Bernard Lonergan, S.J.

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In the mid-1930's Bernard Lonergan was a young Jesuit in his mid-twenties studying in Rome. At the time Italy had been taken over by the fascists, Germany by the Nazis and Soviet Russia by the communists. It was during this time that Lonergan reached the firm conviction that in order to heed Pope Pius XI’s call to “restore all things in Christ,” including the economic and political order, Catholic theology needed new foundations. Those foundations - a direct response to modernity’s materialism and relativism - could only be found in the pedagogy of self-knowledge; or, as he was to later call it, “self-appropriation.” He found historical exemplars of this program in Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Newman. He found contemporary exemplars in scientific and scholarly methodology.

Born in Buckingham, Quebec, on December 17, 1904, Lonergan attended Loyola College, Montreal, from 1918 to 1922. On July 29, 1922, he entered the novitiate of the Society of Jesus at Guelph. In 1926 he was sent to study philosophy at Heythrop College in England, and while there, he obtained a degree in classics at the University of London. After teaching at Loyola College in Montreal from 1930 to 1933, he was sent to study theology at the Gregorian University in Rome where he was ordained to the priesthood on July 25, 1936. With the exception of a tertianship year in Amiens, France, he remained in Rome until the beginning of the Second World War in 1940. During these years he began his long study of Saint Thomas Aquinas.

So convinced was Lonergan that Aquinas had himself engaged in exercises of self-knowledge, that he wrote two major works on him: the first, a doctoral dissertation on the notion of operative grace in Aquinas; and the second, written after he returned to Canada in 1940, a series of articles on St. Thomas’ notion of “verbum,” the process of the "inner word" from the act of understanding.

The contention of this paper will be that Aquinas was speaking of understanding and that an interpretation in terms of general metaphysics misses the point; to follow Aquinas here, one must practice introspective rational psychology; without that, one no more can know the created image of the Blessed Trinity, as Aquinas conceived it, than a blind man can know colors.

Lonergan was convinced that the pedagogy of self-knowledge had to be applied to modern scientific methodology and consequently during the 1940s he began to write an analysis of scientific and philosophical methodology. The fruit of this work was his 1957 book, Insight: An Essay on Human Understanding. While focusing on self-appropriation, Lonergan formulates the positive content of his work in this way:

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.
In Insight Lonergan shows that such a program of self-appropriation leads to a critique of culture, especially the various self-destructive “undertows” that pass as reasonable.

...as insight and oversight commonly are mated, so also are progress and decline. We reinforce our love of truth with a practicality that is equivalent to an obscurantism. We correct old evils with a passion that mars the new good. We are not pure. We compromise. We hope to muddle through. But the very advance of knowledge brings a power over nature and over men too vast and terrifying to be entrusted to the good intentions of unconsciously biased minds. We have to learn to distinguish sharply between progress and decline, learn to encourage progress without putting a premium upon decline, learn to remove the tumor of the flight from understanding without destroying the organs of intelligence.

The program of Insight, then, though demanding, has very practical implications:

...to be practical is to do the intelligent thing, and to be unpractical is to keep blundering about. It follows that insight into both insight and oversight is the very key to practicality.

In 1953 Lonergan returned to Rome to teach theology at the Gregorian University, where he remained until 1965. During that time he published several Latin texts on the theology of the Trinity and on Christology. He also began to focus on the nature of historical consciousness especially as modern historical scholarship influenced theological methodology. Only a self-aware methodology can aid the theologian in avoiding contemporary cultural traps. In 1972 he published the fruit of that study, Method in Theology.

Method is not a set of rules to be followed meticulously by a dolt. It is a framework for collaborative creativity. It would outline the various clusters of operations to be performed by theologians when they go about their various tasks. A contemporary method would conceive those tasks in the context of modern science, modern scholarship, modern philosophy, of historicity, collective practicality and co-responsibility.

Between 1965 and 1975 Lonergan was the research professor of theology at Regis College in Toronto. In 1971-1972 he was Stillman Professor at Harvard University. Between 1975 and 1983 he was the Visiting Distinguished Professor at Boston College. During this time he returned to his early interest in “restoring all things in Christ,” now specifically with regard to method in economics. The resulting work, An Essay in Circulation Analysis, analyzes the patterns in the circulation of money in an exchange economy. As with all the work of the latter half of his life, this work aimed at the transformation of modern culture. It will be published among the twenty two volumes of The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan now being published by the University of Toronto Press.

On November 26, 1984, Lonergan died at the Jesuit infirmary at Pickering, Ontario. Since his death "Lonergan Centers" have been established throughout the world. Every year there is a "Lonergan Workshop" at Boston College and a similar workshop at Santa Clara in California. Various Festschriften have been dedicated to his thought as well as a quarterly journal, Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies. The Lonergan Research Institute in Toronto contains the archives on his life and thought and is currently collaborating with the University of Toronto Press in publishing The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan. His words continue to inspire his early program of
“transforming all things in Christ.”

To grasp the contemporary issue and to meet its challenge calls, then, for a collective effort. It is not the individual but the group that transforms the culture. The group does so by its concern for excellence, by its ability to wait and let issues mature, by its persevering efforts to understand, by its discernment for what is at once simple and profound, by its demand for the first-rate and its horror of mere destructiveness.

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