

*PhD, Ingvild Røsok: «The Reality of Love, a Critical and Constructive Analysis of Karl Rahner's Theology of Love»*

## **Abstract**

Is it possible to see love as one phenomenon, one single *reality*? From Scripture we learn that when other virtues and skills cease, love remains. Still, there is a common experience that love seems to be the reason for rivalry, possessiveness and egocentrism. In popular meaning, love is connected with romanticism rather than with charity or ethics and in the history of theology love is traditionally divided in three: Agapé, Filia and Eros. Is the reality of love that fragmented or has the word lost its meaning? That question is the backdrop and starting-point for this thesis.

Karl Rahner claims a radical unity of the love of God and the love of neighbour, and this claim is the central axis throughout the thesis. My *assumption* is that Rahner's unified understanding of love refutes the traditional, threefold division of love. I aim at exploring the consequences for contemporary Christian spirituality: what does it mean for the human-divine relationship that love is one? Does it follow that charity as well as erotic love and friendship are channels for God's love?

The thesis consists of three parts. In Part I, I examine Rahner's theological anthropology which establishes his views on love. He turns to ontology to explain the dynamic process of becoming a subject, a process which depends on the relationship to the other. Any person that sees him/herself as a subject has already been with the other, before returning to oneself. In this dynamic movement, the persons are ontologically united, according to Rahner. This is his foundation for claiming the unity of love. Rahner's theological anthropology is deeply rooted in a conviction of God's self-communication to all people, also named uncreated grace. It is this grace that initiates the dynamic process of becoming a subject – and thus enables love to happen. By acknowledging oneself as a subject, the human being has consequently also accepted God's self-communication. This existential acceptance of God's grace is thus happening at an unconscious level, but may later be articulated and developed through a conscious relationship. In this way Rahner argues that the unity of the love of God and the love of neighbour concerns all human beings, consequently establishing the notion of "Anonymous Christians".

In Part II, I test this transcendental-ontological view of love on various texts of Rahner, related to the issue of love. This is done by looking at the cognitive, the affective and the spiritual perspectives of love and by using Andrew Tallon's theory of triune consciousness as a tool. I find that Rahner's approach is overly cognitive, although a phenomenological reading reveals underlying, affective perspectives within his cognitive language. The affective is more articulated in the texts on spirituality. The most critical finding relates to Rahner's neglect of affirming the value of friendship and erotic love. In some texts he speaks rather condescendingly about the affective and/or erotic perspectives of love. I question how this corresponds with the fundamental view of love as expressed in his theological anthropology,

and I articulate a need for developing Rahner's thoughts in a way that makes it applicable for what I call an embodied spirituality of love.

Part III discusses this critique further, in dialogue with more recent research. Reading Rahner *beyond* Rahner, I aim at a reconstruction of his understanding of love which is applicable on spirituality. I pay attention to *desire* as one important aspect for a spirituality of love, and I suggest complementing Rahner's theology of love with Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenological approach as developed in *The Erotic Phenomenon*. The two thinkers have some similarities, in spite of their different approaches. They both point to *kenosis* as an important aspect of love: Love is by nature kenotic and self-giving. With Rahner, this understanding seems to be restricted to charity and the abandoning to God. Marion relates the kenotic nature of love to Eros and Agapé in a way that maintains the unity of love. I see his understanding of the erotic phenomenon as a positive supplement to the transcendental approach of Rahner.

In my conclusive chapter I suggest ways of applying the most central findings of my analysis on the themes of "desire and deification", which may be seen as the beginning and the end of the spiritual journey. The themes are discussed in the context of spiritual direction, also providing some reflective questions for the spiritual director to consider. I argue that Rahner's theological fundament has relevance and continues to challenge contemporary spirituality, but I see a need for a more coherent reading and stretching of his arguments. In so far love is one, and God is the source of this love, then human and divine love is utterly intertwined and has to be experienced incarnated in our concrete reality in all its variety.