

A RESPONSE (I) TO FATHER LONERGAN

If I understand Father Lonergan's position in this paper correctly, it might be summarized in this way: the causes of vast changes in Catholic theology in the present century lie in the fact that the old (or classicist) style of dogmatic theology has now been eliminated, 1) by what amounts to a knowledge or information explosion that calls for great specialization; 2) by the acceptance of the obvious fact of cultural pluralism; 3) by acknowledgement of man's historicity; 4) by a new notion of science that is not rooted in metaphysics and the necessary. As a result, science in the future, and this includes theology, will be rooted in the cognitional and the psychological, with a stress on the importance of conversion and on the role of deliberating, evaluating, deciding and loving. The change that is going on is comparable to the transformation of theology in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

I agree with almost all of what Father Lonergan has said—but for discussion purposes, I will concentrate on areas where I have some disagreements or on matters that he has not mentioned which seem to me to be significant for his topic, in the following seven comments:

1. I am not sure that what has been described here amounts to a *genuine revolution* in Catholic theology, although this may be a matter of semantics. Up until now, it has been easier to provide a critique of past methods and a list of things that have been abandoned than it is to describe what has emerged that is of real worth—this seems to be true of Father Lonergan's paper, which is much clearer on what is disappearing or apparently discredited than on what is to replace it as a viable form of theology.

2. His stress throughout is on change in methodology, and perhaps for this reason he has *not dealt with a revolution in content* of theology *and in approaches* to content. On this basis, he has not mentioned a number of factors which seem to me to be at least as significant for the far-reaching changes that have taken place in Catholic theology and its methodology as the ones he lists. I would

like to add four more elements in this revolution: a) an emphasis on humanism, with a stress on the *continuity* of the Christian message with secular values in this world—in contrast to a theology that would emphasize a dichotomy between spiritual and secular values, in contrast as well to a theology that would emphasize the need for redemption from sin, in contrast finally to a theology that would lay stress on the future life; this can lead and has lead to a tendency to reject any conclusion whose reasonableness cannot be *fully* verified both in itself and in its consequences; b) a separation of prayer and personal holiness from the study of theology, with a consequent de-emphasis of the doctrine of grace; this can easily reduce theology to a set of abstract principles or a study of human history; c) a stress on the importance of involvement with current issues, and on theology's immediate practical consequences or lack of them—which leads easily to an identification of truth and relevance, to the detriment of both; d) a questioning of the theologian's relationship to the organized Church, or to official church authorities—which at times leaves theologians with what Charles Davis described this week as free-floating personal ideologies.—I don't think that the current situation in Catholic theology can be considered realistically without taking these elements into account.

3. His treatment of *pluralism and historicity* is accurate and useful but it does not point up the critical problem facing Catholic theologians, and the Church as a whole, in this area now:—not whether to admit pluralism and historicity or reject it—but rather how to determine what must be permanent and lasting in the Christian message if it is to be truly Christian in an age of rapidly shifting cultures and situations.

4. I would simply ask Father Lonergan if he is fully convinced that the undeniable *swing away from metaphysics* that he has described is a *lasting* phenomenon—since there are some evidences in our society already of a disenchantment with the results of empiricism.

5. The paper seems to me to *underestimate the importance of the Church, the faith community, in theological development*. The old-style theologian may have seemed to be using proofs that covered a vast area and to be presenting them as conclusive, as if he

had full command of his subject, but the picture was not really what it seemed. First, what he proposed was the fruit of scholarly work of many people. (I never met the theologian a generation ago who had full personal control of even most of his material.) But, much more to the point, what he was really doing was basing his teaching and conclusions not so much on his scholarship and evidence (even when he said that was what he was doing and really believed it himself). What he was really doing was articulating the current living faith of the community (in part) and serving as a spokesman for it, becoming a polemicist for it (even when he was invoking arguments from the past rather than the present to establish a position), a systematizer of it—and finally, serving as a source of growth in it (along with many other sources in the life of the Church), but this last role was filled less frequently and less significantly than he imagined. In short, he was more dependent on the faith of the community than he realized, more dependent on it than it was on him and his colleagues.

The critical problem for a Catholic theologian now is the same as it was twenty years ago, and it is not how to control all the material or to attain full knowledge. If so, he could make no significant statements about doctrine till the last historical or sociological or exegetical datum had been run through the biggest computer. Instead, it is how he can authentically articulate the faith of the Church as it is being lived and help it to grow. This is a more complicated work now than twenty years ago, but it is still one he carries out in profound dependence on the Church rather than the reverse. Theology survives and thrives because faith communities, i.e. churches, care enough about it to make it important.

6. I may be badly misreading him here, but Father Lonergan's paper seems to me to delineate theological developments *too much in terms of the mental processes of theologians and not enough in terms of the whole life of the Church*.—The definition of the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1950 had two important consequences for the methodology of Catholic theology: a) it forced us to break with the commonly held view that all development in our understanding of the faith comes through a logical process carried on by theologians—and it made us much more

conscious of the operation of the Spirit in ways that are much more complex than syllogistic reasoning; b) it made us aware of the fact that the experiential contribution of the faithful might be much more significant for development of doctrine in many areas than the formal studies of theologians. It seems to me that both of these notions are obscured in the approach adopted here, and I simply ask if an old and questionable framework for explaining the development of doctrine, with too much emphasis on the intellectual and logical, is being retained.

7. Finally, Father Lonergan is *more sanguine* on the course of the current Catholic revolution in theology than I am. It may be the fore-runner of a golden age, as the new methods of the twelfth century led to the glories of the thirteenth, but at this point, I see some resemblance to the decay of the fourteenth with its stress on nominalism and subjectivism and its all-embracing criticism that paid little attention to the positive riches of the Christian message. I hope that Father Lonergan is right and I am wrong.

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