

BERNARD LONERGAN AT THE SERVICE OF THE CHURCH

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[Cardinal Martini, archbishop emeritus of Milan, and currently scholar in residence in Jerusalem, delivered this inaugural address on November 17, 2004, during a three-day international congress held at the Gregorian University on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the birth of the Canadian Jesuit Bernard J. F. Lonergan (1904–1984). The congress explored the contribution of Lonergan to Christian theology and, in particular, his proposal for a new methodology capable of assuring the internal unity of theology as well as fostering its many integrations with the natural and human sciences, historical research, philosophical reflection, and other types of knowing. Cardinal Martini in his lecture brought out the person of Lonergan as well as his ecclesial and cultural significance.]

MY PRESENTATION TODAY has the solemn title of an “Inaugural Address,” but the reality is that I am neither a philosopher nor an influential cultural commentator. Therefore, many of the things that one could say in an inaugural lecture from the cultural perspectives of the new millennium escape me. On the other hand I am not even in a full sense a pastoral worker. I am retired because of age and health from all pastoral responsibility and above all else I dedicate my time in Jerusalem to prayer, especially intercessory prayer for the many intentions accumulated in years of service as bishop of Milan and for the many hopes and sufferings of the peoples among whom I now live. A part of my time is also dedicated to the study of ancient manuscripts and in some modest pastoral service, as needs and requests demand. All of this would not seem to have much to do with the thought of Bernard Lonergan, now being published in over twenty volumes. These truly remarkable feats of thought are now very fortunately also being published in Italian.

Nevertheless, I have agreed to give this introductory address at this congress honoring the centenary of the birth of Bernard Lonergan because of the gratitude I feel for how much he has given to me during my active service to the Church, whether in the biblical field, or in the field of pastoral activity. I also am grateful for what he continues to give me in the encouragement, renewed every day, to understand the world in which we live and to seek to find meaning in its dramatic contradictions and complexities.

It is not easy for me to describe this in abstract and conceptual terms. I prefer the way taught us by the biblical tradition, the way of narrative, even if in this I run the risk of being somewhat autobiographical. But I do not see any other way than this narrative way to express my gratitude to Bernard Lonergan and to seek to express his importance for me and, I believe, for our epoch.

I will begin by saying that a number of years ago I missed a great opportunity to know him directly and to attend at least one of his courses. For, in fact, in the 1950s he taught at the Gregorian University while I studied at the Biblical Institute. At the time I heard people speaking of this professor who taught in quite excellent Latin, but pronounced in a manner almost incomprehensible for non Anglo-Saxons, and who set out a very profound teaching admired and championed by some, but unintelligible to others. At the time I was too immersed myself in my biblical studies to let my curiosity get the best of me by going to hear him, and thus, as I said, I lost out on an opportunity which would certainly have been priceless for me.

I did have with me his foundational book, about which some students had great praise, with its significant title, *Insight*. But I never found the time to read it through. Its very size as well the difficulty of its language frightened me. I was content from time to time to look up some words in the analytical index and to consult some of its pages—with the result that I concluded that this book was too difficult for me, even while at the same time feeling its fascination and in some way its capacity to be thought-provoking and to open up new horizons.

The real contact with Lonergan's work was stimulated, instead, by a simple article in *L'Osservatore Romano* at the beginning of the 1970s. It was an article by Professor Battista Mondin, who at the time taught philosophy at the Urban University, and who on the basis of Lonergan's recent book, *Method in Theology*, presented an organic vision of theological knowledge which attracted me by its clarity and completeness. I got hold of the book immediately and set out to read it avidly because I sensed that it spoke to so many of my questions and put order into so many of my thoughts. If I could use a spiritual example, just as you can define the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius Loyola—a book very dear to me—as a method for putting order into one's own life, so the work of Lonergan seemed to me to be a method for putting order into one's own way of thinking, knowing, reasoning. Some things in his writing really struck me and they have struck me ever since as gradually I have read his other books and articles.

Lonergan "the Mystic"

First, I was struck above all by a certain "mystical" vision of human existence, which set out in first place the love of God poured out into our

hearts through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). Finally I had found a theologian who gave primacy to the experience of God, or as he himself expressed it, “falling in love with God,” and saw everything as deriving from this fundamental experience. I was equally struck by the central role given in his organic systematization of theology to “conversion” and therefore to the practical and experiential aspect of the Christian life on which theology reflects. Even if, especially in his fundamental work, *Insight*, that which appears to be first is the human mind which seeks to experience, reflect, evaluate, know and thus to become conscious of the constant and invariant functioning of consciousness, in reality it is evident in his theological work that in the end the focal point of everything is constituted by the gift of God poured out into our spirit.

There is therefore the philosopher Lonergan who appears in—say 80 percent of his work—as a philosopher of the centrality of the human person and his knowing, as an expert in anthropology and epistemology; but there is an even deeper Lonergan, whom I would even call “mystical,” who acknowledges the primacy of the love of God poured into us, and of the experience of the Spirit. For the first time I had found a theologian who had the courage to say that on certain privileged occasions love precedes knowledge. Let me cite his words literally:

It used to be said, *Nihil amatum nisi praecognitum*, Knowledge precedes love. . . . There is a minor exception to this rule inasmuch as people do fall in love, and that falling in love is something disproportionate to its causes, conditions, occasions, antecedents. For falling in love is a new beginning, an exercise of vertical liberty in which one’s world undergoes a new organization. But the major exception to the Latin tag is God’s gift of his love flooding our hearts. Then we are in the dynamic state of being in love. But who it is we love, is neither given nor as yet understood. Our capacity for moral self-transcendence has found a fulfillment that brings deep joy and profound peace. Our love reveals to us values we had not appreciated, values of prayer and worship, or repentance and belief. But if we would know what is going on within us, if we would learn to integrate it with the rest of our living, we have to inquire, investigate, seek counsel. So it is that in religious matters love precedes knowledge and, as that love is God’s gift, the very beginning of faith is due to God’s grace.¹

From this principle many practical consequences follow—whether in the field of apologetics, or in the field of preaching and pastoral work, or even in taking up the problem of the salvation of non-believers. For this reason Lonergan frequently returns to this topic, particularly when he speaks of the pluralism of religious languages. He underlines how the grace with which God floods our hearts—before our knowing it—

. . . could be the grace that God offers all men, that underpins what is good in the religions of mankind, that explains how those that never heard the gospel can be

¹ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972; Toronto: University of Toronto, 1996 reprint) 122–23.

saved. It could be what enables the simple faithful to pray to their heavenly Father in secret even though their religious apprehensions are faulty. Finally, it is in such grace that can be found the theological justification of Catholic dialogue with all Christians, with non-Christians, and even with atheists who may love God in their hearts while not knowing him with their heads.²

I cite this long passage from *Method in Theology* to indicate how much even a pastor can attain from that wisdom that Lonergan began to establish on the basis of a rigorous analysis of human understanding and therefore on a strictly anthropological basis. For Lonergan is known above all as a philosopher of human understanding and it is for this reason that I wanted to underline the fact that he has given so much to me as a pastor and has been an inspiration and a support for me in so many initiatives in the service of the faith of the people.

Knowledge

Secondly, I found Lonergan's analysis of the process of scientific knowing to be significant: from the first beginnings of the data of a problem through working hypotheses to verifications and definitive judgments—though always subject to correction and improvement. For I found that these were the same steps I had taken in my own doctoral work at the Pontifical Biblical Institute on the nature of the text of the Bodmer Papyrus XVI (a codex from the 2nd century) in relation to the text of the Greek Vatican Codex 1209 (B) from the fourth century. Consequently, that which I had lived, guided more or less by instinct and common sense, found in Lonergan's analysis of the experience of every scientific research project a clarity and justification which was a great comfort to me.

In fact, I came to understand that that analysis of the process of human knowing had the universality and transcendence that Lonergan attributed to it, one which opened up to me the process of all scientific thought and indeed of all human thought in general. It was thus that I was able to understand his strong critique of every theory of human understanding which compared it to "seeing what is out there to be seen" and his high esteem for Saint Thomas Aquinas's teaching that "truth is found in judgment," and even more the somewhat revolutionary affirmation, at least in Catholic circles, of the Augustinian judgment that the truth is not found in things but in ourselves—"in interiori homine habitat veritas."

When I entered into pastoral work as Archbishop of the diocese of Milan in the years 1980 to 2002 I came to understand better how many pastoral projects and judgments could be founded on a strong and empirical knowledge of the facts valued and deeply explored according to the process Lonergan had analyzed so intimately: the observation of the data, a work-

² Ibid. 278.

ing hypothesis, verification and judgment—according to Lonergan the invariant pattern of every kind of knowledge. In addition, there was that “mystical” sense already mentioned which led me to privilege above all else in the analysis of the facts the signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit, gift of the Father, an analysis prior to the sociological type so common in society’s way of thinking—and even in the thinking of some Christian communities. Because of that I have always repeated and I repeat here that the point of departure for every pastoral project is not an analysis of the sociological facts but an intuition of those movements of the Spirit which give rise in a community to joy, peace, a willingness to serve, etc, according to the teachings of Paul in Galatians 5:22–23, and corresponding to the Beatitudes and many other biblical passages. I thus came to see a practical welding together of the discernment typical of the *Exercises* of Saint Ignatius, above all in his rules on consolation and desolation, and the hermeneutic rules which I took from Lonergan’s pages.

In addition, many other pastoral experiences led me to understand the extremely deep meaning and as well the practical and pastoral implications of his work. I found myself, for example, so often running up against the difficulty of the differences of languages and in particular the differences between levels of language. This is evident in the Scriptures themselves which use a common sense and popular language as distinct from the language of theory, the language of theologians from which catechisms often take their formulations. Sometimes the two languages are contrasted as if in opposition to each other, as if it were necessary to defend one and disqualify the other. Lonergan shows that each of these has its own place and legitimacy in the journey of human knowing and that instead of losing time in opposing them, it is much more fruitful to recognize the values and limits of each of them.

It was in this way that I was able to better understand many biblical assertions, especially in the area of morality and spirituality, which if treated with technical rigidity would lead to absurdities. We ordinarily make use of our good sense in reading the Scriptures, but Lonergan gave a precise reason for these differences of language and showed the meaning as well as the necessity of both levels of communication.

This also had unexpected practical and pastoral consequences. I sometimes encountered persons accustomed to a scientific language, in particular mathematics and physics, who told me of their difficulty in grasping the importance of Christian themes and in making a synthesis in their own minds between their scientific knowledge and the truths proclaimed by the Scriptures. These and other difficulties due to the multiplicity and differences of language, very much sensed by a contemporary world ever more complex and specialized in its own modes of expression, found in Lonergan’s synthesis an answer and a way of resolution.

Lonergan’s analysis in fact was very attentive to the different levels of

language and differences of mentality expressed in them. He notes that beyond the level of common sense (which speaks of things as they seem to us) there is also the level of theory (which treats of things in their relations to one another), as well as the level of interiority rooted in authentic self-appropriation.

No doubt, we have all to begin from undifferentiated consciousness, from commonsense cognitional procedures, from some one of the multitudinous "ordinary languages" in which the endless varieties of common sense express themselves. No doubt, it is only by a humble and docile process of learning that anyone can move beyond his original ordinary language and its common sense and come to understand other ordinary languages and their varieties of common sense. It is only by knowledge making its bloody entrance that one can move out of the realm of ordinary languages into the realm of theory and the totally different scientific apprehension of reality. It is only through the long and confused twilight of philosophic initiation that one can find one's way into interiority and achieve through self-appropriation a basis, a foundation, that is distinct from common sense and theory, that acknowledges their disparateness, that accounts for both and critically grounds them both.³

In this quote one sees the importance for Lonergan of self-appropriation on the level of interiority. It is thus worth quoting another page where he describes this level of human development:

It is not the consciousness that accompanies acts of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. It is not the consciousness that accompanies acts of inquiry, insight, formulating, speaking. It is not the consciousness that accompanies acts of reflecting, marshalling and weighing the evidence, making judgments of fact or possibility. It is the type of consciousness that deliberates, makes judgments of value, decides, acts responsibly and freely. But it is this consciousness as brought to a fulfilment, as having undergone a conversion, as possessing a basis that may be broadened and deepened and heightened and enriched but not superseded, as ready to deliberate and judge and decide and act with the easy freedom of those that do all good because they are in love. So the gift of God's love occupies the ground and root of the fourth and highest level of man's intentional consciousness. It takes over the peak of the soul, the *apex animae*.⁴

Lonergan therefore distinguished various levels of consciousness and language (which correspond, in fact, to diverse moments in the historical development of humanity) and indicates at the same time a unitary line in which they can be understood and thus their complementarity understood as well. In this way many objections are clarified, helping profoundly cultivated and intelligent people locked into specialized language schemes to overcome this barrier and to recognize that the acquisition of truth demands a serious and honest unfolding of all the steps in the process of knowing.

³ Ibid. 85.

⁴ Ibid. 106-7.

I also ought to add that I have in fact verified in my own experience how long and difficult this journey is. According to Lonergan's citation of the Louvain psychologist, A. Vergote, "man reaches genuine religious faith and a properly personal assumption of his inherited religion about the age of thirty."⁵ But I would hasten to add that this is a best-case scenario. My own experience and that of others has taught me that many people do not truly reach that triple religious, moral, and intellectual conversion necessary for such maturity—and hardly ever prior to the age of forty. That fact entails important consequences for pastoral practice, consequences demanding long and profound examination.

At the same time a certain moral and religious conversion, even if not yet well integrated into the whole of the person and his relations, can happen much before that age; and in the light of the Church's maternal care for all, this is sufficient for acting rightly in the light of God and working within the ambit of the Christian community.

Knowledge and Being

Another element that greatly struck me in Lonergan and that greatly helped me in the interpretation of historical data from the present and the past was his capacity to reflect on the historical experiences of different civilizations and to grasp in them the elements of progress and decline. In his work these are connected with the fundamental schema on consciousness and the presence or absence of moral, intellectual and religious conversion. As I mentioned above, he gives such great weight to the experience of conversion, an experience which is not only religious (that is, the decision to love the Highest Good above all else), but also intellectual (that is, when one overcomes the prejudice that truth is "out there" rather than being discovered through a process of analysis, hypothesis and verification), and moral (when the good is chosen for itself instead of being good only for ourselves). With these criteria he analyzes the reasons for the progress and decline of civilizations and offers criteria and encouragement for intelligent and constructive action, even in the social and political area. I cite here a significant page from *Method in Theology*:

So faith is linked with human progress and it has to meet the challenge of human decline. For faith and progress have a common root in man's cognitional and moral self-transcendence. To promote either is to promote the other indirectly. Faith places human efforts in a friendly universe; it reveals an ultimate significance in human achievement; it strengthens new undertakings with confidence.⁶

⁵ Ibid. 290.

⁶ Ibid. 117.

I have found and I continue to find great comfort and a sense of interior freedom or liberation in reading such pages. Lonergan has in fact a gift of language so clear and evocative as to be fascinating, even after reading just a few pages. Everything in his thought is rigorously coherent and every element recalls all the others so that sometimes one has the impression that he is repeating himself and saying fundamentally the same thing. But in reality he is only applying certain cognitive categories to all of reality and so he often returns to the relation of these categories to the facts of history. Such pages help therefore to confront the complexity of human events, a complexity that remains insoluble and menacing for those who lack this interpretive key and that by means of this key can be illumined. Thus, even a person who wants to commit himself or herself to the concrete service of society can receive comfort and encouragement in this way.

Lonergan says the same thing in a technical way when he speaks of the isomorphism or parallel structure between the levels of consciousness and the levels of being, between knowing and being: a correspondence between the steps in the process of understanding (on the way toward judgment and deliberation) and the different levels of reality. I hesitate to enter into this kind of material, because I realize that I am not personally trained in rigorous philosophical reasoning, but to the extent that I can understand it, all this can certainly give clarity to the mind and can therefore constitute an interpretive instrument for the multiplicity of sciences and the complexity of human events. That Lonergan was able to apply these intuitions to concrete issues with an accompanying liberty of spirit is evident from his September 1968 letter on the relationship between Aristotelian thought and modern scientific thought on human conception. It contains important understandings regarding the problem of contraception and the relation between causality and statistical laws.⁷

When there began to be talk in the Italian Church and elsewhere on “culture oriented in a Christian sense,” I was forced to assert that this cannot just be a series of vague aspirations and general ideas, but this ought to consist in a concrete proposal; and among contemporary proposals Lonergan’s seemed to me to emerge above all others for its clarity and simplicity as well as for its capacity to take into account the complexity of reality. For this reason Lonergan has always seemed to me extraordinary in his capacity on the one hand to penetrate into the meanderings of human reasoning, the grades of knowing and the grades of being and, on the other hand in his openness to the intervention of God in history pouring out into us his love and generating that new consciousness based on love which is faith. He asserts clearly that “without faith, without the eye of love, the

⁷ See *Lonergan Studies Newsletter*, 1990, n. 11.

world is too evil for God to be good, for a good God to exist.”⁸ But at the same time he continues by saying that for the one who has the eyes of faith and of love the world appears as that place where the presence of God is manifested precisely in inviting us creatures to freely rescue good out of evil and therefore to express something of the divine within the obscure happenings of history.

CONCLUSION

There are many other things that I could add to these few things that I have expressed and that have been suggested to me by my personal experience. It would be interesting, for example, to analyze the idea of a university which one can take from Lonergan’s works and which found expression in some of his articles. A university conceived as helping persons not to be beguiled by false and confusing ideas and by the mirage of too specialized research, but capable of offering a synthesis which permits one to put everything in its right place and to work to combat the decline of societies and to encourage the forces of renewal and of the reconstruction of spirits and of hearts to insure justice for all.

This mention of the aim of the university reminds me of the initial inspiration for Lonergan, the point of departure for his research. The great economic depression of the 1920s was a trauma for him and in his examination of that dramatic history he concluded that there was need for an economic theory that would take into account the development of society as well as preventing the ensuing disastrous mistakes it was prone to. One could say that this was the inspiration and the driving force behind his philosophical and theological research, that led him from one topic to another touching on all fields of philosophy and theology with recurrent attempts to elaborate an economic theory corresponding to the ideals he envisaged. There was no end to such work. Recently some of his unedited contributions toward a macroeconomic theory have been published.⁹ That theory aims at discovering the laws of economic development and the cycles of progress and decline so as both to understand them and to guide them according to the demands of justice. I am not capable of judging the relevance of these writings to present-day economic reality, but I would note the fact that a philosopher and theologian of Lonergan’s caliber was moved by the desire to respond to such practical economic and social issues. Such a motivation gave to all his work a concreteness and a close-

⁸ Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 117.

⁹ [Translator’s note]: See Bernard Lonergan, *For a New Political Economy*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan 21, ed. Philip McShane (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1997). Also, *Macroeconomic Dynamics: An Essay in Circulation Analysis*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan 15, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1998).

ness to concrete human needs that show the author's desire before all else to serve the human family in its fundamental needs. In this way he illustrated the close relationship between theology and the daily life of people.

Lonergan in his works often insisted that he was moved to update the concept of science in line with the new vision emerging from the scientific revolution of the last centuries. In this he went beyond a definition of science as "*cognitio per causas*" to a description of scientific work as a constant approximation to the truth by way of experiments, based often on statistical laws, with attempts always susceptible to greater precision and correction. I do not know how to evaluate even this aspect of his general program, but I would note that through Lonergan's method it is possible to understand the knowing process involved in every instance of research and therefore to grasp the analogies between the scientific method in the natural sciences and that in the human sciences. His discovery then of the level of interiority as a level other than the strictly scientific one opens up a space for theological and philosophical reflection capable of standing next to and not apart from scientific research.

Finally I would like to underline the fact that Kant's "dare to know" [*sapere aude*] which symbolizes the beginning of the Enlightenment is taken up by Lonergan in a context which gives him an unshakeable foundation consisting in the appropriation of the transcendental method operating in all our serious research. That method becomes by means of the transcendental precepts, "be attentive; be intelligent; be reasonable; be responsible," a foundation for autonomous human knowing capable at the same time of receiving the gift of God's love. That such an autonomy is not a motive for *hubris* or pride but a gift of God the Creator to be exercised with responsibility is evident from all of Lonergan's work. Many times in his writings he expresses the root of this attitude in the very structure of human consciousness. I cite one quote among many:

One can find out for oneself and in oneself just what one's conscious and intentional operations are and how they are related to one another. One can discover for oneself and in oneself why it is that performing such and such operations in such and such manners constitutes human knowing. Once one has achieved that, one is no longer dependent on someone else in selecting one's method and in carrying it out. One is on one's own.¹⁰

For this reason I am convinced, as has been noted many times, that Lonergan's work constitutes a new "*organon*" permitting future generations to situate themselves in the river of human research with strong concepts and persuasions always capable of being perfected. This will restore to Catholic thought its full dignity and right of citizenship in the complex and rich picture of contemporary research.

¹⁰ Ibid. 344.