

Bernard Lonergan's *The Triune God: Systematics*

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Chapter 1 The Goal, the Order, and the Manner of Speaking

7. Comparison of the Dogmatic Way and the Systematic Way

In this section, Lonergan goes into considerable detail to illustrate how the differences between dogmatics and systematics play themselves out in the theology of the Trinity. In the background exists Lonergan's desire to draw very clear distinctions since, with confusion, in the theology of the Trinity no real progress can be made either in dogmatics or systematics (each discipline having a different formal or intellectual object). Lack of development in one discipline adversely affects development in the other.

Before going much further, please note the following piece of information. In using the table which has been created by Leo Serroul ("The Two Movements whereby One Proceeds to the Goals of Theology") and which has been posted on www.lonergan.org as a "revised table," please note that Leo sometimes refers to a paper by Bernard Lonergan using the abbreviations: "TU." This refers to Lonergan's paper, "Theology and Understanding" which is published in *Collection*, eds. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), pp. 114-132. Its reading complements what Lonergan here says about the differences between dogmatics and systematics in theology. Sections exist about "Understanding and Science of Faith," "Aquinas on Theological Understanding," "Consequences of the Thomist Position," and "Contemporary Methodological Issues."

With respect now to the contents of this section, Lonergan compares the way of doctrine with the way of systematics on the basis of how each deals with different questions in the theology of the Trinity. See Leo Serroul's table as it begins with no. 45 (p. 5). In dogmatics, in pursuing truth, one begins with New Testament testimony which speaks about the missions of the Son and Holy Spirit, and from there one moves from the dogma of a Trinity in God toward persons, properties, relations and, lastly, the discovery of a psychological analogy which best reveals how relations of origin are to be viewed and understood. However, in systematics, the order of things is reversed and one begins not with any New Testament testimony about missions but with the one God from whom all things flow and to whom all things return. One begins with God and the proper attributes of God: God as a single, unrestricted source or act of knowing and loving. In attending to this unrestricted knowing and loving which are intimately joined to each other in absolute unity, one distinguishes intelligible emanations which allow one to speak of relations and, from these relations, one can speak of persons who, in the end, are compared with each other and with us after they are compared with what is already known about God's divine essence, God's proper attributes, and the so-called notional acts (i.e., paternity, filiation, active spiration, and passive spiration) which refer to the acts or emanations which belong to the different persons constitutive of the Trinity.

If one looks at Lonergan's footnotes, one sees that the order of things discussed in a systematic theology of the Trinity (as Lonergan presents it) is all grounded in the order of questions which

Aquinas provides in the first part of his *Summa Theologiae*. And so, in this way, Lonergan clearly indicates that the order of questions in Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* presents a systematic theology of the Trinity and not a dogmatics. Instead of trying to remove doubts by beginning from what is most evident and, from there, proceeding to what is less obvious and apparent, Aquinas begins from a basic set of notions which explain themselves in terms of how different terms relate to each other. The relations reveal the terms and terms, the relations. Nothing else needs to be understood. And so, from a basic set of notions, one has a first principle which one then applies in a way which includes and absorbs very many things within a single, unifying perspective. The vitality or usefulness of one's basic set of terms is revealed by its assimilative capacity: how very many things it is able to speak about and relate with each other. Recall Dmitry Mendeleev's discover of the periodic table in chemistry and how, by using it, one can explain any given number of chemical transformations.

For a restatement of Lonergan's basic position here, see below a long quotation excerpted from Bernard Lonergan's *Understanding and Being: The Halifax Lectures on Insight*, eds. Elizabeth A. Morelli and Mark D. Morelli; rev and aug. by Frederick E. Crowe with the collaboration of Elizabeth A. Morelli, Mark D. Morelli, Robert M. Doran, and Thomas V. Daly (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp. 9-10:

Thomist Trinitarian theory is a clear instance of first an analytic movement and then a synthetic movement. In the New Testament what we are told regarding the Blessed Trinity is the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Ghost. After a series of Greek councils we arrive at three persons and one nature. There is nothing in the New Testament about persons or nature; these technical terms do not occur. Since the three persons are distinct, we find in the Cappadocian fathers the treatment of the properties of the distinct persons. Each person must have something proper to himself, otherwise he would be the same as the others. Further, both the Cappadocian fathers and Augustine had the idea that these properties must be relative. They cannot be something absolute, because God is simple; if these properties are to be reconciled with the simplicity of God, they have to be relative. Where do the relations come from? They come from the processions. Augustine explained the processions by a psychological analogy. He said they were something like the movement in the mind from understanding to conception, from judgment to willing. So first we have missions, then persons and nature, then properties, relations, processions.

What do we find in St Thomas' *Summa theologiae*, part 1, questions 27-43? Thomas does not start out from the missions; missions come at the end, in question 43. He is making the other movement, from causes to things, synthesis. He begins from a psychological analogy and moves to the processions, to the relations, to the persons, to the missions. The order of discovery is just the opposite of the order of doctrine. In doctrine you start from principles and draw all the conclusions, but in discovery you discover one conclusion after another and gradually you move on to your principles.

In Trinitarian theory, then, we have analysis and synthesis. We have the analytic movement up to St Thomas, and the synthetic movement in St Thomas' *Summa theologiae*. But we do not have things, and we do not have causes. God is not a thing in the sense of the Aristotelian predicaments [ten descriptive attributes or predicates used to speak of things that are encountered in common human experience: substance, quantity, quality, relation, action, passion, place, time, posture, and habit], and the generation

of the Son by the Father is not a matter of causality. The Son is not another God, and neither is the Holy Ghost. Things and causes vanish, but *analysis and synthesis remain*. [Italics mine]

Now we may take a scientific illustration. There are over three hundred thousand compounds known to present-day chemistry, and those are not mixtures but compounds. Chemists explain all of these compounds by a periodic table of about one hundred elements. On the one hand, there is the composition of the compounds from the elements, sometimes in fact and sometimes just in theory (for compounds cannot always be synthesized). On the other hand, there is the analysis of the compounds into their elements. But these elements are not Aristotle's things. In a chemistry course you may be given an introductory definition of hydrogen — hydrogen is an odorless gas with various sensible properties — but you very soon forget that definition, and operate in terms of atomic weight, atomic number, and other properties implicit in the periodic table. The one hundred elements are defined by their relations to one another; they are not defined in terms of substance, quantity, quality, and so on, as these terms are taken in their ordinary meaning.

Please note thus that, for Lonergan, scientific understanding in Aquinas does not significantly differ from scientific understanding in modern science. Despite a shift that has moved from Aristotelian notions of science to modern empirical notions of science, an explanatory perspective works from a basic set of terms and relations that is used as a first principle to understand and order very many things which, otherwise, would not be understood and ordered in terms of how they all relate to each other. The absence of a significant difference reveals a verity or a transcendence in the quality of Aquinas's theological understanding. As thoroughly as he may employ and work with Aristotelian notions of science, his thinking also transcends these limitations.

With respect to the meaning of concepts, when Lonergan speaks about formal differences with respect to concepts (pp. 69-71), he speaks about how, in dogmatics and systematics, one tends to find the same language (the same terms) although the meanings of these terms will differ since, in a point of contrast between dogmatics and systematics, the language which is used is related to different acts of understanding and a different purpose or goal which species a context for acts of understanding. In dogmatics, very minimal understanding is required if one begins by talking about the missions of the Son and Holy Spirit. One works from a commonsense apprehension of meaning: a meaning which appears to be obvious as one reads the words of scripture. Lonergan refers here to a "simple narration of fact" (p. 71). But, as one shifts toward the possible meaning of mission in systematics, one is working with a meaning that now is formed and informed by all the previous acts of understanding which have occurred as one has proceeded from a postulated, speculative first principle or theorem that is used to tackle how very many questions and issues are to be ordered into a whole. A new, much more nuanced, technical meaning for mission emerges and a very significant difference should now be acknowledged. A much more profound meaning presents itself even if this meaning does not contradict and should not contradict the meaning that one had initially known and started from at the beginning of things in dogmatics. In any authentic development or growth in understanding, no meaning *as meaning* is ever truly lost even as meanings are transcended, or as they are enriched in their significance. For an understanding about how this works, take a look at Cardinal Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, chapter one, "On the Development of Ideas." Look at where

he speaks about the question of development with respect to the meaning of ideas i.e., the assimilative power of certain meanings or ideas and the fact that legitimate development does not require rejecting or losing any previously understood meaning.

With respect to the question of truth in the context of theology about the Trinity (dogmatics versus systematics), while Lonergan's discussion presumes what has been said earlier about the question of truth in systematic theology in general, Lonergan now explicitly refers to Aquinas and why the Church has decided to propose his work as a normative guide for the development of systematic theology with regards to the Trinity. The ways and operations which belong to dogmatics can be more widely practiced by persons in general since, in trying to prove or establish whether or not something is true, one acts as an investigator or a scholar to try to uncover and find evidence. However, the postulation of an explanatory principle is more directly an act of one's understanding (as the reception of an insight). It comes more directly from something within a person: from a mind which is more able to receive some kind of profound understanding from images or phantasms which cannot so easily trigger the same act of understanding in the mind of another person. The understanding achieved is much more rare. To illustrate with an example, while it is said that the way of analysis in dogmatics leads to the psychological analogy as the best conclusion which can be reached as one moves from the missions of Son and Holy Spirit toward the being which is the Christian God, profoundly understanding this analogy is another matter. From a statistical standpoint, poor, inadequate understandings tend to exist far more commonly than understandings which are highly insightful and intelligent. These occur at a low rate of incidence. And so, with the passage of time, it has been concluded that, in the order of wisdom, St. Thomas is to be preferred to all other thinkers, all other theologians. In the end, what counts is how very many issues and questions can be related together in a way which can move from God to what God has created and then from what has been created back to God. And, this is the order of issues and questions that Aquinas presents in his *Summa Theologiae*. A universal scheme of things is revealed and, within this scheme, where human beings live and how they fit in.

With respect finally to the views of opponents and how these views are to be considered in dogmatics and systematics, in Leo's revised table, Cell 102 reads in total: "102. However, when one is aiming at extirpating errors so that others not be deceived, one should seek the root whence the error assumes the appearance of truth and there apply the ax. Nor does it matter whether this or that opponent ever explicitly ever adverted to that root, for one is not dealing with the intimate mind of this or that person but with the minds of those who either exist now or will exist. Thus, in Systematics we must attend not so much to opponents as to the roots of their errors [their counterpositions; see above n. 37 p. 17]." With respect to the note 37 which Leo refers to, Leo cites this note as it is given by him in his dissertation (A>Sapientia est ordinare=: An Interpretation of the Pars systematica of Bernard Lonergan's *De Deo Trino* from the Viewpoint of Order"):

"Lonergan calls opposed positions 'counterpositions' (see *Insight*, 413-15 passim; and the index, s.v. 'Positions, vs. counterpositions'). Lonergan observes that 'a basic counterposition . . . contradicts one or more of the basic positions. . . . Any philosophic pronouncement on any epistemological, metaphysical, ethical, or theological issue will be named a position if it is coherent with the basic positions

on the real, on knowing, and on objectivity; and it will be named a counterposition if it is coherent with one or more of the basic counterpositions.’ *Insight*, 413. Counterpositions are discussed in chap. 2 below. For an exhaustive study of possible counterpositions, see Michael Vertin, ‘Dialectically-Opposed Phenomenologies of Knowing: A Pedagogical Elaboration of Basic Ideal-Types,’ *Loneragan Workshop 4* (1983): 1-26.”

In dogmatics then or, more precisely, in a history of dogmatic or doctrinal developments which attempts to show how theologians and the Church were able to move from apprehensions of meaning present in scripture toward apprehensions of meaning which grasp more exactly what Christians should truthfully believe, one attends to the nuances of the historical context. One wants to determine what questions were being addressed in any given controversy and one wants to determine what writers were hopefully intending to accomplish in their different works and writings. By knowing all the various, intricate “ins” and “outs,” one discovers how and why disputes about evidence have been resolved in the way it was done. One grasps more fully why, in general, it can be said that all the evidence points to the truthfulness of a given disputed belief or creed. It is no accident, surely, that the history of dogmatic theology precedes the history of systematic theology since the deeper understanding of systematics can only be sought after one first clearly knows what it is that one is supposed to believe (what the Christian or Catholic is supposed to believe). However, as one shifts into systematics and the search for intelligibility, a deeper understanding of things, one attends to controversies about meaning from a different context (a different standpoint). A more basic explanation is sought about why sometimes controversies existed at fundamental levels and so, in seeking this kind of understanding, one tries to work from a perspective which attends to sources of meaning that exist remotely or implicitly in the minds of theologians and controversialists. To explain or to account for a history (as this exists with respect to the question of meaning), one moves into a kind of meta-history: a philosophy of history or, more simply, a meta-philosophy (a philosophy of philosophy) which exists to identify basic principles which can serve as a heuristic to indicate why some real differences existed in the human apprehension of meaning: differences which explain why real developments sometimes occurred and why, at times, they failed to occur. Instead of working, for instance, through a history of philosophy which works chronologically through time from one philosopher to another, from one thesis to another, one breaks away from this more conventional approach and, from a higher order of reflection which presents itself as a kind of meta-philosophy, one has a basis for explaining the history of the different philosophies which together are constitutive of the history of philosophy. Why did a given thinker fail or partially fail to move toward understanding in dealing with a particular issue or question? In the order of teaching which Lonergan thus talks about (an *ordo doctrinae* as Aquinas speaks of it), from such a perspective, students are given an overall view of things through an ordering of meaning (a metaphysics) which touches their souls in the human search and desire for meaning. A world of meaning, in its depths, connections, and links, reveals itself. For this reason, in and from his study of human cognition (cf. *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*), Lonergan distinguishes a set of positions from a set of counterpositions. The positions refer to the what and why of knowing and what is known as a result of our knowing and the counterpositions refer to all contrary, defective points of view. On the basis partially of this earlier analysis, Lonergan organizes and presents a theology of the Trinity that is grounded in the Church’s doctrinal and theological tradition.