The Mystery of Lonergan

Richard M Liddy, Seton Hall University
BERNARD LONERGAN'S writings are notoriously difficult. On more than one occasion I have noticed eyes roll upward at the very mention of his name—as if someone had brought up the topic of nuclear physics. This only makes the depth of people's attachment to his thought rather mysterious. After all, in the context of present crises, what value is there in epistemology? What good is cognitive theory for what ails the world? The way Tertullian put it was, "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?"

And yet, since Lonergan's death in 1984, there has slowly developed a more and more extensive "Lonergan network" throughout the world. The Lonergan Research Institute in Toronto, containing the Lonergan archives, is presently collaborating with the University of Toronto Press in publishing the 25 volumes of the Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan. There are Lonergan centers in Boston, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Ottawa, Sydney, Dublin, Naples and elsewhere—most with their own Web sites. There are journals, newsletters, yearly conferences—all dedicated to drawing out the implications of his thought.

Why this growing influence? Those of us who were his students in Rome in the 1950's and 60's knew him as a rather un-prepossessing Jesuit teacher who spoke with a pronounced Canadian accent and had a certain "grandfatherly" mien, albeit at times a somewhat "crusty" granddad who did not suffer fools lightly. I had him for two semesters, for courses on the Trinity and on Christ, in 1961-2. There were about 650 of us in the great hall of the Gregorian University, and Lonergan's lectures—in Latin—were certainly over the heads of most of us. The pedagogical conditions at "the Greg" in those days were not conducive to "interactive learning," to say the least, and yet something special came through. His presentation of the Trinitarian life gave us a glimmer of how our lives are caught up in the mystery of infinite love. He taught us that somehow our own thinking and acting is a participation in the life of the Father, the eternally spoken Word and the Spirit proceeding as love from grasped meaning.

Bill Shea, now the director of the Center for Religion, Ethics and Culture at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass., once drew what I consider an accurate portrait:

Bernard Lonergan looked like a man who knew what he was doing and enjoyed it. In the score of times I saw him, I could not take my eyes off him. That is understandable, perhaps, because he was the big man in my small world. But he was not what one would expect a great teacher to be. He had none of

---

MSGR. RICHARD M. LIDDY is director of the Center for Catholic Studies at Seton Hall University, South Orange, N.J.
the sense of theatrical drama, no flash, no bamboozle, none of the Great Man aura. He had a monotonous voice; his hands shook distractingly; he looked overweight, not at all prepossessing in his physical appearance, and he had little physical grace. Oddly, then, it was a pleasure listening to him and watching him. I think it was because he was very smart and clear about what he was doing, and he did it with pleasure. In the academic world one does not often run into really smart people, though one regularly does run into intelligent and capable people. I had the conviction, both from the time I read Insight and from the first time I listened to him lecture and answer questions, that he was the smartest person I had run into.

Life and Work
Bernard Lonergan was born in Buckingham, Ontario, on Dec. 17, 1904. He attended the ungraded elementary school there, run by the Brothers of Christian Instruction. At the age of 13, he went on to board at the Jesuit high school and junior college of Loyola in Montreal; and on July 22, 1922, he entered the Society of Jesus at Guelph in Ontario. Four years later he was sent to study philosophy at Heythrop College in England, where he found the Suarezian scholasticism taught there incomprehensible. He "took refuge" in Newman.

"My fundamental mentor and guide has been John Henry Newman's Grammar of Assent. I read that in my third year philosophy (at least the analytic parts) about five times and found solutions for my problems. I was not at all satisfied with the philosophy that was being taught and found Newman's presentation to be something that fitted in with the way I knew things." Elsewhere he wrote of Newman’s influence: “Newman’s remark that ten thousand difficulties do not make a doubt has served me in good stead. It encouraged me to look difficulties squarely in the eye, while not letting them interfere with my vocation or my faith.”

From Newman he came to a deep appreciation of the process of human judging; but it was from the early dialogues of Plato and Augustine that he came to appreciate the act of understanding. Plato’s

Doctrine of Ideas, by an Oxford don, John Alexander Stewart, led him to understand Plato, not as a proponent of “forms in the sky,” but rather as a methodologist—asking and answering questions that promote understanding. This was reinforced by his reading of the early “Platonic” dialogues of Augustine, who, on the way to his religious conversion, had been himself influenced by “some books of the Platonists” in the spring and summer of 386. These writers—Newman, Plato and Augustine—gave Lonergan what Peter Brown noted that Augustine obtained from the Platonists: that is, the one essential tool for any serious autobiography, “a theory of the dynamics of the soul that made sense of his experience.”

In 1933 Lonergan was sent to study at the Gregorian in
Rome, where he remained until 1940, finishing his doctoral dissertation on Thomas Aquinas’s teaching on grace. While in Rome he fell under the influence of three Jesuit writers, all of whom led him to Aquinas: Peter Hoenen, Joseph Maréchal and Bernard Leeming. During Leeming’s course on Christ in 1935-36, Lonergan had his fundamental “intellectual conversion”: a clarity and distinctness of apprehension of the human act of understanding as the door to knowing reality. That conversion found expression in his *Insight* (1957), his *Method in Theology* (1972) and his writings in various fields. That conversion led him to conceive of Catholic theology as oriented to influencing all of human culture: art, literature, science, history, the human sciences and even economic theory. This interdisciplinary and intercultural vision of theology took root in him during the 1940s and 50s, when he taught in the Jesuit seminaries in Canada before being sent back to teach at the Gregorian in 1953.

*Insight Into Insight*

In the fall of 1964, having finished four years of theology, I too was sent back to Rome to obtain my doctorate in philosophy. At the time, people “in the know” said to me, “Study Lonergan,” and I am profoundly grateful they did. Through that concentrated encounter with his work, especially his 700-page *Insight: An Essay on Human Understanding*, I changed. The reason he was over my head when I had him as a young student was that I needed to change in order to understand what he was about. The core of Lonergan’s appeal is what he called “self-appropriation,” a personal act of taking possession of one’s own consciousness.

In *Insight* Lonergan takes the reader through a demanding tour of modern mathematical physics, but his point is not to learn physics but to learn about oneself. It is a question of coming to understand, through numerous personal “experiments,” the structure of one’s own consciousness. “Insight into insight,” he called it in short. One reason people are so committed to so exigent a thinker as Lonergan is that he promotes a very personal act of commitment, a commitment to an understanding of one’s own self. He explains:

> The crucial issue is an experimental issue, and the experiment will be performed not publicly but privately.... No one else, no matter what his knowledge or his eloquence, no matter what his logical rigor or his persuasiveness, can do it for you. But though the act is private, both its antecedents and its consequents have their public manifestation. Winter twilight cannot be mistaken for the summer noontday sun.

The promise was extraordinary,
looking to a very distinctive "peak experience." He wrote
of it as an experience of "startling strangeness"—and that
was my experience. Some 35 years later, I can remember
as if it were yesterday the moment when it all came home
to me. It was a late afternoon in Rome in the spring of
1966 and I had been studying Insight a good part of the
day. I decided to take a shower (there was warm water dur-
ding those hours of the day), and while taking that shower
it hit me: "He's talking about me!" It would take many
pages to describe the content of that insight, but suffice it
to say that what hit me that day has never left me.
Lonergan's main goal was not that one might become "a
Lonerganian," but that one might come to know one's
own mind and the structure of the reality that the mind is seeking to
know.

A Charism for the Church?
At a time of great suffering and even
tragedy in the church, it is very important
to look for the gifts God is giving to the
church. One such gift was—and is—
Bernard Lonergan. He lived in the 20th
century, 1904 to 1984, but his thought
will become even more influential in the
21st century. Just as Thomas Aquinas
provided the language with which the
Western church for 800 years largely
came to understand itself, so there is need
for some such common language today.
Discussing Aquinas's influence on cul-
ture, Lonergan wrote:

In the medieval period theology
became the queen of the sci-
ces. But in the practice of
Aquinas it was also the principle
for the molding and transfor-
mation of a culture. At a time when
Arabic and Greek thought were
penetrating the whole of
Western culture, he wrote exten-
sive commentaries on numerous
works of Aristotle to fit a pagan's
science within a Christian con-
text and to construct a world
view that underpinned Dante's Divine
Comedy. To this paradigm theol-
y today must look if it is to
achieve its aggiornamento.

Lonergan's spirituality is a spirituality
of "the Word" as it spreads out to all of human culture. Such
a spirituality radiates outward to focus on the long-term cul-
tural implications of the Gospel. In an empirically inclined
culture from which God is often so decidedly absent,
Lonergan's thought can open up—even in the midst of sci-
cific and scholarly work—the question of God that lurks just
below the surface. The conversion in our understanding of
ourselves promoted by Lonergan can break open the hard-
ened symbols and clichés of misunderstanding that so often
define our culture. Besides a wordless "apophatic" spirituality
that loses itself in contemplation, there is also a need today for
a "kataphatic" spirituality that values the Word and shows how
that Word fits into our other human words—sciences, schol-
arly disciplines, literature—so that God can have a say in the world we construct.

Lonergan’s triad of experience, understanding and judging is the subjective side of Aquinas’s “potency, form and act”—and only by showing this subjective side can we in the third millennium arrive at a wisdom that links the disciplines with the world of faith. “When the natural and human sciences are on the move, when the social order is developing, when the everyday dimensions of culture are changing,” Lonergan wrote, “what is needed is not a dam to block the stream but control of the river-bed through which the stream must flow.”

A student of Lonergan’s thought—obviously a fan—said to me not so long ago: “There hasn’t been anyone like him since Aquinas, and there won’t be anyone like him for the next 200 years.” Certainly, most of us who had him in class in Rome in the 1950s and 60s did not think of him as “epochal,” but it looks, at the beginning of the third millennium, as if his stature will continue to grow. The key to the “mystery” of Lonergan’s appeal is that he has provided a language that makes it possible for persons of faith to move through the welter of contemporary movements toward an understanding of themselves, the universe—and God. As he put it in Insight, “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.”

Great teachers in the church, like Augustine, Aquinas, Teresa of Avila and Thérèse of Lisieux, have been named “doctors of the church.” They have combined holiness with the ability to teach others and help others find their way in the world. In a day when English is the lingua franca of the world, there are still no English-speaking doctors of the church. I await with eagerness the naming of John Henry Newman as such a doctor, and I hope that Bernard Lonergan will not be far behind.