

Essays in Systematic Theology 45:
The Structure of Systematic Theology¹

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I wish to begin by thanking John Dadosky for inviting me to participate in this initial session of the ‘interest group’ on the thought of Bernard Lonergan.

I have tried to think about this presentation in relation to the theme of the convention, and so have attempted to put together an approach to the structure of systematic theology that would situate sacramental theology in a larger systematic framework responsive to the global situation or set of cultural matrices with which systematic theology mediates Christian constitutive meaning.

I will address: (1) the issue of what a systematics based in Lonergan’s work would be, (2) some of the contributions of *What Is Systematic Theology?* (3) pneumatology, the psychological analogy, and the multi-religious context, (4) a possible sequence of theological topics, (5) social grace, and (6) sacramental theology within this framework.

1 Basing Systematics in Lonergan

Once he completed and published *Method in Theology*, Lonergan did not show us what he thought a systematic theology based in that book would be. To a certain extent those of us who frequently take our lead from him are on our own. Moreover, for at least some of us who root our own systematic work in Lonergan, the chapter on systematics in *Method* is the most disappointing chapter in the entire book. Lonergan’s earlier work in systematics, represented

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especially in the massive Latin treatises on the Trinity and the Incarnation, clearly belongs primarily to the second stage of meaning. It is a theoretical and indeed metaphysical theology, and in *Method* he decisively moves beyond that stage, not of course by neglecting theory and metaphysics but by insisting on interiority as the only ground that makes them verifiable. But he does not do systematics from that basis. His systematic treatises are metaphysical theology brought to a point of perfection, brought perhaps as far as it can go and has ever been brought. In some instances, for example, in the use of the psychological analogy for understanding the divine processions, he tells us what Aquinas really meant in a manner far more explicit than is found in Aquinas himself; and yet his elaboration can be verified by reading the text of Aquinas in its light. His Latin treatises exhibit a few permanent new achievements. But they do not mediate between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion, and specifically of Christian faith, in that matrix. They pay very little attention to the cultural situation in which they are written beyond the narrow horizon of the Gregorian University in the late 1950s and early 1960s. And they seem indifferent to addressing a larger situation. Clearly, a systematics rooted in *Method in Theology* would in many ways be quite different from Lonergan's efforts in that functional specialty.

But at least four emphases are clear from Lonergan's own work in a theoretical systematics, and in my work I have insisted they must be retained. The first is that the principal function of systematics is to present on the level of contemporary questions a hypothetical, imperfect, analogical, obscure, and gradually developing understanding of the mysteries of faith. The second is that the first and central problems are those mysteries that have received dogmatic status in the church, particularly the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the gift of the Holy Spirit in grace. The third is that systematic understanding proceeds as much as possible in the *ordo*

doctrinae, the order of teaching, as contrasted with the order of discovery. The order of teaching begins with that reality that, once it is understood, renders possible the understanding of everything else. And the fourth is that an effort must be made to keep the understanding explanatory rather than purely descriptive, but, again, explanatory on the level of our time. Thus, while the basic terms and relations have a technical meaning that goes behind what can be had either from a simple inspection or an erudite exegesis of the original sources, nonetheless they are not metaphysical but rather name the basic realities discovered in interiorly and religiously differentiated consciousness, from which the remainder of the categories are derived. While these emphases raise questions to which I have drawn attention in *What Is Systematic Theology?* still, answering the questions will not negate these four emphases but rather strengthen and nuance them considerably.

Finally, to these four emphases from Lonergan's systematic work may be added two further points that emerge after his breakthrough to functional specialization: (1) the insistence that a contemporary systematic theology will take the form of a theological theory of history, an insistence that emerges in Lonergan's work in 1965, and (2) the persuasion that is increasingly clear in his post-*Method* writings that the multi-religious character of our world sets the stage for a contemporary systematics.

So, to sum up the first point, we may say that systematics is an effort to provide an analogical, imperfectly explanatory understanding of the mysteries of faith on the level of its time, grounded in interiorly and religiously differentiated consciousness, expressing an understanding of the realities named in Christian constitutive meaning in terms of a theology of history, and invested with a profound sensitivity to the multi-religious context.

2 The Contributions of *What Is Systematic Theology?*

It was with the conviction that the chapter on systematics in *Method in Theology* did not do enough to tell us what a methodical systematics would be that I wrote *What Is Systematic Theology?* I intended the book to be by and large an elaboration on chapter 13 in *Method in Theology*, an elaboration based in the point that I just made regarding history. Lonergan had affirmed as early as 1965 that systematics is to be a theological theory of history, that the mediated object of systematics is *Geschichte*, not the history that is written, but the history that is written about. Thus each of the major elements among the mysteries of faith that systematics is charged to understand and elaborate must be expressed in categories that indicate the significance for human history of the realities named in Christian constitutive meanings: of God, Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the Incarnation, revelation, creation, original sin, redemption, sacraments, church, eternal life, and so on.

One way to summarize what I tried to add in *What Is Systematic Theology?* is to raise the question of theological categories. In an earlier book, *Theology and the Dialectics of History*, I attempted to set forth a heuristics of history in terms of Lonergan's scale of values and the dialectical structure of the human person, of culture, and of the social order. The scale of values and the dialectics of subject, culture, and community would be the principal general categories (those shared with other disciplines) of the systematics I am envisioning. In *What Is Systematic Theology?* I drew on a hypothesis that appears at the very end of Lonergan's systematic treatise on the Trinity in order to establish the theological context of the special categories, the categories peculiar to theology. That hypothesis, which unfortunately I cannot go into in any detail here because of time, links the four divine relations – paternity, filiation, active spiration, and passive spiration – with four created imitations of and participations in those relations: respectively, in Scholastic terms that need transposition into religious interiority, the grace of union or secondary

act of existence of the Incarnation, the light of glory, sanctifying grace, and the habit of charity. The theory of history expressed in *Theology and the Dialectics of History* and the hypothesis that links the divine relations with the divine missions together constitute what I call the unified field structure of systematic theology. *What Is Systematic Theology?* lays out that structure in detail, especially in chapter 7.

Thus, this proposal about systematics insists that systematics has to begin with the Trinity. The commonplace understanding of Lonergan is that everything begins with the human subject. This, I think, is a misunderstanding. *Method* (not just the book but the task) begins with the subject. But systematic theology begins with God. It proceeds in the order of teaching, of synthesis, of composition, and in that order one begins with the understanding of that which will make it possible to understand everything else. For Christian faith that is the doctrine of God. Systematics has a structure analogous to the procedures of a science like chemistry. Chemistry textbooks do not begin by narrating the history of the discovery of the periodic table. They begin with the periodic table itself. In similar fashion, the functional specialty ‘systematics’ does not begin with the history of the discovery of Christian constitutive meaning. It begins with the hypothetical understanding of that reality or set of realities that grounds the understanding of everything else in the discipline. That reality is the triune God.

However, Thomas also began with the triune God, and to say that systematics begins with the Trinity does not mean that we are simply to repeat the first 43 questions of the *Summa theologiae*. Our context is not Thomas’s. Clearly it was in terms of modernity that Lonergan understood the massive cultural shift that impressed on him the need for a thorough exploration of theological method. He spoke of that context as determined by modern science, modern historical consciousness, and modern philosophy. To these cultural factors that constitute

modernity we must add, some forty years later, the deference to the other that constitutes the postmodern phenomenon, and so in particular the interreligious context within which all Christian theology must be conducted from this point forward, and the vast call that both God and humanity are uttering for social and economic justice, for gender equity, and for an up-to-date embodiment of sexual differentiation. The triune God with which a contemporary systematics begins is a God whose gift of grace is offered to all women and men at every time and place. Today that offer also calls for the transformation of cultural meanings and values and the elaboration of social structures that deliver the goods of the earth in an equitable fashion to all. The Incarnation of the Word of God is best understood in our time as the revelation of that universal offer of grace and of the demands that come with it. Once meaning is acknowledged, with the help of the hermeneutical heirs of modern philosophical developments, to be constitutive of the real world in which human beings live and know and choose and love, a soteriology can be phrased in largely revelational terms, so that the introduction of divine meaning into history not only cognitively but also effectively and constitutively is redemptive of that history and of the subjects and communities that are both formed by that history and form its further advance in turn. This redemptive grace has to move to the transformation of the everyday cultural values and social structures that constitute the infrastructure of human living.

With this in mind the Trinity with which I *begin* systematic theological reflection is the Trinity with which Lonergan *ends* his book on the Trinity. The missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit are the eternal processions of the Son and the Holy Spirit joined to created external and historical terms that are the consequent conditions of those processions being also missions: the grace of union or secondary act of existence of the Incarnation, in the case of the mission of the Son, and sanctifying grace and charity, in the case of the mission of the Holy Spirit. The Trinity

with which a contemporary systematics begins is thus a Trinity whose missions are acknowledged from the beginning as identical with the immanent processions joined to created external terms. An elaboration of the Trinitarian structure of divine mission would thus be part of systematic theology's equivalent to a periodic table, and like the periodic table in chemistry it would stand at the very beginning of a systematic theology, along with the other part of the unified field structure, the ongoing and developing theory of history to which *Theology and the Dialectics of History* contributes. The mission of the Holy Spirit constitutes the first reality in the realm of religious values in the integral scale of values, and by and large the systematics that I envision would articulate the relation of that mission and of the consequent and revealing mission of the Word to realities at the other levels of value: personal, cultural, social, and vital.

3 Pneumatology, the Psychological Analogy, and the Multi-religious Context

If systematics begins with the Trinity in history, a theology of the Trinity in history has to begin with the mission of the Holy Spirit. That is where God begins as God enters human history. The visible mission of the Word is the revelation of what God has always been doing in the invisible mission of the Holy Spirit. The visible mission of the Word is first for us. But a systematics must begin with what is first in itself, and so with the invisible mission of the Holy Spirit.

Here I follow Frederick Crowe's major paper, 'Son of God, Holy Spirit, and World Religions,' to understand the mission of the Word in the context of the universal offer of divine healing and elevating grace. The offer of the gift of God's love, that is, the gift of the Holy Spirit, is the inchoate supernatural fulfilment of a natural desire for union with God, and a pledge of the beatific knowing and loving that is our supernatural destiny. The gift of the Holy Spirit is thus not only first but also universal. The hypothesis with which I begin thus enables us to understand

what a metaphysical theology called sanctifying grace as the sheer gift of the unrestricted love of God offered to all.

The elaboration of this gift enables us to develop a new variant on the Augustinian-Thomist psychological analogy for understanding the divine processions. As the gift of God's love comes to constitute the conscious *memoria* in which the human person is present to himself or herself, it gives rise to a set of judgments of value that constitute a universalist faith, a faith that gives thanks for the gift, a faith that in fact is the created term of an invisible mission of the Word. Together this self-presence in *memoria* and its word of Yes in faith breathe charity, the love of the Givers and a love of all people and of the entire universe in loving the Givers of the gift.

I am here using Christian language to talk of something that I am convinced is universal. This emphasis on the mission of the Holy Spirit introduces multi-religious advances on the theological situation, and these change everything in that situation. They do so in ways that are enriching but at the same time for many anxiety-producing. They also do so in ways that are as yet unforeseen. We do not know what God has in mind. As Frederick Crowe has insisted, there is no answer as yet to the question of the final relationship of Christianity to the other world religions. We are working that out. It is a set of future contingent realities, and nothing true can be said about them now. There will be no answer to that question until we have worked it out, and we are at the very beginning of that elaboration.

With this in mind I have suggested in more recent work that the functional specialties in which Lonergan elaborates the overall structure of theology, a structure in which systematics is but one set of tasks among many, need to be considered as functional specialties for a global or world theology. The functional specialties, which I number as nine rather than eight, are really

functional specialties for a vast expansion of theology, and of every functional specialty in theology, beyond what even Lonergan had explicitly in mind. The data relevant for Christian theology become all the data on the religious living of men and women at every age, in every religion, and in every culture. For the one whom Christians call the Holy Spirit is at work everywhere, and not simply in the post-resurrection, Pentecostal context of Christian faith. It is quickly becoming the responsibility of Christians to discern the workings of the Holy Spirit on a universal scale, and in theology that responsibility will take the form of interpreting the religious data, narrating what has been going forward in the religious history of peoples, dialectically and dialogically discerning what is of God from what is not, discriminating genuine transcendence from deviated transcendence in the various religions of humankind including Christianity and Catholicism, and taking one's stand on what is of God wherever it may be found, articulating this in positions that all can accept, and understanding the realities affirmed in such judgments. In all my work on this task, I have insisted that the dynamics of the charity that returns good for evil, in Christian terms the Law of the Cross, is central to that discernment of all religious data.

4 Theological Loci or Topics

If the first development beyond Trinitarian theology is thus pneumatology, the second is Christology, and these three together – Trinity, grace, and Christ, in that order – constitute the contemporary dogmatic-theological context in terms of which there are to be understood the realities named in the other special categories of systematic theology. I would propose very briefly that the order of these other loci or topics is something like this: revelation, creation, original sin, redemption, sacraments, church, praxis, and eternal life. I will come back to this at

the end, but first I wish to situate these theological topics in the context of a grace that is not only individual but also and especially social.

5 Social Grace

While Trinitarian theology, pneumatology, and Christology may formulate the dogmatic-theological context in terms of which the other topics are understood, they do not provide by themselves the unified field structure adequate to the unfolding of the understanding of Christian faith on the level of our time. To this dogmatic-theological context must be added a theory of history, one that is theologically and philosophically informed and that will enable theological minds to generate not only the special categories that name specifically theological realities but also general categories shared with other disciplines. Because the realities named in the special categories are understood in relation to those named in the general categories generated in a theory of history, systematic theological meaning is inherently social in its import and relevance. Its objective is not only the understanding, but also, through the functional specialty ‘communications,’ the promotion, of the reign of God in history. That reign of God I understand in terms of the integral functioning of the scale of values, where, from above, the love of God (religious values, the gift of the Holy Spirit) is the condition of possibility of the emergence of persons in integrity (personal values). Such persons in turn are the originators of genuine cultural values, at both the infrastructural or every-day and the superstructural levels of culture. Cultural values condition the justice of the social order, and a just social order is the condition of the equitable distribution of vital goods. As systematics moves from the articulation of the trinitarian analogy, pneumatology, and Christology to the derivative theological topics – revelation, creation, original sin, redemption, sacraments, church, praxis, and eternal life – the function of

grace as social becomes ever more significant. Moreover, systematics as I have understood it is inherently and intrinsically a social undertaking. Social grace can be incarnate in the theological community itself. And wherever it functions, it is a participation in the invisible mission of the Word.

6 The Place of Sacramental Theology

I close by relating what I have suggested to the theme of this convention: Sacraments and the Global Church. While the structure of the systematics that I have suggested places sacramental theology and ecclesiology after, and dependent upon, Trinitarian theology, pneumatology, Christology, the theology of revelation, creation, original sin, and redemption, this obviously does not mean that sacramental theologians and ecclesiologists have either to do all these other things first or wait until others have done them before they turn their attention to what they are really interested in. But it does ask that ecclesiology and sacramental theology be self-consciously situated in the dogmatic-theological context and unified field structure that are set by these other considerations. When that happens, the theology of the church will become, I believe, a theology of a community on mission in collaboration with the divine missions and serving God as the Incarnate Word served the Father, that is, as the embodiment of the deuterio-Isaian servant in the face of social and cultural distortion and injustice. Sacraments will be understood as the major symbolic events in which *such* a community celebrates its origins, its ongoing life, and its destiny. Pneumatology will already have placed this community in a multi-religious world, where the Holy Spirit is active everywhere, not just in the church and not only through the sacraments. This will take nothing away from ecclesiology or sacramental theology, or from the church and the sacraments, but it will make them very different realities from what they currently

are seen to be. Charles Taylor has called attention to four disjunctions of the church from the world it purports to address: a disjunction from the spiritual seeking that asks questions the church does not want to entertain, a disjunction in the model of authority that the magisterium is desperately holding onto, a disjunction from the sexual morality and gender emphases that contemporaries in the West increasingly accept as correct, and a disjunction from plural forms of spirituality.² I conclude simply by expressing my hope that an ecclesiology and sacramental theology developed in the context that I am suggesting would help the church overcome its alienation as expressed in these disjunctions. A beginning might be made by acknowledging that the theology of the church is not first in the order of teaching but close to last, and so that a theology and an ecclesial praxis that would understand the prior topics – Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the Incarnation, revelation, creation, original sin, redemption, and even the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist – in terms of an assumed ecclesiology rather than understanding the church in terms of the prior topics, is a distorted theology. The mission of the church is an extension of the missions of the Spirit and the Word, of divine Love and divine Truth. ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ This means that the appropriate theological understanding of the church can occur only within the dogmatic-theological context set by an adequate Trinitarian theology and within the unified field structure established by the integral scale of values.

² These disjunctions are listed in an unpublished note that is being employed to generate multidisciplinary conversations and writings.