

Bernard Lonergan's "Method in Theology"*#

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(Translated by Donald Buzzelli)

Last April a volume on theological method by the Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan came out in London and New York. Not only has its author's name become widely known, but this, his most recent book, was long awaited. Indeed, in part it was already known and discussed. In his activities as a theologian over thirty-five years, Lonergan has always given special attention to methodological problems. In fact, one can say that in the work that has now appeared both his teaching and his research have reached their long-sought goal.

Origin of the work

When I wrote the introduction to the Italian edition of Lonergan's first book[1] in 1970, I emphasized two things: first, that he has brought to our attention an important moment in the history of the medieval doctrine on grace; second, that this piece of Scholastic theology, which is paradigmatic for grasping concretely what the Scholastics meant when they called theology a science, led him to pose the more general question of theological method. This question provided, more or less directly and explicitly, the thread of his research. That research involved, first of all, analyzing the ideal of theology that operated in St. Thomas or, more exactly, toward which Thomas was gradually moving. In Lonergan's first book, St. Thomas's thought appears as a particular stage in the execution of a very broad program. This program seeks the limited but fruitful understanding that is the goal of theological speculation according to Vatican I, which drew on that medieval tradition six centuries later.

From there Lonergan moved to the examination of St. Thomas's general theory of knowledge through a study of Thomas's Trinitarian theology. This theory of knowledge underlies not only the *Imago Trinitatis* that Aquinas worked out in the wake of the Augustinian tradition, but also his ideal of a science and his concrete activity as a theologian.[2] The result of Lonergan's study was to restore balance to later Scholastic epistemology, which had one-sidedly attended to the terminal products of cognitive activity (the concept, judgment as a mere *compositio*, the syllogism). These products are there, and have their importance; but there is also the intelligent and rational activity from which they proceed: the insight into concrete and singular data that grounds both the concept and the universal and abstract definition, and the reflective insight that grounds the absolute positing of the judgment. This discovery was decisive for all of Lonergan's subsequent philosophical and theological thinking. For man, knowing is not only, or mainly, a matter of universal and necessary concepts (cf. Kant), or of rigorous syllogistic deductions. Knowing is correctly understanding the data. This directly leads to the two theses that would remain central to Lonergan's position on knowledge: knowledge is a structure of experiencing, understanding, and judging; and the key moment in knowledge is understanding.

With understanding restored to its primary position, in place of propositions and demonstrations, we now have the viewpoint from which the problem of method can be set out.

In Chap. 1 of *Method in Theology* Lonergan formulates the notion of method as follows: “a normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding cumulative and progressive results.”[3] Now, at the end of his study of the *verbum* he wrote: “Method is a means to an end; it sets forth two sets of rules—rules that facilitate collaboration and continuity of effort, and rules that guide the effort itself. The latter aim at understanding, but since we cannot understand at will, they amount to rules for using chance to defeat mere chance. Still, if method is essential for the development of understanding, it is no less true that method is a mere superstition when the aim of understanding is excluded.”[4] In other words, though we recognize the limits of the cultural context in which St. Thomas operated (the context of Aristotelian science), his intellectualism already provides the basis for method considered as a cumulative process for arriving at and developing understanding.

Once he had taken possession of some of the central elements in St. Thomas’s thought, Lonergan felt ready to begin his work on method in theology in the early 1950s. To this end he took up an investigation of the methods followed in other fields of knowledge, first of all in mathematics and the sciences of nature. His purpose was not to recommend that theology slavishly imitate what common speech and opinion simply calls “science”. Nor was he suggesting a vague analogy that might enable theology to emerge from its state of inferiority. Rather, he wanted to bring out the procedures and methods that scholars had employed for centuries in certain fields of knowledge with obvious success. His investigation of mathematics and the science of nature in the first five chapters of *Insight*[5] gave him the basis for a philosophical account and interpretation of the science of nature as it exists today.

In a 1958 presentation on *Insight* to the American Catholic Philosophical Association, Lonergan declared: “Since St. Thomas wrote, there has piled up a heap of disputed questions that St. Thomas himself never treated directly and explicitly. Since he wrote, there has occurred a notable development in man’s understanding of the material universe. Since he wrote, there has arisen an array of disciplines with new problems that press upon the Catholic philosopher and especially the Catholic theologian.... What our time demands of us is..., I believe, to know and to implement Aristotelian and Thomist method, to acknowledge in man’s developed understanding of the material universe a principle that yields a developed understanding of understanding itself, and to use that developed understanding of human understanding to bring order and light and unity to a totality of disciplines and modes of knowledge that otherwise will remain unrelated, obscure about their foundations, and incapable of being integrated by the queen of the sciences, theology.”[6]

His call to Rome in 1953 to teach at the Gregorian University caused him to set aside his plan for a work on theological method and bring *Insight* to a close as a freestanding philosophical essay. In Rome his activities unfolded on two fronts.

The first front was his teaching of theology. The academic situation of being on a large faculty allowed him to concentrate for a dozen years on two dogmatic treatises: the *De Deo Trino* and

the *De Verbo Incarnato*, and to probe them deeply. This could only be beneficial, in view of the work on method that he had temporarily deferred. As he himself wrote with regard to St. Thomas, “performance must precede reflection on performance, and method is the fruit of that reflection.”[7] Lonergan’s performance consisted in studying and experiencing in the concrete what the problems of theology are in the present-day cultural context, what the possibilities of a solution are, and what means are available to the theologian. In an interview granted in 1970[8] Lonergan observed that, while the academic situation from which his Latin manuals had emerged was already desperately antiquated, it had not yet been demolished. It was presumed that the professor of dogmatic theology was a specialist in everything: Scripture, the Fathers, the Councils, Scholasticism, Reformation theology, contemporary philosophy. But even though having to write such pretentious books was entirely invalid, Lonergan recognizes that in the manuals that came out of his teaching at Rome there are chunks that are still valid today, either directly as to their content or indirectly as a model of rigorously scientific theology.

The second front was his research on method. Once he had acquired a knowledge of the methods of contemporary science, and had outlined in *Insight* a philosophical method that is adequate to present-day science, Lonergan dedicated himself more directly to theological method. The steps in this investigation and the results he gradually achieved are documented in the methodological reflections scattered here and there in his manuals of theology. Particularly important are the introductions to the two volumes on the Holy Trinity. They testify that, while Lonergan was drawing up his treatises *ad usum auditorum* [for the use of students], he was asking about the method of doing theology that was traditional in the Catholic Church. The final result of this questioning would be to point out another method, more adequate to the situation that had now developed. The special courses for final-year students provided the academic setting in which our author gradually developed and presented his ideas on method in theology. The titles indicate this clearly: *De methodis universim inquisitio theoretica*, *De intellectu et methodo*, *De methodo et historia*, and finally, from 1961 to 1964, *De methodo theologiae*.

I have indicated that the aim of *Insight* was to bring philosophy into contact with the science of nature. The volume *Method in Theology* takes advantage of the epistemological analysis of *Insight*, but it also has the merit of integrating theology with the results of historical research and hermeneutics. Indeed, the theme of historical consciousness gradually acquired a dominant position in Lonergan’s studies after *Insight*. Accompanying this was the theme of the human sciences as sciences of a reality that is not only mediated, but also constituted, by meaning. But once the human sciences have been introduced, the problem of hermeneutics arises, i.e., the problem of grasping the meaning that constitutes human reality. We do this by ascertaining both the type of knowledge that such meaning expresses and the cultural, social, and historic influences that make possible and define that meaning.

Method in Theology was drawn up immediately after Vatican II. Obviously, that fact did not fail to influence the execution of the project that Lonergan had conceived more than twenty years earlier. This does not mean that he deals with the specific problems that claimed the attention of theologians after the Council. In *Method* he does not propose to do theology himself, but strictly limits himself to reflecting on the method to be followed in doing theology. Still, the Church’s new understanding of itself that was worked out at the Council is clearly present in the work we

are examining. Indeed, one of the results of the “aggiornamento” desired by John XXIII and launched by the Council was to highlight the unavoidable need to pass from the classicist notion of culture to the modern notion, which Lonergan calls empirical. Much of the Catholic Church’s life, pastoral practice, and doctrine and much theological reflection had been modeled on the classicist notion. According to the modern notion, however, culture is not a universal and permanent achievement, but the totality of meanings and values that inform a certain way of living. Consequently, culture is in a more or less rapid process of development or, inversely, of decay. In this context, which the Council dramatically brought to light, the problem of method has imposed itself on the theologian with all its urgency.

At a Theological Congress held in Toronto in August 1967, Lonergan stressed the contrast between so-called dogmatic theology, which had been introduced into Catholic theology about three centuries earlier, and methodological theology, which is taking shape today and to which the present volume hopes to contribute.[9] Dogmatic theology strictly depended on the Aristotelian conception of science as knowledge of what is necessary and universal and follows logically from its premises. Thus the principal instrument for doing science was the syllogism. By contrast, modern empirical science does not make logical demonstrations. It constantly accumulates new information, develops an understanding of it, and masters its materials more and more. But it does not preclude the discovery of other pertinent data, the emergence of new understanding, or the reaching of a more comprehensive view. On the basis of this ideal of empirical science, and in view of the eminently historical character of human reality, Lonergan asserts that theology too has in large measure become an empirical science. Where previously the move from premises (provided by Scripture and Tradition) to conclusions was short, simple, and certain, today the road from the data (of Scripture and Tradition) to their interpretation is long and arduous. It leads, at best, to a well founded probability that is still open to revision. Corresponding to the empirical conception of culture, theology can only be a continuous and cumulative process. The problem of method thus becomes the problem of finding the pattern of recurrent and related operations that give the cumulative and progressive result called theology.

Structure of “Method in Theology”

Now that we have sketched the origin of Method in Theology, let us see how it is structured. The work is divided into two parts: first the premises and second the execution or, in the image used by Lonergan himself, first the Background and then the Foreground.

The first part can be considered a transition from the position reached in *Insight* to the actual presentation of the method. The first chapter gives a preliminary notion of method and then briefly recalls the basic pattern of conscious and intentional operations already studied in *Insight*. This pattern is the transcendental method, the method immanent in our intelligent, reasonable, and moral consciousness as open to the unlimited field of the intelligible, the real, and the good. Any other method is only a specific instance of the transcendental method, varying according to the various particular fields to which it is applied. This is true of theological method also. But before moving to an examination of theological method (Chap. 5), Lonergan in the intervening chapters treats the human good, meaning, and religion. It is only in religious experience that we have the specific component of reality on which theology reflects and at the same time the

specific principle that makes theology a discourse performed by the Christian, in the light of faith, about the absolutely transcendent reality to which he adheres. In Chap. 2, 3, and 4 we have the results of the studies to which Lonergan dedicated himself after *Insight*: the affective components of man's conscious life, intersubjectivity, the symbol, the human world, the gradual differentiation of consciousness, and language. And lastly, as I said, the subject of religion.

Here, in continuity with *Insight*, Lonergan sees the question of God as the final goal implicitly operative in our intentionality, which is the dynamism that makes us pass from pure experience to understanding, to judging rationally, to choosing responsibly. But at the same time he goes beyond *Insight* and examines religious experience, which is the actualization of our capacity for self-transcendence. It is not an achievement of our knowing and choosing, but the fruit of the love with which God gives himself to us, according to St. Paul's often-cited expression in the Epistle to the Romans (5:5). According to scholars, religious experience characterizes all the great religions. Out of this love, this supreme meaningful reality, arises the knowledge that is faith: faith is the eye of love, the "reasons of the heart" of which Pascal speaks. By virtue of this love, man is moved to undertake the search for God. It is this that unites men, beyond their differing beliefs, in a single saving faith.

Lonergan has moved from the old faculty psychology (the faculties are really distinct, and operate in an irreversible order) to intentionality analysis (which distinguishes four levels of conscious and intentional operations in a single dynamism). As he will point out later, in the chapter on systematics, this move enables us to realize more clearly the unity of the operations and the way they influence each other. It also helps us recognize the possibility of an inversion of the order in which they occur, insofar as an occurrence at the existential level (the gift of God's love) can precede the natural process of knowledge. Or, rather, this existential occurrence is the prime mover and the ultimate direction of our knowing and choosing.

Chap. 5 holds a key place in the structure of the book. In it, the author presents the basic principle of his theological method, which consists of eight different and interconnected sets of operations. Even before arriving at this division, he had recognized the need to divide up the vast field of theology. This is something that had been widely noticed by theologians and carried out in practice, even if it was not yet reflected on sufficiently. In the introduction to his first volume on the Holy Trinity, Lonergan had asked what could be the proper task of traditional dogmatic theology, given that the flourishing of positive [historical] studies had led to the division of the immense span of theology into numerous and ever more specialized fields. It might seem that dogmatic theology today can only be a collection of many disparate disciplines, so that the teacher should only introduce the students to the various problems, present the opinions of experts, and indicate the books and articles in which the individual problems, in their growing proliferation, are treated *ex professo*. Lonergan had made a clear division between the dogmatic and the systematic parts of his treatise on the Holy Trinity. To this he added the essay in positive theology I mentioned above that investigated St. Thomas's Trinitarian theology. This was his first response to the question of how theology should be divided. But a general answer, expressed in a methodology that embraced all the diverse activity that goes under the name of

theology, was left for the future Method in Theology. The volume now published indeed contains that answer. According to its more mature conception of method, method is not only, or mainly, a matter of allotting the right places and functions to positive, dogmatic, and systematic theology as they have been understood and practiced up to now. Rather, method points out the basis of theology in man's interiority. In conformity with the structure and laws immanent in our intentionality, it determines the appropriate tasks for positive, dogmatic, and speculative studies, and for still other activities that in that earlier period seem not to have received Lonergan's explicit attention.

In Method Lonergan proposes a division of theology into eight parts, called functional specializations. This division is based on two principles.

First of all, it is based on the two phases in which theological reflection occurs. There is theology in *oratione obliqua* in which one encounters the past, i.e., the Christian doctrinal heritage. There is theology in *oratione recta* in which the theologian illuminated by the past confronts today's problems in order to direct the community of believers toward its future. The second principle of division is provided by the structure of our conscious and intentional operations, which take place on four distinct levels, each with its own result and purpose. These are the level of experience that results in the acquisition of data, the level of intelligence that seeks to understand the data acquired, the level of judgment that ends in the affirmation or negation of the hypotheses brought forth by intelligence, and the level of decision in which values are recognized and the methods or means are chosen that lead to the realization of those values.

These two principles together give the following division of theology: research, interpretation, history, and dialectic, in the first phase of theology; and foundations, doctrines, systematics, and communications, in the second phase. In each of these specializations the theologian, while operating at all four levels of consciousness, pursues the proper end of one of these levels. Thus he attempts to discover the data in research, grasp their meaning in interpretation, establish the facts in history, and resolve conflicts in dialectic. In the second phase, taking the intentional operations in reverse order, he attempts in foundations to objectivize the horizon of comprehension implicit in the existential event of conversion. In doctrines he expresses judgments of fact and value. In systematics he seeks coherent and appropriate understanding. In communications he attempts to provide suitable data for the diffusion of the Christian message.

As our brief description shows, this division corresponds, at least in part, to disciplines and specializations that already exist. What is new in Lonergan's methodology is that these eight parts are rigorously defined as eight interdependent, continuous, and cumulative processes. They receive their division and their norms, not from practical reasons of convenience or by convention, but from the structure of our intentionality. They are eight different tasks having eight different proximate ends, and are carried out under different rules. One result of the intentionality analysis carried out in *Insight* and taken up in *Method* was that it brought out the normative character of that intentionality. All these various parts of theology are functionally interconnected (each presupposes the preceding ones and prompts the succeeding ones) as distinct and separable stages of a single process that goes from the data (research) to the final

result (communications).

With this notion of specialization we can recognize that some disciplines fully belong to theology even though at one time they were thought of as merely auxiliary. Thus we can do away with the totalitarian pretension that once considered the dogmatic or the speculative theologian to be the only real theologian. Later a similar claim was made by positive theology, often understood in a positivistic sense, and, in recent years, by hermeneutics. While Lonergan was working on the final draft of his *Method*, the boom in hermeneutics reached its height. Theology was hermeneutics. Terminological matters aside, there is no doubt that some questions were treated as hermeneutic problems when in fact they were not. These questions have an immediate goal that is different from understanding a meaningful reality within a historical perspective. They thus require a different method. Indeed, in very recent years hermeneutics has been scaled back. If one keeps in mind that in *Insight* Lonergan already has a precious section on the problem of interpretation, and that after *Insight* he became more and more interested in the problematic of the human sciences, it was foreseeable that he would assign to hermeneutics a distinct place among the functional specializations. Lonergan places precise limits on hermeneutics, but not because any theological perspective will naturally be exhausted sooner or later by reason of its inherent limitations. Rather, his contribution to hermeneutics can be helpful because he delimits hermeneutics through an analysis of human intentionality. This intentionality operates in the theologian as in anyone else who asks questions for understanding, for judging, and for deciding, and who strives to find a satisfactory answer. As Lonergan himself observes in Chap. 1, after presenting his position on knowledge and moral activity: “[T]heologians have minds and use them. . . . [T]heir doing so should not be ignored or passed over, but explicitly acknowledged in itself and in its implications.”[10]

Two characteristics of his method immediately stand out. First, its generality, so that it is valid, in its essentials, for any human science that studies a cultural past in order to guide its future. It is generally valid because the structure of our conscious and intentional operations is identical in every field of application, and because increasing specialization in every field of knowledge calls for increasing interdisciplinary cooperation. Thus Lonergan’s theological method can also be relevant for theologians of other denominations. He emphasizes the ecumenical aspect of his method when he sets out the functional specialization of dialectic, which has a task comparable to that of the old apologetics, and the specialization of foundations, which he connects with the fundamental theology of the past.

The second characteristic is that in theology, as a systematic reflection on the Christian reality, an explicit role is given to the existential (moral and religious) level of unfolding consciousness, and thus to judgments of value. This cuts off at its root the rationalistic tendency in theology to consider “pure reason” as operating with full independence from man’s moral activity and personal religious commitment. Lonergan does not do this by making his position voluntaristic or irrationalistic, but by recognizing that the tendency to self-transcendence immanent in our intentionality reaches its fullest actualization at the moral level. Actualization at this level must be rational if it is to be authentic and correspond to its intrinsic exigencies. At this existential level one chooses one’s own basic horizon grounded in religious conversion, and so the general method, which applies to every human science, becomes a specifically theological method.

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The second part of the volume presents the individual functional specializations. As I said earlier, the purpose of this book is strictly methodological. Attention is constantly on the operations that the theologian performs in the different specializations, not on the realities with which theologians are concerned. Still, the reader will find that the methodological discussions often have clear relevance to the problems most debated in theology today. What has been mentioned above is enough to give some idea of how Lonergan understands the individual specializations. It is interesting that he devotes two chapters to history. This is obviously the result of his interest in historical problems, but it is also testimony to how important he considers a correct conception of history to be for theology. He openly acknowledges the need to go beyond the Scholastic exposition of Christian doctrine, and he outlines the shift this requires from a theoretical theology based mainly on metaphysical categories to a methodological theology based on categories derived from intentionality analysis. But just because of his comprehension of history, he also points out that the new theology must integrate the theology of a St. Thomas Aquinas as a genuine achievement of the Christian community and as an element of continuity in a doctrine that is essentially traditional. Referring to his two earlier studies, Lonergan writes: "Aquinas' thought on grace and freedom and his thought on cognitional theory and on the Trinity were genuine achievements of the human spirit. Such achievement has a permanence of its own. It can be improved upon. It can be inserted in larger and richer contexts. But unless its substance is incorporated in subsequent work, the subsequent work will be a substantially poorer affair." [11]

What effect will Lonergan's method have on theology? It is always difficult to predict the judgment of history. But if it is true that his whole thought or, if I may put it so, his whole message, is centered on understanding, then it seems that one can say of Method what F. Crowe said fifteen years ago about the possible relevance of Insight for method in theology: "[I]n this field, the effect of understanding is not necessarily the overthrow of traditional procedures; it may simply be the enabling us to talk intelligently about procedures we already use." [12] That is not a small thing. Certainly the fact that the method proposed here is based on a very precise interpretation of man's cognitive and moral activity (the position of Insight) will not promote its quick acceptance or its wide adoption. But this method will have a deep and more lasting effect whenever theologians turn this philosophical premise into the object of their own self-appropriation. As Lonergan said of this book while it was still in preparation, "What is to be hoped for is the open-eyed and fully deliberate acceptance that brings forth solid fruits and thereby initiates a movement." [13]

* Originally published in Italian as “Il metodo in teologia” di Bernard Lonergan,” in *La civiltà cattolica*, December 2, 1972, pp. 468-477.

Bernard J.F. Lonergan, S.J., *Method in Theology*, 2nd ed. University of Toronto Press, 1990.

[1] Bernard J.F. Lonergan, S.J., *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas* in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, University of Toronto Press, 2000. [Italian edition *Grazia e libertà. La grazia operante nel pensiero di san Tommaso*. Ed. Natalino Spaccapelo, S.J. Rome, Gregorian University, 1970.]

[2] Bernard J.F. Lonergan, S.J., *The Concept of Verbum in the Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Published from 1946 to 1949 in *Theological Studies*. Reissued as *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas* in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, University of Toronto Press, 1997.

[3] *Method in Theology*, p. 4.

[4] *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, p. 223.

[5] Bernard J.F. Lonergan, S.J., *Insight. A Study of Human Understanding*, London, Longmans Green, and Co., 1957 and 1958. Republished in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, University of Toronto Press, 1992.

[6] *Collection: Papers by Bernard J.F. Lonergan*, in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, University of Toronto Press, 1993, p. 145.

[7] *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, p. 10.

[8] “An Interview with Fr. Bernard Lonergan, S.J.” in *A Second Collection*, ed. William F.J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell, University of Toronto Press, 1996, pp. 209-230.

[9] The subject of Lonergan’s comments was “Theology in a New Context,” republished in *A Second Collection*, pp. 55-67.

[10] *Method in Theology*, p. 25.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 352.

[12] Frederick E. Crowe, S.J., *The Origin and Scope of Bernard Lonergan’s “Insight”*, in *Sciences Ecclésiastiques* 9 (1957), p. 292.

[13] *Lonergan Responds*, in *Foundations of Theology, Papers from the International Lonergan Congress 1970*. Ed. Philip McShane, S.J. Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1971, and Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1972, p. 233.