

Karl Rahner and the Immortality of the Soul

Mark F. Fischer
St. John's Seminary, Camarillo, CA

Do the assertions of Karl Rahner (1) that the soul does not exist for its own sake but is a “principle” of being, and (2) that one must reject anthropological dualism in order to consider the body and soul a unity, endanger the traditional doctrines of the soul’s independence and immortality? Rahner’s Christology says no. As a principle of being, the soul “causes” the body to realize its potential for immortality. United with the body, the soul is the seat of human (distinct from animal) nature, capable of spiritual growth. Immortality and independence reflect the divine Word’s entrance into human nature.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Father Klein for his implicit presentation of the sacramental principle, namely, that the tangible world of material reality is indeed the realm of spirit. For us Rahnerians, spirit manifests itself wherever we express our fundamental orientation (in Father Klein’s phrase) to “that which lies beyond our world.” We and the world are sacraments of God, signs that not only testify to God’s existence, but make the divine reality actual in our words and deeds. This theme pervades the thought of Karl Rahner.

Father Klein indirectly extends the sacramental principle to the doctrine of the immortal soul, a doctrine that traditionally provides a motive for upright behavior in this life and hope for eternal life after death. He quotes a passage from Rahner’s *Foundations of Christian Faith*,¹ implying that spirit and soul are synonyms in the vocabulary of Scholasticism. Indeed, the indirect contention of the middle section of Father Klein’s paper is that, for Rahner, spirit and soul mean the same thing. He adds, however, that Rahner consistently preferred the term “spirit” over “soul.” Father Klein states that this was a “significant choice” for Rahner’s theology. We will have to explore further why the choice was significant. For now, it is enough to see that the sacramental principle extends to the human soul. The matter of our bodies, we can say, expresses not only spirit, but our very souls.

But while affirming with Rahner the sacramental principle, Father Klein also raises troubling questions for us Catholics, disturbing us with allegation that we may have misunderstood the soul. He warns us against “naïve anthropology,” drawn from Greek philosophy, that may distort our conception of it. According to this naïve anthropology, the soul is an “invisible, secondary self that accompanies and animates the one that we and others observe.” Father Klein attributes this naïve anthropology to “the Greek dichotomy of body and soul,” a dichotomy (he says) that does not express the true integration of the two in Hebrew thought. So the paper disturbs us with the suspicion that we too may have misunderstood the soul. We may have unmoored it from the body and misconceived it as an “invisible self.”

¹ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, translated by William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978, 1992 printing), p. 30.

If we examine this suspicion superficially, it might appear slight and inconsequential. After all, it is *only* a question about the human soul—a topic whose very existence many philosophers put in doubt.² Why (someone might ask) is the existence of the soul even an issue for us Catholics today? We might answer that it remains an issue for every Catholic thinker because it is part of our heritage. The 1992 *Catechism* states that the word “soul” refers to “the innermost aspect” of the human being, that which is “of greatest value” to us.³ It is most valuable because, by virtue of our spiritual souls, we are made in God’s image. Those are the words of the *Catechism*. But perhaps we should be speaking now, not of catechesis, but of theology. Father Klein defines theology as “the lifetime of prayer and study one does to recover from catechesis.” Must we jettison catechesis and replace it with theology in order to reject naïve anthropology and substitute for it something less common and prosaic?

I say no, and in what follows I would like to lay out some reasons. My arguments, in brief, begin with the premise that Greek thought can hardly be reduced to naïve anthropology. Although the great thinkers of Athenian antiquity may be misinterpreted as the proponents of a naïve anthropology, that hardly does justice to their philosophy of the human being. My secondary premise is that our catecheses on the doctrine of the soul express (to use Rahner’s phrase) spirit in the world. Without the Church’s doctrine of the immortal soul, we would not be able to develop the existence and nature of the soul as a topic for Christian theology. My conclusion has to do with the doctrine of the incarnation. As expressed in the theology of Rahner, the incarnation was the moment in which the divine Word emptied itself and became flesh, emptying the Word into human nature and so recreating it anew. The doctrine of the soul now expresses our partnership with the God who took human nature as the vessel of divinity.

Part I: The Greek “Dichotomy”

So let me begin with a few remarks about Greek thought and its contribution to the “dichotomy” between body and soul. Rahner spoke of the body-soul dualism as “repugnant to modern scientific anthropology.”⁴ In Platonism, the soul exists for its own sake, apart from the body. Not so for Christians. Rahner correctly insisted that the soul is a “principle of being,” not a being that exists for its own sake.⁵ But his assertion requires careful exegesis. A hasty reading

² The *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1974 edition, does not even include an entry on “soul” in the *Macropedia*. The *Micropedia*, however, has an unsigned two-column article that refers to William James, who believed that “the soul is an unnecessary and unverifiable concept not required either to undergird the sense of personal identity or moral responsibility.” The article adds, “Twentieth-century philosophers and scientists have generally followed James’s lead, holding that man and certainly other beings are understandable without any recourse to the notion of soul,” with the exception (among others) of Gabriel Marcel.

³ Pope John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, English translation copyright United States Catholic Conference – Libreria Editrice Vaticana (New York: Pauline Books and Media, 1994), §363.

⁴ Karl Rahner, “Natural Science and Reasonable Faith,” in Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 21, trans. Hugh M. Riley (New York: Crossroad, 1988), p. 42.

⁵ This polemic appears throughout Rahner’s works. We see it, for example, in Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary*, edited by Cornelius Ernst, OP, and translated by Richard Strachan (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), s.v. “Soul,” p. 442. The same critique can be found in Elmar Klinger, “Soul,” in *Encyclopedia of*

can lead to false conclusions. The first of these mistakes is that, if we reject the dualism of body and soul, we may also reject the independence and immortality of the soul. It is one thing to say that the soul does not exist for its sake, and quite another to deny its independence from the body. Rahner certainly does not deny the soul's immortality and independence. We will have to see how he accounts for these when, as he says, the soul does not exist for its own sake.

Rahner, as I said, can be easily misread. To this first mistaken consequence from a hasty reading let me add a second. It is the conclusion that body-soul duality, which Rahner attributes to Platonism, sufficiently describes the thought of Plato on the soul. One finds this teaching in Plato's *Timaeus*, but one needs to place the *Timaeus* in relation to other texts.⁶ While discussing Plato's beliefs about the individual soul, I prefer a more modest passage from the *Apology*, Socrates' defense on the occasion of his trial. When Socrates was unjustly condemned to death, he speculated on the possibility of an afterlife.

Death is one of two things (he says). Either it is annihilation, and the dead have no consciousness of anything, or, as we are told, it is really a change—a migration of the soul from this place to another.⁷

If death is annihilation, he concludes, then it is like deep, restful sleep. But if it is the migration of the soul to another world, a world with *just* judges, then Socrates said that he would count himself fortunate. The passage in the *Apology* is meant to show us a righteous man, confident in the justice of his cause, facing death with equanimity. There is no pedantic exposition about an immortal soul. It is unfair to attribute to Plato the dogma of the soul as a being that exists for its own sake, apart from the body.⁸ For that reason, Rahner usually speaks of "Platonic dualism" rather than the dualism of the historical Plato.

Let me add a third mistake that can occur from a too-hasty reading of Rahner on the subject of body-soul duality. Rahner warns us against the "primitive dualism" of Greek anthropology that undermines the authentic Christian teaching that the human being is a unity of body and soul.⁹ Hebrew belief was certainly not dualistic. "Faith in the one Lord who is creator

Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi, edited by Karl Rahner, translations edited by John Cumming, Executive Editor (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975): pp. 1615–18.

⁶ Undoubtedly we find a dichotomy between body and soul in Socrates' dialogue with Timaeus. The universe is the work of the creator, said Timaeus, who "framed the soul according to his will" and then formed within it the corporeal universe, uniting body and soul. The soul "is invisible and partakes of reason and harmony," Timaeus added, and because it is intellectual and immortal, it is "the best of things created." Plato, *Timaeus* 37a, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in Plato, *Collected Dialogues*, edited Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961, ninth printing 1978), p. 1166. Plato is here teaching about the world soul, not the individual human soul. He expresses the conviction, fundamental to the Greek enlightenment, that reason is immortal and divine. But does that suffice to describe Plato's teaching on the soul?

⁷ Plato, *Socrates' Defense (Apology)*, 40c, translated by Hugh Tredennick, in Plato, op. cit., p. 24. The Platonic Socrates, hardly the developer of a static dogma, continues to be a fertile source of reflection about what is truly immortal, namely, the goodness and justice of the upright human being.

⁸ This is rather the consequence of Platonism, the philosophic dogmas developed by followers of Plato who minimized his tentative and less systematic texts.

⁹ Rahner, *Foundations*, p. 30.

and lord of creation's history rules out . . . on principle any absolute form of dualism in the Old Testament.”¹⁰ Father Klein drew the following conclusion:

For the Hebrew mind, relation with the Deity was truly intra-worldly. To stand in covenant with the God of Israel was to know his blessing in this life, in one's physical body, one's descendants, one's crops and herds.

God blessed the Hebrews in this life, and yes, to that extent, their relationship with God was “intra-worldly.” On the basis of that sound assertion, however, one might proceed to a false conclusion. One might conclude that the Hebrews disbelieved in the immortality of the soul.

When Greek thought began to enter the Hebrew world, however, the question of personal immortality leapt to the fore. We see it, for example, in the Second Book of Maccabees, a Greek-language celebration of the courage of the Jewish people at the time of the invasion of Jerusalem by Hellenized Syrians in the period 180–161 BC.¹¹ Second Maccabees tells the story of seven brothers and their mother who refused to partake of pagan sacrifices during the feast of Dionysus. Clinging to the Law of Moses, they submitted, one by one, to death. After the Seleucid torturer ripped the scalp from one of the brothers, his victim retorted: “You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life” (2 Macc 7:9). This passage suggests that the personal immortality of the soul is not an abstract question, but intrinsically linked to upright morality.

Second Maccabees does not disprove the contention of Father Klein, namely, that “for the Hebrew mind, relationship with the deity was truly intra-worldly.” To refute this point would require extensive exegesis, if it could be proven at all. But even in the Hebrew Bible there is enough evidence to suggest that personal immortality was a concern of the Israelites.¹² My point is not to refute Father Klein, but to indicate a conclusion that one might falsely draw from his (and Rahner's) words. The absence of dualism in the Old Testament does not mean that the Hebrews had no belief in personal immortality. It remained a burning issue for the Jews through the time of Jesus as reflected in the disputes between Sadducees and Pharisees over the resurrection of the dead (Mk. 12:18; Acts 23:8).

So what can we say about the traditional distinction between body and soul (the distinction that Father Klein calls a “dichotomy”), that scientific anthropology finds so repugnant?¹³ The problem, we saw, is that discussions of the soul may wrongly posit the

¹⁰ Eberhard Simons, “Dualism,” in Rahner, Editor, *Encyclopedia of Theology*, p. 374.

¹¹ The Seleucid King, Antiochus IV—a self-proclaimed apostle of Hellenization—entered the Jerusalem Temple and erected an altar to Olympian Zeus, the “abomination of desolation” described by the prophet Daniel.

¹² The Book of Genesis alone testifies that life on earth is a sojourn or pilgrimage (47:9), that the deceased go to their fathers (15:15) and are gathered to their people (25:8, 17), and that departed souls are not annihilated but reside in Sheol (37:35).

¹³ To speak of a “dichotomy” between body and soul may be preferable to the word “dualism.” The Fathers of the Church defended “dichotomism” (the teaching that Christ had a human body and soul) against “trichotomism” (the teaching that the divine Logos took the place of Christ's human soul, apart from his human body and merely animal

existence of two separate beings, visible and invisible. We can sidestep that with the hermeneutical recognition that ancient texts express truth in the mode of thought of their day. We seek their truth for us. We want to avoid the over-hasty conclusions that one may dispense with the soul as the body's principle of being, that this is merely a fossil left from an excavation of Plato's cave, and that one can abandon the doctrine of the immortal soul as incongruent with Biblical teaching. Let us move now from possible misunderstandings to the positive doctrine of the rational soul.

Part II: The Rational Soul

The Church has traditionally taught that the divine Logos assumed in Jesus Christ not only a body but also a rational soul.¹⁴ It was important for the Church Fathers to establish the full humanity of Jesus Christ, especially his bodily reality, over against the pessimism of the Gnostics, who despised matter and sought salvation by escaping from it. So the body is important. But the soul is at least equal in importance. The soul is the medium, according to St. Thomas, by which the Word became flesh.¹⁵ This is more than a bit obscure, so let us take a few moments to examine it in detail, starting with three affirmations from the *Catechism* about the human person as body and soul:

- The material body is animated by a spiritual soul which is the form of the body (§365).
- Every spiritual soul is created immediately by God, and is not produced by the parents (§366).
- At the incarnation, the divine Word was united to human flesh animated by a rational soul (§466).

These affirmations reflect the metaphysics of Aristotle brought into the Christian world by medieval philosophy. How are we to understand them today? Rahner provides an answer. He treats the union of body and soul, the immediate creation of the soul, and the divine Word's entry into human nature in such a way that he recovers their truth and makes it relevant. Let me say a word about each.

soul). See Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (1952), edited in English by James Canon Bastible, translated (1955) from the German by Patrick Lynch, fourth edition (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1960), p. 97. Ott attributes the view that the Logos took the place of Christ's human soul to Apollinaris of Laodicea "under the influence of the Platonic Trichotomy (synthesis of the human being out of flesh, soul, and spirit)," p. 141. Rahner disagrees, however, refusing to call biblical and Thomistic anthropology dichotomism. See Rahner and Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary*, s.v. "Dichotomy," p. 128.

¹⁴ This reflects the doctrine of the Council of Chalcedon, that Christ was a single person with two natures. His fully-human nature comprised body and soul. "The General Council of Chalcedon: Symbol of Chalcedon (451)," in J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, revised edition (New York: Alba House, 1982), p. 154. Substantially the same point was made in the "Second Letter of Cyril to Nestorius" (A.D. 431), *ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part III, question 6, article 1. First Complete American Edition in Three Volumes, literally translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York et al.: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947), vol. II, p. 2061.

Soul as Form. The affirmation that the soul is the “form” of the body reflects the doctrine of hylomorphism, the doctrine that all things are composed of matter and form. From an Aristotelian viewpoint, an individual person consists of a material body with virtually unlimited potential and a soul that actualizes the matter.¹⁶ The soul “causes” the material (Aristotle would say) to take a particular form. By means of the soul, the material body becomes the person he or she is meant to be.

When we say “meant to be,” however, we add the dimensions of history and purposefulness. These are the dimensions that Rahner emphasizes. The ancient concept of the soul, he suggests, enables us to speak about the development of the human person throughout life and about the goal of that life.¹⁷ If the soul brings matter to perfection, it does so over time. Let me provide an illustration. The human being gradually changes. It is difficult to imagine the future adult as we look at the face of a child. Conversely, it is hard, even for parents, to recall in their adult children what they were like as infants. In Rahner’s hands, the doctrine of the soul reminds us that the infant and the adult are one and the same person. Adults, however, determine who and what they have become. They do so by making choices, choices that no one could have predicted. In that manner, we can say, they achieve themselves.

The doctrine of the spiritual soul as the form of the material body, in Rahner’s writings, distances itself from Greek hylomorphism in the strict sense. It becomes instead a way of talking about time and purpose. The soul brings matter to perfection by shepherding the body from infancy to old age. It accounts for our human ability to mature, develop, and transform ourselves, all the while remaining the one, single person who we are.¹⁸ Father Klein said that, when we speak of the soul, we mean “the human person as that part of the world that is oriented towards that which lies beyond the world.” This makes sense. Soul is a synonym for the principle by which we transcend what we were before.

Rahner’s insight into the soul as the seat of human nature complements today’s natural science, which may find it difficult on the basis of a materialist hypothesis to explain the emergence of personal consciousness and the human capacity for self-transcendence. Rahner teases us with the suggestion that matter has its own spirituality. “Matter,” he writes, “by virtue of its origin and the end toward which it tends, must, after all, be quite ‘spiritual,’ inasmuch as its creator is absolute spirit and can hardly be the cause of something that is purely spiritless.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Aristotle made this connection: “Matter is potentiality, form actuality.” Aristotle, *De Anima (On the Soul)*, II.i.412a, translated by J. A. Smith, in Aristotle, *Basic Works*, edited and with an introduction by Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 555.

¹⁷ Recall that, for Rahner, the soul is not a separate being but a principle of being. The Rahner-Vorgrimler *Theological Dictionary* described this in a highly compressed way. The soul, it said, “brings material, spatio-temporal being to its own perfection, allows it to determine itself and thus to rise above the determinateness proper to material being.” Rahner and Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary*, “Soul,” p. 443.

¹⁸ “The *forma* of the living being, the entelechy, integrated in a somewhat obscure way into the material element, belonged to the material element by virtue of its *eductio e potentia materiae*.” Rahner, “Natural Science and Reasonable Faith,” p. 28. Form belongs to matter because it “causes” it to become what it has the potential to be.

¹⁹ Rahner, “Natural Science and Reasonable Faith,” p. 29.

Natural scientists confidently—perhaps overconfidently—dispense with the Greek concept of hylomorphism. But Rahner, renewing the ancient teaching about body and soul, unlocks with it the paradox of continuity and purposeful change. The ancient teaching helps us to see that persons are material beings who realize a spiritual destiny.

The Immediate Creation of the Soul. This brings us to our second “catechetical” theme about the soul as created immediately by God, not produced by a child’s parents. This doctrine was taught in 1950 by Pope Pius XII but has a long history.²⁰ Scholastic theology held that God created each individual soul at the moment of its unification with the body, and rejected competing theories from antiquity, such as the teaching that the soul pre-existed, or emanated from the divine substance, or was generated by the child’s parents by means of “semen spirituale.”²¹ The affirmation by Pius XII about the immediate creation of the soul took place in response to the polygenic theory of human evolution, that there were more than two “first parents.” Pius XII stated that faithful Catholics cannot accept the opinion that some human beings exist who did not trace their parentage back to Adam, or that the Biblical Adam merely represented a number of first parents.²² Rahner proposed refinements to certain aspects of this teaching, and it is worthwhile to trace his thought.

The problem with polygenism is that it appears to undercut the doctrine of original sin. The Council of Trent taught that Adam’s first sin lost for him and his descendants both holiness and justice.²³ If there had been more than one first parent, then original sin would not have been transmitted to all, and human beings would exist who are untainted by Adam’s sin. To Pius XII, such speculation about polygenism seemed to erode the Church’s teaching.

Rahner never rejected monogenism in favor of polygenism.²⁴ But in his earliest article on the topic, published in 1954, he argued that monogenism is a metaphysical question. The concept of the “first man,” he wrote, “must not only be thought of as just temporally and numerically the first,” but must be understood metaphysically as “the transcendent humanity instituted by

²⁰ Pope Pius XII, Encyclical Letter *Humani generis*, August 12, 1950, accessed on February 22, 2007 from the Vatican web site, <http://www.vatican.va>.

²¹ Ott, *Fundamentals*, pp. 99–100. Ott notes that the decision of the Council of Vienne (1311–1312), which affirmed that body and soul form an intrinsic natural unit, “does not imply a dogmatic recognition of . . . the Aristotelian-Scholastic hylomorphism” (p. 97).

²² Pius XII, *Humani generis*, par. 37.

²³ Original sin, the Council of Trent stated, “is transmitted by propagation” to the entire human race. Thus all of Adam’s progeny needs the reconciliation achieved through Jesus Christ. “The General Council of Trent, Fifth Session, Decree on Original Sin (1546),” in Neuner and Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, p. 138.

²⁴ About polygenism, Rahner wrote: “To all appearances the teaching office has . . . abandoned its opposition to polygenism” (Rahner, “Natural Science and Reasonable Faith,” p. 41). There was never an official abandonment of the position of Pius XII. The phrase “to all appearances” may be an allusion to Roberto Masi, “The Credo of Paul VI: Theology of Original Sin and the Scientific Theory of Evolution,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, English edition (April 17, 1969). Masi said, “Even if we accept as valid the scientific theory of evolution and polygenism, it can still be in accordance with the dogma of original sin.”

God.”²⁵ When the Church teaches that all human beings descended from Adam, it is not primarily making a natural-scientific argument. Rather, the claim pertains to metaphysics. Adamic descent means that the Biblical account of our first parents affirms the primacy of God as creator. The emergence of humanity was ultimately a divine act.

Twenty-seven years after his article of 1954, Rahner returned to the doctrine of the “immediate” creation of the soul. He knew that Pius XII had insisted upon the soul’s immediate creation. The soul did not gradually evolve as primitive hominids became more human. No, said the pope, it was established in an immediate way, without the medium of human parents. This doctrine, Rahner suggested, is not meant to deny that human parents produce a human being. On the contrary, the doctrine must be understood metaphysically. God established a world, not in a one-time act of creation, but in a constant process of divine causality, that is, in a relationship that is being “continuously constituted” by God.²⁶ The divine causality, Rahner concluded, “can be identified with the ‘creation of the soul’ in the way in which Pius XII teaches.”²⁷ Rahner affirmed the teaching, showing that its deepest truth is not empirical but metaphysical.

The Word, Flesh, and the Soul. Let us move on, then, to our third catechetical theme. It is about the Word becoming flesh, flesh animated by a rational soul. The topic connects our somewhat abstract reflection on the soul with human salvation. Our authority here is St. Thomas Aquinas. In the third part of the *Summa*, Thomas described how the Word became flesh, set our lives in order and delivered us from evil.²⁸ He did this by “assuming” flesh, that is, by becoming human. To assume flesh, in the Thomistic view, God’s Word required the medium of a soul.²⁹ The soul, we remember, is the “principle” of human being. It is a “medium” because it stands between God and human flesh. God chose to act upon what is more remote (namely, the flesh) through that which is less remote (the soul). The soul, the principle of human nature, is less remote from God because it is rational.

If this is still confusing, we must blame it on the difficulties of medieval metaphysics. Thomas’ point is that God had created human nature as the suitable dwelling of the divine Word, and now chose to dwell in it.³⁰ God heals us by becoming one of us. Because the Word assumed flesh—that is, in Thomas’ view, a material body animated by a soul—we can hope for salvation.

²⁵ Karl Rahner, “Theological Reflections on Monogenism,” article 8 in Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, translated with an introduction by Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), pp. 229–96, pp. 293–4 cited here.

²⁶ Rahner, “Natural Science and Reasonable Faith,” p. 36.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 45.

²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 53, art. 1 (vol. II, p. 2309).

²⁹ Ibid., III, q. 6, art. 1 (vol. II, pp. 2060–61).

³⁰ Thomas echoed the fourth-century Bishop of Constantinople, Gregory of Nazianzus, who argued that it was necessary for the Word to assume our human nature. “That which He has not assumed,” wrote Gregory, “He has not healed.” Gregory Nazienzen, Letter 101, “To Cledonius the Priest against Apollinaris,” in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, editorial supervisors, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 7 (Cyril of Alexandria and Gregory Nazienzen), Division 1, “Letters on the Apollinarian Controversy,” edited and translated by Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, digital edition (Albany, Oregon: AGES Software, 1996, 97), p. 839.

The language of Thomism may tempt us to understand this topic in an instrumental fashion. The divine Word needed the medium of a soul in order to assume human flesh and, in that flesh, to accomplish something on our behalf. The soul, we may wrongly conclude, is merely an instrument to facilitate the incarnation. But Rahner focuses his attention not on the soul as an instrument, but as the seat of human nature. He does so by examining Thomas' doctrine that human nature is unique. It is, Thomas said, "more assumable" by the Word than any other nature because it is rational and intellectual.³¹ About the "assumption" by God of human nature, Rahner had this to say: "The Incarnation of God is the unique and *highest* instance of the actualization of the essence of human reality, which consists in this: that man *is* [my emphasis] insofar as he abandons himself to the absolute mystery whom we call God."³² God created human nature, in short, with the capacity for knowing and loving the divine Word. So when Thomas said that the divine Word assumed flesh through the medium of the soul, he meant that God took on our nature in a fundamentally human way. We will have to say more about this in the conclusion to this paper. For now it is enough to assert that God became a being, like us, with the capacity over time for growth, maturation, and self-transcendence.

Let us pause here to take stock of our progress so far in the analysis of the rational soul. We saw that the Church's doctrines are transmitted via the matter-and-form distinctions of Greek hylomorphism. The *Catechism* teaches that the human soul causes matter to take a particular form, that it was created immediately by God, and that it was the medium through which the Word became flesh. In Rahner's hands, the doctrine of the soul expresses the purposeful development of the person in time. He interpreted the immediate creation of the soul metaphysically, that is, as a creation in the manner established by God. And he saw the incarnation by means of the soul as an expression of the unique capacity of human nature to receive God's Word. Rahner's approach to the doctrine of the soul—a "catechetical" doctrine if ever there was one—can be variously described as selective, analytic, and radical. It is radical in that it goes to the root of the soul, probing its truth. And at that root lies the incarnate union between divinity and humanity, the union by which God's Spirit becomes preeminently manifest in the world.

Part III: The Soul and the Word

In the first part of this paper, we focused on the misunderstanding of the soul as a separate being (as distinct from a principle of being). We attributed this to Platonism, the medieval interpretation of Plato's texts, and we asserted that the Church's doctrine of the soul needs to be disentangled from these interpretations. In the second part of this paper, we saw how Karl Rahner achieved that disentanglement. He did so by focusing on the soul as the seat of human nature. The doctrine of the soul reveals the essential nature of the human being as one

³¹ Human nature is "more assumable" by the Word than any other nature, said Thomas, "because human nature, as being rational and intellectual, was made for attaining to the Word to some extent by its operation, viz., by knowing and loving him" (*ibid.*, III, q. 4, art. 1, in vol. II, p. 2051). God created human nature capable of "attaining" (*attingere*) the Word.

³² Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 218.

capable of maturity and spiritual growth, especially through its free and responsible decisions. St. Thomas was our guide to the doctrine that the divine Logos became flesh by means of a rational soul. If we understand this, however, as the Word entering history for Jesus' lifetime to achieve our salvation, and afterwards returning to the Father, then (Rahner said) we have understood the incarnation in an incomplete way. In this final section of the paper, I would like to return to the question of the immortality of the soul from the standpoint of the incarnation as presented in Rahner's theology. We will see that the soul (as the seat of human nature) makes free and responsible decisions by responding to God's Word, the Word to which the soul can listen and obey.

Father Klein has remarked that Rahner preferred the term "spirit" over "soul." Rahner explained the choice, after a fashion, in his discussion of "Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World." There Rahner identified the Christian concept of salvation with the goal of the entire cosmos. He described the goal as "self-presence in spirit."³³ He meant that there is purposefulness in all creation, a purpose that comes to self-consciousness in us, "the spiritual creatures which are its goal and its highest point." Although individual human beings can only dimly imagine the creation's final state of fulfillment, nevertheless as a community we have words to describe it. "In Christian terminology," said Rahner, "we usually call it man's final and definitive state, his salvation, the immortality of the soul or the resurrection of the flesh." Rahner preferred the word "spirit" over "soul" because it captured, in a manner unique to the German language, the unity of the "spiritual" and the "human." The word *Geist* or spirit expressed for Rahner the dynamism of God's relation to all creation, a dynamism not found in Greek's distinction between *pneuma* and *psyche*. Whether we call ourselves soul or spirit, our final goal is the goal of the cosmos as well, the immediate presence of God as our transcendent ground.

That brings us to the more profound doctrine of the incarnation that Rahner proposed. An understanding of the incarnation as merely the one-time entry into history of the incarnate Word is an incomplete understanding. Yes, the Word did assume flesh, as St. Thomas said, through the medium of the soul. But this assumption of flesh was no mere disguise. It was rather an act of creation. Rahner said that God "creates the human reality *by the very fact that* he assumes it as his own."³⁴ By entering our human nature, God "became man," not in the sense of assuming a role, but rather by taking on the human reality as God's own reality.³⁵ Rahner expressed this in the language of the Philippians hymn: the divine Word, Jesus Christ, emptied himself. The self-emptying of God was a self-gift to humanity. God, said Rahner, "possesses the possibility of *establishing* the other as his own reality *by dispossessing* himself, by giving *himself* away." When the Word became flesh, God established human beings as God's own reality. Our reality

³³ Rahner, *Foundations*, p. 190. All of the citations that follow in this paragraph can be found on the same page.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

³⁵ About the verb "to assume" Rahner has this to say: "The phrase is already found in Augustine that God 'assumes by creating' and also 'creates by assuming,' that is, he creates by emptying himself, and therefore, of course, he himself is in the emptying" (*ibid.*, p. 222). The reference may be to Augustine, "On Faith and the Creed" (*De Fide et symbolo*), Chapter IV, number 8, translated by S. D. F. Salmond, in Philip Schaff, editor, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1887), First Series, vol. III, part I, "Doctrinal Treatises," p. 325.

became the reality of the Word. That Word dwelt, not just among us, but within us. That is the more profound meaning of the phrase “became flesh.” When the Word entered human nature, that nature, our very human soul, became immortal.

That does not mean, of course, that the soul lacked immortality prior to the incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ. God’s Word was present before the incarnation, present in God’s creative acts, in the gift of the Decalogue, and in the teachings of the prophets. Indeed, people hear the divine Word whenever they recognize the voice of God speaking to their innermost conscience. In that sense, the soul was always immortal. But it was immortal precisely because God created it with the capacity for hearing the Word and obeying. Whether the soul obeys God’s Word or not, its choices have eternal consequences. But this leads to a question. If God was speaking the divine Word before Jesus Christ, then what did the incarnation of the Word accomplish?

To this question Rahner gave an important three-part answer. First, he acknowledged that genuine revelations of God’s Word arise outside the explicit revelation to the Church, despite the fact that those revelations are provisional and can be mixed with falsehood.³⁶ They are genuine but limited. Second, Rahner said that Christianity’s interpretation of revelation history is definitive. It “correctly knows itself to be guided and directed by God.”³⁷ Christians understand revelation history as God’s communication to humanity of the divine self, a history that is “most successful,” “absolute,” and “unparalleled.”³⁸ Finally, however, Rahner acknowledged that the Christian understanding of revelation is still an interpretation. He called it “a species, a segment of the universal, categorical history of revelation.”³⁹ It is subordinate to the primary revelation, wherein God addresses human beings in the depths of their hearts. It interprets the experience by which the Word, the divine life that created and assumed our human nature, has entered the very reality that it created.

To sum up, the soul is immortal because God created it with the capacity to receive God’s Word. Throughout history, that Word has addressed human beings via the conscience. Then, at a specific moment in history, the divine Word emptied itself, assumed a human soul, and made that soul its dwelling place. In that act, God revealed the divine intention for us. God intended an intimate relationship between divinity and humanity, a relationship by which God would freely offer us a share in the divine life. Our proper response is to discern the Word, to accept its message, and to act upon it. When we do, even when it costs us our lives, God validates that choice, recognizing its permanence, and incorporates it into God’s own history.

³⁶ Alternative histories of revelation are “provisional and not yet completely successful” and are “permeated and made obscure and ambiguous by man’s guilt.” Rahner, *Foundations*, p. 155.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 155. Christianity, properly interpreted, is “the process by which the history of revelation reaches a quite definite and successful level of historical reflection, and by which this history comes to self-awareness historically and reflexively” (ibid., p. 146).

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 140, 162, 174.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 155.

That was the testimony of Jesus Christ. Because God raised him from the dead, we, his brothers and sisters, can hope that God will raise us as well.

That is how I would express Rahner's contribution to the doctrine of the immortal soul, a summary that complements, I believe, the account in Father Klein's paper. The doctrine is not a Platonic myth about a second, invisible self. It is not a medieval application of hylomorphism, an application that requires an Aristotelian worldview. Rather, it is a twentieth-century Catholic's interpretation of salvation history, a history that the Church expresses in catechetical concepts. When God assumed flesh via the soul, it became the immortal dwelling of the divine Word. By it, we share in God's own immortality. It is our motive for upright living now, and our hope for eternal life.