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Bernard Lonergan at the Service of the
Church

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CARDINAL MARTINI ON BERNARD LONERGAN

Msgr. Richard M. Liddy

In December of 2004 at the Gregorian University in Rome an international conference was held marking the centenary of the birth of the Canadian Jesuit theologian, Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984). Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, retired Archbishop of Milan, gave the keynote address on the occasion in which he highlighted the ultimately pastoral character of the Canadian theologian's very rigorous work. [The address can be found translated in English in the September 2005 issue of *Theological Studies*.]

Martini was mentioned as a possible "papabile" at the last conclave and he is held in high esteem by many, among whom the many young people who between 1980 and 2002 crowded the Duomo in Milan on Sunday afternoons to hear the explanations of the Gospel by this former Jesuit Scripture scholar. Now in failing health, Martini spends much of his time in the Holy Land. Besides some study of ancient manuscripts and some pastoral work,

I dedicate my time in Jerusalem first and foremost to prayer of intercession for all the intentions accumulated in my years of service as bishop of Milan and for the great hopes and sufferings of the peoples among whom I live.

In this article I would like to highlight some of Martini's talk which talks not only of Lonergan but of major issues facing the contemporary church. What comes across vividly in the Cardinal's talk is his deep affection for Lonergan, despite the fact that he never met him. He gave his address,

"in recognition of the feeling I have for how much he gave me during the period of my active service to the Church, whether in the field of Biblical research or in the field of pastoral activity – and for what he continues to give me in the encouragement, renewed each day to understand the world in which we live and to seek to find some sense in its dramatic contradictions and complexity."

For Lonergan is known above all as a philosopher of human understanding and it is for this reason that I wanted to underline this aspect that he has given so much to me as a pastor and has been an inspiration and a support for me in so many initiatives in the service of the faith of the people. (333)

Martini studied Scripture in Rome in the 1950s at the time Lonergan began teaching there, and he heard of Lonergan's brilliance – as well as Lonergan's idiosyncratic Canadian pronunciation of Latin – from his fellow students but his own attempts to crack Lonergan's major work, *Insight*, never met with success. "I concluded that this book was

too difficult for me, even while at the same time feeling its fascination and in some way its capacity to ... open up new horizons.” It was not until the early 1970s, after he completed his own initial biblical research, that the true importance of Lonergan’s work began to dawn on him. At the time he read an article in *L’Osservatore Romano* by Battista Mondin that on the basis of Lonergan’s 1972 *Method in Theology*, presented an organic vision of theology that attracted him by its clarity and completeness.

I got a hold of the book immediately and set out to read it avidly because I sensed that it spoke to so many of my questions and put order into so many of my thoughts. Just as one can define the book of the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola – a book very dear to me – as a method for teaching one how to put order in one’s life, so the work of Lonergan seemed to me to be a method for putting order into one’s own way of thinking, knowing, reasoning.”

Martini highlights three aspects of what he found in Lonergan’s thought: its ultimately “mystical” character; its clarification of what it means “to know;” and its orientation toward the universe. Each of these has eminently pastoral implications.

Lonergan the “Mystic”

Many Catholics involved in pastoral work roll their eyes to heaven at the mention of Lonergan’s work. But what Martini emphasizes is that Lonergan’s work, rigorous it is, is ultimately rooted in religious experience. “Finally I had found a theologian who gave primacy to the experience of God, or as he himself expressed it, ‘falling in love with God,’ and saw everything as deriving from this fundamental experience.”

That experience also found expression in the centrality of “conversion” for Lonergan, a term central to his vision of the dynamics of the human person – a conversion that is multidimensional: religious, moral and intellectual. Although Lonergan highlights the importance of intellectual conversion, Martini finds the experience of love at the core of Lonergan’s work. “For the first time I found a theologian who had the courage to say that in some privileged occasions love precedes knowledge.” And the major instance in which love precedes knowledge is the love of God, the love that Saint Paul says, “floods our hearts with the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 5, 5)

From this principle many practical consequences follow – whether in the field of apologetics, or the field of preaching and the pastoral field, or even in considering the problem of the salvation of non-believers. Lonergan frequently returns to this topic, particularly when he speaks of the pluralism of religious languages. He underlines how the grace with which God floods our hearts – before our knowledge –

...could be the grace that God offers all men, that underpins what is good in the religions of mankind, that explains how those that never heard the gospel can be saved. It could be what enables the simple faithful to pray to their heavenly Father in secret even though their

religious apprehensions are faulty. Finally, it is in such grace that can be found the theological justification of Catholic dialogue with all Christians, with non-Christians, and even with atheists who may love God in their hearts while not knowing him with their heads. (Method, 278)

Martini cites this long passage from *Method in Theology* to indicate how much even a **pastor** can attain from that wisdom that Lonergan began to establish on the basis of a rigorous analysis of human understanding and therefore on a strictly anthropological basis.

Knowledge

Secondly, Lonergan's work helped Martini explain what he was doing when he was trying to learn something. His own doctoral work involved a detailed analysis of the Bodmer Papyrus XVI (a codex of the 2nd century) in relation to the Greek Vatican Codex 1209 B of the fourth century. Studying Lonergan he found that what he did more or less on instinct found in Lonergan's analysis a **"clarity and justification which was a great comfort to me in regard to the process of every scientific research project."** In fact, it opened up to him the process of all scientific thought and indeed of all human thought in general.

It was thus that I was able to understand his strong critique of every theory of human understanding which would compare it to "seeing what is out there to be seen" and **his high esteem for Saint Thomas Aquinas' teaching that "truth is found in judgment" – and even more the somewhat revolutionary affirmation – at least in Catholic circles – of the Augustinian judgment that the truth is not found in things but in ourselves "in interiore homine habitat veritas."**

But what were the pastoral implications of an accurate account of knowing? According to Martini, it was precisely an adequate understanding of the criteria of knowledge that helped him in his pastoral praxis.

When I entered into pastoral work as archbishop in the diocese of Milan in the years 1980 to 2002 I came to understand better how many pastoral projects and judgments could be founded on a strong and empirical knowledge of the facts valued and deeply explored according to the process that Lonergan had analyzed so intimately: the observation of the data, a working hypothesis, verification and judgment...the invariant pattern of every kind of knowledge.

Such was the case even in determining the movement of the Holy Spirit. To that one added that "mystical" sense already mentioned which led me to privilege before all in the analysis of the facts the signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit, gift of the Father, prior to a sociological analysis common to society in general and even to some Christian

communities.

Because of that I have always repeated and I repeat here that the point of departure for every pastoral project is not an analysis of the sociological facts but an intuition of those movements of the Spirit which give rise in a community to joy, peace, a willingness to serve, etc, according to the coordinates given by Paul in Galatians 3, 22-23 and corresponding to the Beatitudes and many other biblical passages. I thus came to see a practical solidarity (*salditura*) between the discernment typical of the Exercises of Saint Ignatius, above all with the rules on consolation and desolation, and the hermeneutic rules which I took from Lonergan's pages."

Martini was also struck by the "different languages" and different "levels of language" among people, such as a more technical language and various kinds of common sense language. Such is evident even in the Scriptures themselves. Sometimes the two languages are contrasted as if in opposition to each other, as if fighting for one and disqualifying the other "Lonergan shows that each of these has its own place and legitimacy in the journey of human knowing and that instead of losing time putting them in opposition, it is much more fruitful to recognize the values and limits of each of them." As St. Thomas Aquinas put it, "*Sapientis est distinguere.*" It's the mark of a wise man to make distinctions.

This was especially so with regard to many biblical assertions, especially in the area of morality and spirituality, which, if treated with technical rigidity, would lead to absurdities. Lonergan showed the reason for this use of good sense.

Also, in my pastoral work I found people used to one particular technical and scientific language who found it difficult to make a synthesis in their own minds between their scientific knowledge and the truths proclaimed by the Gospel. These and other difficulties motivated by the multiplicity and the differences of languages, very much sensed by the contemporary world ever more complex and specialized in its own expressive modes, found in Lonergan's synthesis an answer and a way of solution. Lonergan's analysis in fact was very attentive to the different levels of language and differences of mentality expressed in them. (From *cs* to theory to interiority).

Hence the importance of self-appropriation

L. therefore distinguished various levels of consciousness and language (which correspond in fact to diverse moments in the historical development of humanity) and indicates at the same time a unitary line in which they can be seen and thus their complementarity.

Thus many objections are clarified, helping profoundly cultivated and intelligent people but closed in a unique language scheme to overcome this barrier and to recognize that the acquisition of truth demands undergoing a serious and honest percorso of all the grades in the process of cognition.

[Differentiated consciousness can understand undifferentiated, but not vice versa – he or she is “talking over your head” – you need a conversion in order to understand]

I have in fact in my own experience verified how long and difficult this journey is – and he cites Lonergan citing the Louvain psychologist, A. Vergote, that “a person reaches a genuine religious faith and makes his personal appropriation of his inherited faith at around 30 years old.”

If civil law recognizes adult responsibility at the age of twenty-one years, the professor of religious psychology at Louvain had it that man reaches genuine religious faith and a properly personal assumption of his inherited religion about the **age of thirty**. (MT 289-290)

MT 85 – How long self-appropriation takes: - Quotes Vergote on religious consciousness and talks about 40 years old- We have to get down to the basics of the issue

But Martini adds that in his experience that is a best-case scenario because his own experience and that of others has taught him that many people do not truly reach that triple religious, moral and intellectual conversion necessary for that maturity – and hardly even prior to forty years old! That fact brings with it important consequences for pastoral practice. Certainly moral and religious conversion, even if not yet well integrated into the whole of the person and his relations, can happen much before that – and it is sufficient in the light of Mother Church as pastorally attentive to all, to act rightly according to God and also to work in the ambit of the Christian community.

[One thinks of Newman’s “first conversion” at the age of 15 – which even at the age of 60 he recalled as a turning point in his life – and one thinks of questions about the age of ordination to the priesthood – and even marriage – in a complex world where it takes much longer to make such profound decisions with an adequately informed consciousness and freedom.]

Knowledge and Being

Reflections on knowledge, progress and decline in history and culture – his analysis of progress and decline has even social and political implications. Cf MT

Faith is linked to human progress: MT 117

So faith is linked with human progress and it has to meet the challenge of human decline. For faith and progress have a common root in man's cognitional and moral self-transcendence. To promote either is to promote the other indirectly. Faith places human efforts in a friendly universe; it reveals an ultimate significance in human achievement; it strengthens new undertakings with confidence.

I have found and I continue to find great comfort in reading such pages. Lonergan has in fact a gift of language so clear and evocative to be fascinating, even after reading just a few pages, because everything in his thought is rigorously coherent and every particle recalls all the others so that sometimes one has the impression that he is repeating himself and saying fundamentally the same thing. But in reality he is only repeating he is only applying certain cognitive categories to all of reality and so he often returns to the relation of these categories to the facts of history.

Such pages help therefore to confront the complexity of human events, a complexity that remains insoluble and menacing for those who lack this interpretive key and that instead by means of this can attain light. Thus, even one who wants to commit oneself to the concrete service of society can receive comfort and encouragement in this way.

Lonergan says this in a technical way when he speaks of the isomorphism parallel between the levels of knowledge and the levels of reality – this can certainly constitute an interpretive instrument for the multiplicity of sciences and the complexity of human events. A liberty of spirit arising from such knowledge – check out his Sept 1968 letter on the relation between Aristotelian thought and modern scientific thought on human conception.

Cf. his letter of 1968 on the distinction between Aristotelian and modern thought on human conception with some important intuitions regarding also the problem of contraception and the relationship between causality and modern statistical laws. (Lon Studies Newsletter, 1990, n. 11)

When one talks in Italy and elsewhere of “faith and culture” or a pastoral project oriented toward culture in a Christian sense, this cannot just be a series of vague aspirations and general ideas, but **they ought to consist in a concrete proposal and among the contemporary proposals that of Lonergan seemed to me to emerge above all others for its clarity and simplicity and at the same time its capacity to connect with the complexity of reality.**

For this reason it always seemed to me extraordinary in Lonergan his capacity on the one hand to penetrate into the meanderings of human reasoning, the grades of knowing and the grades of being and, on the other hand his openness to the intervention of God in history, who pouring into us his love, generates that new consciousness based on love, which is faith. He affirms clearly that

“Without faith, without the eye of love, the world is too evil for God to be good, for a good God to exist.” (p 117) But he continues by saying the one who has the eyes of faith and of love the world appears as that place where the presence of God is manifested precisely in sparking (spingere = encouraging) us creatures to freely bring good out of evil and therefore to

express something of the divine in the obscure happenings of history.

Conclusion –

He could add much else – for example the idea of the university which can be taken from Lonergan's works – a university conceived as helping men not to let themselves be beguiled by false and confusing ideas (cf Bloom quote) – and by the mirage of too **specialized (sectorial) research, but capable of offering a sguardo (vision) of synthesis which permits one to put everything in its proper place and to work to combat the decline of society and to encourage the forces of “ripresa” renewal and of the reconstruction of spirits and of hearts to insure the justice for all.**

NB the initial inspiration for Lonergan – the great Depression – the need for an accurate economic theory – this was the driving force behind his phil and theol writings – cf recent posthumous publication – the cycles of economic progress and decline – His theology-phil spoke to a concrete social need. **“That gives to all his work a concreteness and an adherence to concrete human needs which shows the will of the author before all to serve man and humanity in their primary exigencies, thus showing the strict relationship between theology and the daily life of people.”**

His new notion of science – and the commonality between the methods of studying nature and those for studying the spirit. His realm of interiority is next to, not opposed to, science.

He believes man is autonomous – be attentive, etc. – but he is at the same time capable of receiving the gift of God. Such is not a motive for hubris but a gift of the Creator to be exercised with responsibility – this is evident in all Lonergan's work. One can discover one's own insides, the structure of one's own consciousness, and having done that, one no longer depend on others for the selection of a proper method and for putting it into operation. The initiative is in your own hands. (MT 361 Ital)

Lon's is a New “organon” which will also permit future generations to situate themselves in the river of human research with strong concepts and persuasions capable of being perfected – thus restoring to Catholic thought the full dignity and right of citizenship in the complex and rich picture of contemporary research.

The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan are presently being published by the University of Toronto Press and there are *Lonergan Centers* throughout the world. This fall a *Lonergan Research Institute* will open at Seton Hall University. (1904-1984) left a body of scientifically oriented work that seemed anything but pastoral. But what is significant in the *Civiltà Cattolica* article was its author, Cardinal Carlo Martini,