



The Continuing Significance of Bernard Lonergan

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Pope Benedict's recent addresses to Jesuit audiences have strongly echoed the thinking of twentieth century Catholic philosopher Bernard Lonergan, suggests Gerald Whelan SJ. Who was this influential man, and why is his work so important and relevant to Jesuits today?

On 16th May 2008, *L'Osservatore Romano* showed a photograph of Pope Benedict being presented with a book, a new Italian translation of Bernard Lonergan's *Insight*. The mere presenting of a book may not always be considered important enough to warrant a photograph with such a figure, and no doubt some readers were curious about who this author Bernard Lonergan was. But, at the same time, an international conference was being held at the Italian Philosophical Institute in Naples under the auspices of the Pontifical Theology Faculty of Southern Italy to celebrate the same publishing event. The conference was entitled *Beyond Essentialism: Bernard Lonergan, an Atypical Scholastic*, and delegates at this conference came from a variety of European countries as well as Canada, USA, Chile and India. Thus, also in Naples the question was heard: who is this Bernard Lonergan and what does he have to say?

Bernard Lonergan was a Canadian Jesuit who lived from 1904 to 1984. He was a philosopher and a theologian and he is mostly known for two seminal works: *Insight* (1957) and *Method in Theology* (1972).¹ He was both a student and a professor at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome and also taught in Montreal, Boston, and Toronto. During the 1970s he was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine as he was "considered one of the finest philosophic thinkers of the twentieth Century", and in a recently published book on Twentieth Century Catholic Teachers by Fergus Kerr he makes the top ten list formulated by this author of the most important Catholic thinkers of the last century.²



So what is to be said about the thought of this thinker? I would like to bring more focus to this question by first outlining a call that the Holy Father has been repeating recently in meetings with Jesuits. In 2006 the Pontifical Gregorian University was graced with a visit by Pope Benedict XVI; a visit that the author of this article was privileged to witness. In his address to the university community the Holy Father stressed the importance

of theological reflection today and of the immense needs for a creative engagement with today's culture not least with those aspects that are drifting away from faith and those that are responsible for many social injustices. He added that theology must avoid being a mere "sterile repetition" of achievements of the past but something that is vital and attractive to thinking people today.

This theme was repeated by the Holy Father when he addressed the delegates of the Jesuit General Congregation in February of 2008:

The Church is in urgent need of people of solid and deep faith, of a serious culture and a genuine human and social sensitivity, of religious priests who devote their lives to stand on those frontiers in order to witness and help to understand that there is in fact a profound harmony between faith and reason, between evangelical spirit, thirst for justice and action for peace.³

This address also included a call to Jesuits to a "defence of Catholic doctrine particularly in the neuralgic points strongly attacked today by secular culture . . . the salvation in Christ of all human beings,

of sexual morality, the marriage and the family”. Clearly a deeply felt and yet nuanced appeal is being made by the Holy Father to the Society of Jesus to embrace both fidelity and creativity in carrying the Christian message to the world. I would like to continue with this brief outline of the thought of Bernard Lonergan in the context of suggesting that his thought, especially as expressed in his book *Method in Theology*, could do much to help realise the hope of Pope Benedict XVI for the work of Jesuits, as well as, of course, for the Church in general.

Understanding Lonergan’s thought is not easy. His own insights developed over many years and those wishing to understand him do well to trace this development carefully. So it is that I offer a brief intellectual biography of Lonergan in three steps: 1. Early influences on Lonergan; 2. *Insight* and eleven years of Apprenticeship to Aquinas; 3. *Method in Theology*.⁴ I conclude by relating Lonergan’s thought to the call made by the Holy Father to these recent Jesuit gatherings in 2006 and 2008.

Early influences on Lonergan

Lonergan was the son of a loving family; his father was an engineer and his mother was a woman of cultivated tastes in music and other arts. After attending a Jesuit high-school he joined the order at the age of seventeen. He was one of those geniuses who does not always shine early in life; his exam results from school and the reports on him by his superiors did not usually speak of anything exceptional. This having been said, from an early stage he was considered bright enough to be a potential teacher of philosophy or theology and was sent to England for philosophy and to the Gregorian University in Rome for his studies in theology. In between, he spent four years back in Montreal teaching schoolboys. In summarizing these key formative years in Lonergan’s life four points come to mind.

First, Lonergan was not impressed by the manualist, neo-scholastic philosophy and theology he was offered in the English philosophate at Heythrop College and at the Gregorian University. This was the age of dogmatic theology framed in terms of a conceptualist metaphysics. These manuals were offered to the young Lonergan, training him in Aristotelian logic and in skills of apologetics to defend

Catholic truth. Little encouragement was given to speaking of personal experience, to cultivating one’s own powers of inquiry, or to investigating questions that had not already been answered by authorities from the past. On this matter Lonergan was wont to exercise a sardonic wit that would get him into trouble at various times in his life. During his time in England he had a visit from his Provincial superior who asked him: “Are you orthodox?” In response he confessed: “Yes I am orthodox, but I think a lot!” Speaking the philosophy and theology of the time he would later assert: “One entered the rationalist door of abstract right reason, and came out in the all but palpable embrace of authoritarian religion”.

Second, Lonergan’s capacity for independent thinking was assisted by living in England and by that fact that as well as undergoing his seminary philosophy studies he pursued a civil degree in mathematics and classics. Through his study of mathematics he was exposed to the English intellectual tradition of empirical attentiveness as opposed to abstract reasoning (we can also recall that he was the son of an engineer). He began to appreciate the significance of the modern scientific revolution and of how dangerous it was for Catholic theology to be basing itself on out-dated Aristotelian notions of scientific reasoning. In later years he would often quote the following passage of a historian of science on the importance of the scientific revolution:

Since that revolution overturned the authority in science not only of the middle ages but of the ancient world—since it ended not only in the eclipse of scholastic philosophy but in the destruction of Aristotelian physics—it outshines everything since the rise of Christianity and reduces the Renaissance and Reformation to the rank of mere episodes, mere internal displacements, within the system of medieval Christendom.⁵

Third, as well as studying mathematics in his secular university degree, Lonergan studied classics. He felt an increasing attraction to ancient philosophy and, given his questions about how to establish the credibility of the Catholic faith, it was perhaps inevitable that he would be attracted to the thought of that eminent English Churchman, John Henry Cardinal Newman. In Newman, Lonergan encountered the work of a mind that had been formed not in Neo-scholasticism but in classical studies and the Church Fathers. In *The Grammar of Assent*, Newman

traced this process of his own conversion to the Catholic faith from Anglicanism in a manner that spoke of a personal quest for truth and which had echoes of St. Augustine's *Confessions*—a work to which Lonergan also became attached at this time. From Newman and Augustine, Lonergan first acquired the insight that he would develop throughout his life: that philosophy should not begin with metaphysics but with an account of concrete, lived experience.

A fourth major concern of Lonergan during this time was with issues of social justice. These were the years of the stock market crash of 1929, the Great Depression, and the rise of fascism in Europe and all these made an impression on him. His scientific proclivities led him to an interest in the study of the economic mistakes that had contributed to these problems and his philosophical tendencies also led him in a more foundational direction. He began reading the works of historians of civilization such as Arnold Toynbee and Christopher Dawson and he began to recognize a value in modern philosophers of history (an interest that would intensify later in his life). With Karl Marx he agreed that “the point is not to understand history but to change it!” Once again he found himself worrying that the credibility of the manner in which the Catholic Church was communicating its message. Twice during his theology studies he wrote to his Provincial superior in Canada asking that he be allowed to commit his life to the developing of a philosophy of history “that will leave Hegel and Marx, in spite of the enormity of their achievement, in the shade”. In a manner, perhaps characteristic of religious life at the time, if not today, his Provincial ignored these letters and instructed him to continue at the Gregorian and to complete a doctorate in dogmatic theology so as to prepare to become a member of the faculty of theology there.

'Insight' and eleven years of apprenticeship to Aquinas

In 1938 Lonergan was instructed to pursue a doctorate on the theology of grace of Aquinas. Despite an initial reluctance to be studying theology at all, he quickly began to feel that it was in fact providential that he had been assigned to this work. We note again his sardonic humour when he asserts: “I began to suspect that Aquinas was not as bad as he was painted”. In fact, Lonergan can be described as falling in love with the thought of this great scholastic

and saint. Because of the outbreak of the Second World War, he was sent home to Canada after his two-year doctoral studies, and his assignment to teach theology in the Gregorian was delayed. He was given relatively light teaching duties in the Jesuit theologate in Montreal and this gave him the opportunity to continue a close study of Aquinas. He continued this for a further nine years and, together with his doctoral years, would later speak of his “eleven-year apprenticeship to St. Thomas Aquinas”. Reading Aquinas in parallel with certain modern philosophers stimulated Lonergan to proceed with writing his first great work, the 900-page book on philosophy: *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*.

What was it that so attracted Lonergan to Aquinas? He quickly became convinced that instead of being a dry and dogmatic logician as the manualist authors portrayed him Aquinas was in fact a genius who was a model of the kind of searching enquiry that Lonergan had also found in works of John Henry Newman and St. Augustine. In Aquinas, Lonergan found a yet more profound account of the working of the human mind than he had quite found in these other authors. Lonergan was of course aware that Aquinas was working within the limits of the Latin language and a medieval worldview that was different in many ways from the modern. Nevertheless, he became convinced that, with just a little push, so to speak, the thought of Aquinas could be brought into dialogue with that of Descartes and Kant and so brought to help solve a number of modern philosophical problems.

So it was that Lonergan set out on the monumental task of writing *Insight*. In this work his aim was nothing less than to redirect the course of modern philosophy and to provide at the same time foundations for a Catholic theology that would be truly “at the level of its times”. His aim was to develop a philosophy that could incorporate the insights into human knowing derived by the developments of modern science and yet also remain open to the ethical and religious insights held by Catholics.

As a faithful Catholic thinker, Lonergan was by no means opposed to metaphysics; however, unlike the neo-scholastics, he insisted on not placing this in the first place philosophically, but in the third place: in the first place must come cognitional theory and in the second place epistemology. In his account of

cognitive theory he invites his readers to first attend to their acts of knowing. From Aquinas he had developed an ability to explain how we first attend to data and then achieve acts of insight. However, in *Insight* he illustrates these acts of insight not by quoting Aquinas but by devoting his first five chapters to how insight functions in modern mathematics and science. He asserts that for something that is so pervasive in human living it is remarkable how little we or our great philosophers have attended to this phenomenon of insight. Next, he draws on his old friend Newman to explain how a “pure desire to know” in us drives us to either affirm or reject our acts of insight in an act of judgement, and he explains this act largely as Newman had done.

The epistemological moment of *Insight* comes when – having completed this account of our three cognitive levels: experience, understanding, and judgement – Lonergan invites his readers to an act of “self-appropriation”. Here they affirm that in their own lives their acts of knowing are in fact structured in this three-step manner. This is the epistemological moment: now one is not just observing and understanding a phenomenon of mental acts but one is judging as true that one really can, oneself, attain objective knowledge by passing through these steps. Finally, for Lonergan, metaphysics anticipates the broad lines of what we are capable of knowing by such authentic acts of knowing. He speaks of an “isomorphism” between the structure of knowing and the structure of being. Thus, for example, he speaks of the notions of potency, form and act as being isomorphic to our experiencing data, our understanding, and our judging. But there is more to be explored with respect to this isomorphism; in fact, the move from epistemology to metaphysics begins to reveal to us what powerful intellectual tools philosophy can now make available to us.

Thoroughly understand what it is to understand and not only will you understand the broad lines of all there is to be understood but also you will possess a fixed base, an invariant pattern, opening upon all further developments of understanding.⁶

Within the context of this confident metaphysical position, Lonergan turns to the kind of economic and social concerns that characterised his earlier hopes as a Gregorian student to devote himself to a philosophy of history. He speaks of human history as a

prolongation of the “actual order of the universe” and how human freedom allows not only for insight but for a “flight from insight”. He then employs an analogy from algebra to speak of history as characterised by two “vectors” of progress and decline. Continuing this metaphysical line of thought, he offers a proof for the existence of God and, desiring to limit himself to philosophy in this book, concludes with speculation about the broad lines of how God might choose to intervene in human history, so as to solve the problem of evil. In this manner he introduces the notion of a third vector of history: “renaissance”, or “redemption”.

Finally, we can note that while *Insight* is a long book it is actually an incomplete one. In the end, Lonergan had to rush its completion in 1954 because the order to return to the Gregorian as a professor had at last arrived and he was convinced that he would have little time to write in his new assignment. He had intended to further develop his application of the foundations offered in this work to a deeper analysis of history and social ethics and to a proposal for a new method of proceeding in Catholic theology. Many years later he would again see the hand of providence in not being allowed to follow his immediate desires; he would later recognize that he was not ready to produce a work on method in theology: first, he had another long apprenticeship to undergo.

‘Method in Theology’ and eleven more years of preparation

When Lonergan arrived back in Rome in 1954, he was made busy, as he expected, and asked to teach tracts on both Christology and Trinity. He remained in Rome until 1965 when illness brought him back to Canada. In 1965 he underwent two major operations for lung-cancer and, then, to the surprise of all went on to live for another nineteen years.

Upon his arrival in Rome in 1954 some capable students challenged Lonergan that he did not have a deep familiarity with the philosophers of the nineteenth Century who brought the methodology of modern science to the study of history and, indeed, to the study of religion as a historical phenomenon. A related body of philosophy that also needed appreciating was that of the existentialists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Lonergan

accepted this challenge and to a certain extent “went quiet” for another eleven years as he read and considered authors such as Leopold von Ranke, Wilhelm Dilthey, Soren Kierkegaard, and others.

During this period of deep study Lonergan became increasingly clear that his thinking in *Insight* needed further development. In February 1965 (the year he was diagnosed with cancer) he had a key insight about how to integrate his new readings into a proposal for a comprehensive method in theology. This insight has four major dimensions—all of which had in fact been emerging during the previous eleven years: first, that there is a fourth level of consciousness: second, that we love God before we know him; third, that theological method should be organised not according to the themes theologians are addressing but according to the level of consciousness that is especially being employed in the particular theological activity in which they are engaged; and fourth, the need to integrate critical-historical methods into theology.

First, during these eleven years Lonergan’s account of self-appropriation started to become more concrete and existential. Indeed, passing through his cancer operations helped him to become less intellectualist and more capable of speaking about the drama of human living, about emotions in general and about love in particular. He begins to speak of four levels of consciousness instead of the three that he had identified in *Insight*. This fourth level is concerned with decision-making and he traces how we begin operating at this level when we feel an affective response to value as we attend to facts we have affirmed at the third level of judgment.

Second, with this expanded notion of “responsible consciousness” Lonergan was now also able to explore more deeply the phenomenon of religious conversion. He recognized that the experience of God’s operative grace is the one exception to the rule that have to know something (from the third level of consciousness) before we can love it (at the fourth level). In the event of religious conversion, mysteriously and supernaturally, we love something before we understand it. This process of trying to understand what we already love is the task of theology. We can note that this insight allows Lonergan to break, once and for all, with traditional neo-scholasticism where theology begins with truth-

claims about God. Now theology is a reflection on the religious experience of the person doing the theologising.

Third, the “eureka” experience of Lonergan in February 1965 centred on the insight that a methodical approach to theology should distinguish different “functional specialties” where the distinction is not in subject matter studied but in the kind of mental acts required by the theologians involved in different stages of a process. And fundamentally, this process should involve two phases; a first that retrieves the past of a religious tradition and a second that communicates this to culture.

The fourth insight is essentially included in the third, but it needs explaining. Lonergan’s earlier insights about the fourth level of consciousness and the unique nature of religious conversion (point 2 above) will become especially relevant to the second phase of theology where the theologian has to take personal responsibility for a commitment to communicate to culture. However, Lonergan recognized that if the second phase of theology must be based on religious experience and not primarily on concepts nevertheless the first phase of theology must employ all the best modern methods of historical studies to retrieve the original data of revelation – its initial articulation in scripture and the subsequent tradition of interpreting it within the Church over the centuries.

So it is that Lonergan now felt ready to write his second seminal work, *Method in Theology*. In his introduction he defines the function of theology:

A Theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix.⁷

He proceeds to outline how there are eight functional specialties in theology, four in each of the phases. Broadly speaking, his account of phase one begins with an account of how we collect the data of revelation (experience), interpret it (insight), trace the development of traditions of interpretation (judgment) and recognise that not all of the traditions are compatible with each other and that a choice will have to be made between some of them (decision).

If phase one begins with activities analogous to the first level of consciousness, phase two begins with an

activity that is analogous to the fourth level of conscious and proceeds “downwards” through the other levels of consciousness. So it is that the phase begins with “foundations” where theologians make explicit their own religious, moral, and intellectual conversion and then account for which doctrines they are choosing to retrieve from tradition so as to communicate to culture (Decision). They next proceed through the functional specialties of doctrines (judgment) to systematics (insight) to communications (experience). To this eighth functional specialty Lonergan gave the same name he gave to the whole second phase of theology of which it is part (some students of Lonergan suggest he could have better called it the functional specialty of “inculturation”). This functional specialty is so important that we need to investigate it more carefully.

The importance of “communications”

Of the functional specialty, “communications”, Lonergan asserts: “It is in this final stage that theological reflection bears fruit”.⁸ This is where theology tries to influence the constitutive meaning first of the Christian community itself and then of a culture as a whole. In Lonergan’s chapter on communications he reintroduces the notions of progress, decline and redemption in history that had been a theme of interest for him from his days as a student of theology at the Gregorian and is addressed at greater length in *Insight*. He asserts that the task of communications is “the redemptive and constructive roles of the Christian Church in human society”;⁹ as such, the redemptive task of communications is to reverse decline and to promote progress.

Lonergan is not naïve about the power of the forces of division and decline in our culture. He notes that the deepest source of division in society comes from “the absence of intellectual, moral, or religious conversion”.¹⁰ He continues: “The unconverted, and especially those that deliberately refused conversion, will want to find some other root for alienation and ideology. Indeed, they will want to suggest, directly or indirectly, that self-transcendence is a case . . . of alienation”.¹¹

In the end, however, Lonergan’s message is a positive one:

The Christian message is to be communicated to all nations. Such communication presupposes that preachers and teachers enlarge their horizons to include an accurate and intimate understanding of the culture and the language of the people they address. They must grasp the virtual resources of that culture and that language, and they must use those virtual resources creatively so that the Christian message becomes, not disruptive of the culture, not an alien patch superimposed upon it, but a line of development within the culture.¹²

How should we help prolong this “line of development within the culture”? In this respect he asserts that there is no excuse for avoiding some challenging intellectual work of “effecting an advance in scientific knowledge; 2. of persuading eminent and influential people to consider the advance both thoroughly and fairly, and 3. of having them convince practical policy makers and planners both that the advance exists and that it implies . . . revisions of current policies”.¹³

Conclusion

We can note two points about Lonergan’s thinking between the publication of *Method in Theology* in 1974 and his death ten years later. Firstly, Lonergan took his own call to “effect an advance in scientific knowledge” so seriously that he devoted most of these final years to research and writing in the discipline of economics. He was convinced that his breakthrough on methodological questions could be applied, with certain amendments, to the social sciences. Strikingly, he would speak of how important it was for economists to be morally converted and intellectually converted.

Secondly, we can note that while Lonergan enthusiastically welcomed the developments of Vatican II, he felt, frankly, that the aims of the council would best be realised if the Church adopted the method he had outlined for theology. It was with much sadness that he witnessed what he considered a

descent into “bad philosophy” in much theology after the council, instead of the kind of deep transposing of traditional philosophy that he had spent a lifetime trying to achieve. In this context, he went so far as to speak of “the debacle that followed the pastoral council”.¹⁴ Still, he remained hopeful for a long-term future where the kind of method he tried to explain would become employed ever more widely:

Classical culture cannot be jettisoned without being replaced; and what replaces it cannot but run counter to classical expectations. There is bound to be formed a solid right that is determined to live in a world that no longer exists. There is bound to be formed a scattered left, captivated by now this, now that new development, exploring now this, now that new possibility. But what will count is a perhaps not numerous centre, big enough to be at home in both the old and the new, painstaking enough to work out one by one the transitions to be made, strong enough to refuse half-measures and insist on complete solutions even though it has to wait.¹⁵

Perhaps we can give the last word to Pope Benedict XVI and recall aspects of his address to Jesuits at the Pontifical Gregorian University in November 2006 so as to demonstrate how close were the hopes of Bernard Lonergan to those of the Holy Father:

The mission of the Gregorian (is) a mission at once easy and difficult: it is easy because you were founded to achieve this aim; it is difficult because it requires a constant fidelity to and rootedness in our Catholic history and tradition, never losing sight of these, and at the same time an openness to the realities of or present day, attending to them with discernment and formulating creative responses to the need of the Church and the world.¹⁶

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¹ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: uno studio del comprendere umano*, edizione italiana a cura di Natalino Spaccapelo e Saturnino Muratore (Roma, Città Nuova, 2007); Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Il metodo in teologia*, edizione italiana a cura di Natalino Spaccapelo e Saturnino Muratore (Roma, Città Nuova, 1990).

² Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* (Oxford, UK, Blackwell Publishing, 2007)

³ Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, 21 February 2008.

⁴ A key intellectual biography of Lonergan has already been translated into the Italian language: Frederick Crowe, Bernard J.F. Lonergan: progresso e tappe del suo pensiero, Edizione Italiana a cura di Natalino Spaccapelo e Saturnino Muratore (Roma, Città Nuova, 1992).

⁵ Quoted in Lonergan “Questionnaire on Philosophy” *Philosophical and Theological Papers, 1965-1980*, *Collected works of Bernard Lonergan, Volume 17*, edited by Robert Croken and Robert M. Doran (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 353.

⁶ Lonergan, *Insight*, Introduction, p. 22.

⁷ *Method in Theology*, Introduction p. xi.

⁸ Lonergan, *Method* p. 355.

⁹ *Method* 368.

¹⁰ *Method* 357.

¹¹ *Method* 358.

¹² *Method* 362.

¹³ *Method* 366-67.

¹⁴ Lonergan, “Horizons and Transpositions”, in *Philosophical and Theological Papers, 1965-1980*, *Collected works of Bernard Lonergan, Volume 17*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 410. Lonergan, “Horizons”, p. 412-417. Lonergan, Quoted in Lonergan “Questionnaire on Philosophy” *Philosophical and Theological Papers, 1965-1980*, *Collected works of Bernard Lonergan, Volume 17*, edited by Robert Croken and Robert M. Doran (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 353.

¹⁵ Lonergan, “Dimensions of Meaning,” *Collection, Collected Works 4*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1988) pp. 244-5.

¹⁶ Lonergan, “Dimensions of Meaning,” *Collection, Collected Works 4*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1988) pp. 244-5.

¹⁶ Discorso di sua santità Benedetto XVI alla Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 3 Novembre 2006.