

doubt their truth, but I greatly doubt the capacity of people in general to bear them'. Stephen was, more truly than Dr

Colaïaco seems to have conceived, a significant inhabitant of the Victorian crisis.

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THEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS. Vol XV: Penance in the Early Church by Karl Rahner, trans. by Lionel Swain. DLT, London, 1983. £25.00 net.

This volume gathers together eight essays on the history of penance in the early Church. Seven of the chapters are revised and expanded versions of articles published between 1938 and 1955. Here they have been ordered geographically: Part II The Roman Tradition (Hermas and Irenaeus); Part III The African Tradition (Tertullian and Cyprian); Part IV The Tradition of the East (*Didascalia Apostolorum* and Origen). Part I is introductory and includes a study of "Sin as Loss of Grace in Early Church Literature" and a more general and methodological chapter entitled "The History of Penance". This last alone has not appeared before and is perhaps the unpublished outline referred to by Rahner in "Reflections on Methodology in Theology" (*Theological Investigations* XI, p 68).

In the preface to this volume, Rahner foresees two lines of criticism of his inclusion of these studies in the series *Theological Investigations*. Firstly they are old; secondly they are historical and hitherto this series has "contained explicitly only systematic studies" (p viii). He might have added that in his preface to the first volume of the series he had stated the intention of *not* including studies such as these, mentioning by name six of the chapters of this fifteenth volume. With full justice, Rahner replies to the first of these charges that though old, these studies are not outdated, that they have in any case been revised, and that their bibliographical information has been brought up to date. Rahner blusters a little against the second charge before telling us the real (or, as he says, "yet another") reason for republishing these essays: "I am suspected by many people of being only a speculative theologian who works without reference to history and who, in some circumstances,

attempts to dispel difficulties which arise in understanding statements of the Church's magisterium by the merely speculative interpretation of such statements" (p viii). At first glance, one might be rather saddened at the spectacle of a venerable theologian being moved to republish his *juvenilia* in order to hush the twittering of his critics. But there is more at stake here than one theologian's *amour-propre*. No one could doubt the genuineness of Rahner's claim that he is "absolutely convinced that genuine Catholic theology must always proceed on the basis both of exegesis and of the history of dogmas and theology . . ." (*ibid.*). Similar statements could be found in the writings of every period of Rahner's career. When in the present volume he reflects on Origen as a theologian he is surely sketching his own ideal: "Origen does not wish to be anything other than a man of the Church. Consequently, what is prescribed by the gospel and taught by the Church are, for him, the inviolable and self-evident norm of the whole of his thinking. Although he offers a more profound explanation and understanding (*gnosis*) of the transmitted teaching of the faith and of the Scriptures which must remain inaccessible to the majority of ordinary Christians, he does not do so by appealing to a secret tradition, after the manner of the Gnostics" (pp 246f).

Not one of the essays in this volume could be described as a purely historical study. Each of them is transparently the work of a theologian whose interest in the Church's past is inseparable from his interest in the Church's present and future. This does not mean that Rahner merely ransacks the past for support for his own views, or that his method is not properly historical. On the contrary, he shows

himself to be a thoroughly competent historian, and well aware of the danger of inappropriately mixing historical and dogmatic methods. But his awareness of this danger does not lead him to abandon one method in favour of the other. In all these essays Rahner maintains a confident control of both methods: now cautiously separating them, now interweaving them in imaginative and thought provoking ways. Thus in the middle of his investigation of Tertullian's theology of penance he suddenly observes: "The customary form of the sacrament of penance today would correspond to a priest's private Mass, that is to say, the co-operation of the whole Church in the celebration of this sacrament is no longer discernible liturgically". He goes on to reflect: "The dogmatic theologian ought to be able to see something more beyond the doubtless correct observation that the exclusive power of bishops and priests in the celebration of the sacrament of penance even in the sense in which this sacrament was understood in Tertullian's time was not contested. Without wishing simply to revive the ancient penitential liturgy with its community prayer, he will recognize in this liturgy a reality which still belongs to this sacrament today and which deserves to be brought to the attention of Christians: that he finds reconciliation with God only because he receives in and from the Church that Spirit which lives there in all its holy members" (pp 140f).

Although all these essays richly repay the effort of reading them, it should perhaps be noted that the effort required is considerable. Even Rahner buffs may find themselves needing to pause for breath. Apart from the now notorious prolixity of style, there is a good deal of tight historical argument about controverted issues. Moreover, following the thread of the argument is not made any easier by Rahner's distressing habit of weaving Latin and Greek words, phrases and sentences into the syntax of his own prose. When the translator has not succeeded in translating these monstrous hybrids one is faced with two parts of a sentence, one in Greek or Latin and one in English, each part need-

ing the other to complete its sense but lacking grammatical relation to it. There is a particularly gross example of this on page 255. Nor are these the only occasions on which the translator betrays a lack of real interest in what Rahner is saying and a lack of enthusiasm for conveying his meaning lucidly. Sentences with no more than the average Rahner quotient of obscurity are frequently turned into English which is either totally opaque, or just plain daft. For example, "Revising familiar material in this way is never very satisfying. But, perhaps for that very reason, it is all the more necessary to do" (p 125). Rahner's point is that many of the gains of previous scholarship have been buried or forgotten and therefore are precisely *not* familiar. At the beginning of the following chapter we read: "So much has already been written about the penitential teaching of Cyprian of Carthage that there is hardly any hope of saying something new on the subject in this present study" (p 152). This should surely win a prize in a competition for the opening sentence most likely to discourage the reader from proceeding. In fact, Rahner is saying that under the circumstances it can scarcely be hoped that such a study will say *only* new things. Sometimes no effort has been made to adapt the text to English idiom. For example: "This image applies directly only to the access of the penitent who is knocking to penance in the Church . . ." (p 137). A whole new field of obfuscation is opened up by the arbitrary and irregular use of punctuation. For example: "Thus the duration of the actual period of penance becomes irrelevant and in the West it seems to be blended with Lent when, perhaps after a successful conversion, the actual church, liturgical celebration of penance was incorporated into the beginning of Lent" (p 11).

In view of the "first draft" quality of the translation, the large amount of Greek and Latin (often proof-read less carefully than the English text), and the relegation of the footnotes to the end of the book, where the reader receives no help in their use, those wishing to make serious use of this book will probably prefer to seek out the German edition.

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