

**Essays in Systematic Theology 44:**  
**Rehabilitating and Transposing the Theorem of the Supernatural:**  
**A First Installment<sup>1</sup>**

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### **1 Charles Hefling's Question**

During a meeting that Charles Hefling and I attended at Boston College in October 2011, he remarked that he didn't think many theologians today really hold the theorem of the supernatural. That remark stayed with me, and when Fred Lawrence repeated Charles's observation in an email to me a couple of months later, I decided to write Charles and ask him if he could expand a bit on his statement.

After citing as three 'proximate reasons' for making this claim conversations that he had had with three friends and colleagues, after stating how the massive influence of Karl Barth has affected this issue, and after stating how difficult it is to follow Lonergan through *Grace and Freedom*, Charles writes, 'I think the *real* difficulty is this. If the theorem of the supernatural is important, that's because it answers a question that people really ask. It did so (according to Lonergan and the historical sources he draws on) in the thirteenth century. What, at the present time, would be the question equivalent to the one that "tortured" the twelfth century?'<sup>2</sup> And in a related comment, Hefling adds, 'One reason why I think there *isn't* an equivalent (*de facto*) is that nobody much thinks of theology as a science, in which it *matters* whether one's thinking is coherent. (Theorems? In *theology*?) And of course theology *became* scientific when the theorem

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1 This paper was delivered at the West Coast Methods Institute, Loyola Marymount University, on 14 April 2012.

2 The reference is to Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990) 310: 'But what tortured the twelfth century found its solution in the thirteenth.'

of the supernatural was discovered.<sup>3</sup> The two stand or fall together, and at the moment they seem to have fallen pretty low.’

Now, no serious Lonergan student would dispute the claim that in ‘De ente supernaturali’ Lonergan really does set forth in Scholastic language precisely what the supernatural order is.<sup>4</sup> He does this, not historically, not by retrieving the twelfth-century questions to which the theorem was an answer – this he did in summary fashion in his doctoral dissertation on operative grace – but systematically, and so by retrieving the core of the answer to those questions, namely, the entitatively disproportionate order referred to as ‘the supernatural.’ From within the framework of second-stage-of-meaning theology,<sup>5</sup> it is hard to see how an improvement can be made on ‘De ente supernaturali’ with respect to the questions of what precisely the absolutely supernatural order is and of what the relation of human nature to this order is. Lonergan’s achievement is made even more noteworthy by the fact that in this 1946 text Lonergan, in his proposals regarding the obediential potency of human nature for the self-communication of God and the natural desire to see God, answered the very question that Henri de Lubac would raise in the same year. It is astonishing, I think, that to this day most theologians do not realize that Lonergan answered de Lubac’s question before de Lubac asked it or at least before Lonergan had read de Lubac on the issue.

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3 ‘If we ask when it was that theology took the step that with Euclid was taken by geometry, with Newton by mechanics, and with Mendeleev by chemistry, the answer is that this step, this fundamental step, was taken when theology became a unified subject with a sharply delimited field distinct from any other subject. This step came with the discovery of the systematic notion of the supernatural order by Philip, Chancellor of the University of Paris, about the year 1230.’ Bernard Lonergan, *Topics in Education*, vol. 10 in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Robert M. Doran and Frederick E. Crowe (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) 242.

4 See Bernard Lonergan, *Early Latin Theology*, vol. 19 in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, trans. Michael G. Shields, ed. Robert M. Doran and H. Daniel Monsour (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011) 52-255.

5 ‘In a second stage besides the mode of common sense there is also the mode of theory, where the theory is controlled by a logic.’ Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 85.

Still, the difficulty, it seems to me, is the one Charles mentions: So what? What is the question today to which this material is relevant? Twelfth-century theologians were ‘tortured’ by the lack of an adequate distinction between nature and grace, and especially by the lack of a coherent account of nature itself that would enable them to explain why everything is not grace and to account for essential human freedom and not only for the effective freedom that grace makes possible.<sup>6</sup> These questions are being revived in theology, and in many instances by people who are unaware of Lonergan’s contribution to their solution. But despite this burgeoning interest in these old questions in some theological circles, I would have to agree with Charles Hefling that another way of raising the question to which the theorem of the supernatural is needed if we are to make the theorem itself again a centerpiece of good theology. If, as Lonergan maintains, theology really became a distinct science only with the discovery that answered those twelfth-century questions, then naming an equivalent question for our time might impress on theologians the need for a scientific rigor they may have neglected. It might also propel serious systematic theology into a new era, with new questions and new emphases, but also with a revitalized retrieval of the core achievements of the past.

## **2 Vatican II’s Question**

I would like to propose that at least one contemporary question that might move us to examine again the theorem of the supernatural order and to transpose its core affirmation into the context of contemporary problems, as well as inspiring us to take up serious systematic theology once again, may have been raised by the Second Vatican Council. The council left unanswered the question, How are we to understand systematically the doctrine of the universal mission of the Holy Spirit? That doctrine was affirmed by the council, and the affirmation was repeated by Pope John Paul II. Both affirmations, as doctrinal statements, are unequivocal. But if we examine

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<sup>6</sup> Again, see Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 310.

them we discover within them the unanswered systematic question, How can this be? That question, I propose, could be the question Hefling is seeking.

The principal relevant text from Vatican II occurs in section 22 of ‘Gaudium et Spes.’<sup>7</sup> That text first emphasizes the revelatory function of the mission of the Word. ‘It is Christ, the last Adam, who fully discloses humankind to itself and unfolds its noble calling by revealing the mystery of the Father and the Father’s love.’ But the revelatory mission of the Word is itself redemptive. ‘[B]y his incarnation the Son of God united himself in some sense with every human being’ (GS 22). It is not only Christians who receive ‘the first fruits of the Spirit’ (Romans 8.23), which enable them to fulfill the law of love. Rather, ‘Gaudium et Spes’ asserts, ‘This applies not only to Christians but to all people of good will in whose hearts grace is secretly at work. Since Christ died for everyone, and since the ultimate calling of each of us comes from God and is therefore a universal one, we are obliged to hold that *the Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in this paschal mystery in a manner known to God*’ (GS 22, emphasis added). The final words in that statement express both the doctrine being affirmed by the council – ‘the Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in this paschal mystery’ – and the systematic question that the council left unanswered, How can this be? The council’s expression of that question is found in the words ‘in a manner known to God.’

In the encyclical *Redemptor hominis* Pope John Paul II refers to this passage and emphasizes, ‘This applies to everyone, since everyone is included in the mystery of Redemption, and by the grace of this mystery Christ has joined himself with everyone for all time ... Every individual, from his or her very conception, participates in this mystery ... Everyone without exception was redeemed by Christ, since Christ is somehow joined to everyone, with no exception, *even though the person may not be conscious of it*’ (§14). Lonergan’s nice little

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<sup>7</sup> I rely for my references on Susan Wood, ‘Solidarity in Grace: The Salvation of Non-Christians,’ a paper delivered at the Fall 2011 Marquette Colloquium on Doing Catholic Systematic Theology in a Multi-religious World, now found in the proceedings of that colloquium on the website [www.lonerganresource.com](http://www.lonerganresource.com). This excellent paper supplies several other references besides those mentioned here.

distinction between consciousness and knowledge would render the conclusion of this quotation better: ‘even though the person does not know that this is the case.’ In another encyclical, *Redemptoris missio*, John Paul writes, ‘Universality of salvation does not mean that it is given only to those who believe explicitly in Christ and join the Church. If salvation is meant for all, it must be offered concretely to all ...The salvation of Christ is available to them through a grace which, though relating them mysteriously with the Church, does not bring them into it formally but enlightens them in a way adapted to their state of spirit and life situation’ (§10).

So much for the doctrine. It is clear. But the council and the pope do not go further, to answer the systematic-theological question, How can this be? What is this grace that enlightens and makes salvation available to all, whatever their state of spirit and life situation? I am proposing that this might be at least one way of asking the question that Hefling is looking for.

### **3 How Can This Be? Hints from Aquinas as Interpreted by Lonergan**

I would like to suggest that valuable hints toward answering this question may be found in texts of Thomas Aquinas that Lonergan relied on in his doctoral dissertation and that simply need to be transposed into the contemporary interreligious context. The problem that prevents a satisfactory answer to the systematic question is one that Aquinas himself may have overcome. Susan Wood, in the paper on which I relied for my references to the council and the pope, indicates what the problem is when she writes, ‘Various attempts to account for the salvation of non-Christians generally focus on some variation of baptism by desire and the implicit act of faith contained in a righteous act of good conscience.’<sup>8</sup> I am sympathetic to the notion of a faith contained in good conscience but I prefer not to rely on what seems to me to be the forced notion of baptism by desire. The notion is forced not only because there is no evidence of a conscious desire for baptism on the part of most righteous non-Christians, but also because it presupposes that the paradigmatic instance of sanctifying grace is the grace infused in baptism. I am not

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<sup>8</sup> Wood, ‘Solidarity in Grace’ 4.

questioning that sanctifying grace is infused in baptism. I am asking if this is the paradigmatic instance of such grace. To affirm that it is, I believe, causes more problems than it solves. This affirmation is similar and perhaps identical to the early thirteenth-century attempts in the wake of Philip the Chancellor's discovery of the theorem of the supernatural to make the grace infused with baptism solve all the problems related to grace. In many ways the church may still be in that phase of the unfolding of the theology of grace, a phase that for Lonergan was the sixth phase in a seven-phase development. Aquinas moved the problem into a seventh phase. He did so by reconciling sanctifying grace, understood in an expanded fashion, and what would come to be known as actual grace. I want to suggest that if we retrieve his advance, we will find an answer to the council's question.<sup>9</sup>

As Lonergan shows, Aquinas in his early commentary on the *Sentences* succumbed to the tendency that I am saying we must overcome. But he soon realized his mistake, and I wish to appeal to his first correction of the mistake in the *De veritate* as perhaps a highly significant text even for us today. For in that work he expressed a position that I do not believe he ever went back on. I believe he simply developed it, step by step. If Lonergan's interpretation of Aquinas's development on the question of operative and cooperative grace is correct, then we can find in the Angelic Doctor himself not only evidence that the meaning of sanctifying grace can be expanded beyond an exclusively sacramental designation but also a suggestion of just how this might be. I am not proposing an anachronistic reading of Aquinas. Vatican II's question was not Aquinas's, just as Aquinas's question was not Vatican II's. I am proposing, however, that elements in Aquinas's development as he answered *his* question may prove helpful in answering Vatican II's question.

Lonergan emphasizes that it is clear from the text of *De veritate*, q. 27, a. 5, that Thomas did not limit the expression *gratia gratum faciens*, which refers to the grace of justification,

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<sup>9</sup> On the phases in the development of the theology of grace, see the brilliant first chapter in Lonergan's doctoral dissertation, in *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1 in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000) 162-92.

sanctifying grace, to the habitual gift bestowed in baptism. Thomas writes: ‘The grace that makes one pleasing is understood in two ways: in one way for the divine acceptance itself, which is a gratuitous will of God; in another way for a certain created gift, which formally perfects man and makes him worthy of eternal life.’<sup>10</sup> The second of these two ways is the habitual gift bestowed in baptism. But the first of these two ways is the one that interests Lonergan in his study of Aquinas and that now interests me as I wrestle with a contemporary problem. Thomas writes in the same text that ‘every effect that God works in us from his gratuitous will, by which he accepts us into his kingdom, pertains to the grace that makes one pleasing’<sup>11</sup> and so to sanctifying grace, the grace of justification. Lonergan interprets this to mean that these effects of gratuitous divine will that are distinct from the habitual grace infused with baptism but that nonetheless are explicitly called *gratia gratum faciens* are themselves ‘sanctifying graces.’<sup>12</sup> If we were to push the meaning of this affirmation beyond Thomas’s explicit intention and indeed beyond Thomas’s concrete context and question, it would suggest at least the beginning of an answer to the questions hidden in the doctrinal affirmations of Vatican II and Pope John Paul II regarding the universality of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Those questions would be answered by a theology of actual grace that would acknowledge that at least some instances of actual grace are also sanctifying graces in the strict sense of the term. The issue would then be one of naming which instances of actual grace qualify.

There is evidence, I believe, in the later and more definitive *Prima secundae* that Thomas did not change his mind on this issue. But before I go there, I want to recall with Lonergan an intermediate text between *De veritate* and the *Prima secundae* that is crucial for the argument I

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10 ‘Gratia vero gratum faciens ... dupliciter accipitur: uno modo pro ipsa divina acceptatione, quae est gratuita Dei voluntas; alio modo pro dono quodam creato, quod formaliter perficit hominem, et facit eum dignum vita aeterna.’ Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 27, a. 5.

11 ‘...omnem effectum quem Deus facit in nobis ex gratuita sua voluntate, qua nos in suum regnum acceptat, pertinere ad gratiam gratum facientem ...’ Ibid.

12 Bernard Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1 in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000) 35.

wish to make. While it was in *De veritate*, q. 27, a. 5, that Thomas introduced the idea of what would later be called actual grace, and while he included at least some instances of such grace as justifying grace, he still referred there to these instances of *gratia gratum faciens* as *gratia cooperans*, cooperative grace, not as operative grace (see *ibid.* ad 3m), and so not as the work of God alone. Obviously he is still working things out. But in the *Quodlibetum primum*, written a number of years later and shortly before the *Prima secundae*,<sup>13</sup> Thomas posited for the first time the need to acknowledge an actual grace that occurs before and independently of the infusion of habitual grace in baptism, and in fact to acknowledge this grace of conversion not as cooperative but as operative and so as the work of God alone. On Lonergan's interpretation, even if the term *gratia operans* is not used in the first *Quodlibetum*, the actual grace of conversion to which that text is referring is the work of God alone. And, as every reader of *Grace and Freedom* knows, in the *Prima secundae* actual grace, like habitual grace, is both operative and cooperative.

So the breakthrough affirmation that Lonergan finds in *De veritate*, q. 27, a. 5, is that what would come to be called actual grace is in at least some instances *gratia gratum faciens*, a category previously reserved to the habitual grace infused with baptism. For Lonergan this means that these graces, in their effects, are multiple, and at least some of them are legitimately called 'sanctifying.' The first *Quodlibetum* made this actual grace not just cooperative, as it was in *De veritate*, but operative, held it accountable for religious conversion, and emphasized that it occurs in adults prior to and independently of the infusion of habitual grace in baptism. It remains to be shown that the term *gratia gratum faciens* continued to mean both habitual and actual grace – that is the issue of interpretation, if we are going to rely on Thomas for an answer to our question – but I propose that this can be argued from an exegesis of the connection between article 1 and article 2 of q. 111 in the *Prima secundae*. And so I turn to those articles.

Article 1 asks whether it is appropriate to distinguish grace into *gratia gratis data* and *gratia gratum faciens*, grace gratuitously given and grace that makes one pleasing. These two

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<sup>13</sup> The dates of the *De veritate* are 1256-59 and of the *Prima secundae* 1271-72. The *Quodlibetum primum* was written slightly before the *Prima secundae*.

terms occur throughout the development that Lonergan is researching in *Grace and Freedom*, both prior to Aquinas and in Thomas's own work. But they constantly shift their meaning. The division in the *Prima secundae* (as contrasted with earlier divisions given the same names both in Aquinas and especially in his predecessors) is a distinction between God's immediate action on the recipient (*gratia gratum faciens*) and God's use of other people as instruments to lead their fellow human beings to God, for instance, in the preaching of a sermon or homily. The latter is the exclusive meaning of *gratia gratis data* in article 1 of q. 111. God's immediate action on the person, on the soul, is *gratia gratum faciens*, and God's use of others is *gratia gratis data*. In other words, over the course of the history of the use of these two terms, there can be discerned a broadening of the meaning of *gratia gratum faciens* and a narrowing of the meaning of *gratia gratis data*. In Thomas's early commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, as Lonergan emphasizes, *gratia gratis data* referred to every gratuitous gift of God other than the habitual grace infused with baptism, which alone merited the term *gratia gratum faciens*. But in article 1 of question 111 of the *Prima secundae*, 'gratia gratum faciens' refers to every grace 'per quam ipse homo Deo coniungitur,' while 'gratia gratis data' refers exclusively to the gift of one person being provided by God to help another and lead that other to God. Obviously, both the habitual grace infused with baptism and the actual grace that is an interior movement caused immediately by God are instances of 'gratia gratum faciens,' justifying grace, sanctifying grace. Moreover, article 2 goes on to ask whether both the habitual grace infused with baptism and the actual grace that in fact concretely joins a human being to God by a special interior movement are appropriately distinguished into operative and cooperative grace, and the answer is affirmative, with the addendum in the response to the fourth objection that operative grace and cooperative grace in either case, habitual or actual, are really the same grace but distinguished according to effects. In other words, the grace about which article 2 is asking includes every grace whereby human beings are joined to God by God's immediate action, whether that grace be habitual or actual. The history of Thomas's thinking about operative and cooperative grace moves, then, from the unity of *gratia gratum faciens* and the multiplicity of

*gratia gratis data* in the commentary on the *Sentences* to the multiplicity of *gratia gratum faciens*, at least in terms of effects, and the extreme narrowing of the meaning of *gratia gratis data* in the *Prima secundae*. The God of the *Prima secundae*, it would seem, is much more prepared to invite human beings to participate in divine life, and does so in many more ways and with many more people, than was the case with the God of the commentary on the *Sentences*. At least this is a potential implication of what Aquinas is saying.

#### **4 Return to the Council**

Now let us return to the text of ‘Gaudium et Spes’ for a further specification of what the contemporary meaning of the theorem of the supernatural might be in these cases. In commenting on that text I deliberately omitted saying anything about one crucial phrase from section 22: what the Holy Spirit offers everyone in a manner known only to God is ‘*the possibility of sharing in this paschal mystery.*’ That sharing is twofold: receiving the benefits of the historical causality of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus<sup>14</sup> and participating in the dynamics of the Law of the Cross whereby the evils of the human race are transformed into a greater good through the loving and non-violent response that returns good for evil. The problem of evil is, I submit, the real question today to which the theorem of the supernatural is a response, and the response is found primarily in the dialectical posture that refuses to return evil for evil. That dialectical posture is for the Lonergan of chapter 20 of *Insight* a function of supernatural charity. That response is by no means limited to the baptized members of Christ’s church or even to those outside the church who have in some way become heirs of the positive *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Christ’s historical causality. While the term ‘charity’ traditionally refers to a habitual orientation, supernatural habits may not only be infused with baptism but also given in at least some of the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit by which a person is joined to God in

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14 See John Volk, ‘Lonergan on the Historical Causality of Christ,’ Ph.D. dissertation, Marquette University, now on [www.lonerganresource.com](http://www.lonerganresource.com), under ‘Scholarly Works/Dissertations.’

the concrete circumstances of his or her own life; and they may be developed due to fidelity to such promptings.

One final precision is required. We are speaking here of actual grace, and in ‘De ente supernaturali’ Lonergan proposes an original thesis on the meaning of actual grace. Thesis 5 reads, ‘Interior actual grace consists in vital, principal, and supernatural second acts of the intellect and the will.’<sup>15</sup> I do not have the time to go into all the terms in that definition, but the key word is ‘principal.’ Principal acts stand as efficient causes of other acts. In the order of knowledge, principal acts are insights, acts of understanding, whether direct or inverse or reflective or deliberative. In the order of decision, principal acts are what the later Lonergan, following Joseph de Finance, will call acts of vertical liberty whereby one moves from one horizon to another. Supernatural interior principal acts are acts produced by God immediately in us without any efficient causality on our part: acts of insight and the presentation of horizon-elevating objectives or ends (each of which is *gratia operans*) to which, by God’s grace, we are enabled to assent (*gratia cooperans*). Among such principal supernatural acts, I propose, are (1) the inverse insight that the violence that returns evil for evil solves nothing, (2) the direct, reflective, and deliberative insights entailed in concrete instances of non-violent resistance and the return of good for evil, and (3) the divinely proposed invitation to participate in a manner of living that concretely and, whether acknowledged as such or not, is patterned on the just and mysterious Law of the Cross. We are here moving into the territory staked out by charity, and charity and sanctifying grace are inseparable. There is never one without the other. The grace-enabled assent to the promptings of the Holy Spirit regarding an act of charity that would return good for evil brings with it the justification that is meant by *gratia gratum faciens*. At least *these* actual graces are also sanctifying graces, and they are so by definition.

So I am proposing that focusing on such divine gifts might provide a way to rehabilitate the theorem of the supernatural in our time or at least to awaken interest in its significance. I

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15 Lonergan, *Early Latin Theology* 229.

have proposed only one instance of a contemporary question to which the theorem of the supernatural provides an answer, but one that, because it is so crucial for humankind in our day, could actually revive the requisite conversation about the theorem of the supernatural and enable us to transpose its meaning into our contemporary context.