

**A Response to Darren J. Dias’s Lecture
“Trinitarian Theology and Religious Diversity; Implications for a Systematic Framework”**

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First I would like to thank Fr. Dias, and I would also like to thank Fr. Doran and Marquette University for the opportunity to participate in this first colloquium, *Doing Catholic Systematic Theology in a Multi-religious World*.

In response to Fr. Dias’s lecture, I offer two basic reflections.

First: I am in general agreement with the thrust of Fr. Dias’s argument. I would like to offer a caution if you will, with respect to how we understand the relationship of the divine missions.

Fr. Crowe’s thesis, and thus Fr. Dias’s argument, presumes a certain understanding of the mission of the Spirit which places a great deal of emphasis on the contingent and consequent external term of that mission, which is sanctifying grace.¹ If the sending of the Spirit is strictly understood as God’s gift of his love and the consequent created external term of this mission is sanctifying grace, then it is a logical necessity to “move” the mission of the Spirit prior to the mission of the Son, in order to affirm the Catholic Church’s teaching that God desires all people to be saved and gives sufficient grace to all people in accordance with God’s will.

But here is a question. Although Fr. Dias appeals to Luke’s Spirit-Christology, Luke also provides us with the narrative of Pentecost, *which is paradigmatic itself* for the Church’s self-understanding. In this narrative, even though the Spirit is certainly present prior to Pentecost, nevertheless Pentecost represents something *new* that is *theologically significant*. If we do

¹ Bernard Lonergan, *The Triune God: Systematics*, translated from *De Deo Trino: Pars systematica* (1964) by Michael G. Shields, edited by Robert M. Doran and H. Daniel Monsour. *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan Volume 12* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 475. Hereafter *DDT*.

reverse the order of how we traditionally understand the divine missions, have we preserved all that we want to hold together in a systematic meaning? How do we preserve the theological meaning of the Pentecost narrative? What type of sending was Pentecost, if we also assume the Spirit was sent *before* Pentecost? One of the challenges Catholic theologians face is to take into account the theological meaning of scripture. This has always been a challenge, but it was made explicit when the Second Vatican Council, in *Dei Verbum*, described the study of scripture as the soul of sacred theology.² If Catholic theology takes seriously Vatican II's teaching, we cannot easily dismiss some traditional temporal elements in how we understand the relationship between the mission of the Son and the mission of the Spirit. It would seem to me that there are *aspects* of the Spirit's mission, critical to an intelligibility of the mission of the Spirit, that only maintain their theological meaning if understood as temporally subsequent to the visible mission of the Son. My caution here is that we do not absolutize a temporal sequence within the ordering of the divine missions, from a systematic perspective. In fact the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that the missions of the Son and the Spirit have been operative throughout history. This church doctrine states that from the beginning to the end of time, whenever God sends his Son, he always sends his Spirit; their mission is conjoined and inseparable.³

Part of our challenge to understand the intelligibility of the mission of the Spirit, central to Fr. Dias's argument, is to broaden the field of how we understand the contingent, created external term that constitutes the technical definition of a divine mission. If the intelligibility of the mission of the Spirit is *strictly* formulated in terms which limit the intelligibility to the created external term which is interior grace, then our systematic theology will be deficient. Lonergan himself, in *De Deo Trino*, stated that in order to understand a divine mission one must

² Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*, #24.

³ CCC, #743.

also include the personal relations inaugurated and strengthened by the created external term, in order that the end of the mission may be attained.⁴ For Lonergan, the end, the ultimate purpose of the divine missions, is redemption. And redemption involves not just individual sanctification, but the establishment of a graced community, a good of order, a social sanctification if you will, along the lines argued yesterday by Fr. Doran.⁵ And this would seem to involve not just a soteriological element, but a revelatory element that could only occur in the fullness of time. And perhaps that revelatory element is not limited to a single religious tradition. But with respect to Christianity, my caution if you will, is whether there is a revelatory aspect in the mission of the Spirit that only makes systematic sense if understood as temporally subsequent to the mission of the Son?

Second: My second reflection is to dive deeper into the category of redemption itself, the purpose of the divine missions, and how this relates to Fr. Dias's argument that the Trinity should be the starting point for theological reflection on religious diversity. In my interpretation of Fr. Dias's argument, the central question seems to be the following: *what is the intelligibility of religious diversity if we understand the presence of diverse, authentic religions in history as providential, as originating from God; in other words, as solutions, not problems.* Fr. Dias, agreeing with the argument of Dupuis, sees God's plan for humankind as the root cause of religious diversity itself, so religious diversity is not a problem, but constitutive of God's plan for history.

⁴ *DDT*, 483. In this reference to *DDT*, Lonergan is specifically referencing the question of the *ratio* of the mission of the Spirit. The Latin *ratio* is difficult to translate, but the editorial note indicates that Lonergan's purpose here is to broaden the field of the intelligibility of a divine mission beyond a formulation which limits the formal intelligibility of a divine mission to a divine procession plus the appropriate created external term. The intelligibility of a divine mission would include the *purpose and created effects* of the divine mission in history.

⁵ In his lecture "What is the Gift of the Holy Spirit?" Fr. Doran mentioned that since we have developed a social understanding of sin, it is time that we develop a social understanding of grace.

My purpose at this point is not to look for flaws in Fr. Dias's argument because I am in general agreement with him. My point is to follow Lonergan's axiom to "develop positions, and reverse counterpositions." I believe Fr. Dias's argument is a valid position, and my response is to offer a suggestion that develops his position by leveraging Lonergan's thought on the category of redemption.

When Lonergan speaks about redemption, he usually offers an insight that the fundamental category in which to bring together various intelligibilities of redemption into a single view is the category of *mystery*. What Lonergan means here by *mystery* is not a truth that we cannot adequately understand in this life, but mystery in the sense in which the New Testament uses the word: the secret counsel of God, or the plan of God, or the will of God. Lonergan's correlation between redemption and God's plan for humanity appears in his lecture "Redemption," given in September of 1958 in Montreal. Traditionally, and particularly in the era when Lonergan taught Christology in the mid to late 1950's, redemption was treated within the framework of Christology. This was certainly the method Lonergan inherited, and his three theses collectively dealing with redemption are the last three theses of his text, *De Verbo Incarnato* (hereafter *DVI*).⁶ Lonergan wrote a supplement to this text, in English titled *The Redemption, A Supplement to De Verbo Incarnato*. It is a book in itself. In the first sentence of the first chapter, Lonergan once again speaks of the hidden plan of God's will, stating that it has now been revealed, and that this plan is God's will to gather all things under heaven and on earth under one head, Christ (Lonergan quotes Ephesians, 1:6-10).

When Lonergan handed this text over to Fr. Crowe in 1972, he said it was intended to be an additional thesis to *DVI*. But when you read the text, it is hard not to see, behind the text, a

⁶ Theses 15 – 17.

theologian intending to offer an intelligibility of redemption that can stand on its own, that is not simply an additional thesis to Christology.

If I interpret Fr. Dias's argument correctly, one of the primary decisions we need to make for dialogue on religious diversity, as Catholic theologians, is a decision on the theological structure that guides our reflection. What I am suggesting here is the necessity for an advancement in Fr. Dias's position, a greater emphasis on redemption as an explicit, special theological category, part of that paradigm shift needed to search more deeply, in the light of Christian faith, for the meaning of God's design for humankind and the how the plurality of religions fit into that design. If the goal is to truly leverage Lonergan's thought, then redemption and God's plan for history go hand-in-hand.

For example, Fr. Doran has pointed out, in his book *What is Systematic Theology*, that the early material on Lonergan's breakthrough in theological method included material beyond method *per se*, but also included theological content whose concern was for history in the specialties of the second phase (this would be the phase of mediated theology, which includes doctrines and explanation). Quoting Fr. Doran, "here doctrine is to be a doctrine on history, emphasizing redemption."⁷ And the category of "explanation" in Lonergan's early notes, which in *Method* would be named *systematics*, is to be a theological theory of history.⁸ Fr. Dias does well in presenting a section on the new challenge of history in our approach to religious diversity. He states that a Trinitarian framework marginalizes Christological and soteriological issues and raises new questions having to do with history. The statement is true to an extent. On the other hand, since the mission of the Son and Spirit are of central concern to us in this Trinitarian framework, and since their single, common end, is redemption, then a Trinitarian

⁷ Robert Doran, S.J. *What is Systematic Theology*, 154.

⁸ *Ibid.*

framework, properly understood as Trinity in History, does not marginalize soteriology, but in fact does the opposite: it emphasizes that soteriology, redemption, must be integral to the framework itself. The Trinity, on its own, cannot serve as a framework for systematic reflection on religious diversity.

This argument is supported by considering systematic reflection just within the confines of Christian doctrines. Systematics cannot be limited to reflection on dogmas. And here again I will leverage the work of Fr. Doran in *What is Systematic Theology*: the principal function of systematics is not limited to reflection on the dogmatic mysteries of faith, but to a wide variety of truths which a theologian assents to, whether they are dogmas, ecclesial doctrines, theological doctrines, or even perhaps the teaching of an authoritative source. A theologian's judgment that a particular understanding or achievement in theology is true, or closes a debate, or is the best analogy for understanding a mystery....for that theologian *that* understanding, *that* analogy, becomes a doctrine for his or her own theological reflection.⁹ There are scriptural doctrines on both the resurrection and redemption and there are theological doctrines for both.. However, no formulation for either has been given dogmatic status. Nevertheless, redemption, as with the dogmas of the Trinity and Incarnation, is at the core of the constitutive meaning of the Christian community. Contemporary reflection on redemption, along the lines of a Lonerganian view, would yield an intelligibility of redemption understood with a view towards historical process, and how historical progress, including the diversity of religions, helps to reveal what was hidden: the secret counsel of God, God's salvific plan for humankind.

In Lonerganian terms, this plan might be called God's "solution to the problem of evil," calling to mind the heuristic Lonergan developed in Chapter 20 of *Insight*.

⁹ Doran, *What is Systematic Theology*, 41.

I will end by noting that Fr. Dias quoted David Tracy's concern that the question of other religions can no longer be left until the end of a Christian systematic theology, but should enter at the very beginning. I would like to suggest an analogy. The question of the intelligibility of redemption must enter into the discussion at the beginning, and not be left until the end of a reflection within Christology or simply derived or implied by a focus on Trinitarian theology. In Lonergan's Trinitarian Theology, the missions of the Son and the Spirit are oriented to the exact same end: redemption. Fr. Dias states that these missions have a single aim – drawing humanity into the beatific vision. This statement needs to be nuanced. For Lonergan, *redemption is distinguished in both its proximate and ultimate context*. The ultimate context is of course the beatific vision. But there is a proximate context as well, and this proximate context is in history, it is the *good of order*. It is the good of order which tries to avoid evil, but when evil is present, God's plan is not to overpower evil, but to transform it into the supreme good, through what Lonergan calls the "just and mysterious Law of the Cross."¹⁰ If the Trinity should be the architectonic principle for reflection on religious diversity, and if the missions of the Son and Spirit are both ordered to the same and single end, which is redemption, then the doctrine of redemption can advance this position. But in doing so it should enter at the beginning. Not as subordinated to Christology, and not simply as derivative of Trinitarian theology, but as a theological category fully informed by an historical-mindedness faithful to the trajectory that Lonergan has left us.

¹⁰ See *DVI*, Thesis 17.