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"A Shower of Insights" Autobiography and Intellectual Conversion

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"A SHOWER OF INSIGHTS"
AUTOBIOGRAPHY
AND INTELLECTUAL CONVERSION

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In the introduction to his *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, Bernard Lonergan writes of an experience of "startling strangeness" that befalls someone who understands what the act of "insight" is all about. Of that discovery he says, "one has not made it yet if one has no clear memory of its startling strangeness." In the mid-1960s, while wrestling with *Insight*, I had such an experience. I was a young priest studying philosophy in Rome. Lonergan had been my theology professor in Rome, but quite honestly, at that point he had been over my head. The Vatican Council was in session and much was happening in the Catholic Church and in the world, so that studying philosophy — especially such a highly intellectualist philosophy as Lonergan's — was not high on my agenda. Other issues, both public and personal, were in the forefront. Nevertheless, since I had been sent to study philosophy and, according to those who seemed to be "in the know," Lonergan's was the best around, I threw myself into *Insight*. Every day for over a year I labored over that text — initially as an adversary, but then more and more sympathetically — until eventually a moment came that I remember "as if it were yesterday."

In this article I will ask some questions about that experience and put it within the broader context of writing one's memoirs or one's autobiography. I will begin with a description of what happened back in the spring of 1967 — and some anecdotal evidence of others with similar experiences. Then I will raise some questions about how such an event can be understood differently as one reflects on or writes about it years later. I
will consider, for example, “What really happened that day back in 1967? Is my description really the way it happened? or am I ‘reading back’ into that experience later awarenesses?” I will also ask, “Was what happened to me that day what Lonergan really meant by an ‘intellectual conversion?’ Did it live up to his standards — or any other standards for that matter — for an intellectual conversion?” Finally, connected to these two questions, I will ponder, “Has my understanding of what happened that day changed? Has my understanding of that event placed it within a new context or horizon?”

1. STUDYING LONERGAN

In the spring of 1967 I had been reading and rereading Insight for over a year. But this intense study did not take place in a vacuum. The sixties were a time of great ferment in the Catholic Church, and they were a time of great ferment in me. The Second Vatican Council had inspired and shaken us. Things were no longer neatly packaged. Change was in the air. The conflict between liberals and conservatives reverberated in my own insides. Thrilled to be in Rome during the five years of the Council, I remember very distinctly feeling disillusioned when after the Council we realized that the “same old school” still seemed to be calling the shots. In addition, we slowly began to realize that the sense of dynamism and change accompanying the newer historical consciousness often did not have roots. As Lonergan once wrote of that new con-sciousness: “Far more open than classicist culture, far better informed, far more discriminating, it lacks the convictions of its predecessor, its clear-cut norms, its elemental strength.”¹ Such was our situation, and it affected the young priests with whom I was studying. Some in fact were leaving the priesthood. Major issues loomed for all of us. And I was not immune from those issues. My insides began to founder. Fortunately, through the guidance of an older student priest, I began to pray more deeply and to share my own insides more deeply.

This personal conflict in the midst of a changing world provided the human context for my continued reading of *Insight*. I was asking the questions, What really is “insight?” What do you mean by “the mind?” by “my mind?” by “me?” What do you mean by the “real?” by “reality?” Such questions were not unconnected with my own personal struggles.

I was also at the time involved in writing a doctoral dissertation on Susanne K. Langer’s philosophy of art. My aim was to kill two birds with one stone. I was interested in learning Lonergan’s work, and since Lonergan thought highly of Langer, I thought this might be another entree into his thought. I also thought that this dissertation might expose me to the world of American philosophy. Furthermore, since Langer’s area of interest at the time was art, and since this was becoming a popular topic among Catholics, particularly in relationship to the changes in the liturgy, I thought that work in this area might be valuable. And Rome itself, of course, was a living museum of art.

So I began to research and write the dissertation. The first chapter I dedicated to Langer’s early work, which was influenced by Anglo-American “logical philosophy” and the cultural analyses of the neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer. Though Langer was very influenced by “logical philosophy,” she was also convinced that there was a “formal” or intellectual character to non-discursive symbols, such as art, myth, and ritual. That was the point of her *Philosophy in a New Key* and the point of departure for her major work on art, *Feeling and Form*. This, of course, fit in with Lonergan’s emphasis on insight as intellectual, and with his own writings on aesthetic and artistic consciousness. So the second chapter of the dissertation on Langer’s theory of art went smoothly.

In the third chapter I intended to investigate Langer’s overall theory of human mentality, a theory that would shed light on and fill out her theory of art. However, in 1967, as I worked on the dissertation, Langer published *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, a work specifically dedicated

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to a theory of human mentality. As I read and reread this work, I found myself stunned. There I encountered a totally naturalistic view of human knowing and human life. In that work Langer reduces all “higher” human intellectual activities, including insight, to imagination, imagination to feelings, and feelings to biological and electro-chemical events. These positions constituted her basic view of human knowing.

Langer represented the whole modern naturalist tradition in philosophy. As I studied her work, I gradually discovered that there was a gulf separating what she was saying about human knowing and what Lonergan was saying. Furthermore, what she was saying had consequences. Langer once spelled out the implications of her basic view of the human person:

That man is an animal I certainly believe; and also that he has no supernatural essence, “soul” or “mind-stuff,” enclosed in his skin. He is an organism, his substance is chemical, and what he does, suffers, or knows, is just what this sort of chemical structure may do, suffer, or know. When the structure goes to pieces, it never does, suffers, or knows anything again.

This thoroughgoing naturalism led to the assertion that there is nothing beyond what a narrowly conceived empirical method might reveal.

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4As I read and reread Langer’s work, I came to the conclusion that for her, knowing is a bipolar activity in which the “concepts” of scientific or philosophical thinking are the subjective pole, “matter” is the objective pole, and some type of vision or “looking” is the mediating activity. Thus we “see” forms of feeling in works of art; and in metaphorical activity we “see one thing in another,” life in the candle flame, death in sleep, and so forth. This, she asserts, is the basis of all “higher” differentiated activity. Compare with my review of Susanne K. Langer, Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling, vol. 1, in International Philosophical Quarterly, 10, no. 3 (1970), 481-84.

5Susanne K. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key (New York: New American Library, 1948), 44.
2. CONFLICTING PHILOSOPHIES BECOME A CONFLICT IN ME

The conflicting viewpoints between Langer and Lonergan became a conflict in me. On one evening in particular I was studying in my room sometime in the spring of 1967 as twilight spread over the city of Rome. I remember saying to myself quite clearly:

Who’s right here? — Lonergan or Langer? Both can’t be right — between them there’s a basic conflict about the human person, the human mind, indeed about reality.

I questioned my own motivation: “If you come down on Lonergan’s side, is that because he’s a religious, a Jesuit priest, and you yourself are a lifelong Catholic and a priest as well?” I could admit all these underlying motivations that might incline me toward a more religiously amenable answer. But the question itself was not directly a religious one. It was a question of fact. What were the facts? What was the truth about the human mind? In fact, it was a question about what I was doing then and there. It was a question whose adequate answer I could find only within my own self.

Previously in philosophy courses I had learned many opinions about the mind and the human person. I had learned what the great philosophers had said. But their sayings and opinions had passed through my own mind and on to test papers without connecting with my own basic self-knowledge. I could repeat the various positions on knowledge and the various schools of philosophy. But my opinions were not rooted. They were vulnerable to basic challenges. The challenge I faced that evening in Rome was the challenge of modern naturalism.

In some ways naturalism with its empiricist emphasis was easy to understand — or at least to imagine. Its emphasis on sensation and imagination was rather obvious: the “blooming buzzing confusion” of sense experiences linked together by associative habits. So were the emphases of the other philosophies I found rolling around within me: the traditional scholasticism I had been taught, with its “intuition of being;” Immanuel Kant’s emphasis on the knowing subject who cannot intellectually get out there to “things in themselves;” and the various existen-
tialist writers who seemed to say, "A pox on all your houses — what
counts are your own personal decisions!"

Yet the study of these philosophies was very important for me. For
they each represented people taking a stand. All were a challenge to me to
come to a decision about myself and my own "foundations." Lonergan
once wrote about these foundations: "It is a decision about whom and
what you are for and, again, whom and what you are against. It is a
decision illuminated by the manifold possibilities exhibited in dialectic. It
is a fully conscious decision about one's horizon, one's outlook, one's
world-view."

The major emphases of these various schools of philosophy were not
too difficult to understand. I had been reading around in them for some
time. In contrast, Lonergan's position was difficult to understand. I sensed
that he was on to something in his emphasis on understanding. Still, he
seemed to imply that there was a residual materialism, or "naive realism,"
even in someone like myself who had studied many years of Catholic
philosophy and theology. I sensed he was calling for a change in me if I
were to truly understand what he was talking about.

I knew I had learned something from the study of Insight. I had
learned something about understanding in mathematics, in science, and in
common sense. But to a great extent what I had learned had been what
Lonergan had written about such understanding. And as Jesus said to
Peter, "But who do you say that I am?" Similarly I felt the question in me,

"But who do you say you are, Dick Liddy? What do you say about
your own knowing? Your own mind? Your own self?"

This inner dialogue was not about what Lonergan or anyone else had
said about knowing; it was rather about what I was coming to know about
my own knowing. The evidence for answering these questions was to be
found within me. It was a question of putting the book down and
"thinking" about the meaning of the book.

And so I kept asking the question "Is this all true?" In particular,

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Is it true that understanding is distinct from imagination? Is my understanding distinct from my imagination? Couldn’t understanding be just another form of imagination? Couldn’t I imagine that?

I played many mental games, trying to “imagine” other structures, other explanations, for the structure of my own mind. Again and again I said to myself that all the later elements in Lonergan’s book, including the existence of God, depended on the correctness of the earlier analyses of insight. So, as I read the second half of Insight I could not help but repeat to myself the question:

Is the understanding of understanding in the first part of the book correct? The circle, for example, is Lonergan correct on that? Is there a specific act called “understanding” or is understanding just some kind of “imagining?”

My imagination threw up on the screen of my mind all kinds of conflicting images and questions: “Perhaps what I call ‘understanding’ is just a kind of imagination — for example, an imagining of perfectly equal radii?” But that didn’t seem to make sense. For imagination just “represented” the sensitive experiences of seeing the spokes on a wheel or some symbolic radii. The fact that mathematics deals with intelligibilities that can be symbolized but not represented seemed strong evidence for a distinct intellectual level of consciousness. But what was this level? Where was it? What did it look like? Beneath the surface of my mind there still percolated the question, “Where is this act?” I was not sure I had a real handle on it. I was not sure what insight was like. I was not sure I could situate it clearly within my own consciousness. I was not sure I “had” it. In some real way, I was looking for something with a label on it:

“THIS IS THE ACT OF INSIGHT! THIS IS UNDERSTANDING!”

or

“BEHOLD — INSIGHT!”

But the reality of course turned out to be more subtle.
3. A SHOWER OF “INSIGHT”

And that is when I remember having an “Archimedean experience.” It was late one afternoon in Rome in the spring of 1967 and I had been working on this material for most of the day. In fact, I was like Archimedes, relaxing in water — taking a shower. Various questions and images were floating through my head and at one point I remember saying to myself: “Where is this act of insight?”

And then it hit me: You’re asking the wrong question!

Look at the question you’re asking! You’re asking a question that cannot be answered! You’re asking “where?” is your attempt to visualize what can’t be visualized! You’re attempting to imagine what of its nature goes beyond imagination. Indeed, you can be aware of insight; you can understand it in its relationships with other cognitional acts; you can come to judge that understanding correct; but you can’t see it! The very question you’re asking is formulated in imaginative and visual terms and, as such, can’t be answered!

That is my formulation now of what I said to myself that afternoon thirty-five years ago. Perhaps my words then were somewhat different; but that was the substance of it. I realized that the question I was asking, that I spontaneously felt could be answered, could not be answered. I was in the shower, in a room, in a place that could be designated spatially. But an explanatory understanding of my own understanding could not be so designated. Then I realized that I was understanding! That is why that moment that afternoon thirty-five years ago stands out in my mind today. It is part of my “psychological present.” Another important dimension of my insight was the discovery that I had not understood. For a long time, while reading Insight, I had been bothered by an underlying question, a question I hardly realized I had — a question that was literally part of me, part of “my guts.” It was a question that as such could not be answered — and I had come to understand that.

7Someone once told me of one of Rollo May’s books on human creativity in which he specifically speaks of “the shower experience.” I have not been able of locate the reference. Someone else referred to “the three ‘b’s’ — the bed, the bath, and the bus — all places in which you’re relaxed and insights can emerge.”
In a section on “belief” in *Insight*, Lonergan emphasizes the importance of coming to understand such instances of one’s failure to understand. For such awarenesses are important moments in the process of self-appropriation. They are like a single thread leading to other threads that affect the whole fabric of one’s mentality. That moment in the shower precipitated a whole inventory of instances of misunderstanding and oversight that were principally due to my desire for a “picture” of what I was trying to understand. That deep-seated habit of wanting to “picture” things had extended itself to wanting a picture of insight.

4. A “STARTLING STRANGENESS” AND THE FEAR OF IDEALISM

As was mentioned at the beginning of this article, the introduction to *Insight* speaks of the “startling strangeness” one experiences as one gets the point of the book. It is a breakthrough as distinctive as the difference between winter twilight and the summer noonday sun. One has not yet experienced it if one has not yet made the discovery that there are two quite different realisms, that there is an incoherent realism half animal and half human, that poses as a halfway house between materialism and idealism, and on the other hand that there is an intelligent and reasonable realism between which and materialism the half-way house is idealism.

Let me use a diagram to illustrate that sentence in relation to my own history, for it concerns what happened to me in the shower that day and how I came to interpret it. Previously in my training I had been taught to look at the major schools of philosophy in this way:

Materialism ➔ Realism ⇐ Idealism

“Realism” or a realist philosophy was thought to occupy the sound middle ground between materialism and idealism; it took something of

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8 *Insight*, 737-39.
9 *Insight*, 22.
10 *Insight*, 13.
11 *Insight*, 22.
materialism's emphasis on matter and some of idealism's emphasis on mind. In a real way it was "half animal, half human."

Now Lonergan was saying that such realism is itself incoherent. Because it is "half animal," it is not human enough. The only truly coherent realism is to follow out idealism's emphasis on the priority of mind, while purging idealism of its assumption that only by "looking" can knowing be realistic. If reality is attained not merely by sensitive experience but also by understanding and true judgment, then a genuinely progressive diagram of the relationships between the major positions in philosophy would be:

Materialism → Idealism → Critical Realism

That was the issue that faced me in the aftermath of my experience in the shower. I kept asking myself, "Is this real? Am I on to anything here? Or am I just getting wrapped up in my own mind? Am I becoming an idealist? Does this insistence on the intellectual pattern of consciousness lose contact with reality? Or is it the way we really know reality?" Lonergan noted that in his early years he himself had experienced the fear that he was becoming an idealist.\(^{12}\) I found that same fear in myself. I feared that somehow I was getting too wrapped up in my "self" and never reaching reality "out there."

But then I realized that this itself involved the same imaginative "inner-outer" schema on the self and on reality that had bedeviled my efforts to figure out "where" insight was. Idealism still holds on to the idea of reality as "out there," and since we do not have any intellectual intuition, any intellectual "look," we consequently cannot get "out there" to "the really real." If, on the other hand, reality is mediated by reasonable judgment, rooted in a grasp of the sufficiency of the evidence, then we attain reality through the truth of reasonable judgments. This reality-ordered process becomes a critical realism through the process of self-appropriation. The breakthrough to understanding the unimaginability of

insight was for me intimately connected to the breakthrough to a critical realism.

Lonergan once touched upon this fear of idealism while writing about the early Christian writer Tertullian, for whom the criterion of reality of the divinity of the Son of God was that he was made “of the same stuff” as the Father. In that context Lonergan goes on to say:

Unfortunately, some people have the impression that while Tertullian and others of his time may have made such a mistake, no one repeats it today. Nothing could be further from the truth. For until a person has made the personal discovery that he is making Tertullian’s mistake all along the line, until he has gone through the crisis involved in overcoming one’s spontaneous estimate of the real, and the fear of idealism involved in it, he is still thinking just as Tertullian did. It is not a sign that one is dumb or backward. St. Augustine was one of the most intelligent men in the whole Western tradition and one of the best proofs of his intelligence is in the fact that he himself discovered that for years he was unable to distinguish between what is a body and what is real.¹³

5. THE TESTIMONY OF OTHERS

I have not made an exhaustive study of others who have had experiences similar to mine while studying Lonergan’s works, although that would be a worthwhile project. But I can recall some anecdotal evidence of those who have witnessed to me the “startling strangeness” that overcame them when first they experienced an “insight into insight.”

There was, for example, the professor of philosophy who told me of an afternoon, over thirty years ago, when he was reading Insight on the grounds of the North American College in Rome. “I was absolutely carried away by it,” he said. “When I walked up to my room that afternoon, everything was different — everything!” Another philosophy professor witnessed to the same experience of “everything looking different” after having had a breakthrough in reading Lonergan. The

experience has a strange similarity to some accounts of religious experience, for example, in the following account of Jonathan Edwards.

After this my sense of divine things gradually increased and became more lively, and had more of that inward sweetness. The appearance of everything was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory in almost everything.\textsuperscript{14}

Still, the experience we are focusing on was primarily an intellectual awareness. Another student of \textit{Insight} remembers attending the horse-races at a track in Dublin. "In the middle of the races," he said,

I began to think of the meaning of "reality." Then it hit me — like a ton of bricks. I realized I understood what Lonergan was talking about! — and it was quite different than our ordinary meaning of "reality." I can remember that moment quite vividly.

Another person told me he remembers very distinctly the turning point in his own journey. "I was in a class at Boston University," he said.

The professor was a very open man, encouraging us in our own opinions, while at the same time going on about his own. And his opinions on philosophy and human knowing were quite distinct from what \textit{Insight} had been leading me to. I remember saying to myself: "I know he's wrong. I know I hold a whole set of positions on consciousness, insight, etc., that are in opposition to what he's teaching." Perhaps it was his teaching itself that so set up the contrast for me. I can remember that moment years back quite clearly. It was a key moment in my own self-knowledge.

And Philip McShane writes about his experience:

I recall vividly the strangeness of the beginning of my own escape, and the concomitant shift in sensibility, when I was 26, with four years of mathematical science and two years of philosophy behind me. The pivotal text, oddly enough, was not \textit{Insight}, but the fifth element in the general notion of inner word in the first of the \textit{Verbum} articles. Since then I have found it easy to keep track of the few students I have helped towards and into that strangeness, and I have no doubt that Maslow's statistic, "less than 1% of adults grow," holds sway for the population of philosophers with regard to this

\textsuperscript{14}Quoted in William James, \textit{The Varieties of Religious Experience} (New York: New American Library, 1958), 199.
bridge. The statistic can change only if we seriously and incarnately make this bridge a topic, and the difficulty of its crossing a topic.\textsuperscript{15}

Other students of Insight find it difficult to recall particular moments in their philosophical journey. Sometimes they explain this in terms of never having had to "unlearn" an inadequate philosophy — such as the particular brand of neo-scholasticism I was taught. The very effort expended on learning a particular philosophy as well as the break from that philosophy perhaps makes the breakthrough particularly vivid.

Still, the basic breakthrough to an understanding of understanding is not just from one or other explicit philosophy to Lonergan's philosophy. Rather, it is a breakthrough from the spontaneous, implicit, "philosophy" we carry with us from childhood to truly understanding ourselves and the world mediated by meaning.\textsuperscript{16} That break would seem to be the basic cause for the "startling strangeness" that Lonergan describes in the introduction to Insight. Elsewhere he speaks of "being dazed and disoriented" for a while as one becomes accustomed to the new view of things.

The transition from the neglected and truncated subject to self-appropriation is not a simple matter. It is not just a matter of finding out and asssenting to a number of true propositions. More basically, it is a matter of conversion, of a personal philosophic experience, of

\textsuperscript{15}Philip McShane, Creativity and Method: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lonergan, ed. Matthew Lamb (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press: 1981), 548. Compare also with McShane, Economics for Everyone (Halifax: Axial Press, 1998), 36: "What, then, do I mean by a concept, a serious explanatory concept, such as we struggle towards in these chapters? I can perhaps appeal to the description that I regularly, in the past twenty years, invited my students of philosophy to ponder over. There are two characteristics of a serious explanatory concept. You will remember the weeks, months, even years, that you spent — with feats of curiosity, not feats of memory — in struggling towards it. You will be able, even years later, to speak of it illuminatingly, through illustrations, for perhaps ten hours. Maybe you are led by this to suspect that serious explanatory concepts are rare achievements? And certainly they are not passed on from generation to generation in compact learned nuggets."

\textsuperscript{16}Compare also with Lonergan's reference in his Verbum: Word and Idea in Saint Thomas, ed. F. E. Crowe and R. M. Doran, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 20-21: "For the materialist, the real is what he knows before he understands or thinks; it is the sensitively integrated object that is reality for a dog; it is the sure and firm-set earth on which I tread, which is so reassuring to the sense of reality; and on that showing intellect does not penetrate to the inwardness of things but is a merely subjective, if highly useful, principle of activity."
moving out of a world of sense and of arriving, dazed and disorientated for a while, into a universe of being.\textsuperscript{17}

This would seem to be memorable moment. That certainly was my experience. Everything was different. I now understood what Lonergan was talking about. Other parts of Insight began to fall into place, one piece after another as in a big puzzle. In particular difficulties about the "isomorphism between the structure of knowing and the structure of being" also fell into place. I had been trying to "imagine" a structure of being diverse from the structure of knowing being. Again, the difficulty had been one of imagination. Every effort to imagine that "being" was not intelligible, I discovered to be just that — an image. That which I sought, the intelligibility of everything, the object of my inquiring intelligence, cut through every such imagination.

My question in the shower, "Where is this insight?" was a question that came out of my connection to the earth — out of my whole early human development of orienting myself in the "already out there now world." It was a major achievement to overcome that lifelong orientation in just this one area. Yet, there were many other areas where the weight and force of "the already out there now real" continued to exercise its powerful sway, and it still does.

Nevertheless a Rubicon had been crossed. An interior center of gravity had shifted. Though in my thinking and acting I have through the years fallen below that center point, still, from that moment onwards I knew that reality is more than what I imagined — and that I am more as well.

6. INTELLECTUAL CONVERSION AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

In the chapter on "History" in Method in Theology Lonergan writes:

Towards an autobiography, a first step is a diary. Day by day one records, not every event that occurred — one has other things to do — but what seems important, significant, exceptional, new. So one selects, abbreviates, sketches, alludes. One omits most of what is too

\textsuperscript{17}"The Subject," A Second Collection, 79.
familiar to be noticed, too obvious to be mentioned, too recurrent to be thought worth recording.

Now as the years pass and the diary swells, retrospect lengthens. What once were merely remote possibilities, now have been realized. Earlier events, thought insignificant, prove to have been quite important, while others, thought important, turn out to have been quite minor. Omitted earlier events have to be recalled and inserted both to supply the omitted context of the earlier period and to make later events more intelligible. Earlier judgments, finally, have to be complemented, qualified, corrected.18

So what am I doing in this paper? What have I been doing in these previous pages? I have been trying to “tell my story.” I’ve been describing my process of self-appropriation. It’s part of my “memoirs,” a contribution to my autobiography, if I ever get around to it — my attempt to objectify what was going on within me at a certain period in my life.

But one’s story can change. I don’t think I kept a diary during those years, but I have checked my letters from that time to my parents and I do not see any mention of this event there. Of course, it is not something you would naturally have written home about! But I was busy telling them of other events in Rome at the time — things I was also interested in — so that even if I did keep a diary, this event might not have made it into writing. I had many concerns in those days — the excitement of the Second Vatican Council still pervaded Rome — and my “insight into insight” was just one of those concerns. And when afterwards, after I came home to the States to teach, I also became involved in many other things: I became the Spiritual Director of the seminary, eventually Rector and for a time the Acting Chancellor of the university. Consequently, although the breakthrough I have recounted above became very important in my life, it need not have become so. Someone could have had an experience similar to mine, but other “dominant concerns” could have swamped it, as they threatened to do so from time to time in my own life.

So the life of the mind is connected to the life of the heart and the heart’s decisions. The life of the mind is connected to the religious and moral life and to the decisions flowing from those dimensions of the human spirit. Without going into those dimensions of my “autobio-

18Method in Theology, 182-83.
graphy," I can say that the reason that insight in the shower is still so important to me is that through the years I have followed up on it. Right from the beginning, decisions flowed from that insight into insight. Those decisions involved continuing to read Lonergan, to teach what I learned, to stay in Lonergan studies, to go to the Lonergan Workshop, to write a book about Lonergan, and so forth. It is because of those subsequent decisions that that event in the shower in Rome has become ever more significant as the years have unfolded.

There is a further aspect to the matter, and that is the social and communal dimensions of that event. Thus far I have not highlighted the fact that there were others studying *Insight* in Rome at the same time. I would sometimes speak with them about what we were learning. In addition, just as we were standing on the shoulders of Lonergan in our coming to know ourselves, so also he benefited in his self-understanding from the long tradition of Plato, Augustine, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Newman, as well as from the advances of the modern sciences. Our thinking — even about ourselves — takes place within a communal and historical context.

Peter Berger once brought out this need for the help of community if we are to take our moments of self-knowledge seriously. Speaking of religious conversion, he noted:

> It is only within the religious community, the *ecclesia*, that the conversion can be effectively maintained as plausible. This is not to deny that conversion may antedate affiliation with the community ... But this is not the point. To have a conversion experience is nothing much. The real thing is to keep on taking it seriously; to retain a sense of its plausibility. *This* is where the religious community comes in. It provides the indispensable plausibility structure for the new reality. In other words, Saul may have become Paul in the aloneness of religious ecstasy, but he would remain Paul only in the context of the Christian community that recognized him as such and confirmed the "new being" in which he now located this identity.19

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So it was "the Lonergan community" that has helped me to continue to take seriously that moment so long ago and, even more importantly, to make decisions that followed up on that moment. Through the years that community has helped me to come to see the implications of the breakthrough from picture thinking for thinking about innumerable issues both in the Church and in the world. The element of community is also very helpful in introducing others to the meaning of an "insight into insight." Lonergan once wrote about the effectiveness of a "seminar" approach to these questions:

Everyone will have his own difficulties. There is an advantage, then, to having a seminar on the subject. It gives people a chance to talk these things out ... to talk them out with others. There is a set of concrete opportunities provided by the seminar that cannot be provided by any mere book. The more you talk with another and throw things out, the more you probe, and the more you express yourself spontaneously, simply, and frankly, not holding back in fear of making mistakes, then the more quickly you arrive at the point where you get things cleared up.\(^\text{20}\)

In addition, these moments of "startling strangeness" that have happened to so many in "the Lonergan movement" take place in an historical context, a context of progress, decline, and redemption, a context that brings with it historical responsibilities.

There is social and cultural process. It is not just a sum of individual words and deeds. There exists a developing and/or deteriorating unity constituted by co-operations, by institutions, by personal relations, by a functioning and/or malfunctioning good of order, by a communal realization of originating and terminal values and disvalues. Within such processes we live out our lives.\(^\text{21}\)

So seemingly purely personal questions — such as the meaning of "insight" — have more than purely personal moral implications. They lead to questions that are social, cultural, and political. Lonergan himself


\(^{21}\)Method in Theology, 184.
drew out some of these cultural implications in his writing of *Insight* and *Method in Theology*. As he says in the latter work,

Still intellectual conversion alone is not enough. It has to be made explicit in a philosophic and theological method, and such an explicit method has to include a critique both of the method of science and the method of scholarship.²²

So also, in the last pages of his *Method in Theology* Lonergan makes a pitch for a critical approach to the human sciences based on intellectual conversion. Just as the natural sciences, history, and philosophy need a dialectical critique based on such conversion, so also do the human sciences.²³ Such a purification can lead to significant healing of the human family and creative policies for human development. In such a way intellectual conversion can find application-insertion-relevance in the contemporary world situation.

So in a sense what happened to me in Rome was “nothing much.” Whether or not it was an “intellectual conversion” that lived up to Lonergan’s high standards still remains a question for me and in that sense that question still exercises an influence on my life. Indeed, just as there are stages of moral and religious conversion, so one can speak analogously of stages in intellectual conversion, at least insofar as one allows intellectual conversion to influence all of one’s intellectual life. “In any individual at any given time there may exist the abstract possibility, or the beginnings, or greater or lesser progress, or high development of intellectual or moral or religious conversion.”²⁴

Still, on an apologetic level, this breakthrough to my own mind in the mid-1960s was also a breakthrough to convictions about the issues treated at the end of *Insight*, especially the possibility of ethics, moral impotence, the existence of God, and the need for God’s solution to the unintelligibility of sin. Somewhere Lonergan remarks that through the break-

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²²*Method in Theology*, 318. So also, compare with the introduction to *Insight*, 22: “For the appropriation of one’s own rational self-consciousness, which has been so stressed in this introduction, is not an end in itself but rather a beginning. It is a necessary beginning...”


²⁴*Method in Theology*, 326.
through to one’s own mind “You’re almost all the way home,” that is, home to the question of God and to identifying God’s solution to the problem of human living. That was my experience. My own insight into insight, culminating that afternoon in the shower, helped me find my way, with God’s help, through the turbulent sixties — and ever since.

Lonergan himself was rather blasé and off-handed about his own intellectual conversion. He mentioned it once in a discussion on the history of philosophy:

So there was considerable room for development after Aristotle and you get it in St. Thomas when he distinguishes existence from essence and makes them really distinct; and to make them distinct really you have to have something equivalent to an intellectual conversion even if you don’t know what is meant by an intellectual conversion. I had the intellectual conversion myself when in doing theology. I saw that you can’t have one person in two natures in Christ unless there is a real distinction between the natures and something else that is one. But that is the long way around.25

Besides showing Lonergan’s reticence at autobiography, the tenor of this passage illustrates that he had other very important things to attend to than the details of his own life. His concern was what he could concretely contribute to the world. Still, that moment in Rome in 1935 was foundational both for his writing of Insight as well as for all his later writings. That experience reproduced in him something similar to what had happened to Saint Augustine in the summer of 386 when he came to realize that the word “real” went beyond the meaning of the word “body.” So the dates of 386, 1935, 1967, and 2002 are connected. They remind me of Eric Voegelin’s words about a “Gospel:”

A Gospel is neither a poet’s work of dramatic art, nor an historian’s biography of Jesus, but the symbolization of a divine movement that went through the person of Jesus into society and history.26