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Considering Hope

Rachel Henry

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ABSTRACT:
Hope based on an expected outcome can be elusive in a world that contains so much suffering. This piece considers Karl Rahner’s theological hope as a more appropriate and helpful framework in the context of the diminishing vocations to monastic communities in the United States.

Considering Hope
by Rachel Henry

Anyone who takes the time to observe monastic communities in the U.S. will notice that they are, as Elizabeth Johnson says, “for all practical purposes...passing away.”¹ The impending loss is substantial for

those who rely on these communities to provide a peaceful place apart, and one who cares for these communities can’t help but wonder how monastics themselves are approaching these changes. Given their general clear-headed and clear-heartedness as well as the joy evidenced in their daily living, they appear to have opted for neither despair nor resignation. Their response must instead be the way of living that Karl Rahner calls hope, which could be an example for us all of how to live productively during times of change and upheaval.

Rahner’s description of hope is strikingly beautiful:

Theological hope … is the free and trustful commitment of love to the ‘impossible’, i.e. to that which can no longer be constructed from materials already present to the individual himself and at his disposal. It is called the expectation of that which is absolute gift, the giver of which withdraws himself into an unnamable incomprehensibility…. It cannot forbid itself to conceive of the inconceivable, because that inconceivable is precisely and inescapably present in existence. 2

What a relief to have hope freed from the bounds of planning and expected results and relocated into the “inconceivable” and “incomprehensible” that is nonetheless “inescapable,” into our relationship with the holy mystery that Rahner says constantly calls us beyond ourselves. This hope can stand up to the “concentrated historical suffering and evil” with which “human reason cannot in fact cope,” 3 as Edward Schillebeeckx puts it, whereas any hope that originates in our imaginations will eventually fail because it must be as finite as we are. Only hope whose source is outside of oneself makes any sense.

Rahner is speaking of this hope in the context of death, but seeing as the inconceivable is “present in existence” and the kingdom of God is both at hand and to come, it’s fair to say, as Mary Catherine Hilkert does,

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that “God makes a way when there is no way” on this side of the veil as well. This truth does not cancel out the truth that there is “an excess of suffering and evil” in the world for which “the Christian message does not give an explanation.” Rather, it affirms the necessity for Christians to “preach neither cross, death, nor resurrection, but the entire paschal mystery of the death, life, and resurrection of Jesus.” That is, Christians are called to do what the One they profess to follow did: hold the tensions of this creation and refuse to settle for one side or the other—to deny the existence of love or hate, to separate divinity from finitude—until in and through God, all is transformed into God.

Though the passing away of the religious orders that causes Elizabeth Johnson to ask “How is hope born?” is not the evil to which Schillebeeckx refers, it is a death, an ending, an enormous loss, and likely a source of suffering. The monastic response to the beginnings of this ending does not appear to be using reason to try to cope, to hold onto what exists; it appears, rather, to be living into hope. The sisters of St. Benedict’s Monastery in St. Joseph, Minnesota, for example, keep at the center of their lives the truth that “instead of dying into nothingness, Jesus dies into the living mystery of God.” Each time one of the sisters dies, the announcement reads “born into eternal life.” This announcement does not hold with Schillebeeckx’s description of death as “absurd” but rather sees death as the next step in life. It is a reverent acceptance of the goodness of our creatureliness.

If we can pray, as Michael Himes recommends, “may God be God, and may I be a creature,” if we can remember that “God will have the

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5 Schillebeeckx, “God Does Not Want Mankind to Suffer,” 725, 728.
6 Hilkert, “Preachers of Grace,” 296.
7 “Hold, carry, and transform” comes from a talk Ronald Rolheiser gave on “Adult Generative Discipleship” at the Religious Education Congress in Los Angeles, date unremembered.
8 Johnson, “Resurrection,” 404.
9 Johnson, “Resurrection,” 408.
last word in our lives…: Let there be life,”¹² then we can order our lives around that “free and trustful commitment of love to the ‘impossible’,” then we can be people of hope in and for this world not because we’re wishing to skip ahead to eternal life but because we “[expect] that which is absolute gift”—we trust in the resurrection now and to come.

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Bibliography


