

KARL RAHNER AND A PROTESTANT VIEW OF THE SACRAMENTALITY OF THE MINISTRY

The purpose of this paper is to explore the thesis that the sacramentality of holy orders as this is interpreted by Karl Rahner is compatible with one version of an authentically Reformation doctrine of the ministry.

Our topic is strictly limited in several respects. First, the comparison is between a particular Roman Catholic position as stated by a single theologian and a particular Protestant position which shall be described, in order to keep this discussion manageable, chiefly in Lutheran terms, even though Calvinistic and Anglican versions of it can also be found. The positions of most Catholics and most Protestants are much more at variance than those which we shall describe, but this is for our purposes irrelevant. We shall be attempting to identify possibilities of *rapprochement* rather than present prevailing differences.

Secondly, we are not arguing that the Catholic and Protestant views with which we deal are the same, but only that they are compatible, not contradictory, not church-dividing. An heir of the Reformation can recognize Rahner's understanding of the sacramentality of orders as theologically legitimate without compromising his fundamental convictions. Actually, as we shall see, there is a good deal of similarity between what Rahner and some Protestants would say on this topic, but it is not this, but the lack of contradiction which chiefly interests us.

Thirdly, we shall limit ourselves as much as possible to the single question of sacramentality defined as narrowly as possible. It will be impossible entirely to avoid other issues such as the distinction between laity and clergy, the sacrificial and mediatorial roles of the priesthood and questions of validity and apostolic succession, but these will be kept as brief as possible. In short, it is only one aspect of the doctrine of the ministry which will be dealt with, and com-

patibility on this may leave other important differences quite untouched.

This may seem strange, for there is a strong tendency to regard sacramentality as the most refractory of all problems in this area. As one commentator, speaking of the so-called "high church" Lutherans, puts it, no matter how "strong their emphasis on the concept of the office . . . there is no trespassing into the domain of order as sacrament. They may speak at times of an irrevocable ordination as having an indelible duty laid upon one, but not of an indelible *habitus* (i.e., sacramental character) of office. Further, Luther's fundamental principle that the sacrament of baptism is the common and sufficient basis for the priesthood of all believers as well as for special service in the church is as a rule not contested."¹ The kind of Catholic who, on his side, is most sympathetic to the ministerial emphases of certain Protestants draws a similar line. Hans Küng, for example, thinks that the point at which what he considers the best of the Lutheran views are most deficient, is that by disregarding the sacramentality of the ministry, they neglect the importance of grace for the office and thus make it so to speak, just another job.²

Thus both sides think of sacramentality as the central issue. Yet, as so often happens in interconfessional debates, a little attention shows that two different things are being spoken of. The Protestants we mentioned are objecting to a particular theory of ministerial sacramentality which they assume to be binding Catholic doctrine,

¹ G. Hoffman, "Amt und Gemeinde," *Begegnung der Christen* (ed., M. Roesle & O. Cullmann), Stuttgart & Frankfurt, 1960, p. 196. Cf. R. Josefson, "The Ministry as Office in the Church," *This is the Church* (ed. A. Nygren), Philadelphia, 1952, p. 272:

"the idea of the universal priesthood of believers means that every Christian faces the possibility of being called to the office, precisely because the needed authority does not belong to him as a person, nor is it conferred upon him by a sacramental ordination, but it belongs to the office itself."

² Hans Küng, *Structures of the Church* (tr. of *Strukturen der Kirche*) New York, 1964, p. 148:

"Does the difference between universal priesthood and special priesthood consist solely in the functions and efficacy of the officeholder? Does not the difference also lie in the special God-given charism that is bestowed through ordination and not solely in the sociological differentiation of status?"

viz., the view that through ordination there is imprinted on the soul an indelible character which is to be understood as "a *habitus* of office." The Catholic, in contrast, at least in the case of Hans Küng, is concerned, not with a particular theory, but that the sacramental dimension of induction into the service of Word and sacrament be recognized in some fashion.

This suggests that there are at least three distinct questions which need to be investigated. First, is the Reformation theological tradition opposed to all ways of understanding the ministry as sacramental or only to certain theories which have been prevalent in Roman Catholicism? Second, what are the objections to these Catholic theories, and what kind of view of the sacramentality of the ministry is possible within the Reformation context? Thirdly, if there is such a Protestant view, is it compatible with a Catholic position such as that represented by Karl Rahner?

I

It may come as a surprise to many Protestants as well as Catholics, but there can be no doubt about the answer to the first question. Instead of rejecting the sacramentality of the ministry *in toto*, the Reformers expressly affirmed that from certain points of view ordination into it can be described as a sacrament.

Calvin says of "the true office of presbyter" that he is quite willing to accord the place of sacrament to it. "For in it there is a ceremony, first taken from Scripture, then one which is not empty or superfluous, but a faithful token of spiritual grace (I Tim 4:14). However, I have not put it as number three among the sacraments because it is not ordinary or common with all believers, but is a special rite for a particular office."³

³ *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (tr. by F. L. Battles in *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. 21, Philadelphia, 1960). IV. xix. 28 Cf. *Ibid.* IV. xix. 31 and IV. 3. 16. For Calvin's interpretation of the grace of ordination, see his commentary on II Tim 1:6:

"the gift was not at this point [at ordination] conferred on him in such a way that it can be said that it had not been previously given. For it is certain that he excelled both in doctrine and in other graces before Paul ordained him to the ministry. And there is no objection to saying that when God wished to avail himself of the service of Timothy, and called

The Lutheran Confessional Writings are equally positive.⁴ Thus Melancthon writes in the *Apology* that "If order is understood in relation to the ministry of the Word, we have no objection to calling it a sacrament" because "it is commanded by God and has great promises attached to it." The specific rite of the laying on of hands can be termed a "sacrament" in view of the fact that "the Church is commanded to constitute ministers, from which it certainly follows that God approves this ministry and works through it." To be sure, he also makes clear that ordination should not be placed on the same level as the "three sacraments of salvation," i.e., baptism, the Lord's Supper and absolution.⁵

It can be seen from these quotations that in part our problem is terminological. The Reformer's criteria for "sacraments" in the strong sense were that Scripture testify expressly to their direct institution by Christ and, secondly, that the grace they communicate be saving, that is, as Luther put it, that it be for the forgiveness of the sins of the one receiving it.⁶ If one defines the word in this way, then holy orders is not a sacrament, not even for a contemporary Catholic. But if one defines it more broadly as a rite of apostolic (and in this sense, *de iure divino*)⁷ institution which causes the

him, he then further molded him and filled him with new graces and doubled those that he had already given."

Cited by Henri d'Espine, "Ordination and the Diversified Ministries of the Church," *The Church and its Changing Ministry* (ed. R. C. Johnson), Philadelphia, 1961, p. 122.

It should be noted that "In the absence of an authoritative doctrine [regarding ordination], the personal teaching of Calvin can take its place to a degree, in that it lies at the basis of most of the institutions and practices of the Reformed Churches." *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁴ For the most complete and careful study of the sacramentality of the ministry in the thought of the Lutheran reformers, see H. Lieberg, *Amt und Ordination bei Luther und Melancthon*, Gottingen, 1962, pp. 223-229, 348-352 and *passim*.

⁵ Article XIII (Cited from the tr. of T. G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Philadelphia, 1959), pp. 212-214.

⁶ Lieberg, *op. cit.*, p. 170. Cf. Luther, *Weimar Ausgabe* 54, 428, 3 f: "*Ordo non est sacramentum . . . Non habet promissionem remissionis peccatorum.*"

⁷ For Luther and Melancthon on the *de iure divino* character of the rite of laying on of hands, see Lieberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 209 ff. and 270 ff.; for Calvin, cf. *Institutes* IV. 3. 16: "For the Spirit of God establishes nothing without

grace which it signifies, then some Protestants, including certain of the most authoritative early voices, acknowledge that there is a sense in which the ministry may be called a sacrament.

It must be immediately added, however, that this acknowledgment has not been universal, nor has there been any clarity on what it implied. There are many passages in Luther, especially in his early reformatory period, which seem wholly opposed to a sacramental understanding of the ministry.⁸ Nor was any consensus achieved on how to understand the nature and relationship of the various factors which are, so to speak, involved in making a minister, viz., the inward vocation of the Holy Spirit, the outer call of the church, and the rite of ordination or of the laying on of hands. In most of Protestantism and through most of Protestant history it has been widely assumed that the Reformation denial of the sacrament of order was total and complete. This at least partly excuses the gross misrepresentations of its doctrine of the ministry which one finds even in scholarly Catholic literature.⁹

cause in the church, so we should feel that this ceremony, since it has proceeded from him, is not useless . . ."

⁸ See Lieberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 229 ff. for a balanced and persuasive summary of the evidence that Luther's attacks on ordination as a sacrament were always directed against the rite *as it had come to be practiced* and not against the "apostolic rite" of the laying on of hands. Further, it is clear from the references given that Luther affirmed that induction into the ministry involves a blessing (p. 214 ff.) and a gift of grace, of the Holy Spirit, to the minister for the exercise of his office which is so thoroughly "objective" that heretical ordinations are valid and this gift of the Spirit works judgment on the unfaithful officeholder (p. 223 ff.). His frequent attacks on the notion that ordination confers grace refer to the grace of personal justification, not to the grace of office: "*nicht für sich selbst noch für seine Person, Sondern für das Amt*" (*Weimar Ausgabe* 28, 468, 2 ff., 28 ff.; cited by Lieberg, p. 223). A failure to make this distinction has led even a competent recent investigator such as W. Brunotte to suppose that Luther did not recognize an "Amtscharisma" (*Das geistliche Amt bei Luther*, Berlin, 1959, p. 188 ff.). In contrast to this, the evidence indicates that Luther (and even more the Lutheran Confessional Writings) are open to the affirmation of what a Roman Catholic would speak of as "grace of order conferred *ex opere operato*" when *opus operatum* is understood in the sense of, e.g., the article of that name in K. Rahner and H. Vorgrimler, *Kleines Theologisches Wörterbuch*, Freiburg, 1961

⁹ For example, the 1932 article on the subject in the *Dictionnaire de Théologie catholique* (XI/2, col. 1346) says that Protestants unanimously keep the imposition of hands "*comme une coutume humaine*," and that Lutherans, Cal-

The Protestant tendency in this matter, needless to say, was largely occasioned by anti-Roman polemics. Just as Catholics surrendered the priesthood of all believers to Protestants, so the Protestants surrendered the notion of a sacramental ministry to the Catholics. To be sure, it is also possible to argue, as many Protestants as well as Catholics have done, that the essential genius or principles of the Reformation were in favor of this development. However, arguments of this kind can lead far too easily to such sweeping judgments as that, for example, of Cardinal Newman to the effect that Lutheranism by a fatal declination inevitably ends in Strauss's "open infidelity."¹⁰ It is impossible and, I trust, unnecessary to argue against such sweeping and totally unverifiable allegations. The continued existence of churches with seventy odd million members which officially affirm the Catholic creeds and the *Confessio Augustana* would seem to be sufficient refutation. Now these churches, as well as various other Protestant bodies, have not excluded, even if they do not profess, a sacramental understanding of the ministry.

II

We turn now to our second question. What kind of sacramental understanding of the ministry is possible within the Reformation tradition? Such an understanding must have two main features. First, in the words we have already quoted from the Lutheran Confessions, "If ordination is interpreted in relation to the ministry of the Word,

vinists and Zwinglians, whether of the 16th century or of today, agree fundamentally in denying "*la collation d'un pouvoir spirituel dans le sacrament d'ordre.*"

¹⁰ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, chap. 5, sec. 4: "the equable and orderly march of and natural succession of views, by which the creed of Luther has been changed into the infidel or heretical philosophy of his present representatives . . . is a proof that this change is no perversion or corruption, but a faithful development of the original idea." This is simply an extreme example of a widespread way of thinking which supposes that it is possible to discover basic Protestant or Catholic principles which are in such disagreement that the kind of *reapprochement* on the doctrine of the ministry sketched in this essay can be demonstrated by reference to these principles to be either factitious or else proof that either Rahner or the Reformers are inconsistent with their own fundamental Catholic or Protestant commitments. Needless to say, the present essay repudiates such an approach, whether in its Newmanian "romanticist" form, or in its idealist or existentialist versions.

we have no objection to calling ordination a sacrament." That is, ordination is sacramental in reference to proclamation, not in reference to what the 16th century referred to as the sacrifice of the Mass. Secondly, the sacramentality of ordination and the ministry should be understood in a personal-existential and ecclesial-functional way, not in individualistic-ontological categories; or, to phrase the contrast in scholastic language, it should be understood exclusively in terms of the grace of order, not in terms of sacramental powers and indelible characters. Briefly stated, the notions of a sacrificial priesthood, on the one hand, and of an indelible sacramental character, on the other, have historically been the two chief centers of controversy.

It is chiefly the first point, the notion of a sacrificing priesthood, which was the focus of attack in the past. The Reformers criticized it as an attempt to continue that "Levitical priesthood" which was abolished with the Old Covenant. Christ has now become the sole mediator between God and man, the sole high priest, and others share in this office simply as members of his body through baptism. To suppose that there is a special order of sacrificing priests in the church is blasphemous, and ordinations into such an order, so Luther said, are invalid (though he did not draw from this the conclusion that former Roman priests should be re-ordained).¹¹

For our purposes, however, it is unnecessary to pursue this topic. It is correct to say, I suppose, that Catholic theology as a whole no longer maintains—if it ever did¹²—the specific notions to which Protestants have objected of the priest as enacting, quite apart from the communal participation of the faithful, something like a new propitiatory benefit-gaining sacrifice of the divine victim.¹³ I

¹¹ Lieberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 169-170. Numberless passages could be cited to show that the Reformer's rejection of the sacrament of holy orders was, so to speak, incidental to their attack on the "sacrificing priesthood." It is ordination into this "Levitical" order of priests which is most definitely not a sacrament of the new covenant, but this, in their minds, was quite distinct from the question of whether what Calvin calls "the true office of presbyter" and the Lutheran Confessions "the ministry of the Word" is sacramental. See fn. 3 and 5 *supra*.

¹² Francis Clark, *Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Reformation*, London, 1960 is the most vigorous and learned effort yet made to defend 16th century Catholic theologians against the imputation that they actually taught what the Reformers accused them of on these matters.

¹³ It should be noted that Protestants continue to think, whatever Catholics

do not mean to suggest that all problems connected with the sacrificial aspect of the Eucharist have been resolved,¹⁴ but only that this is no longer the center of controversy over the ministry. Instead, the problem of the sacramental character and powers has moved to the fore.

This can be discussed on several levels. There is, on the one hand, the familiar confrontation between the ontological and metaphysical categories of scholasticism and the more personalistic ones which are now becoming popular also in Catholicism. We are all aware of the difficulties raised in our day regarding the meaningfulness of talk about metaphysical or ontological properties imprinted on the soul. We are familiar with the argument that the theologian, in order to avoid identifying a theological affirmation with the technicalities of a particular philosophical tradition, is obliged in such cases as that of the indelible sacramental character (just as in the more often discussed instance of transubstantiation) to explain what he means in language other than that of Aristotelian scholasticism. In addition, the Protestant usually maintains that the impersonal categories of this tradition are deficient, not simply because they no longer communicate effectively, but because they are intrinsically incapable of expressing the intensely personal and existential char-

may say to the contrary, that the Mass is in effect a "new" sacrifice, a sacrifice which supplements that of Calvary, as long as such statements as these are taken at face value: "*In pluribus vero missis multiplicatur sacrificii oblatio; et ideo multiplicatur effectus sacrificii, et sacramenti*" (St. Thomas Aquinas, S. T. III, 79, 7 and 3). Or this: "What is the sacrificial worth of each individual Mass offered up? The Church considers that the sacrificial worth of two Masses is just double the sacrificial worth of one Mass: her whole sacramental jurisprudence is based on that principle" (A. Vonier, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, London 1952, p. 343). See R. Prenter, "Das Augsburger Bekenntnis und die römische Messopferlehre," *Kerygma U. Dogma I* (1955) pp. 42-58, esp. p. 53, fn. 7.

¹⁴ It would seem, however, that a major step towards removing such difficulties has been taken by Vatican II's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* when it affirms that communal celebrations of the mass are to be preferred "as far as possible, to a celebration which is individual and quasi-private" (a. 27) and also by its approval of concelebration (a. 57). What is perhaps still only implicit in the council's action is explicit in K. Rahner, "Die vielen Messen und das eine Opfer," *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 71 (1949), esp. pp. 266-267. His interpretation of the sacrificial character of the Mass seems wholly unobjectionable from the point of view of the Reformers.

acter of the *res sacramenti*. These, however, are difficulties which apply to every part of the scholastic treatises on the sacraments. The specific problem which the Protestant has with the indelible character and powers of the sacrament of orders is, not that they are meaningless, but that they have objectionable implications for the whole doctrine of the ministry. They are the theological basis, so Protestants have usually supposed, for the traditional Roman hierarchical clericalism, for the division of the people of God into first and second class citizens. The priest as an individual has special spiritual properties and powers which laymen do not possess.¹⁵ Only he, as Protestant polemicists like to phrase it, can perform the miracle of transubstantiation. He is a sacred personage removed from the common things of life. Further, ordination becomes a quasi-magical transmission of personal powers by means of the laying on of hands.

It is necessary in discussions of this kind to confess that a pseudo-sacral clericalism of various types has in practice often been rampant in Protestantism also, but this, so the Protestant likes to believe, has at least been opposed by the Reformation's thoroughly functional doctrine of the ministry. We need only recall the basic points. What is all-important is not any special powers possessed by the minister as an individual, but rather the office, the function, the service for which he has been set aside of publicly proclaiming the Word and administering the sacraments. According to the original Calvinistic and Lutheran understanding (which admittedly has often been mixed in the course of history with left-wing sectarian elements), this

¹⁵ Many examples could be cited of this Protestant conviction that it is the ontological distinction between clergy and laity deriving from the sacramental character and powers of holy orders which constitutes the distinctive, and fundamentally objectionable, aspect of the Roman Catholic view of the ministry. See, e.g., Per Erik Persson, *Roman Catholic and Evangelical: Gospel and Ministry, an Ecumenical Issue*, (tr. E. H. Wahlstrom), Philadelphia, 1964, pp. 69 f. and 82 f. and J. Heubach, *Die Ordination zum Amt der Kirche*, Berlin, 1956, pp. 80-81. Heubach's analysis is particularly interesting because he insists so strongly that "*Ordinieren heisst nicht nur berufen und senden, sondern auch zum Amt der Kirche segnen*" (p. 113) with the result that he speaks at length of "*Die Unabänderlichkeit des Auftrages (Segen oder Fluch)*" (pp. 117 ff). Thus, even though he thinks of the view he represents as strongly opposed to the Roman Catholic one, nevertheless his position actually approaches the one which, as we shall later see, Karl Rahner holds.

ministerial office is of divine institution and is necessary, indeed, constitutive of the church. The community of believers is not at liberty to dispense with the office; God has intrusted it to them, and they are under obligation to fill it with appropriate men. The office stands over against the congregation, and the office-holder acts, not at all simply as a representative of the people, but *in persona Christi*.¹⁶ Nevertheless, he is in himself nothing, and the service, the office, to which he has been commissioned by Christ through the church is everything. Consequently, there is nothing to impede the layman under appropriate circumstances from performing the services of preaching and administering the sacraments with full validity and efficaciousness. Indeed, simply because the function, the service of Word and sacrament, is so important, laymen may be obligated at times to undertake these tasks. To be sure, the main Protestant churches have always stringently insisted that this should not be done except under genuinely emergency circumstances, but this is not because the unordained lack the power—every baptized Christian has the power, for example, to consecrate the elements—but for the sake of good order in the church. Protestants at this point endlessly repeat the words of St. Paul, “but all things should be done decently and in order (I Cor. 14:40).¹⁷

¹⁶ E.g., the *Apology* vii. 28 (Tappert ed., *op. cit.*, p. 173):

“When the sacraments are administered by unworthy men, this does not rob them of their efficacy. For they do not represent their own persons but the person of Christ, because of the church’s call, as Christ testifies (Luke 10:16), ‘He who hears you hears me.’ When they offer the Word of Christ or the sacraments, they do so in Christ’s place and stead.

Cf. such statements as these regarding the publicity appointed ministry from Calvin’s *Institutes*:

“But when a puny man risen from the dust speaks in God’s name, at this point we best evidence our piety and obedience toward God if we show ourselves teachable toward his minister, although he excels us in nothing” (IV. 3. 1): “For neither the light and heat of the sun, nor food and drink, are so necessary to nourish and sustain the present life as the apostolic and pastoral office is necessary to preserve the church on earth” (IV. 3. 2).

¹⁷ E.g., the Lutheran Confessions mention the possibility of the exceptional performance of “sacerdotal” functions by laymen only by adducing St. Augustine’s story of the Christian aboard ship who baptized a catechumen and was then absolved by him (Tractate 67-68, ed. cited, p. 331). The reason usually given by Lutherans and Reformed for keeping exceptions to a minimum is

It is clear, then, that this functional (or, better, service-directed) view of the ministry, opposes any notion of the sacramental communication of special ministerial powers or of an ontological character; but we now need to note that it does leave room, as we have seen the Reformers recognizing, for what is spoken of in the Catholic tradition as the specific sacramental grace of orders which has as its purpose to make the recipient a worthy minister of his office (D 701). Indeed, even though they have assiduously avoided the use of the term "sacrament," Protestants have almost invariably in their liturgical practice and generally in their theology admitted the sacramental nature of ordination in this latter sense. That is, they have followed the New Testament in regarding the rite of commissioning by the laying on of hands as an efficacious sign, a visible promise, of the gift of the Holy Spirit strengthening the ordinand for faithfulness in his service. To be sure, the gift may be refused and, consequently, in the language of the scholastic tradition, it may be that no sacramental reality whatsoever is communicated to the ordinand. Yet this need not prevent one from regarding his ordination as a sacrament, and an unrepeatable sacrament at that.

It should not be repeated even when the ordinand lacks living faith for the same reason that baptism is not repeated when received in similar circumstances. God's promise of grace, sealed by the visible rite, stands firm, and the sacrament becomes efficacious whenever the man allows God to act, when, to use Catholic terminology, the proper dispositions are present. The minister has been commissioned to serve the church in certain ways, and this commission remains effective even when the individual resists the sacramental grace which has been offered through it. In short, the limitation of the sacramental reality to the grace which makes a man a worthy servant of the office does not have the slightest trace of the Donatist or Novation heresies that a valid ministry is dependent on personal holiness.¹⁸

stated thus in a typical passage from Calvin, *Institutes*, IV. 3. 10: "Therefore, in order that noisy and troublesome men should not rashly take upon themselves to teach or to rule (which might otherwise happen), especial care was taken that no one should assume public office in the church without being called."

¹⁸ In addition to the references cited in fnn. 3 and 10 *supra* for the Reformers affirmation of the "sacramental grace of orders" (in contradistinction

In turning, thirdly, to the comparison with Karl Rahner, we discover that his view seems tailor-made to fit the two Protestant requirements we have outlined even though there is absolutely no indication that this is one of his conscious purposes. He holds that it is the sacramental grace of order, not the character or powers, which make it a sacrament, and, further, that its sacramentality is related to the ministry of the Word, to what Rahner calls the "prophetic," rather than the "cultic," element of the priesthood. However, these affirmations are embedded in a total theory which certainly intends to be fully faithful to Roman Catholic dogma, and which therefore

to indelible character and the power), note what is said by a contemporary who is representative of at least a good many Lutherans:

Zwar wird man nicht sagen können, dass durch die Ordination das Amtcharisma überhaupt erst mitgeteilt wird, aber man wird doch sagen müssen, dass dieses Charisma, das bisher nur als latentes, als Möglichkeit bei ihm war nun bei ihm bewusst—und verpflichtend festgemacht—und ihn fortan prägt und somit doch in einer ganz neuen Weise bei ihm ist. Man wird durch die Ordination nicht in einen besonderen geistlichen Stand mit spezifischen geistlichen Qualitäten hineingeordnet, wohl aber wird man mit seiner Person und Existenz an die besondere Art des Dienstes an Wort und Sakrament verhaftet, und da diese Art eine besondere Stiftung Gottes ist, muss man sagen, dass man durch Gott selbst daran festgemacht ist. E. Kinder, *Der Evangelische Glaube und die Kirche*, Berlin, 1958, pp. 158-159.

Both Kinder (p. 158) and Heubach (v. fn. 15 *supra*) also affirm, in effect, the life-time character of the ministerial vocation and the unrepeatability of ordination. This conforms to the constant practice of most Protestant bodies. Sometimes, as in the case of early French and Scots Reformed disciplines, excommunication has been decreed for those who desert the ministerial office. "Although there was no belief in the imprinting of an 'indelible character' at ordination, there was the investing of the ordinand with an almost inalienable office, or at any rate an office too spiritual to be put off except by a decree of the Church" (J. L. Ainslie, *The Doctrine of Ministerial Order in the Reformed Churches of the 16th and 17th Centuries*, Edinburgh, 1940, pp. 196-197).

Luther, in contrast, is generally said to have at one time approved re-ordination for those re-entering the exercise of the ministerial office or assuming a new charge, but this is an inference for which definite evidence is lacking (Lieberg, *op. cit.*, p. 227, fn. 315). He did, however, assert in the early period that a man who has once been made a priest can become a layman again "since he differs in no wise from a layman except by his ministerial office" (*Weimar Ausgabe* 6, 408). This, however, must be understood as a polemic against the ontologically conceived indelible character, not as a denial of the "unrepealability" of the commission and the associated blessing (Lieberg, pp. 227-228 and Heubach, *op. cit.*, pp. 112 and 117 ff).

raises questions for Protestants. We shall examine in turn what might be called the "Protestant" and "Catholic" aspects of his position.

III

First, Rahner focuses the sacramentality of the ministry on the grace of order because he insists just as strongly as any Protestant on the personal-existential nature of the sacraments and of the realities they communicate. For him, therefore, an essential part of explaining why the priesthood is a sacrament is to explain the existential importance to the individual of the priestly vocation. Unless there is something about this calling which affects the individual to the depths of his being in a unique way it would be impossible to describe it as sacramental. He curtly dismisses the notion, which Protestants have thought of as the normative Catholic one, that the indelible sacramental character is to be understood as an "inner, indestructible spiritual sign" or *habitus*. "We know so little to say about it which is theologically certain, and its explanation is necessarily so much a matter of formal generalities . . . that nothing can be derived from it for our question"—i.e., for the question of why the priesthood is existentially important and therefore sacramental. Instead, the sacramental character is simply the public signs, by which the Church visibly transmits the office, and it can be indelible because these are "a fact having social duration . . . a really historical and social perceptibility."¹⁹ Therefore, as we have said, what is sacramentally communicated in such a way as to qualify the inner being of a man is not character or official powers but rather grace. As Rahner puts it, "The communication of the authority and power of office and the sacrament as communication of grace are two processes which point in totally different directions. The universal, formal concept of official authority and empowerment signifies the possibility of a person acting in a communal role in some particular way vis-a-vis the community." (This, it might parenthetically be remarked, is an expression of what a Protestant terms a "functional" view of the ministerial office). "Grace, in contrast, qualifies a person

¹⁹ *Schriften zur Theologie*, Einsiedeln, 1962, Vol. 3, p. 302 and *The Church and the Sacraments* (tr. W. J. O'Hara), Friburg and Montreal, 1963, pp. 89-90.

in his innermost existential core *vis-a-vis* God and his own salvation."²⁰

In short, Rahner appears to agree with the Protestant who contends that because the office is a function, a service, within the community rather than a personal attribute of individual men, it is not by itself sacramental. Its sacramentality arises from the fact that those who are inducted into the office need and receive a grace, a charism, which is directed towards, as Rahner puts it, "the preservation of the faith of the *preacher* in this wholly new situation."²¹

This last sentence introduces the second "Protestant" feature of Rahner's view. The ministerial charism is directed, not primarily to the worthy exercise of the cultic power—in, e.g., the Eucharistic sacrifice—but to the proclamation of the Word. He notes, on the negative side, that the administration of the sacraments does not engage a man's whole being in a quantitatively or qualitatively new way. The validity and even the fruitfulness of the sacraments depends only minimally on the worthiness or holiness of the celebrant. All that is strictly necessary is that he have the right intention. Further, even if one thinks, not in terms of the minimally necessary, but of the desirable, one must say that the personal involvement of the priest is of the same kind as that of all Christian believers. In the Eucharist, for example, he like they "is called upon to offer the sacrifice as his own sacrifice and personally appropriate in faith and love that sacrifice of Christ which is there made present." His special role is simply a new obligation to bring to actualization the same vocation which is conferred on all believers through baptism and confirmation.²²

In contrast, on the positive side, the apostolic, prophetic aspect of the ministerial vocation puts a claim upon the total existence of the one called in a way which is both specially intense and qualitatively new.

That it is intense is clear, because, as Rahner says, "The proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not only the presentation of objective truths comprehensible in and of themselves," but it rather

²⁰ *Schriften* 3, pp. 302-303.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 311 (Italics added.)

²² *Ibid.*, p. 306.

demands the decision of faith.²³ Therefore, "It is only really possible to bear witness to the faith by being a Christian, oneself, that is, by one's own holiness . . . for one cannot refuse in oneself what one demands as necessary in others."²⁴

Words become inauthentic unless there is evidence "that the grace which is being proclaimed is reality in the preacher also." This is why the New Testament writers represent the holy *pneuma* which is necessary for genuine proclamation as one which sanctifies the proclaimer, and why they always deal with what might be called the ethics of the ministerial office in connection, not with its specifically cultic functions, but with its apostolic ones.²⁵ To be sure, the preaching of an unsanctified man may also be heard as fruitfully "true" and not simply externally "correct," but this happens only because he speaks within the Church, within a communal context where there is visible evidence of the connection between the Gospel and holiness.²⁶

It is clear from this that the preacher's vocation as such demands a more intense existential involvement than do other callings. To be sure, God asks of all Christians that love and faith be visible realities in their lives, but this is not ordinarily a necessary condition for the adequate performance of their day-to-day tasks, for building good bridges, digging good ditches, or writing a fine sonnet. Their faith need not—in some cases, should not—be directly manifest in the products of their labors, whereas in the case of the preacher, as Rahner puts it, "speech must itself be faith."²⁷

Even this, however, is not a new, a unique, qualification of the priest's existence because every Christian is at times called upon to testify to his Lord in such a way that speech is faith.²⁸ What ultimately distinguishes the existential situation of the preacher from that of the laymen is twofold. First, his job is to witness, he is to seek out new times and places in which to speak of Christ, whereas

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 307-308.

²⁴ *Church and Sacraments*, p. 105.

²⁵ *Schriften* 3, pp. 308 and 311.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 308, fn.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

the laymen is asked simply to be prepared to do this when the occasion offers, when it is "natural" to do so in the daily round. The preacher, as Rahner puts it, must be prepared to be "mistaken for an insensitive fanatic who intrudes in the private affairs of other people."²⁹ Secondly, the preacher, as appointed by the Church and in distinction from the layman, does not so much testify of his own faith or being as a Christian, but directly of Christ.³⁰

The conclusion of these considerations, is that the preacher's task places a claim on the whole of his existence which both in intensity and in character is different from that laid upon Christians in general.³¹ It is this which explains why the special sacrament is connected with it.

There is nothing in this, it should be noted, which minimizes the importance of lay vocations. They also may be of immense existential importance for the Christian life, and they also, therefore, have a sacramental character. But the vocational sacraments of the Christian life in general are simply baptism and confirmation. These suffice for all the different callings, including the monastic and ascetic ones.³² There are only two exceptions. One, which we have not previously mentioned, is marriage, for life in unity with another qualifies a person's whole being, not simply certain aspects, in such a way as to constitute an essential specification of the existence of the Christian.³³ It consequently is also a special sacrament. The other is, of course, the priesthood. In neither case, however, does the recipient of these special vocational sacraments have an advantage in the attainment of saintliness over those who are unmarried or unordained.

This, then, is what we have presumed to call the "Protestant" side of Rahner's position. Especially in his treatment of the proclamation of the Gospel as a sacramental vocation he has presented a Reformation insight with more eloquence and theological precision than any contemporary Protestant I know. I am reminded of a passage from the great English Congregationalist theologian of half a century ago, P.T. Forsyth:

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 304.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 286 and 303.

We can never sever that great impressive idea of a real Sacrament from the idea of the Ministry. . . . In the sacrament of the Word the ministers are themselves the living elements in Christ's hands—broken and poured out in soul, even unto death; so that they may not only witness Christ, or symbolise him, but . . . actually convey him crucified and risen.³⁴

In turning now to the specifically Catholic elements in Rahner's theory, we shall simply ask whether his approach enables him to present these in such a way that they are compatible with a Reformation understanding of the ministry. It will be possible only to advance a few theses without in any way entering into a full discussion of the major issues in ecclesiology and sacramental theology which they raise.

My basic contention is that Rahner proceeds, as Protestants generally have done, with a basically functional understanding of the ministry rather than a static, ontological one. The office is completely instrumental to the purposes for which it exists in the Christian community. It is not independent of or prior to that community. It is validated by the adequacy with which it fulfills its proper tasks. In short, it exists for the Church, not the Church for it. It is wholly in the service of the people of God.

However, from this functional starting point, Rahner reaches Catholic conclusions because his view of the Church which the ministerial office serves is different from the usual Protestant one. Thus his divergence from the Reformation is not in his view of the ministry *per se*, but in his ecclesiology which leads him to analyze the functions of the office differently. I shall develop this point in reference to the priority he gives to the cultic over the prophetic aspect of the priesthood, in reference to his explanation of why ordination is a sacrament in the strict sense, and not simply a sacramental, and in reference to that emphasis on juridical regularity and visible continuity in the transmission of the office which Protestants generally

³⁴ P. T. Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments*, London, 1953 (first publication in 1917), pp. 140, 141. Cited in R.S. Paul, *Ministry*, Grand Rapids, 1965, p. 139. In concluding this section on the "Protestant" side of Rahner's position, it should be observed that I shall not examine the question of whether it is reconcilable with those official statements of Roman Catholic doctrine which may at times appear, at least to a non-Catholic, incompatible with it.

regard as the most incorrigibly "dysfunctional" aspect of the Catholic view.

First, it is because Rahner thinks of the Church as actualizing its essence most fully in the celebration of the sacraments, especially of the Eucharist,³⁵ that he is able to conclude that the most important aspect of the priesthood is the cultic one. Preaching is instrumental to this. To be sure, it is an indispensable instrument because "the words of these sacraments can only really be spoken in the context of the preaching of faith";³⁶ and yet the preacher's role is ultimately subordinate to the priestly one.

This clearly diverges sharply from the Protestant stress on the primacy of the Word, but still it may be questioned that this implies incompatibility. Together with many other contemporary Protestants who have been influenced by that ecumenical movement known as the liturgical renewal, I find myself wondering whether the Reformation emphasis on preaching must not be understood as fundamentally conditioned by the late medieval neglect of the Word. It is utterly unhistorical to think of it as opposed to a position such as Rahner's for which the proclamation of the Gospel is indispensable even if, so to speak, subordinate, and according to which it is the existentially decisive aspect of the priestly vocation. There are a good many loyal sons of the Reformation who are not in the least inclined to hold that the church actualizes its essence more fully when a congregation listens passively to a sermon than when nourished and prompted by the fruitful hearing of the Word, it gathers at the Lord's table thus to proclaim his death until he come.³⁷

Somewhat the same point can be made in reference to Rahner's argument that the ministry is not simply a sacramental, but a

³⁵ "If we distinguish in this way between the Church as a mere institution . . . and the Church as 'event' . . . she becomes an actual event, with a spatio-temporal tangibility, in the highest degree when she becomes event as the communion of saints, as a society . . . [and] the celebration of the Eucharist is the most intensive event of the Church." *Theology for Renewal* (tr. C. Hastings and R. Strachan), New York, 1964, pp. 17-18.

³⁶ *Church and Sacraments*, p. 103.

³⁷ For a balanced Protestant statement of the importance of both preaching and the sacrament, see V. Vajta, *Luther on Worship* (tr. U. S. Leupold), Philadelphia, 1958, pp. 70-75.

sacrament. This depends on his view of the Church as the "*Ur-Sakrament*," the primordial sacrament of Christ's continued saving presence in the world. All the actions of the Church, in so far as it is faithful to its nature, are sacramental, i.e., "historical, spatio-temporal phenomena manifesting the salvific action of God."³⁸ What distinguishes the sacraments *per se* from these many sacramentals are two factors, first, that in them the essence of the Church "is fully engaged and committed"³⁹ and, second, that this happens in situations decisive for the salvation of the individual.⁴⁰ The first factor is clearly present in the case of the ministry. As Rahner puts it, "The really fundamental offices in the Church are the most indispensable constituents of the Church herself" because through them are exercised such vital functions as "bearing witness" and celebrating the Eucharist.⁴¹ The second factor is also in evidence because, as we have seen, grace is necessary for the exercise of these functions,⁴² and thus the act of handing on the ministry "also has as its purpose the sanctification of the man who receives the ministry."⁴³

Now, this line of reasoning is quite without Protestant parallels (which, to be sure, is not surprising because it largely lacks Catholic precedents also). However, as far as I can see, there is nothing in it which is incompatible with the major concerns of the Reformation. The *sola fide* certainly does not oppose the view that the Church is the basic sacrament as long as this is interpreted in terms of a personal-existential sign theory of sacramental causality. Further, both Luther and Calvin agreed that the ministerial office was constitutive of the Church as long as this was understood functionally in terms of the service of the Word and Sacraments. Consequently, it is possible from an authentically Protestant point of view to draw

³⁸ *Church and Sacraments*, p. 31.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* Cf. fn. 16 *supra* for a Protestant (Calvin's) expression of the indispensability of the ministerial office.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 98. However, this sanctification should not be viewed as suggesting that priests have an advantage over laymen in becoming personally holy. This sanctification has to do with what Rahner speaks of as the "preservation" of the faith of the preacher (fn. 21, *supra*) in his difficult situation where he must be prepared to be "mistaken for an insensitive fanatic" (fn. 29, *supra*).

the conclusion that ordination (as well as other of the Church's acts additional to baptism and the Lord's Supper) is of such importance that it can be classified as more than a sacramental, as a sacrament.⁴⁴ To be sure, the Protestant would continue to regard the assertion that there are precisely seven sacraments, no more and no less, as questionable because based on the declarations of an ecclesiastical authority whose competence in such matters he does not recognize.

This brings us, lastly, to the way in which Rahner's approach makes possible a functional interpretation of those elements in the Roman Catholic doctrine of the ministry which seem most dysfunctional, most "hierarchical" in the bad sense, most opposed to the primacy of service. The problem of indelibility, of "once a priest always a priest," has in effect already been dealt with when it was pointed out that the indestructibility of the sacramental character derives, for Rahner, from the life-long nature of the priestly vocation and the consequent permanence of the *signum* which is ordination.⁴⁵ In practice Protestants have generally agreed with this, for they have refused to re-ordain those who re-enter the ministerial service even when they have professed to believe that one who has left that service becomes in every respect indistinguishable from a layman. Even in doctrine, however, there have been in the past as now a good many Protestants who have insisted that the call to the ministry, once accepted, lays an irrevocable claim on a man's entire remaining life.⁴⁶

More difficult is the problem of the Roman Catholic limitation of the ministerial office in the full sense of those who have been regularly ordained into the apostolic succession. This seems, to the Protestant, a prime example of the juridicism and sacerdotalism which denies the primacy of service. Once again, however, Rahner's view of the Church makes possible a thoroughly functional interpretation of Catholic emphasis on the importance of regularity and continuity in the transmission of the office. These are important, not

⁴⁴ i.e., a Protestant, it would seem, could agree with Rahner's way of distinguishing between primary and secondary sacramental acts. See passages referred to in fnn. 39 and 40 *supra*.

⁴⁵ See fnn. 19 and 33.

⁴⁶ See fn. 18 *supra*.

because some magical power is communicated by the laying on of hands, but because the Church, in one of its dimensions, is a thoroughly this-worldly society, an historically and sociologically concrete people comparable to a nation. Just as the continued existence of a nation as a distinct people is, in the long run, largely dependent on the continuity and stability of national institutions (e.g., the state), so the regular transmission of office is an indispensable function by which "the Church in one important respect keeps on reconstituting herself anew."⁴⁷ The traditional objections of Protestants, it would seem, do not apply to this line of argument. It forces them to ask whether the very functionalism on the basis of which they have rejected the importance of what they have been inclined to call "mechanical succession" does not require them to incorporate into their understanding of the ministerial office the growing modern awareness of the historical and sociological conditionedness of the Church. It, like all human communities, depends far more on visible institutionalized unity and continuity than they have generally supposed; and it does so, not because these institutions are divine in the sense of being exempt from sin and failure (as Catholics have tended to argue), but for the very Protestant-sounding reason that the Church is thoroughly human.

Even granting this, however, the Protestant would at this point like to press the question of whether a functional approach can justify the rigidity and exclusiveness of at least most Catholic concepts of validity and legitimacy. To cite what has become a familiar example, does not functionalism imply that the isolated lay Christians in 17th century Japan should have filled the offices God has entrusted to his Church? Was it not their responsibility to ordain some from among their number to act as priests and bishops, and would not the ministry of these men have been fully valid assuming their willingness and desire for recognition by the universal Church whenever this might become possible? Rahner, in contrast to some other Catholic theologians,⁴⁸ has not discussed such ideas, but it

⁴⁷ *Church and Sacraments*, pp. 11 ff. and 97-98.

⁴⁸ H. Küng, *op. cit.*, 201-207 and, much more extensively, F. J. van Beeck, "Towards an Ecumenical Understanding of the Sacraments," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* III (1966) pp. 57-112.

seems that there is nothing in his basic position to exclude them. In short, I am not sure that his outlook is incompatible with the Reformation view that all Christians through baptism have the powers of the ministerial office even though these can be validly exercised by laymen only under very special circumstances.

This analysis suggests the conclusion that Rahner's view of the ministry considered by itself is not fundamentally opposed to a certain type of authentically Reformation position. The great divide comes, as so often, on the question of the nature of the Church's indefectibility and infallibility. Is it possible for the ministry of the Church to become so unfaithful and corrupt that it is legitimate to establish new ministerial orders, as was done in the 16th century? The heirs of the Reformation continue to answer "yes" to this question even when they view the break as an immeasurable tragedy, even when they regard the establishment of separate ministries as an emergency measure which they hope will some day no longer need to continue.⁴⁹ Roman Catholics, in contrast, continue to answer "no." Yet we must continue to work on both sides towards overcoming even this barrier. Perhaps we can gain some hope and encouragement for this task in the possibilities examined in this paper of a growing unity in the understanding of the ministerial office which God has given to his Church.

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⁴⁹ H. Küng, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-143, presents the fullest summary in English of the literature about the Reformer's attitude on this point.