

AN APPRECIATION
OF JAMES J. BACIK'S
HUMBLE CONFIDENCE

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In a 1979 Festschrift he co-edited with Bernhard Welte, Karl Rahner contributed a brief essay on the relationship between theory and practice, or thought and life.¹ It would later be translated and published in the final volume of *Theological Investigations* as “Plea for a Nameless Virtue.”² Rahner’s brief reflections aim to discover a virtue that expresses the unity-in-diversity of thought and life, a virtue left untreated by conventional moral theologies with their lists of discrete virtues. As he often does, he seeks a holistic way of treating reality as it is, rather than avoiding it, explaining it away, prematurely categorizing it, or narrowing it. The virtue would hold thought and practice open to their proper scope—and Rahner leaves it nameless so it can do so.

Thirty-five years later, American priest and theologian Father Jim Bacik gave a name to this virtue: humble confidence.³ His book by the same name is a record of how Jim has performed this virtue, in just the way Rahner would have liked. *Humble Confidence* comprises four luminous chapters on Rahner’s anthropology, doctrine of God, Christology, and ecclesiology, and a fifth chapter that demonstrates Jim’s pastoral dialogue with Rahner throughout his many years as a priest, student, teacher, theologian, son, friend, and Christian. This multi-faceted account of the ongoing significance of Rahner’s theology and spirituality centers on the now-named virtue of humble confidence. “Rahner’s work,” Jim observes, “can inspire us with confidence in the power of the Spirit and the value of the Catholic tradition, while stressing our complete dependence on divine grace.”⁴

This morning I cannot present an exhaustive account of the numerous ways this book illuminates Rahner anew. I shall limit myself to a few highlights from the first four chapters, and suggestions for must-reads out of the many reflections included in chapter five.

Chapter 1: Jim's rich schematization of Rahner's anthropology in terms of fourteen existentials, which he classes under seven dialectical pairings, is concise yet comprehensive. Most importantly, he shows how Rahner's difficult, variegated anthropology provides a basis for a "contemporary dialectical spirituality" of "committed-openness", "reflective-spontaneity", "hopeful-realism", "enlightened-simplicity", and "prayerful-prophetic action."⁵ Rahner's anthropology can help contemporary Christians to lead lives that integrate and unify spiritual qualities often presented as diametric opposites.

Chapter 2: Most of us know Jim's earlier book, *Apologetics and the Eclipse of Mystery*.⁶ This book was a boon for me during my Master's study. Thus I was excited to find in the chapter on God several pages on Rahner and mystagogy.⁷ Several lucid pages on Rahner's theologies of grace and the Trinity follow. But most striking to me, a parent of a three-year-old who has become very interested in prayer, was the profound discussion of Rahner's defense of petitionary prayer.⁸ In essence, petitionary prayer exemplifies Christian humble confidence in the "often surprising power of the Spirit."⁹

Chapter 3 presents Rahner's Christology as a resource for helping people to meet challenges to making Christ the center of their lives.¹⁰ The best way Rahner does this, Jim amply illustrates, is through his many meditations on specific events and scenes in the life of Jesus. He helpfully foregrounds the foundation of Rahner's Christology in the meditations on the life of Christ in Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*.¹¹ Not to be missed are the pages regarding Rahner on Jesus casting out demons, which underscores social and cultural evil, and prompts us to formulate responses to it.¹²

Chapter 4 shows how Rahner's ecclesiology can assist Catholics today in meeting four challenges to the life of the church: the "spiritual but not religious" phenomenon, the mass exodus of Catholics from the Church (especially in Europe and the US), the interpretation of Vatican II, and the need to renew parish life. Fascinating is Jim's pairing of Rahner's theology of the parish as an event of the universal church with the history of parishes in the United States.¹³ Along the way, he makes a Rahnerian argument (with reference also to Pope Francis) for an extraverted church nourished by vibrant local life.

Chapter 5 interweaves exposition of Rahner's theological and spiritual works, Bacik's autobiography, and many installments of Jim's "Reflections" series, which he has shared with interested people for many years, and now are available online at his website.¹⁴ I have never before seen in such concentrated form an example of Catholicism's radical openness to God's self-communication through the world. The range of topics covered in this chapter is truly extraordinary, from the sacrament of penance to Christian-Muslim dialogue, from caring for an aging parent to ministering to collegians, from the meaning of the priesthood to the prose of John Updike, from the deep faith of Mother Teresa to the barbarisms of the New Atheists. Must-reads are Jim's powerful meditation on his late mother's spirituality of acceptance,¹⁵ his Easter reflection on the Resurrection as a spiritual "Big Bang,"¹⁶ and his hopeful apologia for renewed ecumenical passion.¹⁷

Likewise, the appendix that follows the fifth chapter merits close consideration for its even-handed, non-defensive reply to the less-than-cordial George Weigel and Rusty Reno and the only slightly more cordial Robert Barron. On Jim's reading, the future of theology would do well to be Rahnerian: humble in its openness to the world, confident that this openness is a function of life in Christ and the Spirit.

Rahner concluded his 1979 essay with these words: “Whether or not this virtue’s name is known in the end is not so important. But this virtue should be practiced. Today, especially, when one could get the impression that the majority of humankind is divided into weary relativists and obstinate fanatics.”¹⁸ I shall risk disagreeing slightly with Rahner here. The name does matter, and humble confidence fits the bill. But Rahner is right, of course, that whatever this virtue’s name, it should be practiced. Thank you, Jim, for your work, today, especially, when one could get the impression that the majority of humankind is divided into apathetic youth, social-Darwinist capitalists, and—little has changed since 1979—obstinate fanatics. Today, especially, humble confidence must be thought and must be practiced. Jim’s book can inspire us to do this.

¹ Karl Rahner, “Die Spannung austragen zwischen Leben und Denken: Pläydoyer für eine unbekannte Tugend” in Karl Rahner and Bernhard Welte (eds.), *Mut zur Tugend: Von der Fähigkeit, menschlicher zu leben* (Freiburg: Herder, 1979).

² Karl Rahner, “Plea for a Nameless Virtue” in *Final Writings: Theological Investigations 23*, trans. Joseph Donceel, ed. Paul Imhof (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 33–37.

³ James J. Bacik, *Humble Confidence: Spiritual and Pastoral Guidance from Karl Rahner* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2014).

⁴ *Ibid.*, ix–x.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 16–18.

⁶ James J. Bacik, *Apologetics and the Eclipse of Mystery: Mystagogy According to Karl Rahner* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980).

⁷ Bacik, *Humble Confidence*, 29–33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 40–42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹² *Ibid.*, 60–62.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 80–91.

¹⁴ See frjimbacik.org, under the “Reflections Articles” tab.

¹⁵ Bacik, *Humble Confidence*, 99–103.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 135–38.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 143–46.

¹⁸ Rahner, “Plea for a Nameless Virtue,” 37.