

ON THE METHOD OF THEOLOGY

An institute on the method of theology was held July 9–20, 1962, at the Jesuit Seminary (Regis College), Toronto, in which about fifty theologians took part, mostly from the seminaries and universities of Canada and the United States. The formal program consisted of two morning lectures each day in general session, and discussions in the evenings in smaller groups. As might be expected, however, the surplus value of such an institute showed itself in divers unscheduled ways; thus, the moral theologians attending met privately to discuss the relevance to their particular problems of the ideas being debated, the professors of college theology did likewise, and in the informal atmosphere of the seminary lounge-room animated conversations were carried on far into the evening after the adjournment of regular meetings.

It is impossible here to give an account of the separate discussions, but an attempt will be made at a résumé of the topics handled by Bernard Lonergan, S.J., of the Gregorian University, whose lectures in any case supplied the chief ideas discussed in the evening sessions. There is no need to insist on the way a thinker's ideas will suffer in such a compressed account (poets are liars by profession, it was once said, and so are summarizers) but perhaps it will not be superfluous to note also the relevance of the principle, *quidquid recipitur . . . : scil.*, these few paragraphs might better be said to resume one participant's most vivid impressions of the lectures than their objective content.

A central theme was the problem created for the theologian by the emergence of a new ideal of science. Today there is not merely the old medieval problem, presented indeed with a new urgency, of whether there is to be a strict theoretic side to theology, valid and valued in its own right; there is also the complication introduced by a considerably changed view of what science is. For St. Thomas, science dealt most characteristically with the certain, the unchangeable (or change understood only from its term), the *per se*, the necessary, the universal; modern science deals with probabilities, change in itself (at the instant), the *per accidens* (statistical laws), empirical *de facto* intelligibility, and particulars (if not as such, at least as included in the genesis of the universe). Now it is notorious that many central mysteries of the faith are particular and contingent events, or even developing processes; they seem to demand a theology modeled more on modern science than on ancient.

Moreover, this is applied to man through the newly-developed empirical human sciences, which study, not *natura pura*, not man as he ought to be

secundum rationes sempiternas, but man as he is in his sinful condition. They consider man, therefore, in a way which involves the theological context, but at the same time they cannot be integrated into theology in the old medieval way. For medieval theologians took over Aristotelian philosophy, which had already integrated the mathematical and physical sciences, and added theology to obtain a coherent and closely-knit view of the universe. But the empirical human sciences are not adequately integrated into a philosophy of human nature as such, and present to theologians today the appearance of an alien body in the scientific organism they have inherited.

Parallel to the sciences and the difficulties they offer to the all-embracing scope of theology, there is a new mentality and way of approach in men themselves. Historical consciousness has invaded every field, to add on a sense of relativity (not relativism); tradition is not a norm in the way it was, but, with the development of new arts, new sciences, new technology, man has a new sense of self-determination, of choosing what he is to make of himself in independence of tradition; and this development occurred to a great extent outside the Catholic context.

Again, phenomenology, existentialism, and personalism are cultivated in a way that leads directly to interiority and subjectivity, bypassing the theoretic element that has characterized theology. The symbolic mind is replacing the conceptual; there is a shifting from the classical definition of man as *animal rationale* to the phenomenological *animal symbolicum*. There is a demand for a praying theology as opposed to a thinking theology. And this whole mentality seems more akin to the religious spirit of all ages than does textbook theology. The old question then recurs: Is there to be a theoretic element in theology? In ancient times the milkmaid laughed at Thales, who was so absorbed by the stars that he could not see the well at his feet. Is there a place for Thales in theology, or only for milkmaids? The old question is put with a new insistence, with the support of new weapons, under the impetus of a new wave of anti-intellectualism.

Fr. Lonergan has proved over the years that he is no enemy of change and progress—in fact, some find him too progressive altogether—but neither does he consider that acceptance of the new requires the abandoning of the old. The problem, in the mathematical terms he often favors, is, after recognizing the differentiations that have occurred, to achieve the summation, the integration, of the differentiated operations; and this, where there is question of such seemingly disparate trends and doctrines, is a genuine problem. He finds, however, the possibility of integration in the preconceptual operations of the subject. The questions native to the human mind are prior to the differentiations of intelligence and mentality that occur through

the stages of human history; they are common to the prophet, the Scholastic, the existentialist. Likewise, the act of understanding, the first result of the questioning human mind, is preconceptual. Here his book, *Insight*, can be profitably exploited; insight, unlike conception, has direct reference to the sensibly given or the imaginatively represented; it supplies, then, a link with the particular, the empirical, the contingent. Similarly, on the level of judgment there is, prior to propositional forms, a prejudgmental reflective grasp of the sufficiency of evidence which accords with the scientist's experimental verification, his logic and methodology, but equally well makes room for Pascal's *esprit de finesse* and Newman's illative sense. This seems to meet the need for the prolongation of wisdom that transfers the virtue of prudence to the speculative field, that does for speculative science what Thomist prudence did for the practical in the Middle Ages. Thomist prudence was, in fact, an expansion of knowledge to cover the contingent and particular, but its application was in the field of agenda; today we must form a parallel speculative wisdom of the particular and contingent.

Moreover, the elemental drive of human intelligence, which manifests itself in preconceptual questions and answers, has no limits—which is a way of saying that its object is *ens*. And this universal drive carries one beyond the differentiations of spheres of knowing worked out by Max Scheler and propagated so widely under his influence, to supply the means of both a metaphysical unity on the objective side and a methodological unity on the side of the subject's knowing operations. The unity, in turn, permits a coherent account of the differentiations and the possibility of rational transition from one of them to the others. The main relevant differentiations are: the common sense of everyday understanding, natural science, philosophy, human belief, divine faith, theology both positive and systematic. The transition that chiefly concerns the method of theology is that from faith to theology; here the *termini a quo* and *ad quem* are compared not merely as implicit and explicit, but also as *actus exercitus et actus signatus, le vécu et le ihématique, verstehen und erklären*, the experiential and the experimental, etc.

For example, with the set of concepts proper to itself theology thematizes the Scriptures, thematizes them according to its own proper needs, not as event, or expression, or encounter, legitimate as all those themes may be for other purposes, but as the word of God, as truth; and this justifies a selecting and prescinding that is not allowed, say, to exegesis. Thematizing the Scriptures as the word of God, theology interrogates them in the questions arising from its own context, receiving the answers indeed in biblical terms but transposing them to the theological. This is illustrated by some extremely interesting parallels. One is that of the doctor and patient: it is the patient who

suffers the illness *in actu exercitu*, experiences it, and relates what he feels and suffers in his own terms; the doctor, who does not experience the illness but considers it experimentally, thematizing what the patient lives, thinks and puts questions according to his own set of concepts, questions whose relevance may puzzle the patient, and transfers the narrated experience and observable symptoms into his own categories derived from a highly developed science. Though all he knows about the patient he knows from what the patient says and manifests, still he reconceives the whole under a new viewpoint and knows it more accurately. Similarly, a witness stands before a judge and is interrogated about certain events; there is a transition from a tragedy of human life to a legal thematization; the witness, it is true, may know little or nothing of law, but his answers can be transposed into the categories of law by one who possesses legal science. In analogous fashion, the facts of early Christian experience, what was *vécu* in the early Church, can serve a science of theology operating in its own contemporary context.

What is operative in such transpositions is the spontaneous drive to theory, *die Wendung zur Idee*. Nothing is more homely and familiar than illness and wrongdoing, yet, with the passage of time man finds both fields invaded by theory; there is more than a hint that *die Wendung zur Idee* is no accident of time or place and that it will occur as inevitably in the world of faith as elsewhere. Further, it becomes clear that what is proper to the theologian, his specific need, is a *Begrifflichkeit*, a fundamental set of systematic concepts that characterize his science. St. Thomas drew largely on Aristotle for his *Begrifflichkeit*, Bultmann draws largely on Heidegger, and everyone who thinks theologically must consciously or unconsciously use a basic set of concepts which determines the terms in which his questions are put and the answers formulated.

This understanding of the theological situation led Fr. Lonergan naturally to speak of positive theology in its role of showing the development from the sources of revelation to the present theological context. And, since the theologian is dealing always with meaning, several of the closing lectures were devoted to the forms of meaning (linguistic, intersubjective, aesthetic, symbolic), to the general problem of *another's* meaning with which hermeneutics deals, to the history of meaning which shifts our viewpoint from what any one author meant to what was going forward in the total process (the difference between the battle plan of the general and the course of the battle).

This account opened with the more proximate and more easily understandable problem of what sort of science theology is to be; it indicated what the theologian will use his method for, but it omitted the general account of method with which the lectures began as a basic problem. We must now re-

turn to that topic. As the reader has possibly discerned, the pivot of the whole argument lies in the operations of the subject. Questions of method concern, not the object (in this case God and all other things in relation to God), but the subject, the theologian, and his operations. Here Piaget's fundamental work on spontaneous operations and their adaptation resulting in differentiations, the combination of differentiated operations and groups of such combinations, was extensively used to throw new light on the old idea of habit; and the importance of Piaget's work becomes apparent as soon as one recalls the Thomist idea of theology as a habit. Further, the operations are operations of a subject; hence the relevance to a theory of method of such questions as the horizon of the subject, the necessity and conditions for his conversion, his authenticity and inauthenticity, etc.

The particular problem of method in theology is complicated by the presence of three radical and inescapable antitheses that face the subject who is attempting to be a theologian. Piaget's cumulative grouping of groups runs into a block before these antitheses; there are limits to the integration of the subject's operations, so that to move from one group to another with ease is the best that one can hope for. But the discovery of limits, as showing that possibilities in a certain field have been exhausted, has traditionally supplied the tool for further advance, and that is the case here. The antitheses give a logical division of fields of development, and this logical theory of development (in contrast to a historical) provides a clue for distinguishing developments generally.

The antitheses are the sacred world and the profane, the interior world and the exterior, the visible world and the intelligible. The visible world is the world of common-sense understanding, the world of community, of sensitive intersubjectivity; but there is a systematic exigence that moves from this world to the world of theory, the intelligible. Further, once science reaches a certain stage, there is a critical exigence that moves from the world of theory to the world of interiority; one becomes aware of one's operations, critically aware of them. But insofar as one is aware of operations, method arises, and the methodological exigence leads one back from the world of interiority to the worlds of common sense and theory again, and relates them to one another. Then the circuit is repeated, from systematic exigence to critical to methodological, and is repeated again in a spiraling process that may continue indefinitely. Finally, as each of these worlds mediates the others, so all of them mediate the sacred, the ultimate, God—in the same sense as that in which all desire is ultimately desire of God.

The introduction of faith does not invalidate this process. The systematic exigence, *die Wendung zur Idee*, is again evident, only now the world of com-

munity is the Body of Christ; the critical exigence is again evident, giving awareness of a new interiority, with divine faith added to the operations of the subject. And the methodological exigence appears again in the return to the worlds of community and theory, in the effort to relate faith and theology, the Christian experience of the early Church with the systematic formulations of the Church's thinkers. There is a return from the subject to the object but with the new power and penetration deriving from a critical assessment of what one is doing, the resources one has at hand for doing it, the limitations one suffers in carrying out the task. Thus we came to the discussion of the problems of theology in a new world of ideas and the task of integrating the new with the old.

Thus far our résumé. It will hardly satisfy strangers to Fr. Lonergan's thought, but perhaps it will indicate to those familiar with his previous work the direction in which he is at present advancing. For others, to whom it may seem that he comes on the scene rather suddenly, I would add that he has probably been more successful than most theologians in hiding his light under a bushel and that actually his ideas on theological method have been germinating for a long time. His doctoral dissertation,¹ completed in 1940, showed already a deep concern with the nature of theology, but, as if aware of the magnitude of the task, he seems to have postponed a decisive grappling with this question till he had prepared the ground (and himself) in thorough fashion. It would be, I am convinced, a very profitable exercise to follow his development over the period since 1940 in the endeavor to discern significant stages, but it can hardly be done in a concluding paragraph to this short note. Moreover, the sources for such an inquiry are not sufficiently public: much of his written work exists in that semipublished state characterized as *ad usum auditorum*; there is a considerable accumulation of recordings of his lectures and summer courses (a form of preservation of thought not included in the root meaning of bibliography, but very important for all that); and these *opuscula*, returning again and again to the question of method, have been slowly preparing the way for a full-scale study of this problem. May that study not now be long delayed.

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¹ The subject was *gratia operans* in St. Thomas, and the exegetical part was published in a series of articles in *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 2-3 (1941-42); but if one is able to consult the typescript of the dissertation itself, he will find there a long unpublished discussion in which the development of the theory of grace serves as a kind of paradigm for the generic idea of development in speculative theology. It is extremely interesting to go back now after more than two decades and see how many of the author's present ideas are anticipated in the first pages he wrote as a theologian.