

Introduction

In its explicit formulation the classical Christology of the Incarnation does not give expression in a clear and immediate way to the *soteriological* significance of the Christ event. This is especially true of western Christianity's understanding. Perhaps because of western individualism, the idea of an 'assumption' of the *whole* human race *in* the individual human reality of Jesus is rather foreign to their way of thinking. Within this horizon of understanding, then, the hypostatic union is the constitution of a person who *performs* redemptive activity, provided that his actions are moral and that his accomplishment is accepted by God as representative for the human race. But he does not mean in his very *being* salvation.¹

About 300 feet to the south of the Main Building at the University of Notre Dame stands a statue of Jesus. A look at the center of Jesus's chest reveals his radiant Sacred Heart, after which the basilica on campus (which also stands about 300 feet away) is also named. His arms are spread widely and extended in a welcoming gesture to the north, greeting those who descend the front steps toward the central part of campus. This statue of Jesus also faces the towering statue of Mary, which stands prominently on the top of the Main Building's golden dome (Figure 1).

This piece of artwork expresses an important soteriological message, one which is particularly poignant during the campus-wide stations of the cross that takes place during Holy Week. During this two-hour procession, a fourteen-foot cross is carried by students, eventually to the penultimate station located directly in front of Mary on the dome, very close to this statue. As at every other station, the people gathered

1. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (hereafter *FCF*) (New York: Crossroad, 2007), 292–93 (emphasis original).

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intone, “Behold, behold, the wood of the cross, on which is hung our salvation; O come, let us adore.” Notably, these words do not refer to Jesus as our *Savior*, the one who brings about our salvation, but rather, as our *salvation itself*.² This soteriological message is further underlined by the Sacred Heart statue, beneath which is a plaque which bears the words, *Venite Ad Me Omnes* (“Come unto me All”). The Christ depicted here is not simply dispensing grace which he has merited (i.e., “Receive the fruit of my work”), but is, rather, inviting the observer toward him, beckoning the world into his open arms, where it can enter into his radiant, Sacred Heart.



Figure 1: Sacred Heart of Jesus statue, located immediately south of the Main Building at the University of Notre Dame

This book can be summarized as an argument that the theology of Karl Rahner has this same soteriological insight at its core: Jesus is best understood not just as a super-agent who performs and makes possible our salvation, but as the very locus of salvation itself. Since salvation consists in our existing in the immediate presence of God, partaking in his very life and even nature (2 Pet 1:4), this insight could also be

2. The reference to Jesus as salvation itself is confirmed by the phrase which follows, “let us adore.” Properly speaking, the wood of the cross is only *venerated*, whereas God alone *adored*. Thus, the object of the second clause is not the wood of the cross, but rather, the salvation (i.e., Jesus) just mentioned.

expressed in Pauline terms: Our eternal life lies in our becoming “members” of the body of Jesus (1 Corinthians 12), the one who is both fully human and fully God (Philippians 2); Christian existence is one of being “in” Christ, who sums up all creation in himself (Ephesians 1), the New Adam (Romans 5).

In order to make the case that Rahner exemplifies this kind of soteriological rationale, I utilize a theological category under the term “representative soteriology.” Although the word “representative” has been used in soteriological discussions in a number of ways, I specify the shape of this category by appealing to three particular markers and the way in which they interact, namely: (i) Christ, gathering up the human family in himself, brings us before God, (ii) Christ mediates the presence of God to us, and (iii) Christ effects our salvation in a person-centered, rather than a primarily act-centered, manner (Jesus not only *does* our salvation—he *is* our salvation). In such a model, “atonement” cannot be reduced to a particular feat or accomplishment of “making costly amends”; instead, it is a broader, interpersonal term signifying the reconciliation between God and humanity, a reconciliation encompassed in the Logos incarnate.³ Paradigmatic instances of representative soteriology occur in the theology of the early church fathers, especially that of Irenaeus of Lyons and his idea of “recapitulation.” Representative soteriology differs in very important ways from the idea of “physical redemption,” a purely ontological and incarnational theory of atonement attributed broadly to the church fathers in the early twentieth century.

Although the next chapter itself provides a more thorough introduction to the book’s outline, method, and objectives, let me say a brief word here about how it unfolds. The first chapter surveys the secondary literature on Rahner’s soteriology. In this literature, Rahner’s soteriological thought is predominately described as “sacramental,” both by his critics (e.g., Hans Urs von Balthasar, who judges the themes of “symbol” and “solidarity” to be theologically insufficient for various reasons) and supporters (e.g., Joseph Wong, who describes Jesus as irrevocably establishing God’s salvific will in the word through a sacramental mode). My primary thesis is not that this “sacramental” classification is wrong, but that it only tells part of the story: In Rahner’s particular system of thought, sacramental and representative soteriologies necessarily supplement one another. In the second chapter, I

3. On this more ancient meaning of “atonement,” see Gerald O’Collins, *Jesus Our Redeemer: A Christian Approach to Salvation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 10–15.

offer an in-depth look at this “sacramental” character of Rahner’s soteriology, analyzing its basis in his theology of *das Realsymbol* and arguing that the way Rahner speaks of Jesus as *das Realsymbol* inevitably leads to a theologically rich idea of “representation.” In the third chapter, I move away from Rahner’s writings in order to consider classical, patristic instances of representative soteriology; here, Irenaeus of Lyons looms especially large. In chapter 4, I turn back to Rahner, examining the soteriology operative in his early writings, which draw heavily and explicitly upon the patristic categories treated in the previous chapter; in doing so, I focus especially on his theology dissertation, *E latere Christi* (“From the Side of Christ”).⁴ Finally, the last chapter examines work from the latter half of Rahner’s career, demonstrating that the representative soteriology which he adopted during his early, patristic phase continues to have a formative impact on his mature theology.

It is very important to clarify that although Balthasar’s critique serves, to some extent, as a point of departure for my argument, I do not intend for this book to be a work in “Rahner vs. Balthasar” polemics. The contemporary Catholic Church and the theologians within it are, in my judgment, frequently divided in an excessive and tribalist fashion, often accompanied by broad (and often politically charged) labels of “liberal” and “conservative.” There are indeed very important theological differences between Rahner and Balthasar, and these differences certainly deserve to be studied in a careful and critical way. However, my work here is not primarily concerned with such differences, and even less is it an exercise in Balthasar-bashing. Rather, my intention is to point out and elaborate upon a dimension of Rahner’s thought which has been significantly underappreciated by his critics and apologists alike. Since Balthasar’s critique provides an articulate and very convenient entry point into how Rahner’s soteriology is typically (and only partially) understood, I have made use of it.

To this point, I should also add a short autobiographical note—namely, that this Balthasarian critique overlaps to a large extent with my own suspicious reaction to Rahner upon first encountering his thought over a decade ago in an undergraduate course called “Christian Anthropology.” At that time, I was perplexed as to how Rahner’s

4. *E latere Christi: Der Ursprung der Kirche als zweiter Eva aus der Seite Christi des zweiten Adam, eine Untersuchung über den typologischen Sinn von Joh 19, 34* [“From the Side of Christ: The Origin of the Church as Second Eve from the Side of Christ the Second Adam, An Examination of the Typological Meaning of John 19:34”] in *Spiritualität und Theologie der Kirchenväter*, eds. Andreas Batlogg et al, vol. 3 (1999) of *Karl Rahner: Sämtliche Werke* (hereafter *SW*), 32 vols. (Freiburg i.Br: Herder, 1995-), 1–84.

theological anthropology, with its ideas of the “supernatural existential,” human freedom, and self-transcendence, made any essential connection to Jesus Christ. I certainly recognized the maxim that “Christology may be studied as self-transcending anthropology, and anthropology as deficient Christology,”⁵ but it was unclear to me how Jesus could function for Rahner as anything more than a prime instance of successful humanity. By the end of this undergraduate course, I clearly understood that Rahner’s anthropology posited that the free human person’s “Yes” to grace was always a “Yes” to Christ, but it would take a couple of graduate courses and further study of Rahner’s theology of *das Realsymbol* before I had more than a superficial understanding about why this was the case. It was only later that I discovered that *das Realsymbol* provides *only part* of Rahner’s answer to this connection between the believer, grace, and Christ. Thus, this book stands as the next major step in my own quest as a theologian to fully appreciate the role which Christ plays in Rahner’s thought.

Throughout the process of research and writing, I have come to appreciate how Rahner’s soteriology is, to a large degree, encapsulated by that Sacred Heart statue which I walked by so many times during my studies at Notre Dame. Perhaps it is symptomatic of being overinvested in my own small project, but whenever I return to South Bend and visit this statue that stands at the heart of Our Lady’s great campus, I cannot help but hear Rahner’s words:

I want to see the pierced side of him who has locked me in his heart and who therefore took me with him when he went home, passing over from this world through death to the Father, so that I, too, am now where only God can be. I want to see the wood of the Cross, on which the salvation of the world, my salvation, hung. Come let us adore him.⁶

5. “Current Problems in Christology,” *Theological Investigations* (henceforth *TI*) 1:149–213, at 164, note 24.

6. “Good Friday: ‘Behold the Wood of the Cross . . .,’” in *The Great Church Year: The Best of Karl Rahner’s Homilies, Meditations, and Sermons* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 149–54 at 154.