

Class 9: Nov 2/09

Chapters 1-4 of *What Is Systematic Theology?*

Preface, pp. 1-2: The book envisions 'a complete reconstruction of the discipline or functional specialty of systematic theology,' not by an individual but by a community. The new systematics will be 'entirely continuous with the permanent achievements of the past,' achievements, however, that 'were reached in stages of meaning that are now part of history.' The ultimate arbiters of meaning are found in 'interiorly and religiously differentiated consciousness ... in the personally appropriated structure of one's own cognitive and deliberative operations and in the gift of God's love as one has made that gift one's own and followed it where it leads one.'

Chapter 1: The book works from the presumption that there is a certain amount of unfinished business in what Lonergan wrote about systematics (3). His notion of systematics remained unchanged throughout his career, but his own development in other areas raises further questions about systematics. For one thing, more will be included among the tasks of systematic theology than he ever explicitly acknowledged. For another, the dynamic of *Method in Theology* currently is interrupted by the chapter on systematics, and I would like to rectify that. 'More precisely, there are operations that systematic theologians perform that Lonergan does not account for at any point in his presentation of the method of systematics, or for that matter anywhere else' (4). One result of this effort would be 'to open the presentation of systematics to the issues of **cultural and religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue**' (4). 4-5: 'Perhaps no area of theology in direct discourse is of greater importance at the present time and for the foreseeable future than this, and I am convinced that Lonergan's own suggestions concerning the direction that Christian theology must take on these issues are still the clearest I have seen and make more sense than any others, even as they are compatible with the best thinking on the part of people who have specialized in this set of questions.'

This is by no means a rejection of Lonergan's emphases. 5: 'I insist on the necessity of preserving his distinct emphases.' 'I have no quarrel with what Lonergan *does* say about systematics. I am rather noting the absence of certain key elements from his work. I want him to say more. He *can* say more. The 'more' is waiting to be said. Clearly, I cannot make him say more, so I will try to say more myself.'

Lonergan's 'most detailed single exposition' of an understanding of systematics is contained in the first chapter of *The Triune God: Systematics*. Much happened between 1957 and 1972, and yet the understanding of systematics remains unchanged. This is the problem I am addressing.

More particularly, the breakthrough to functional specialization, the notion of mediation, and the foundation of systematics in conversion demand a more extensive notion of systematics than is found in chapter 13 of *Method in Theology*, an accumulation of insights, adjustments, re-interpretations around the notions of systematics. I register agreement with the proposal that the **principal function** of systematics is the understanding of the mysteries of faith affirmed in ecclesial and theological doctrines.

But I think there are **other functions** that need more development than they have been given.

Chapter 2: Four emphases in particular should be retained from Lonergan's notion, but each of them raises a further question. The four emphases are:

(1) The **principal function** of systematics is the hypothetical, imperfect, analogical, obscure, and gradually developing understanding of the mysteries of faith. The *truth* of doctrines pertains to the functional specialty 'doctrines,' where it is affirmed on grounds other than either systematic argumentation or proof and demonstration. The *meaning* of what has already been affirmed as true is the concern of systematics. Thus Lonergan writes (*Method* 336, quoted on p. 8):

Out of the Augustinian, Anselmian, Thomist tradition, despite an intervening heavy overlay of conceptualism, the first Vatican council retrieved the notion of **understanding**. It taught that reason illumined by faith, when it inquires diligently, piously, soberly, can with God's help attain a highly fruitful understanding of the mysteries of faith both from the analogy of what it naturally knows and from the interconnection of the mysteries with one another and with man's last end (DS 3016).

The promotion of such an understanding of the mysteries we conceive to be the principal function of systematics.

The paragraph on 8-9 contrasting Lonergan with Pannenberg should prove helpful here:

Perhaps a clarification by contrast will be helpful. Let us compare this emphasis of Lonergan's with the procedures followed by Wolfhart **Pannenberg** in his *Systematic Theology*. Pannenberg conceives truth as coherence. This is an **idealist** conception of truth entailing a less than adequate distinction between insight and judgment. Within such a conception there is no ground for **distinguishing doctrines from systematics**, for there is **no acknowledgment of judgment as a distinct constitutive element in human knowing**. On Lonergan's account doctrines are correlated with judgment, systematics with understanding. **Doctrines are affirmations. Systematics attempts to understand what has been affirmed**. The affirmations are reached in other ways than by systematic argumentation. On Pannenberg's account doctrines and systematics are one, because on his account judgment and understanding are one; as in all idealisms, they are not adequately distinguished. Thus we have the title of the first chapter of Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology*: 'The Truth of Christian Doctrine as the Theme of Systematic Theology.' On Lonergan's account, again, affirming Christian doctrine as true is one thing, while understanding what one has affirmed to be true is something else. For Lonergan, it is the *meaning* of Christian doctrine, not its truth, that is 'the theme of systematic theology.' It is 'how it *can* be true' that is at stake in systematics. *That* it is true is already affirmed. Or, to be more precise, by the time the theologian begins to do systematics, he or she has already determined precisely what are the doctrines that are to be affirmed. These may or may not be completely coincident with the official doctrines of a particular communion, but the point is that systematics is an attempt on the part of the theologian to state as clearly as possible the meaning of what one has already affirmed to be the case. And at this point, we are concerned

with the principal function of systematics, namely, the understanding of the mysteries of faith affirmed in church doctrines. The truth of doctrine pertains to the functional specialty 'doctrines,' while the meaning of what has already been affirmed as true is the concern of systematics. To affirm certain statements as true and to attempt to understand what these statements mean entail distinct sets of operations. The first set of operations Lonergan calls 'doctrines,' and the second 'systematics.' In Lonergan's words, people 'know what church doctrines are. But they want to know what church doctrines could possibly mean. Their question is the question to be met by systematic theology.'

(2) The systematic theologian does best to take as one's **core problems** those mysteries of faith that have been defined in the church's dogmatic pronouncements. He would single out especially the mysteries of the **Trinity**, the **hypostatic union**, and **grace**. The core meanings that were explicitly affirmed by the Christian church in the *kairos* moments of its self-constitution are to form the core of that synthetic statement.

(3) Systematic understanding should proceed as much as possible according to the **order of learning and teaching** rather than the order of discovery. Method 345-46: '[T]he course of discovery is roundabout. Subordinate issues are apt to be solved first. Key issues are likely to be overlooked until a great deal has been achieved. Quite distinct from the order of discovery is the order of teaching. For a teacher postpones solutions that presuppose other solutions. He begins with the issues whose solution does not presuppose the solution of other issues.'

The contrast between the two ways can be grasped in the difference between the history of a science and the presentation of the science in a contemporary textbook. 9-10: '... the **history of chemistry** shows that the science established its conclusions by moving step by step toward the understanding of sensible data; but a contemporary textbook begins, not by repeating these experiments and so going through the whole history of discovery, but with the periodic table of chemical elements from which over 300,000 compounds can be derived.' **The way of analysis or discovery led to the formulation of the periodic table, while the way of teaching begins from the periodic table and proceeds to compose from it the various compounds that it allows us to understand.** '... a teacher starts with those notions the understanding of which does not presuppose the understanding of anything else but rather makes possible the understanding, in the limit, of everything else in the science.' **Compare Augustine and Aquinas on the Trinity.**

The comparison with chemistry thus leads to the question, What will stand to systematic theology as the periodic table stands to chemistry? 'Answering that question will enable us to proceed in the *ordo doctrinae* that is appropriate to systematics.' Chapter 7 will address the question.

The way of discovery is the way of the first six functional specialties.

This third emphasis is immediately qualified by the admission that most systematic efforts employ also the way of discovery, since there is a history to systematics, and very seldom is a position reached where the sum of the questions is equal to the sum of the resources available to answer them. There is a systematics *in fieri* and occasionally a systematics *in facto esse*. The latter will be the work of a **community**.

There is also a set of movements from particular sets of systematic achievements to further, more complete sets. 10: 'Most systematic efforts ... are part of systematics *in fieri*, and every systematics *in facto esse* is destined to be replaced by new syntheses, as questions arise that cannot be treated adequately within the framework provided by the old system.' 10-11:

In Lonergan's words, the principal 'question to be met by systematic theology' is 'what church doctrines could possibly mean,' and 'the answer to that question is a gradual increase of understanding. A clue is spotted that throws some light on the matter in hand. But that partial light gives rise to further questions, the further questions to still further answers. The illuminated area keeps expanding for some time but eventually still further questions begin to yield diminishing returns. The vein of ore seems played out. But successive thinkers may tackle the whole matter over again. Each may make a notable contribution. Eventually perhaps there arrives on the scene a master capable of envisaging all the issues and of treating them in their proper order.' Yet, as Lonergan makes clear especially in his 1959 course 'De intellectu et methodo,' **even such a synthesis will be gone beyond** as yet further questions emerge, questions that in many instances could not even have been asked had not the systematic synthesis been achieved. The questions are raised within the framework of a particular systematic achievement, and yet they cannot be answered within the confines of that same framework. In the work of one who presents such a synthesis, systematic theology would follow the *ordo doctrinae*, in a manner analogous to the way in which a chemistry textbook composes the compounds from the periodic table. But in the work that leads up to and makes possible such a synthesis *and* in the work that follows once the synthesis that once satisfied now proves inadequate to respond to later questions, both ways of ordering ideas are employed. The *ordo doctrinae* remains the systematic ideal, of course. But it is crucial that the theologian acknowledge which of these two 'ways' he or she is working in at any given point. And when it becomes clear that a particular systematic framework is too narrow to handle the further questions that arise within it, then holding fast to the *ordo doctrinae* of that systematic framework is, at best, a logical-deductivist mistake and, at worst, obscurantist rejection of those further questions. The move has to be made to the systematics *in fieri* that employs the *ordo inventionis*, until there is reached the new vantage point that will account for and respond to the new questions. The irreversible 'upper blade,' the source of all permanent achievements, lies in the dynamism of the minds that raise the further questions. Permanent achievements, both doctrinal and theological, have been reached along the way, but the only arbiter of such achievements lies in the authenticity that acknowledges them.

(4) Systematics is to be, as much as possible, **explanation** on the level of one's own time. First, it is to be explanation, not description. Here the example is the use of technical terms such as procession, relation, person in Thomist trinitarian theory. These terms (*Method* 346, quoted 12) 'have a highly technical meaning. They stand to terms as they occur in scriptural or patristic writings much as in modern physics the terms, mass and temperature, stand to the adjectives, heavy and cold.'

But the contemporary context of the move to explanation demands that one root one's categories in **interiorly and religiously differentiated consciousness**, and that theology **share with other contemporary disciplines some categories**, even while purifying the meaning and use of those categories where necessary. This will bring us back to the chapter on **Foundations**. But the key quotation is the following from *Method* 343:

[T]he basic terms and relations of systematic theology will be not metaphysical, as in medieval theology, but psychological ... General basic terms name conscious and intentional operations. General basic relations name elements in the dynamic structure linking operations and generating states. Special basic terms name God's gift of his love and Christian witness. Derived terms and relations name the objects known in operations and correlative to states ... For every term and relation there will exist a corresponding element in intentional consciousness.

Obviously, then, systematics must employ both the **general categories** that theology shares with other disciplines and the special categories proper to theology itself. 12: 'The base of the general categories is the **interiorly differentiated consciousness** promoted by Lonergan's intentionality analysis; Lonergan indicates that his earlier work *Insight* shows how the general categories are derived. The base of the special categories is the **religiously differentiated consciousness** that would be promoted by an exploration of religious love and a differentiation of the spiritual life.

And on the lack of '**special basic relations**' in this quotation see my footnote 14, p. 209.

The section ends with the remark that this insistence on explanation is qualified, of course, by the reminder that it does not mean moving from causes of being to causes of knowing, as in science (cf. the phases of the moon). In God there are no causes of being. The essential move is rather from causes of knowing that are more evident with respect to us (the way of discovery) to causes of knowing that are more evident with respect to themselves (the way of teaching).

The chapter moves next to **questions about each emphasis**.

(1) If the principal function of systematics is clear, **what are the other functions**, how are they related to the principal function, and how are they related to the other functional specialties?

(2) While the core problems are set by the dogmas that express some of the revealed mysteries, still there are also **aspects of revealed mystery that have not received dogmatic status**. How are these to be related in systematics to the dogmatic elements?

(3) **What precisely is the relation of the *via inventionis* components to the *ordo doctrinae* within systematics itself?** These components, obviously, entail work in the first six functional specialties. When the *via inventionis* operations are performed by a *systematic* theologian in service of systematic understanding, they have a finality other than the one that is proper to the given functional specialty in which such work is being done. What are the dynamics operative when one is engaging in one functional specialty in order to meet the demands of another functional specialty? How does one guarantee