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**Response to Dr. Dias’ “Trinitarian Theology and Religious Diversity:
Implications for a Systematic Framework”**

First off, I want to thank both Fr. Doran and Fr. Dias for the opportunity to respond to an excellent paper on a fascinating and very germane topic. Hopefully what follows will not resemble a simple stream-of-consciousness; however, because of time constraints and because of the fact that a number of issues are actually being tackled in a short space here, I obviously cannot treat all the currents of thought found within the paper. So I will focus on only a few of the tributaries flowing into the main argument. When I was reviewing the paper, I found three areas of reflection that I thought were especially provocative: first, the account of Lonergan’s implicit framework for religious diversity as Trinitarian and the general impact of this characterization on our understanding of religious diversity; secondly, some room that I see for further nuances on the very notion of religious pluralism, using Lonergan’s *Method in Theology*; and, finally, reflection on the importance of the distinction highlighted between faith and beliefs, and between the inner and outer words of religion, again following Lonergan in *Method*.

To begin, I find that one of the most promising overarching themes of the paper bears upon an inversion, or, as Dr. Dias expresses it, following Crowe—a “revolution”—which is a paradigm shift from previous Christian attempts to approach religious diversity, which stressed the apparent deficiencies of other religions, to a more

reverential approach to other belief systems. This new approach, as characterized by Dr. Dias, will be based on the superabundance of the inner life of the Trinity, rather than on the lack of perceived value in other external religious beliefs and expressions that do not match our own. What I greatly appreciated about the transition Dr. Dias is describing and actually beginning to effect in this paper is that it represents what seems to me a beautiful paradox. What from one point of view is an absolutely distinctive doctrine unique to Christianity—namely, the Trinity—and that has sometimes served to divide Christianity from other faiths, becomes, within the context of Lonergan’s Trinitarian framework, the very heart of finding our common ground with other religions. This transition is made possible primarily through the universal mission of the Holy Spirit but also through the Word, which, as Dr. Dias mentions, is present wherever and whenever the Spirit of Love is faithfully communicated and publically avowed.

This semester I am taking a course on St. Thomas Aquinas, and around the same time that I was studying Dr. Dias’ paper I happened upon a quote from his *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*. When speaking in general of the words and deeds of Christ, which are also the words and deeds of God, Aquinas says, “An infinity of human words could not attain to the unique Word of God.”¹ This passage reminded me of the distinction between the mysterious inner word of purely gratuitous love given to us in the Spirit, and then the outer words, mediated to us in human history and community, which are, in a sense, human articulations striving to express this divine reality of love, while also somehow being divinely given words as well.

¹ Quoted in Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work* (Vol. I; Rev. ed; Trans. By Robert Royal; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 200.

However, I would add some hesitations to my largely appreciative comments here, and these hesitations form my second area of concern. While I understand the point being made via an appropriation of Dupuis' distinction between *de facto* pluralism and *de iure* pluralism, I believe that there is space here for further clarification of the very notion of religious pluralism to begin with, especially considering Lonergan's account of pluralism in Christian doctrines in *Method*. Now clearly in that context he is discussing differences in doctrines within the Christian church and how they have developed, but I am wondering if there is not something analogous that a Catholic systematic theologian needs to employ when approaching other religions. That is, he or she must not only consider if differences in religious doctrines—whether they be differences in genesis, expression, formulation, etc.—might be possible indications of the Spirit at work, but also must, simultaneously, distinguish different kinds of pluralism and even admit the possibility that certain religious expressions and practices may be resistances or infidelities to the promptings of the Spirit in a given time and place.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I think that further clarification is necessary regarding the distinction, in the section on a theology of religions, between the inner word/infrastructure/faith and the outer word/superstructure/beliefs. My main desire here is for a clearer elucidation of the exact relationship(s) between the inner word and the outer words as common structural elements of all religions, which, as Dr. Dias remarks, is correlative to Lonergan's distinction in *Method* between faith and beliefs. Now Dr. Dias is careful to specify that both the inner and outer words are divine utterances, and paraphrases Lonergan by stating, "Unlike other religions the Jesus Christ event constitutes the very suprastructure of Christianity, as he is the public

avowal of God's inner gift of divine love."² So this suprastructure of the Incarnation and the life, death, and resurrection of Christ are what make Christianity distinctive. While I agree that it is precisely the universal mission of the Holy Spirit that gives a shared common origin to all authentic religious experiences and expressions, the question of authenticity still remains. That is, we need to know what exactly comprises the fidelity of the outer words of religious belief and expression to the inner word of the freely given love of the Spirit, however ineffable and mysterious that first foundational gift of God may be.

Now I think that Fr. Doran has definitely answered this question at least partly in his lecture last evening, in which he mentioned that we discern the work of the Spirit by the Spirit's fruits, and these fruits are ripened by a faithful living out of the scale of values and, furthermore, can even be tested against the scale of values. But I am wondering if the question can also be answered at an even higher level, meaning, even closer to our systematic understanding of the Trinity. At this point in the response I will focus on how the current paper by Dr. Dias engages and interacts with one of its sources, namely the 2006 article by Fr. Doran in *Theological Studies*, which Dr. Dias cites frequently, called "The Starting Point of Systematic Theology."³ One of the major insights articulated by Doran in this essay, and which he also echoed last evening in his lecture, is that systematic theology must base itself not only on the psychological analogy *from nature* in order to understand the Trinity, but also from an analogy with realities *in the order of grace*.⁴ Specifically, what I am wondering now is if we might

² Darren Dias, O.P., "Trinitarian Theology and Religious Diversity: Implications for a Systematic Framework," 17.

³ Robert M. Doran, S.J., "The Starting Point of Systematic Theology," *Theological Studies* 67 (2006) 750-776.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 767.

construct an analogy between the missions of the Spirit and Word and the inner word of the universal gift of love offered to all peoples throughout history and the outer words of various religious beliefs and expressions.

If we want our approach to be truly Trinitarian, then it seems to me that the plurality of outer words which we find in other religions has to be engaged, discerned, and even judged according to how faithfully and to what extent they reflect the interdependence of the missions of the Son and of the Spirit. First, how well do the outer words of a particular religion communicate and more deeply effect the interior word of divinely given love? Without the Spirit, the Word as the proper object of this universally given being-in-love still enters into human history but is not received, because He comes to rocky ground, unprepared by the Spirit.⁵ Second, how well do the outer words of a particular religion encourage us to more deeply participate in the Incarnation of the Word, and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Without the Word we cannot articulate this mystery of gratuitous love who is the Spirit.⁶ So of course what I have just mentioned is a set of very general, broad criteria that, together with the more concrete scale of values, could be used not only in the process of discerning the work of the Spirit in other religions but in clarifying the relationship between the inner word and the outer word(s), which I think could greatly benefit from further elaboration in Dr. Dias' project.

On one hand, this set of criteria might appear to be following the "old way" of approaching religious diversity by making Christian doctrine the norm by which other religions inevitably appear deficient. On the other hand, however, I am afraid that

⁵ Darren Dias, S.J., "Trinitarian Theology and Religious Diversity: Implications for a Systematic Framework," 12.

⁶ Ibid.

without this kind of deeply engaged and at times very messy and even painful process of discernment, a so-called Lonerganian-trinitarian framework for approaching religious diversity runs the risk of actually collapsing into the theocentric-pluralist paradigm described in the beginning of the presentation.⁷ What I see now in Dr. Dias' work is the real promise and potential of forming a powerful new paradigm by employing the beautiful paradox of locating our approach to religious diversity in the distinctive doctrine of the Trinity and in the universal gift of the Holy Spirit.

However, my conviction is that, in fact, not all outer words—that is, not all various religious beliefs and expressions—should be accepted as self-communications of the divinely given inner word because, in fact, some of them do not actually bear witness to the universal mission of the Holy Spirit. If we erroneously accept all religious beliefs and expressions as faithful to the inner word of grace when some of them might actually be aberrations and resistances to the Spirit, then what begins as a beautiful paradox risks becoming a mottled and watered-down view of religious pluralism. Such an uncritical and undiscerning approach to religious diversity ultimately ignores the real value and meaning of difference because it fails to understand such difference in the context of the superabundant inner life of the Trinity, especially in the inseparability of the missions of the Spirit and of the Son, and in the authentic continuity of fidelity between the inner word and the outer word(s).

⁷ Darren Dias, S.J., "Trinitarian Theology and Religious Diversity: Implications for a Systematic Framework," 3.