

NOTES

DOCTRINES AND HISTORICITY IN THE CONTEXT OF LONERGAN'S *METHOD*

The difficulty of reconciling a permanent element in Christian doctrines with the historicity that affects all human judgments, those of faith as well as those of the secular sciences, is the present form of a general problem that has been troubling theologians in their theology and believers in their beliefs for a century and more. The appearance of *Mysterium ecclesiae*, where—for the first time, so it seems, in a document of the Holy See—the element of historicity in the sources of our faith is expressly taken into account, has given Giovanni Sala occasion for the book which will be my point of departure in the reflections of this Note.¹

I

Father Sala limits his objective rather carefully. He is not engaging in debate on the concrete question that triggered much of the current discussion (Hans Küng on infallibility) but pursues his own independent and unitary line of thought. His intention is to set forth a general philosophy of human knowledge and an epistemology that will enable him to deal with the issues involved, at least in the measure needed to illuminate the relevant passages of the Roman document, and so he freely admits that much of his work will stand or fall with his epistemological premises (pp. 6–9).

His first part provides those premises in four chapters: on human knowing in general, on the character it has of being incomplete and yet at the same time claiming absolute adherence, on its developing character, and finally on the form it takes in historical knowledge. Six chapters in the second part employ these ideas in a study of the word of God and the dogma of the Church: revelation as a word of God that is true, a sample of the process from New Testament to dogma (taken from the field of Christology), dogma as concluding and also initiating a process

¹ Giovanni B. Sala, *Dogma e storia nella dichiarazione "Mysterium ecclesiae."* Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1976. Pp. 358. L. 4,800. Page references will be given in the body of the article. *Mysterium ecclesiae* was published in *Acta apostolicae sedis* 65 (1973) 396–408; an "official" English translation appeared in *Origins: NC Documentary Service* 3 (1973) 97, 99–100, 110–12. The translation speaks of "the historical condition that affects the expression of Revelation" (p. 110, col. 3), translating the Latin "ex historica exprimendae Revelationis condicione." It may eliminate some confusion if we distinguish the present problem from that of dogma and history as it began to trouble the Catholic Church a century ago; at that time the precise problem was the seeming conflict in what dogma and history were saying about the past.

of learning, dogma as going beyond biblical terms, the historical character and transcultural components of dogma, and finally the permanence of dogma. Three chapters in the third part apply this to the exposition of the notion of historicity in *Mysterium ecclesiae*.

As the reader may have gathered from this brief table of contents, Sala is defending a thesis as well as setting forth his views on the topics listed. The thesis is the moderate third position of asserting both the permanence of dogma and its historicity, as against the alternative extremes of plumping for one and disregarding the other. From this viewpoint it is important to read the book as a unitary whole in which what at first seems like a one-sided emphasis is later brought into balance with compensating considerations. For example, a more objective approach is balanced by the recognition (pp. 37-41) of subjective factors, a rather rational tendency by the acknowledgment (p. 81) of the role of feelings, an intellectual view of revelation by the introduction (p. 88) of the kerygmatic, and so on, right up to a discussion of the role of love in relation to the search for truth (p. 305), and of the subject's authenticity in relation to the objectivity of his judgments (pp. 310 ff.). It is clear to me that the author is alive to the complexities of the question, and fully committed to consideration of every factor that is real and significant.

From another viewpoint one must remember the concrete situation in which Sala writes; for, just as truth is always truth in someone's mind, so its expression can hardly be without relation to one's potential audience, circle of readers, or partners in dialogue. Thus, two authors might wish with equal sincerity to do justice to the opposing elements of the question; but one, with an eye on those who deny the permanence of dogma, would concede the historicity, insist more on the permanence, and so appear more conservative; the other, with his eye on the reactionaries to change, would readily admit the normative character of the truth given us in our patrimony, but would be more urgent in stressing its historicity, and so might appear more liberal. From this viewpoint I am in full agreement with Sala on the need for moderation, balance, and a comprehensive effort at reconciliation, in agreement too with most of his positions taken one by one, but, where his stress is on permanence, I would likely feel drawn more in my particular *kairos* to the cause of historicity.

However, with such variations in emphasis, determined by time, place, and circumstance, there is no argument. The real interest in such an effort of reconciliation lies in the way an author understands the question, in the penetration of the ideas with which he endeavors to reach the level of his times and to come to terms with its conflicting demands. Sala has clearly done his own homework and has his own

individual contribution to make, one of careful research, of analytic acumen, of reflective wisdom. But this personal contribution is made in the context of Bernard Lonergan's thought, which supplies a kind of organon for the thesis of *Dogma e storia*.² It is here, in this Lonergan context, that I would like to enter the discussion, not to challenge Sala's presentation but to complement it with an account of my own difficulties in regard to doctrines and historicity, and with some reflections that have come to me as I worked toward a solution.

II

The topic, then, is chapter 12 of Lonergan's *Method*, entitled "Doctrines,"³ and the immediate difficulty can be stated in the form of a seeming contradiction issuing in a dilemma for the reader. On one side, Lonergan seems committed by his view of methodical theology to radical creative work in the area of doctrines. They are to be the result of "the application of a method that distinguishes functional specialties," and indeed the result of *selection* by the theologian; for the method "uses the functional specialty, foundations, to select doctrines from among the multiple choices presented by the functional specialty, dialectic" (p. 298). That is to say, the old doctrines are not enough in a new situation; if they "are to retain their meaning within the new contexts, they have to be recast" (p. 305). There is to be a reinterpretation (pp. 154, 319, 344-45), the sort of thing which in fact went on even in the Old Testament and the New (pp. 306-7). There are "transpositions that theological thought has to develop if religion is to retain its identity and yet at the same time find access into the minds and hearts of men of all cultures and classes" (pp. 132-33).

² Sala has been publishing for twelve years in the field of Lonergan studies. His doctoral dissertation, completed at the University of Bonn, was a study of the a priori in Kant and Lonergan; he has published studies of Lonergan in the periodicals of Italy, Germany, France, Austria, and the United States; he edited the German translation of some of Lonergan's papers, *Theologie im Pluralismus heutiger Kulturen* (Freiburg, 1975); he himself translated *Method* into Italian: *Il metodo in teologia* (Brescia, 1975); it is a great pity that *Insight* got translated into that language without benefit of his extremely thorough acquaintance with the book.

³ *Method in Theology* (London, 1972) pp. 295-333; again, page references will be given in my text. An overlapping work that is roughly contemporary is *Doctrinal Pluralism* (The 1971 Pere Marquette Theology Lecture, Marquette University). The reader will notice that I tend to speak of "doctrines and historicity" rather than of "dogmas and historicity." The latter expression emphasizes more the problem as it is determined by the character of dogma; the former emphasizes more the solution, based on the character of doctrines explained in chapter 12. The last paragraph of that chapter, setting forth "a distinction between dogmatic theology and doctrinal theology," I have found exceptionally helpful. I am not sure that the relation between doctrines and dogmatic theology was as fully worked out when Lonergan wrote what is now p. 132 in chapter 5 of *Method*; that chapter, we remember, was published three years earlier than the book.

But then, on the other side, we find what seems to be a firm and determined commitment to the "word that comes to us from Christ Jesus" (p. 298). The Christian theologian should also be an authentic Christian, "and so will be second to none in his acceptance of revelation, scripture, and his church doctrine" (p. 331). Not only will he accept them; he has also a responsibility to defend them (pp. 323-24), and a responsibility to consider the influence he may exert on the faithful, and the influence his theological doctrine may have on church doctrines (p. 332). Lonergan's own fidelity to the doctrines of his church is shown in *Method* by his acceptance of the doctrine on doctrine of the First Vatican Council (p. 332), and shown elsewhere in work done subsequently to *Method* in the field of Trinitarian and Christological doctrines.⁴

The question, then, that arises directly out of *Method* is whether we do or do not possess our doctrines before we begin theology. We seem, if we try to follow Lonergan, to be tossed from horn to horn of a dilemma. Either we already possess our doctrines through our tradition and faith-commitment, and then what are we doing trying to establish them in the theological task that Lonergan names "doctrines"? Or we do not already possess them, and then what becomes of our commitment as believers to the doctrines of the Christian tradition?

One suspects that so gross a contradiction is not likely to occur in a thinker of Lonergan's power, and so one very sensibly asks first whether the failure is not to be found in oneself. Actually, our argument did contain an oversight which, once noticed, is not hard to remedy, and so the contradiction, at least in its gross form, can be eliminated. For the dogmas to which my faith commits me are a word from the past, but the doctrines that *Method* would have us produce are a word of the future. This is basic and orienting, for it derives from the two phases of methodical theology: "If one encounters the past, one also has to take one's stand toward the future" (p. 133). So the chapter on doctrines lists primary sources, church doctrines, theological doctrines (of the past), methodological doctrine, and then, over against them all, sets up doctrines in the sense of the functional specialty: "There is a fifth variety of doctrines, the ones meant in the title of the present chapter" (p. 298). And these are still to be formulated; for they result from method which "uses the functional specialty, foundations, to select doctrines from among the multiple choices presented by the functional specialty, dialectic" (*ibid.*).

However, blunting the horns of the dilemma does not eliminate further questions; it rather invites them. For example, we may accept dogmas from past tradition and try to formulate doctrines of the future,

⁴ Notably in "The Origins of Christian Realism," first published in *Theology Digest* 20 (1972) 292-305, and reprinted in *A Second Collection* (London, 1974) pp. 239-61.

but we have still to ask how the doctrines are related to the dogmas. Lonergan's summary answer is indicated in a line I have already quoted: the doctrines will be *transpositions* of the dogmas.⁵ What does transposition do? It does not give a new meaning to the old dogmas, for it is just their meaning that is permanent (pp. 322-23); much less does it mean a new religion, for transpositions are needed precisely "if religion is to retain its identity and yet . . . find access into the minds and hearts of men of all cultures and classes" (pp. 132-33). But it seems to involve a rather fundamental change, for it is distinguished from "the adaptations needed to make . . . use of the diverse media of communication" (p. 133), presumably as something analogous to that adaptation but taking place on a more fundamental level. Probably the most direct approach to its meaning is through Lonergan's statement on the theoretical premises of the historicity of human thought, especially the second premise: "human understanding develops over time and, as it develops, human concepts, theories, affirmations, courses of action change" (p. 325). That transition, when it regards the understanding of a truth, is transposition.⁶

A second question follows. My first was put from the viewpoint of the new doctrines, the *terminus ad quem* of the transposition; but one might also turn to the *terminus a quo* and ask what happens to the old dogmas themselves in the transposition. The form of this question, I think, betrays a misunderstanding of what a transposition is and does. It is not an evolution of a material entity into a new form, as when thirteen colonies become the United States and, in so doing, cease to be colonies. If we want a visual simile, we might better think of an album of family

⁵ I am indebted to Lonergan himself for calling my attention to the role of this term. And now, on re-examining *Method*, I would say that "transposition" belongs to a little list of key ideas there that have not been sufficiently noticed. The word did not manage to get into the extensive Index—no doubt a sign of how much remains to be understood in the book. But the term or the idea (under the form "recast," "reinterpreted," etc.) is recurrent; see, for examples, pp. 142, 150, 154, 168, 171, 304, 306-7, 319, 327-28, 344-45, 353, 362-63.

⁶ The sources of Lonergan's notion of transposition are surely to be found in the directly theological work in which he was engaged for nearly forty years as he thought through his *Method*, though it will require the most careful discrimination to incorporate elements of this early work into a methodical theology, or to use it to illustrate his methodological precepts. See especially his *De Deo Trino*, 2 vols. (Rome, 1964); the *Pars prima* of Vol. 1 is now available in English (translated by Conn O'Donovan) under the title *The Way to Nicaea* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976). For instant illustration I propose this simplified example: Nicaea on the consubstantiality of the Son is a transposition of the Pauline attribution to the Son of the glory that in the Old Testament belonged to Yahweh alone; again, the remark of George L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London, 1952) p. 213, that the Nicene question "was whether both the Father and the Son were God in exactly the same sense of the word God," gives his transposition of Nicaea into terms more appropriate today.

pictures; nothing happens to the wedding-day picture of my parents simply as a result of the fact that there is a different picture on their anniversary twenty-five or fifty years later. Similarly, we can say that nothing happens to the ancient dogmas in the transposition; they simply remain what they were. As the pictures are records at different times of one continuing reality, so the successive transpositions are expressions in differing cultures of the one meaning.

A much more pertinent question regards ourselves and our relation today to the dogmas of the past. This is the difficult area, and I think it useful to recall the broad context in which the question arises. It is that of a community of belief which extends across time as well as space: I form one community of belief with Paul, the Nicene fathers, and others in my tradition. Further, a community of belief is not like common ownership of material goods, leaving minds and hearts otherwise free; it involves a common set of values, a common adherence to their concrete embodiment, and a common judgment on the facts and doctrines that support and/or depend on the values. So that the authentic beliefs and dogmas of my tradition from the year 30 through 325 to 1977 are in some fundamental sense our doctrines, and in that fundamental sense they are mine too. If, therefore, someone were to ask me point-blank about my acceptance of any doctrine authentically defined and taught at any time by my community, I would answer: Yes, I accept that doctrine in the sense it had when my community formulated and defined it as the expression of our faith.

At the same time I would question the validity of such point-blank tactics. Truth has an absolute character, but this character cannot simply be transferred to the economy in which truth functions and is communicated. There are two barriers to such transferral. One regards the distinction between content and exercise:⁷ though it may be that a given content is not to be contradicted, it does not follow that I may impose that content on others, or find it relevant to me here and now, or even be required to utter it when challenged. The other regards the distinction within content between meaning and formula: the confession of the divinity of the Son may be made now in Pauline language, now in Nicene language, or today in still another language more appropriate and more pastoral.⁸

⁷ This is the distinction used by St. Thomas to clarify his position on the freedom of the will: "quantum ad exercitium actus" and "quantum ad specificationem actus" (*Sum. theol.* 1-2, q. 10, a. 2).

⁸ A pastoral theology would need its set of pastoral "notes" (not necessarily so called) as counterpart to the old dogmatic "notes" of *de fide, probabilior*, etc. For example, Emil Brunner thought of Trinitarian doctrine as *Schutzlehre*; a pastoral theology would determine what doctrines are mainly "defensive" for us, and contrast them sharply with doctrines that directly affect the life of the believer. Similarly, the pastoral office would

Other questions on our relation to the past are logically prior to that of the economy. I spoke of the "authentic" doctrines of my community, and this leads me to the reflection that we cannot, through any blind commitment to the past, shirk the work of research, interpretation, and history, in determining what our community has authentically held or now holds. There is a responsibility laid on Christians for "purifying their tradition" (p. 299). For example, once we held firmly that Jesus said the words and did the deeds attributed to him (as we thought) by the Evangelists; few of us, however, hold that today. This surely is a purification of something that did not belong in the genuine tradition, and the purification was accomplished largely through the specialties of research, exegesis, and factual history. A second illustration is from the field of the history of dogma. A few decades back I personally—and, it seems, many others—would have said that the Nicene fathers taught implicitly the doctrine of distinct persons in one God. Today I would not try to make Cappadocians of the Nicenes by my "implicitly"; I would simply say they taught no such thing, that the question of distinct persons in one God arose and was answered only half a century later. A third illustration is found in the very question of the permanence of dogma as it is treated in chapter 12 of *Method*, where there is a clarification of "permanence"—it "attaches to the meaning and not to the formula," though we have no meaning apart from a formula (p. 323)—and as well the addition of the factor of historicity to complement that of permanence; how much purifying of the tradition is involved here may be estimated by the trauma many experience in accepting it.

But, when *Method* speaks of "purifying the tradition," it seems to mean something more radical than research, interpretation, and factual history. Lonergan speaks of the possibility that a tradition may become inauthentic: "unauthenticity can spread. It can become a tradition. Then persons, brought up in an unauthentic tradition, can become authentic human beings and authentic Christians only by purifying their tradition" (p. 299; see pp. 80, 162). And so a more radical exercise of the functional specialties comes into play for the theologian: "evalua-

take account, in the profession of faith it requires, of the economy of communicating truth. We would not, if we could, confront Tertullian and Origen in their day with the definition of Nicaea and force them to accept it or else. . . . But then, if we could move in the opposite direction and set them down in post-Nicene times, would it be a responsible action to impose Nicaea on them without a long preliminary education in fourth-century thinking? Well, our world is full of Origenes and Tertullians and others at varying levels of development and with varying forms of culture.—More generally, we would try to imitate the economy practiced by the Lord of revelation, and take account, not only of the limited ability of the hearer to receive or profit from a given truth, but also of the limited role that truth plays in general in Christian living.

tional history . . . decides on the legitimacy of developments" (p. 320; see pp. 302, 312), and dialectic "deploys both the truth reached and the errors disseminated in the past" (p. 299). Thus, very ugly questions may arise for the theologian: Could one face, should one face, the awful possibility that his faith in the Church, his very faith in Jesus Christ, is inauthentic, erroneous, that purification of his tradition requires central beliefs under these headings to be abandoned?

We have moved very quickly to questions which involve the theologian personally in a radical way, which force him out of academic detachment and require him with Kierkegaard to concern himself infinitely with the ethical and the religious. Perhaps, however, theologians can be more direct in communicating with one another than Kierkegaard found possible. At any rate, I wish to try, well aware that words on paper are but a small step toward the mutual encounter and dialectic through which we may achieve the personal growth that is ultimately necessary.

III

My first remark, then, is that the self-devouring monster which we have conceived as a possibility for the theologian is the product of an isolated rationality. It has separated itself from its basis in "self-justifying" love (pp. 123, 283-84), which is a basis, not because we have reached it in critical examination and made it a principle, but because it is given and operative and a principle independently of our reasoning. It is, in fact, the principle of efforts to identify its own object and purify conceptions of that object.⁹ We do not, therefore, begin by cutting off the branch on which we sit; this would not be to face reality but very precisely to lose touch with reality in a morbidity whose remedy is not an argument but the letting what is be.¹⁰

My second remark recalls Newman's "true way of learning," which he opposes to that (it seems) of Descartes. It does not consist in doubting everything that can be doubted till we get down at last to some indubitable truth on which we may then build again. On the contrary, "we ought to begin with believing everything that is offered to our acceptance. . . . In that case, we soon discover and discard what is contradictory to itself

⁹ Orientation to transcendent mystery, or love of God, "provides the origin for inquiry about God, for seeking assurance of his existence, for endeavoring to reach some understanding of the mysteries of faith" (*Method*, p 341).

¹⁰ We know the way some religious persons torture themselves with the question of how much cruelty they could endure for their faith; there is an analogous morbidity in the theologian who worries where his theology may lead him. We know too the penchant of the Late Middle Ages for asking about abstract possibles and the absolute power of God; this is academic morbidity on the grand scale in the schools—again, very precisely, the desertion of reality.

. . . the error falling off from the mind, and the truth developing and occupying it."¹¹ This adds to the passive factor of letting be what is, the positive one of doing what we can in the best way we can.

Thirdly, there is the further specification of that way. As we have given, in Lonergan's self-justifying love, a new formulation to the trust that is operative in Newman, so we may give his learning procedures a new technique through Lonergan's dialectic. For the purpose of dialectic is to build up, not to destroy; the higher level that sublates truth, "so far from . . . destroying it . . . needs it, includes it, preserves all its proper features and properties, and carries them forward to a fuller realization within a richer context" (p. 241). Or, the authentic subjectivity which is the goal of dialectic leads to genuine objectivity (p. 292). However, I mean to omit here all discussion of the technique of dialectic, not because it is unimportant but because in my opinion it is all-important; it is the very crux of the question and deserves more than a superficial exposition at the end of an article on another topic.

IV

May I, however, for that very reason, conclude with a plea to Lonergan students for more concentrated attention on the topic of dialectic? And so, though I began this article by discussing with Sala chapter 12 of *Method*, I would end by moving discussion back to chapter 10. This chapter on dialectic is the point, I would say, at which Lonergan has lost most of his readers, perhaps without our knowing that we have fallen behind. That could be merely a judgment on my own experience, but I do not think it is. The chapter does occupy a strategic place in the structure of *Method*, and if, as most reviewers agree, the book as a whole is going to require slow and laborious study, then the difficulty is likely to be especially acute at this crucial point. Further, there is the significant fact that Lonergan's own development to the point where he could write this chapter was so slow and laborious.¹² Finally, the intrinsic difficulty, as it was in the late 1940's with the act of insight and in the late 1950's

¹¹ John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London, 1930) p. 377.

¹² Some time ago, in an unpublished paper "An Exploration of Lonergan's New Notion of Value" (Boston College Workshop on Lonergan, June 1974), I offered the following clues to a chronology of Lonergan's development under this heading: "There are milestones of progress in the Boston College lectures of 1957, with their attention to the horizon of the subject and his existential concerns; in the Latin treatises of this period with their work on the consciousness of Christ and the theology of the three divine subjects; in the concluding section of the 1964 paper on 'Cognitional Structure,' with its brief but important linking of subjectivity to objectivity; most of all, in the Aquinas Lecture of 1968, *The Subject*." I would now add to these "milestones" a paper Lonergan read in 1967, "Theology in Its New Context," *A Second Collection*, pp. 55-67.

with the act of judgment, is the elusive achievement of self-appropriation, coming now in dialectic to the most difficult point of the process. At any rate, it seems to me, five years after the publication of *Method*, that chapter 10 is a conspicuous hurdle to be surmounted by those who wish to understand what Lonergan is about in that book, and I personally would be especially interested in the views on dialectic of one who is as familiar as Sala is with Lonergan's thought and as accurate an interpreter of it.

However, in pleading for a collaborative effort to understand what dialectic means in itself and as a theological task, I certainly do not mean to suggest that we postpone all work either on the theology of such questions as revelation, kerygma, creeds, etc., or on the concept itself of the theological task named "doctrines." As for the first, theology cannot wait upon method in order to pursue its theological aims. The work must continue with such tools as are available,¹³ and Sala's own discussion of the concepts pertaining to the word of God would be an example of the attempts we must make on that topic till a more methodical theology can be tackled.¹⁴ As for the second, we cannot so concentrate on dialectic as to leave the four specialties of mediated theology aside. Correlations are too numerous, the crosslight from phase to phase and from task to task is too illuminating, to permit us to understand one task in isolation from the others. From this viewpoint I found it unusually stimulating, for my own concentration on dialectic, to be forced by Sala's book to think over again some of the complex questions that surround Lonergan's notion of doctrines and their historicity.

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¹³ In any case, to implement *Method* is not to create a whole new theology but to restructure its tasks, use work already done in some specialties, and work more creatively in others. I would say that the need for originality increases from specialty to specialty in the first phase, so that the immense amount of competent research now available could quite readily be taken over in a methodical theology, whereas dialectic would have to be developed much more creatively.

¹⁴ Sala would agree, I think, that a methodical theology of the word of God, of truth, etc., will require explicit attention to the eight functional specialties, and that his own work on these concepts in chapter 5 is an interim effort to give such guidance as is possible in a brief compass. But the question has repeatedly been raised about Lonergan's own use in *Method* of such concepts as revelation, word of God, etc. It is clear that he is not giving us a theology (except for an element of a theology of dogma, and a hint of such an element for a theology of the word of God), but what is he doing? Can one justify his use? The suggestion may be worth thinking about that, in the image found in *Insight* (London, 1957, p. 291), he is using a descriptive account as "tweezers" by which we hold an object while explanation is being sought. The descriptive account could be summarized as that which Scripture conveys to an amateur prior to all specialized exegesis and theology. Some such account is surely supposed by all of us about Jesus of Nazareth himself; and it is globally valid despite the corrections it accepts later from specialists: we do not lose contact with the real earthly Jesus while we await the results of the historical quest and of the changing, often conflicting, Christologies.