‘A Spirituality of silence’
An interpretation of Karl Rahner and his importance as a resource for contemporary initiatives in spiritual formation

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Summary of thesis:

This thesis offers an interpretation of the life and work of Karl Rahner with the specific purpose of introducing and recommending him as an important source for contemporary initiatives in spiritual formation. The guiding notion through which this thesis is developed is that of a perceived ‘spirituality of silence’. This notion is explored and developed with reference to Rahner’s biography, his Ignatian spiritual roots, his first and most widely read book of prayers and his theologies of mystery, word and sacrament. Finally, the thesis facilitates an extended discussion between the dimensions of ‘spirituality of silence in Rahner’ and the contemporary spirituality of Western culture and the place and role of the church. An extended version of this summary is offered in the introductory section of the thesis proper.

Declaration:

‘I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text’.

Signed: [Signature] Date: 8/9/09
An Introduction to this Thesis

Karl Rahner has often been referred to as ‘the most significant Roman Catholic theologian of the Twentieth Century’ and/or ‘one of the most significant Christian theologians of the Twentieth Century’\(^1\). However, as with many ‘great influences’ in theology, it is common to find that ‘the Christian on the street’ has never heard of the name, let alone investigated and considered the associated school of thought. Within the non-Roman Catholic faith communities, even amongst the ranks of the clergy and lay-theologically educated, it is common to find only the vaguest awareness of the meaning and influence of the theologian Karl Rahner (‘Rahner … wasn’t he the guy who had something to say about the immanent/economic trinity?’). Thus the primary purpose of this thesis is to provide a credible foundation from which to say something intelligible and accessible about Karl Rahner to a potential audience far broader than Roman Catholic academic theologians.

There are many angles from which one could seek to profile and interpret the life and thought of Karl Rahner, his theological disposition could reasonably be described with any singular or combination of the following adjectives: ‘philosophical’, ‘transcendental’, ‘academic’, ‘existential’, ‘pastoral’, ‘apologetic’, ‘spiritual’, ‘historical’, ‘Jesuit’, ‘Ignatian’, ‘reformist’, ‘post-modern’. The meaning behind all of these adjectives has something to contribute to our understanding of Rahner’s scholarly and pastoral activity and output as we will see as this thesis unfolds. Which of these adjectives is the best and most authoritative descriptor remains the subject of ongoing debate amongst Rahner interpreters though certainly the cluster, ‘pastoral, spiritual and Ignatian’ feature strongly in current sympathetic literature\(^2\).

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\(^1\) See chapter 1, ‘The deep silence of the pastoral theologian who listens before speaking’, for specific references reflecting these accolades.

The particular angle from which this thesis chooses to view and interpret Karl Rahner is defined in the title ‘A Spirituality of Silence’ and it is expedient to make some comment following about why this particular interpretive lens has been chosen. Firstly, this thesis proceeds from the view that the writings of Karl Rahner, whether complex academic apologetic or plain prayers of the heart, are motivated and empowered by a deep inner and personal mystical encounter with God. Secondly, that the primary value of a reflective engagement with the writings of Karl Rahner is found in its affective influence. Rahner’s writings have the potential to draw the reader into the very spiritual life from which the writings emerge. To read Karl Rahner may well enlighten and inspire the intellect but ultimately will warm the heart. Thirdly, the term ‘silence’ is one that seems to periodically permeate Rahner’s work and is reflected in many ways in what we know of his life from the biographical literature. Fourthly, it seems that ‘spirituality’ and ‘silence’ are exactly what is needed and what is lacking in our contemporary Western culture and its associated contemporary expressions of faith community. In short, this thesis chooses to interpret Karl Rahner though lenses that seek to bring into conversation the primary essence of his enduring legacy with the great existential need of our time and culture.

The approach of this thesis is not to begin by defining ‘spirituality’ (something of a contemporary obsession and oxymoron) and then interpreting Rahner through a particular, pre-established grid. Rather, this thesis chooses to read Rahner in relation to significant thematic aspects of his life and work and seeks to construct from such a reflective reading notions and concepts of how his ‘spirituality of silence’ may be reasonably described. The first five chapters offer an unfolding exegesis of the notion of silence as a spiritual dimension of Rahner’s life and work, in perpetual conversation with considerations for application to contemporary ministries of spiritual formation, that presume a Christian basis. Chapters one to three focus on the development of the concept of silence and spirituality in Rahner from the perspective of his biography, his roots in the

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3 A similar approach has been taken in a far more systematic format by D. Marmion, *A spirituality of everyday faith – a theological investigation of the notion of spirituality in Karl Rahner* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1988). Marmion’s work emphasizes the fact that Rahner himself never sought to define the term ‘spirituality’ though his life and work speak volumes about the concept.
spirituality of St. Ignatius and his first and (arguably) most significant book of prayers, *Encounters with silence*. Chapters four and five focus on the further development of the concept by focusing on his academic theology of mystery and of word and sacrament. The final chapter focuses primarily on the potential conversations between the concepts of Rahner’s spirituality of silence and various approaches to and understandings of spirituality within the broader contemporary culture.

It should be noted that contemporary Rahner scholarship increasingly views synergies of meaning between Rahner’s devotional spiritual writings and his complex academic theology. Therefore it should not surprise the reader to find that the ongoing development of the concept of spirituality of silence in relation to the later chapters echoes, reinforces and expands on the insights drawn from his biography, spiritual roots and primary text rather than introduces radically new and different ideas. The purpose of including the more laborious exegesis of Rahner’s academic theology is the conviction that the theological basis of spiritual effect is important and that a holistic sense of Rahner in all of his dimensions is necessary for a balanced view. In addition it may also be said that an important dimension of Rahner’s spirituality is reflected in the great lengths that he went to in assisting the Church in re-framing its understanding of a truly authentic way of being spiritual in a contemporary world. In this sense, his complex theologizing may be understood as an authentic expression of his spiritual zeal as well as a delicate and demanding intellectual exercise.

This thesis offers a positive interpretation of Karl Rahner from the conviction that his life and work offers a most important spiritual legacy that ought to be made broadly accessible. That being said, this thesis does not ignore the various and inevitable theological criticisms associated with his work and seeks to include some where relevant in the conversation. Clearly, not everything that Rahner said and did is immediately relevant and even legible to the contemporary Christian or spiritual seeker. It is no doubt true that many of Rahner’s philosophical constructions of the existential spiritual life are

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4 Whilst Rahner himself consistently advocated the importance of a spirituality of experience his life and work exemplify his view that developing and understanding a coherent theology of the spiritual life was in itself an important and necessary part of engaging both God and humanity with the whole person.
somewhat superseded by more recent developments of thought and by the sheer reality of the knowledge explosion in our information age. As with any historical leader in Christian thought and practice, even one whose passing is as relatively recent as Rahner’s (1985), there can be no simple ‘cut and paste’ application of their thought. There is, however, something about this Roman Catholic theologian that profoundly speaks to deep longings in our time and culture for meaningful connection to the sacred and transcendent. It is the profound hope of this author that in some small way this text might become the basis of a bridge between a great spiritual director and a contemporary culture so desperately in need of a renewed connection to the sacred element of human existence.