

## Class 13 Systematics and Communications

### 1 Systematics as Understanding (the Function)

One is doing systematics whenever one is attempting to provide a synthetic understanding of what one has claimed to be true in Doctrines. 335: ‘The seventh functional specialty, systematics, is concerned with promoting an understanding of the realities affirmed in the previous specialty, doctrines.’ In Doctrines one judges what one holds to be true and worthwhile, formulating that judgment as much as possible in categories derived from reflection on conversion. And in Systematics one understands what one has judged to be true, formulating one’s understanding in categories similarly derived.

The key to the distinction, then, lies in the difference between understanding and judgment. ‘... understanding [is] the source not only of definitions but also of hypotheses, while it is by judgment that is known the existence of what has been defined, the verification of what a hypothesis proposes’ (335). Vatican I retrieved the notion of understanding, and of systematics conceived as understanding, when 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 [our] last end’ (DS 3016). Lonergan’s notion of systematics is derived from this statement. The principal function of systematics is precisely this understanding of the mysteries of faith.

Thus systematics *presupposes* doctrines. It is not an argument for or defense of doctrines, much less a proof *ex ratione theologica*. 336: ‘... doctrines are to be regarded as established by the addition of foundations to dialectic. The aim of systematics is not to increase certitude but to promote understanding. It does not seek to establish the facts. It strives for some inkling of how it could possibly be that the facts are what they are. Its task is to take over the facts, established in doctrines, and to attempt to work them into an assimilable whole.’

Primary among the doctrines whose understanding is promoted in systematics will be the mysteries that constitute dogmas. Among the functions of Systematics is the promotion of an understanding of those mysteries – Lonergan calls this, in fact, the principal function.

The understanding of revealed mysteries will be, as Vatican I has said, imperfect and analogous, synthetic and fruitful.

For Vatican I the analogies are drawn from what we know naturally. Thus the Thomist analogy for the Trinity, developed in great detail by Lonergan, is drawn from our natural knowledge of the procession of inner words from understanding and of loving decisions from understanding/inner word considered together. Thomas’s understanding of habitual grace is drawn from Aristotle’s presentation of the nature of habit. Thomas’s theological

understanding of actual grace (what he called *auxilium divinum*) is drawn from Aristotle's understanding of operation. In our time von Balthasar is suggesting analogues from art and drama for understanding some of the divine mysteries.

But no matter how illuminating the analogy may be, theologians are mindful of the fact that their understanding is imperfect. In the words of the Fourth Lateran Council, 'between creator and creature no similarity can be noted without a great dissimilarity being noted.' Or in Vatican I: 'The divine mysteries so exceed created intellect that, even when given in revelation and received by faith, they remain covered over by the very veil of faith itself.' In Lonergan's description of the psychological analogy, it provides a side door through which we may enter to enjoy a brief and fleeting glimpse of what the trinitarian processions might be. And the word 'might' is also important here: systematic understanding of divine mystery is hypothetical.

As synthetic, however, such understanding will bear on the interconnection of the mysteries among themselves and with what we can and do know from reason. Thus it will formulate theology's contribution to an integrated interdisciplinary understanding of reality.

Its fruitfulness will be intellectual and religious, but also practical. Thus today, I will argue, systematics will be a theology of history evoking the reign of God in persons, culture, and community. The general categories will constitute a theory of history, naming the realities with which the realities named in the special categories will be mediated.

In this first section on the function of systematics, and much more fully in *Philosophy of God, and Theology* (now reprinted in CWL 17), Lonergan conducts an all-out campaign for the reintegration of philosophy and theology in Catholic circles, and in particular for the reintegration of natural theology and systematic theology. In Aquinas they are distinguished but not separated, not divided into a philosophy department and a theology department. See 339-40: 'I am not proposing any novelty. I am proposing a return to the type of systematic theology illustrated by Aquinas' *Summa contra Gentiles* and *Summa theologiae*. Both are systematic expressions of a wide-ranging understanding of the truths concerning God and man. Both are fully aware of the distinctions mentioned above. Neither countenances the separation that later was introduced. If the aim of systematics is, as I hold, understanding, then it must present a single unified whole and not two separate parts that tend to overlook the primacy of conversion and tend to overemphasize the significance of proof.'

## **2 Talking about God (material from section 2, 'Closed Options')**

Systematics is God-talk, and a basic problem today is whether God-talk is at all possible. A negative or apophatic theology prefers to say what God is not. Positively it is content to say that God is a transcendent unknown. But affirmative or kataphatic theology will make positive affirmations claiming knowledge of God by revelation or analogy or both. How is this possible? Is God an object?

First, for Lonergan God is not an object in the sense of what is already out there now, or already up there now, or already in here now, or already down there now: that is, not an object in the world of immediacy, the world that is known by seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching. But what if by 'object' I mean an object in the world mediated by meaning, something that is intended in questions and known through correct answers?

To this question, the answer is complex. The primary and fundamental meaning of the name 'God' refers to the objective of an orientation to transcendent mystery. The basic fulfilment of that orientation lies in the gift of God's love. And one can be in love with what one does not know. The love is a gift that does not result from knowledge of God, but rather that is the ground of our seeking knowledge of God. That orientation is not properly a matter of raising and answering questions, especially since that orientation can draw us out of the world mediated by meaning and into the cloud of unknowing. This love is an actuated orientation to transcendent loveliness as absolute mystery. Such an orientation is basic to systematic theology. It provides 'the primary and fundamental meaning of the name, God.' I begin speaking about God by speaking of the unknown objective of such an orientation. Thus God in this sense of the primary and fundamental meaning of the word 'God' is not an 'object' but the term of an orientation to transcendent mystery.

But God can enter the world mediated by meaning in several ways. There is a mediated immediacy of our spirit, psyche, and body to God in prayer. People who pray in absorption can return to the world mediated by meaning, and objectify in images, concepts, words both their own praying and the God whom they met. In that sense God can be an 'object' in the world mediated by meaning.

God can also come into, and be spoken of in, the world mediated by meaning, by the question of God that emerges from questioning our own questioning: as intelligent ground, unconditioned source, moral source of the universe. We can ask and answer the question of God, and in that sense God can enter the world mediated by meaning as an object.

And finally, God can come into the world mediated by meaning by entering it personally through what Christians would call the missions of the Spirit and of the Word, and by thus prompting questions that can be answered.

### **3 Analysis and Synthesis (Material from Section 3, Mystery and Problem)**

'... problems are so numerous that many do not know what to believe. They are not unwilling to believe. They 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' (345), and the answer to that question is 'a gradual increase of understanding.'

There are two distinct moments in the generation of theological understanding: the *via analytica* or *via inventionis* and the *via synthetica* or *via doctrinae seu disciplinae*. The *via synthetica* is a very rare achievement, but it alone is, properly speaking, what Lonergan means by Systematics.

How are these two movements distinct? The way of discovery begins by moving from revelation, Scripture, tradition, doctrines, faith, to new conclusions, in response to problems encountered in communications. Lonergan traces the process in trinitarian theology through five theses: the consubstantiality of the Son, the divinity of the Holy Spirit, the unity and trinity of God, the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son, the Augustinian analogy. Aquinas took the latter as the beginning of a new movement that proceeded in the opposite direction. The way of discovery moved from the divine missions to the divine persons to the divine relations to the divine processions. Aquinas's systematics in the *Summa* moves from the processions within the one God to the divine relations to the divine persons to the divine missions, thus employing the teaching of Augustine and others to understand more deeply the mysteries of faith from which those initial conclusions were drawn. But his terms and relations are far more technical than what can be had from exegesis of the original doctrinal sources. 346: '...in Thomist trinitarian theory such terms as procession, relation, person have a highly technical meaning. They stand to these terms as they occur in scriptural or patristic writings much as in modern physics the terms, mass and temperature, stand to the adjective, heavy and cold.'

The conclusion, then, of the way of discovery is the beginning of the way of synthesis.

This process of discovery and synthesis occurs over and over again in the history of theology. For it will always be the case that at some point the sum of questions will exceed the sum of resources presently available to answer the questions. And when that happens, a process similar to that which Lonergan describes will occur: 345-46.

#### **4 Understanding and Truth**

How is it that the understanding of Systematics follows rather than precedes judgment? Is this not a denial or contradiction of Lonergan's cognitional theory?

Systematics seeks an understanding, not of data but of facts. The understanding of data is expressed in hypotheses, and the verification of hypotheses leads to probable or certain judgments. But here facts have been arrived at (Doctrines) by a prior process of experiencing, understanding, judging, deciding, believing, and these facts now provide the materials to be integrated and synthesized in a new and richer understanding. The facts were generated as facts in the movement 'from above downwards,' by the light of faith proceeding from the gift of love. Systematics now attempts to organize and unify these facts.

The understanding of Systematics, of course, also precedes a judgment on the truth of the understanding itself. But the truth of the facts of Doctrines is different from and firmer

than the truth of the understanding reached in Systematics. I hold as a Doctrine that God is triune. I also prefer Lonergan's systematics of the Trinity by way of a psychological analogy, to other systematic attempts. But my commitment to the Doctrine is stronger than my commitment to Lonergan's systematics. The doctrine is the faith of the church. Lonergan's systematics is an attempt to understand the faith of the church. Both the doctrine and the systematics aim at truth, but in Doctrines I want a clear affirmation of a religious reality, while in Systematics I must be content with an understanding that on some matters at least can be no more than imperfect, analogous, and probable, and so hypothetical.

So, while Systematics is in many ways the supreme and most difficult achievement of theology, it will not have the firmness of assent that is involved in the statements of faith. Thus, I may have a very carefully worked out Systematics of the Trinity, but my belief in God may not be nearly as firm as that of a person who could not understand the first word of my Trinitarian theology. And my affirmation of my systematic understanding will not have the firmness of unconditioned assent that I give in faith to God's existence and constitution as Triune.

Nonetheless, the imperfect, analogous, probable understanding of the truths of faith is the principal objective of Systematics. It must be on the level of one's own time, and so today it must be at home in modern science, modern historical consciousness, interiority, and the situation of one's own cultural matrix.

## **5 Continuity, Development, and Revision in Systematic Theology**

Continuity results from four sources: The structure of intentionality, the gift of God's love, the permanence of some doctrines, and the intrinsic value of some theological achievements.

Development results from the same normative structure of intentionality informed by love, meeting the demands of new situations, new differentiations, various cultures and lifestyles, the contemporary exigences for alternative ways of living.

Revision will be entailed in such development: cultural revisions and theological revisions. Lonergan feels he has provided a method for meeting such demands, but he does not specify just what the revisions are. The *bête noire* of revision and development, as well as of real continuity, will be, in Catholicism classicism, and in Protestantism a too strict application of *sola scriptura*. Neither takes seriously the contemporary situation as a possible theological source.