Rahner insisted that the Roman authority to state doctrine authoritatively could not replace real theology. Canaris hopefully suggested that a change in accent during Francis’s pontificate may preserve a more robust theological task, yielding a deeper sense of faith.

Second, the ITC is positive on popular religion, religiosity and piety, and thus positions itself positively vis-à-vis Rahner. He regarded popular religious practices as more than ways to live out authoritative teaching. Popular religion has normative and creative influence deriving from nearness to its divinizing source. Likewise Pope Francis enthusiastically supports popular piety. Francis reminds us of Rahner’s “grand vision” of the period of the World Church: polycentric, plural in voices.

Third, while the Church respects democracy, the *sensus fidei* cannot be reduced to opinions of a statistical majority. Canaris reinforced this point with Ormond Rush’s insight into diverse expressions of faith, which reflects Rahner’s commitment to an “open church” grounded in the faithful’s asymptotic conversion in a common pilgrimage toward the life God wills. Canaris concluded gesturing toward future work on active reception in theology and ecclesial life.

Ebert contended that Rahner’s practical theology provides a bridge to sociology, which may be used as a tool to listen to and appropriate the *sensus fidei/fidelium* (mercifully abbreviated to SF). Rahner provides a strong theological basis for the validity of the SF by removing restrictions on who is/are “the faithful.” His expansive view of God’s action on the faithful raises an interesting question: is the difference between SF and official doctrine one of kind or degree?

Also, Rahner effects a conceptual clearing for theological conversations on the SF. Particularly helpful are his reflections on the hierarchy of truths. The search after truth brings Rahner to seek guidance from the sciences. He finds that traditional Catholic theology lacks mediating structures for fostering the dialogue he desires. Thus he develops his practical theology as an avenue for incorporating insights from non-theological sciences into theology. Ebert found appealing in Rahner’s practical theology its openness for experiment, particularly at the parish level.

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Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) offered a test case for how to utilize Rahner’s practical theology as a bridge toward sociology. While placing essential caveats about Bourdieu (e.g., his suspicion toward religion), Ebert proposed that Bourdieuan categories like “*habitus*,” “fields,” and “spiritual capital” could be deployed to positive effect by practical theology to understand better how the faith is mediated by environmental structures and social relationships and by subjects who exist within and between power differentials. Such theoretical-sociological reflection could have practical consequences in debates over church offices, ministries, and how to live the abundance of God’s grace.

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