

## Aquinas and Lonergan

### What Lonergan owes to Aquinas; what Lonergan takes from Aquinas

#### 4 Points

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Aquinas was a Christian theologian who wanted to introduce a greater order and coherence among the different teachings or doctrines of the Christian faith. He had noticed contradictions in the received traditional teaching and he wanted to find a way to overcome contradictions and tensions. To do this, he used Aristotle's philosophy and the distinctions or the differences that this philosophy notices and talks about. He used Aristotle's “first philosophy” or Aristotle's primary philosophy which is his metaphysics and Aquinas adapts this for his theological purposes in a way which clearly distinguishes three metaphysical principles: potency, form, and act. These are used to talk about church teachings in terms of the realities that church teachings refer to. For example, what is the celebration of the Eucharist at Mass and what happens during the celebration of the Eucharist? Distinctions are drawn between this and that because one can solve many problems by making distinctions and by adverting to the fact that three different kinds of distinctions can be distinguished from each other: verbal distinctions differ from mental distinctions and these distinctions differ from real distinctions. Like Aquinas, Lonergan wanted to introduce a greater order or a greater coherence into the order of teachings that belong to the Christian, Catholic faith. He wanted to find unities which can exist in our understanding but, in order to do this, he prefers to use a tool which does not directly refer to metaphysics but, rather, to the structure or the order which we find in our human cognition. He works with Aristotle's philosophy of inquiry as this refers to the nature of human questions and how these questions fall into two basic categories: we ask about why something is or what something is and then we ask about the possible truth of an understanding that has been given to us

Aquinas distinguishes between the goal or the object of dogmatic theology versus the goal or the object of systematic theology. In dogmatic theology, we want to prove the truth of a given Christian teaching (or, in other words, point to the truth of a teaching in terms of how it is grounded in authoritative sources that refer to the mediation of scripture and tradition as this comes to us through the teaching of the Church's doctrine).<sup>1</sup> But, in systematic theology, we want to understand the meaning or we want to speculate about what is, in fact, the meaning of a given teaching or what could be the meaning of a given teaching. In our desired understanding, we attend to how one teaching could be related to another and we try to see how the meaning of one truth influences the meaning of another truth. For example, if sin leads to death, how can we talk about Christ's death as a saving event? If we discover better how one teaching is related to another teaching, the meaning of many things can become more apparent and the teaching of the Christian faith can have more to say in terms of how it might be relevant to how we should live our lives. Lonergan wanted to restore the importance of systematic theology within the Catholic Church. If we are too focused on proving the truths of faith, we will know about many dogmas: we will know about the truth of many dogmas but we might not know too much about what they mean (how they relate to each other in the context of a dynamic whole). With speculative understanding, by encouraging this, we can begin to think about many different possible meanings and we can benefit from thinking about these different meanings through a growth in

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<sup>1</sup>Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973), pp. 336-337.

understanding that can be given to us (an understanding that we can share with others). A given truth comes to have a greater impact in the life of a given believer. As a tool to encourage systematic theology, Lonergan articulates a new philosophy which exists as a heuristic philosophy of inquiry that is familiar with the kinds of question and understanding that exists in contemporary science where, within the context of contemporary inquiry, a classical notion of law is related to another type of law which knows about the existence of probabilities.

Aquinas had worked with the metaphysics of Aristotle to develop it further, to refine it, and so he developed a metaphysics which speaks about three metaphysical principles: potency, form, and act. In a hierarchal order, act is of greater importance or value than potency or form (a metaphysics of act in Aquinas replaces a metaphysics of form in Aristotle). Hence, in Aquinas and in Lonergan although in contrast with Aristotle, act supplants or replaces form as the more important, primary metaphysical principle. Aquinas then speaks about an intimate relation which exists that connects potency, form, and act (each points to the other within the order of being or the order of reality) and, in Lonergan, experiencing, understanding, and judgment exist as basis principles within the order of our human cognition (given a distinct set of operations that is constitutive of our human cognition). Where Aquinas speaks about an order of proportion between the order of our cognition and the order of being (the order of transcendent things that are known), Lonergan speaks about an isomorphic relation: experiencing refers to potency, understanding to form, and judgment to act. Hence, by working with the order or structure which exists within our human cognition, it is possible to speak about a *verifiable* metaphysics: every metaphysical principle is to be correlated or it is grounded in the experience which we have of a distinct kind of cognitional act. By this means, we overcome a philosophic bias which wants to reject a role for metaphysics in the context of human affairs and our understanding

Aquinas engages in interiority analysis as a way of moving toward philosophical and theologian conclusions (a procedure which we can also find in Augustine) although, in his language, he does not speak about interiority analysis; he does not identify it (in so many words). For example, see how Aquinas argues for the immortality of the human soul: by attending to how human beings engage in acts of understanding, when we notice that every act of understanding seeks to distance itself or to separate itself from what is given to us in the data of sense or in the data of imagination, we realize that the human soul is something which exists independently of material conditions. The human soul lives by separating itself from material conditions. Through introspective analysis, by the understanding which we can have of our own understanding, we can begin to believe in the immortality of the human soul. But, while Aquinas and Augustine both engage in an analysis of human interiority as a way of dealing with philosophical and theological problems, for Lonergan, interiority analysis exists as a tool that can be directly adverted to and known for what it is as an analytical tool. Lonergan takes a mode of inquiry that he detects in the thinking of Augustine and Aquinas and he exploits it: he joins it to an understanding of the human mind as this has grown and developed in the wake of scientific procedures as these have developed in the wake of the kind of analysis that we find in Galileo Galilei and Charles Darwin.

In conclusion: Aquinas brilliantly succeeded in bringing the methodology of Greek science into the understanding and the articulation of Catholic thought; on the other hand, Lonergan seeks to bring the methodology of post-Greek science into the understanding and articulation of Catholic thought in the context of later philosophy and theology. However, this is a very difficult thing to grasp and understand and to accomplish. I can accordingly recommend a little book entitled, *Creator God Evolving World*, by Neil Ormerod and Cynthia Crysdale. For me, with respect to the current date of

writing, it was the best little introduction that is currently available in English: a possibly good place to begin as a point of departure.