Michael Novak: "Memories of Bernard Lonergan, S.J."
Journal of Macrodynamic Analysis
3 (2003): 194-204
http://www.mun.ca/jmda/vol3/novak.pdf

MEMORIES OF BERNARD LONERGAN, S.J.

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When I was thirteen, I considered entering the Jesuits, but they told me when I inquired that they did not take candidates until they had completed high school. So I went back to a choice that was attractive to me for other reasons, the Congregation of Holy Cross at Notre Dame, Indiana, whose spirituality and activism were a cross between that of the Benedictines and the Jesuits – a strong sense of community, liturgy, and contemplative prayer, along with an unusually broad range of activist vocations, from university professor to foreign (or home) missionary, from Hollywood to inner city parish. In my time in the seminary, 1947-1959, the Holy Cross Fathers had a very high standard of intellectual life, and sent their willing candidates to the best universities all around the world.

Thus it happened that when my other U.S. classmates and I arrived in Rome for theological studies in 1956 – David Burrell, Jim Burtchaell, and Nick Ayo from Notre Dame, and I from Stonehill College in the Eastern Province – we caught up with a truly distinguished band of older fellow students, such as John Dunne, Jim Doig, Harry Baker, Jim Simonson, Bob Kruse and several others, all of whom already were talking with some enthusiasm about Bernard Lonergan, who was in those years teaching dogmatics at the Gregorian University. There was the usual teasing about his flat Canadian accent and inimitable enunciation of Latin. Most of all, there was an unusually deep respect for what all our guys recognized as a truly profound intellect, one of the greatest to appear at the Greg in many a generation.

This high estimation of Lonergan was not entirely shared by our German or French friends, for Lonergan's style had a

distinctive Anglo-Saxon empirical bent, always grounded in experiences accessible to observation. He also had a knack for making subtle distinctions rooted in shades of daily experience. Grasping what he meant by these entailed careful observation and verbal precision. This verbal precision was helped by the concreteness of the English language, and was not neatly so obvious to those used to thinking in the rather more abstract French or German of their native languages.

For example, at one important place in his analysis, Lonergan invited students to note the difference in their own experience between "first awareness" and "second awareness." The first of these is akin to the kind of simple consciousness that is the opposite of being unconscious, the state of being awake, alert, attentive, noticing, although perhaps at ease and relaxed and not particularly engaged in any concrete object or project. The second is rather more self-conscious, like being conscious of being conscious, and being quite aware of one's noticing particular objects or being engaged in a particular project.

Some people are so acutely involved in second awareness that they are constantly self-conscious about what they are experiencing: "Here I am standing on this incredible ridge with the wind in my hair and the sun on my face, looking out on the Pacific Ocean, it's amazing to find myself here!" (Sometimes the secret to a good party is to serve the sort of beverage that turns second-awareness people into first-awareness people.)

When Lonergan makes this distinction in Latin in *De Constitutione Christi*, it is not nearly so clear as it becomes when one renders it into English, as above. The distinction is crucial for understanding the consciousness of Jesus Christ in both its human and divine capacities. It is also a crucial piece in understanding Lonergan's abiding resistance to what he calls "conceptualism," the mistake of imagining (as Richard Rorty does) that understanding is like "taking a look" or "inspecting an image in a minor." That is to confuse the sort of understanding that occurs as second awareness with the sort that occurs as first awareness. The latter – the insight – is far more alive, fiery, living, complete, complex, sweeping and reflexive than the words in which we may express it, as is

shown by the need for more than one expression, and the fact that in different languages the expression may come in at the insight from a very different angle. The French *raison d'etre,* for instance, nails a particular insight in a way that no expression in English or in Italian quite does; and so we tend to slip into the French at that point.

The difficulty arises in learning how to summon up the living insight, as a resource from which *to thematize* or *to articulate* its many aspects, angles, nuances, and shades. The work of conceptual intellect is highly important and invaluable, but it is not at the heart of understanding. It is the servant, not the master. The achievement of the blaze of insight, all inarticulate and rich and as-yet-unthematized as it may be, is the living fire of the mind.

Insight is an instance of first awareness, not the only sort of instance, but a crucial one. An awareness of experiences that prompt a demand for insight, a noticing of something odd, an incipient questioning, is even prior to insight, and also arrives often in the mode of first awareness.

When we arrived in Rome in October of 1956, Holy Cross College on Via Aurelia Antica was abuzz with the impending publication of *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding,* due out the following spring. I begged the older students to put me on to other writings of Lonergan, and Jim Simonson suggested starting with the series of articles on St. Thomas's use of the word *Verbum* that had appeared in *Theological Studies,* articles that had by that time been pretty heavily fingered in the Holy Cross library. Then to try his series on *Grace,* in the same periodical, on St. Thomas's invention of the various terms for grace and their multiple uses. Here St. Thomas was greatly helped by having worked out first various terms for the phases and types of human action, before the effects of grace had become known. This knowledge, verified in the ordinary experiences of his own and his readers' lives, forced upon him a more extensive exploration of the phases and types of grace than he would otherwise have had to face.

Let me pause to point out here that neither Aquinas nor Lonergan was imagining that there is a two-tier world, nature

below like the cake, and grace on top of it like the icing, or anything like that. On the contrary, both imagined that there is in reality and history only one world, all of it conceived and created in, by, and through the Divine Word, *Verbum*, *Logos*, and all of it redeemed by Him. The theory of grace and nature is a theoretical construct, designed to make sense of human experience both among those, like Aristotle, who knew nothing of the *Verbum*, and those like St. Augustine, who did, and who wrote especially well both about the fall of human beings into sin and their need for healing, as an athlete who breaks his ankle needs to heal before he walks again – and always is in greater danger of re-injuring himself than he had been when he was whole. The theoretical construct of grace and nature should not be reified, in such a way as to lead us to imagine two separate realities, nature here, grace "up there." As Georges Bernanos wrote, and Yeats suggested, "Everything is grace," and yet grace works in and through nature, which it penetrates as yeast penetrates dough.

I couldn't understand everything in those articles on the first or second reading, because they presupposed a surer working knowledge than I possessed of the several different books in which at various times in his short life Aquinas treated of each of these subjects. What impressed me about Lonergan at that time was his distinctive historical awareness of the state of the question in writers earlier than Aquinas, and then in Aquinas in earlier and later periods of his life, depending on what Aquinas had been reading and working out in other contexts in between these different treatments.

Ever since I had been an undergraduate at Stonehill, where blessedly we were taught directly from the *Summa* itself and not from some derivative textbook (executed, as one historian commented, inevitably by a mind smaller than that of Aquinas, and often reaching up to his full stature no more than to his knees), the question had haunted me: What is the starting place of Aquinas? Where do all his key terms and axioms come from? How can I trace them back to beginnings, so as to grasp his thought from inside? Lonergan was the first writer who convincingly showed how to do that historically, key word by key word.

With such words as “insight” and “judgment” (from the uses of *Verbum)* and “grace” and “freedom” (from the uses of *gratia* or *grace),* these two sets of articles alone set me upon a path toward a wholly new appropriation of Aquinas. It was exactly what I had been looking for. I couldn’t wait for *Insight* to appear the next summer, and placed my order early.

In one’s first year at the Greg at that time, it was impossible to sign up for a class with Lonergan. In the second year, I would have a chance to hear both his lecture courses, on the Incarnation and on the Trinity, and we were among the first to have his new treatises on these subjects (in their elegant, economical Latin) in our hands. I would also have a chance to take his advanced seminar on *Gratia Operans*. That would be a special joy, in a class of about twenty, in which my friends and I would be among the youngest admitted.

But before that, toward the end of my first year, I was walking in the passageway outside the Grand Aula of the Greg one morning when I espied Father Lonergan approaching, head down. My heart jumped as I instantly grabbed the opportunity, cut off his path and asked, “Fr. Lonergan?”

He looked up, his eyes friendly from behind clear plastic eyeglass frames of the Anglo-American sort, and breaking into a smile (one could see tobacco stains on his teeth), said something the equivalent of “Hi there!”– altogether down to earth and familiar.

Breathlessly I rattled out my message, I was at Holy Cross College where he had a lot of admirers, and I had just finished his *Verbum* and *De Gratia* articles, and they were terrific, and just what I had been looking for for years. I could see scepticism welling up in his eyes, and a little discomfort. It was obvious that I wouldn’t have been reading him for that many years, and it had to be a large question whether I had understood him at all. Still, I blabbered on. “Ever since I read Maritain’s *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* – I’ve read almost everything Maritain ever wrote – I’ve thought I would do a book on the idea of intuition in Aquinas, and now it looks like you’ve done it. From what I see, there’s a lot in common between you and Maritain, but you are more interested in

insight in science…"

He cut me off, pulling back his chin a little diffidently. "I suspect there are a lot of differences between me and Maritain." He said that out of the side of his mouth, as he often did.

"Yes, he talks more about love and art than you do," I stupidly blundered on. "And he's more poetic and less exact, and he doesn't do the precise history of terms the way you do, but still, there's a surprising amount in common." It was clear from some impatience or hurry in his eyes that this wasn't getting me anywhere, except that I did think I saw a question ignite behind his eyes, and so I tapered off somewhat lamely. "Anyway, I'm really looking forward to *Insight* this summer, and to taking some classes with you in my second year. Really good meeting you."

My handshake was a relief to him, and he left me with a wispy smile whose meaning escaped me but didn't discourage me. I felt a little embarrassed for my outburst, but glad that I had at least taken the chance.

The next year, I invited Father Lonergan out to Holy Cross College for an evening of conversation on his work with a half-dozen or so of his most devoted followers at our house. (I really had the impression, probably false, that Holy Cross College supplied the most serious and enthusiastic bunch of his students in the whole city.) In any case, he enjoyed it enough to come back at least once more, and maybe twice, although memory fails me. I remember that we particularly urged him to turn to a study of insight in love and in the arts. The Holy Cross tradition was heavy in poetry, literature, and the arts. Our guiding theme was "culture" – to plant the seed of the gospels deeply in the culture, in its every aspect. That matched a passion of Lonergan's that, at that time, had not become as highly visible in his work as it was later to appear. Some of that work he had already done, but in manuscripts that neither we nor many others then knew of.

One thing that I remember from his lecture courses was the way his accent and his way of talking out of the corner of his mouth drove the German and French students nuts. They were

usually so proud that their Latin was far superior to that of the tongue-stiff Americans, that it disconcerted them to see that we followed his flat accents better than they. One day, the entire American section (well, the part that was awake and attentive, not surreptitiously reading the *Herald Tribune*) erupted into laughter when Lonergan interjected an example that referred to a contest *duplicis capitis*, meaning a doubleheader baseball game, and the Germans and French and all the others saw immediately that they were for once entirely left out of the world of allusions, and perhaps for the first time experienced how we Americans frequently missed European allusions.

I remember also submitting the paper I wrote for Lonergan's *Gratia Operans* seminar to *The Downside Review*, and not only getting it accepted and seeing it published (under the title "St. Thomas in Motion"), but also receiving a kind note from Abbott Christopher Butler, O.S.B., who was later to play a significant role at the Second Vatican Council, and who wrote in that note that he shared my view about the historic importance of Lonergan across the centuries since Aquinas.

One of the maxims I particularly took from Lonergan's conversations and asides during his lectures was that disciples can be a great danger to an original thinker. He said for example that he himself had gone out of his way to avoid controversies during his long career, so as not to distract himself from plowing ahead on the task he had set for himself, to understand the implications of the act of understanding across the whole field of human understanding, and to do so both in the context of reason and in the context of grace. He often stressed the importance of clinging to the insight, without allowing the scaffolding of concepts to entrap the freedom of one's roving inquiries. He never diminished the necessity for doing the hard conceptual and analytical work, and he was anything but romantic about o'erleaping that work to get to flashy (and perhaps insupportable) insights. But he clearly stressed the difference between getting the point and memorising the conceptual jargon. One could fake it by doing the latter, and almost deceive even a master, but sooner or later the difference would come out. He encouraged his students to think for themselves, and to shape for themselves their own

vocabulary, so as not merely to parrot his. He called attention to the fact that that is what he had had to do, so he could hardly discourage others from doing likewise.

It seemed to me then that there is something so captivating about Lonergan's moves, distinctions, brilliantly chosen terms, and the connective links of his thought from one area to another, that many of his disciples get caught up in a cocoon of precious language. It seemed to me that he was doing his best to warn us not to allow that to happen. I am quite confident that my friends – John Dunne, David Burrell, and David Tracy, for instance – would back me up in remembering that lesson, which he mentioned quite explicitly in those days. The worst thing, I remember concluding, would be to turn Lonerganism into a form of conceptualism. Of course, such a fate is in some sense so highly probable as almost to be inevitable.

For this reason, although my own work, from *Belief and Unbelief* through *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove* and on up through *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* owes a great deal to distinctions and moves I learned from Lonergan, I have tried as far as possible to put things in my own words and in my own way. I have tried to show that I mastered important insights without having to repeat his canonical words. Perhaps I have got them not quite right; perhaps it would have been better to stick to formulae. But that would have meant betraying the whole main point, regarding the difference between the insight and its conceptualisation; the whole main point about *verbum*. The freedom that comes from mastery means stepping out on one's own, taking chances, and offering one's own reasons for doing so at each point.

I have tried to be faithful to Lonergan, and to do honour to his example, without becoming a Lonerganian. Lonergan himself gave great honour to St. Thomas without being, in quite the sense Maritain was, a Thomist. Maritain did not lack his own originality, his own poetic gift in rendering Thomistic distinctions in new ways, and in distinctive twentieth-century ways. But Lonergan was original in a far deeper and more thorough way. Indeed, not many people have the brain power to plumb the full dimensions of what Lonergan achieved. To do so, one must master not only the complex vocabulary of St.

Thomas, but also the far more widely ranging vocabulary of Lonergan himself, who had to contend with seven centuries of scientific and philosophical exploration after Aquinas.

There was one side of Lonergan that did not entirely appeal to me, although I could admire it with some awe. He truly was caught up with the Eros of theoretic inquiry. He could delight in tower upon tower of abstraction, inventing a methodology of methods, and behind that a set of reflections on alternative principles of methodology. That's important work, and somebody has to do it. But it is also an area fraught with self-deception, and very far distant from steady verification principles and reality checks. Furthermore, it requires an almost superhuman, almost angelic, detachment from the concrete things of this world and from fleshly involvement in the daily struggles of the world. I do remember Lonergan protesting from time to lime, "Y'know, I have feelings, too!" But the point of that was that he often did seem wonderfully phlegmatic and detached, content with the self-imposed discipline of his own concentration on his work. His emotional tonality was emphatically not Maritain's. When Bernie (a name I think I never called him to his face, but one which sometimes arises in my mind when I think of him with gratitude and affection) also insisted that love had a great deal to do with the way he lived his life, I had no trouble seeing the love of God in him, and the faithful Jesuit's full commitment A.M.D.G. [*ad majorem Dei gloriam*]. But even the way he said it had the emotional flatness of one who seemed to shepherd all his passion for his vocation to theoretic inquiry. That was his way of loving God, so it seemed, and I honoured it.

Bernie could also be a challenge to his friends when they wanted to introduce him to other distinguished people to show him off, and to win for him some of the fame we all felt he richly deserved. I remember once, sometime before 1980 I think, when James Billington, then Director of the Woodrow Wilson Center, decided that it was time to bring Lonergan (about whom he had heard much) into contact with some major economists, and contacted me over at AEI to see if I could help arrange this. With some difficulties, having to overcome the

natural scepticism of some famous economists who did not at all think of themselves as believers, and were not terribly inclined to think an evening with a Jesuit theologian writing on the theory of economics would be an evening well spent, I persuaded them to give it a try. We met in the living room, as I recall, of the genial President of AEI, William F. Baroody, a Catholic and a trustee of Georgetown University, warmly disposed towards Jesuits.

Poor Bernie! In the company of strangers, he pretty much froze. Mr. Baroody, Dr. Billington and I tried to break the ice, and to feed him some leading questions, even on less than theoretic subjects. His answers were not exactly monosyllabic, but on the other hand were not much more than that either. We had brought him together with a stellar group of economists, who had been prepped on his theoretical interests, so different from their own preoccupations, who knew well the differences between Canadian and U.S. debates on political economy, and who could guess the predilections of a Jesuit living much of the year in Europe. Father Lonergan could not, or would not, engage them with questions of his own, or challenges of his own. He was not a master of small talk, In part out of all of us feeling so sorry for the discomfort of Fr. Lonergan, I think that was one of the most painful nights that I have ever experienced.

As the years have passed, I have been constantly surprised and pleased by the number of people I keep running into, in many walks of life, who have one way or another stumbled upon *Insight*, and tried to start small discussion groups so as to deepen their grasp of Lonergan's method with the help of others. It is as though, in learning to become familiar with one's own way of understanding, one has to have the reality check of comparing it with how others are doing. Besides, there are so many different areas in which understanding occurs, from algebra to calculus to the arts and politics and common sense, that one feels the need for help in areas one scarcely knows from one's own experience.

Karol Wojtyla in his own philosophical journey recalls how both Max Scheler and his own experiences under the Nazis forced him toward a more inward, experience-directed

adaptation of Thomistic distinctions. For those moments when he had to do what he had to do, against the screaming rebellion of his own fears and dreads, Wojtyla found Thomas on will superior to Scheler on the sentiments. But Wojtyla found he had to supply for himself the psychological and inward descriptions, which Thomas in his angelic objectivity barely paused to hint at (except on rare occasions). Wojtyla had to invent terms for the "subjectivity" of society and the "subjectivity" of individual human actions.

In an analogous way, Lonergan has provided an inward, descriptive method by which each of us might appropriate the key moves and distinctions of the perennial tradition (from Aristotle through Aquinas to Newman, and still growing) in our own conscious experience and our own favourite words. He has taught us how to become aware of these experiences, and how to put them in words (or 'thematize' them). And how to think critically about them.

Gaining power over the good and trustworthy use of one's own understanding is a very great gift. It is a gift that that sometimes publicly tongue-tied, very private, and most passionate lover of theoretic inquiry – our good friend and great teacher, Bernard Lonergan of Canada – bequeathed us. His gift, considering all the vistas it has opened up, a gift without price. We shall not have done exploring those vistas for many generations to come.

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