

# Lonergan and the Church's Missional Exigences

Eugene R. Schlesinger | Marquette University

## Introduction

In my remarks today, I intend to take a twofold approach to our topic of “Lonergan and the church of our time.” I will begin with a consideration of what the field of ecclesiology stands to gain from the thought of Bernard Lonergan, and follow this with a few remarks about what Lonergan studies stands to gain from ecclesiology. I will conclude, though, with some remarks that might be a bit of a corrective to both Lonerganians and ecclesiologists.

Now obviously, this is a fairly broad topic, meaning that in order to say anything of any particular substance, I need to narrow it down a bit. In assessing what ecclesiology stands to gain from Lonergan's thought, I must first identify the particular exigencies that the church is facing today. After all, as *Method in Theology* so famously puts it, “A theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix.”<sup>1</sup> The upshot of this remark is that in order to know what theology is supposed to be doing, we must understand the historical situation that obtains as this theology is being articulated, for we have moved beyond a classicist view of culture according to which theology had the simple task of re-iterating timeless truths within a uniform cultural context, to an empirical view of culture, one that recognizes the reality of change, and that must attend to this change in order for theology to function properly.

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), xi.

## What Ecclesiology Can Gain From Lonergan

In particular, I want to suggest that in the current context, one marked by pluralism, and in which a common moral and religious outlook with the surrounding cultures can no longer be assumed, the church needs to turn its attention once more to mission. I won't rehearse the argument of my dissertation here, but will instead, simply take my cues from Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*. From its first paragraph, *Gaudium et Spes* locates the church in its pilgrimage as interior to the world, and thus, to the human project. The people of God share in the "joys, the hopes, the griefs, and the anxieties" of the contemporary world (GS 1). Hence, "there is nothing truly human which does not also affect" it.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, "world" is an ambiguous and polyvalent concept. But the constitution provides a succinct definition of the word, which helps to identify that about which we are speaking.

This world it [the Council] sees as the world of men and women, the whole human family in its total environment; the stage of human history notable for its toil, its tragedies and its triumphs; the world which Christians believe has been established and kept in being by its creator's love, has fallen into the bondage of sin but has been liberated by Christ, who was crucified and has risen to shatter the power of the evil one, so that it could be transformed according to God's purpose and come to fulfilment [*sic*].<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), no. 1 [Norman Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), II: 1069 (All references to conciliar decrees will be from Tanner's edition).

<sup>3</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 2 [Tanner II: 1069-1070]. On the ambiguity of the concept "world," and the long road to a definition within the constitution see Gilles Routhier, "Finishing the Work Begun: The Trying Experience of the Fourth Period," in *History of Vatican II*, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak and Giuseppe Alberigo, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, vol. V (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 122–177; Peter Hünermann, "The Final Weeks of the Council," in *History of Vatican II*, V: 288–296; Bernard Lambert, "La problématique générale de la constitution pastorale," in *L'Église dans le monde de ce temps: Constitution pastorale "Gaudium et spes"*, ed. Y. M.-J. Congar and M. Peuchmaurd, vol. III (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1967), 133–135; Charles Moeller, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: History of the Constitution," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, trans. W. J. O'Hara, vol. V (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 61–62; Antony Nirappel,

The world, then, is understood in anthropological terms.<sup>4</sup> It is the environment and sphere of activity wherein human beings live and work, within which history unfolds. Or, as Lonerganians would say, it is the world mediated by meaning. It is, further, understood theologically as the creature of God, which has been corrupted by, but then liberated from sin. The church is firmly rooted in history, yet has an eschatological orientation, destiny, and mandate.<sup>5</sup>

The point is this: *Gaudium et Spes* unfolds a vision of the church as necessarily implicated in missionary engagement with the world. If the church is to leave, to use the image from the Constitution's Fourth Chapter, it must have dough—the world—upon which to work. Older divisions between sacred and profane are left by the wayside, and instead, the church is interior to the real world of history, where it is called upon to “scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in light of the gospel” (GS 4).

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“Towards the Definition of the Term ‘World’ in ‘Gaudium et Spes,’” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 48 (1972): 89–126.

<sup>4</sup> On anthropology as a basic category for *Gaudium et Spes* see Yves M.-J. Congar, “Église et monde dans la perspective de Vatican II,” in *L'Église dans le monde de ce temps*, III: 31; Lambert, “La problématique générale,” 135–137; Joseph Joblin, “L'Église dans le monde: actualité de la constitution pastorale «Gaudium et spes»,” *Gregorianum* 87 (2006): 587–590; Pedro Morandé, “The Relevance of the Message of *Gaudium et Spes* Today: The Church's Mission in the Midst of Epochal Changes and New Challenges,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 23 (1996): 142; Charles Moeller, “Preface and Introductory Statement,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, V: 91–92; George Weigel, “Rescuing *Gaudium et Spes*: The New Humanism of John Paul II,” *Nova et Vetera* 8 (2010): 251–267. Note, though that the anthropocentrism of *Gaudium et Spes* is reinterpreted in light of the incarnation, such that it is also a Christocentrism. So Joseph Ratzinger, “Part I: The Church and Man's Calling, Introductory Article and Chapter I: The Dignity of the Human Person,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, V: 159–163; Pieter Smulders, “L'Activité humaine dans le monde (Chapitre III de la première partie de la Constitution),” in *L'Église dans le monde de ce temps: Études et commentaires autour de la constitution pastorale «Gaudium et spes» de Vatican II, avec une étude sur l'encyclique «Populorum progressio»*, ed. Guilherme Baraúna, vol. II (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1967), 412; Gustave Thils, “L'Activité humaine dans l'univers,” in *L'Église dans le monde de ce temps*, II: 297; Lambert, “La problématique générale,” 167; Alfons Auer, “Part I, Chapter III: Man's Activity throughout the World,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, V: 197; David L. Schindler, “Christology and the *Imago Dei*: Interpreting *Gaudium et Spes*,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 23 (1996): 156–184; Claudio Hummes, “Theological and Ecclesiological Foundations of *Gaudium et Spes*,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 3 (2006): 233–236.

<sup>5</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, no 40 [Tanner II: 1093]. See Lambert, “La problématique générale,” 164–167; Hummes, “Foundations of *Gaudium et Spes*,” 237–238.

And it is in this task in particular, that the thought of Bernard Lonergan can be a great resource to the field of ecclesiology. To begin with, as we have seen the council fathers have located the church as interior to history. The mere fact that things changed at the Second Vatican Council demonstrates a change from a classicist view of culture to historical mindedness. The theological methodology proposed by Bernard Lonergan is designed specifically to meet the demands of such a transition.

In particular, Lonergan provides us with the critical resources to do the hard work of transposing meanings from one cultural outlook to another. This task has a twofold importance for the contemporary church. On the one hand, of course, such transpositions must occur in the theological discourse interior to the church. As the common meanings shared by women and men within the church shift, the permanent achievements catalogued in the functional specialization of “doctrines” must be given an updated intelligibility by “systematics,” while also being articulated to the men and women who believe today.

Now, at first blush, the notion of articulating something in a way that makes sense to contemporary people reminds me of Bultmann’s project of demythologization, which I view as a dead end. I will return to this below, for I believe *Gaudium et Spes* calls us to something different than this and that Lonergan can help us do it. But my allergy to Bultmann does not excuse us from this task of communicating the truth of the gospel in terms of the shared meanings of the contemporary world. It is by transposing meanings, rather than by cutting away what seem to be accretions of myth and superstition, that we shall do this faithfully.

This, then, is the first of the ways in which meaning must be transposed—within the field of theology. This is where Lonergan labored throughout his career. And this tends to be where the discussion is in academic circles as well, which makes sense, because we are the ones carrying

forward this interior discourse. Every clash between bishops and theologians could be mustered as support for the importance of figuring this out. But there is another, perhaps even more pressing way in which we must labor to transpose theological meanings: and this is the no less controversial task of inculturation. Lonergan's description of this task is laudable:

The Christian message is to be communicated to all nations. Such communication presupposes that preachers and teachers enlarge their horizons to include an accurate and intimate understanding of the culture and the language of the people they address. They must grasp the virtual resources of that culture and that language, and they must use those virtual resources creatively *so that the Christian message becomes, not disruptive of the culture, not an alien patch superimposed upon it, but a line of development within the culture.*<sup>6</sup>

I want to submit that this should be the goal in the missionary enterprise, for the gospel to take root as a line of development within the cultures to which it is proclaimed, so that these cultures may, in turn, enrich the church's catholicity. Only a shift from classicism to method will allow us to accomplish this. And such a shift allows for genuine continuity with the tradition, and genuine continuity with the cultures in which one engages.

Moreover, the church is to scrutinize the signs of the times in light of the gospel. This is neither simple acquiescence nor rejection. The church has its yeas and its nays to pronounce to the contemporary scene. History is marked not just by progress, but also by decline, and also, by the grace of God, redemption. The fact, though, that historical developments may indeed be instances of decline, should give us a certain critical distance in evaluating these happenings. And this is why the Bultmannian project of demythologizing will not do. It is in the light of the gospel that what makes sense to contemporary men and women is judged. My mention of judgment ought to bring to mind Lonergan's intentionality analysis, which I raise as meeting precisely this need. The rigorously worked out epistemology of *Insight*, which bears its fruit in

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<sup>6</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 362 (Italics added).

*Method in Theology*, allows for a critically grounded approach to the task of interpreting the signs of the times in the light of the gospel. Attentive, reasonable, intelligent, responsible, and loving subjects are able to identify the positions to be advanced and the counterpositions to be reversed in the signs of the times, rather than rejecting them in a knee-jerk conservatism or embracing them in an uncritical liberalism.

### What Lonergan Can Gain From Ecclesiology

Thus far we have what ecclesiology stands to gain from Lonergan. The answer is, “much.” As to what Lonergan can gain from ecclesiology, at the risk of appearing overly bold, I would say that the answer is *an actual ecclesiology*. Despite some tantalizing suggestions, (like at the end of *Insight* where he mentions that his articulation of the divinely originated solution to the problem of evil has “particular relevance to a treatise on the mystical body of Christ”,<sup>7</sup> or in the chapter on functional specialization in *Method in Theology*, where he locates the entire theological enterprise in the knowledge of the body of Christ—the first phase introducing us to the knowledge of Christ’s body, with the second phase mediating to us “knowledge of God and of all things as ordered to God...as he is known mediately through the whole Christ, Head and Members,”<sup>8</sup> or some brief gestures at the end of *Method in Theology*, about the church as a process of self-constitution of the Christian message and the gift of God’s love) Lonergan’s ecclesiological thought is really quite thin. One would be hard pressed, in reading his remarks on the church, to glean from them any indication that the church is governed by bishops, or that it includes presbyters, or deacons, or that it baptizes and confirms.

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<sup>7</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan 3 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 763–764 [763].

<sup>8</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 135

It is possible that Lonergan has ecclesiological ruminations that would disprove this characterization, but in his trinitarian theology and in *Method in Theology*, ecclesiology seems to be mainly about the good of order, such that the church exists primarily to ensure the recurrence of spiritual goods. Note, “It promotes a good of order in which Christian needs are met regularly, sufficiently, efficiently. It facilitates the spiritual and cultural development of its members. It invites them to transform by Christian charity their personal and group relations. It rejoices in the terminal values that flow from their lives.”<sup>9</sup>

Now, I do not want to deny the truth of this statement, so far as it goes. Moreover, there is clearly something supernatural and divine going on in this understanding of the church. In the quote I just read, he mentions the theological virtue of charity. And in the systematic portion of the *De Deo Trino*, his discussion of the church is in the chapter on the divine missions, so that there is pictured a real sharing in God’s life through sharing in the trinitarian relations. Though even there, the church is such in a fairly indirect way, tasked with promoting the recurrence of sanctifying grace and charity. It really is a fairly unsatisfying ecclesiology when compared to the richness of *Lumen Gentium*, no. 8:

Christ, the one mediator, set up his holy church here on earth as a visible structure, a community of faith, hope and love; and he sustains it unceasingly and through it he pours out grace and truth on everyone. This society, however, equipped with hierarchical structures, and the mystical body of Christ, a visible assembly and a spiritual community, an earthly church and a church enriched by with heavenly gifts, must not be considered as two things, but as forming one complex reality comprising a human and a divine element.<sup>10</sup>

To be fair, in many of these works, Lonergan was working as a methodologist. In other words, he is providing the methodological procedure for theologians, including ecclesiologists, to follow, rather than actually doing ecclesiology. I do not propose that we hold him accountable

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<sup>9</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 363.

<sup>10</sup> *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), no. 8 [Tanner II: 854].

for failing to accomplish a task for which he never set out. It may indeed be that he has provided us with the methodological upper blade, and that the material lower blade of actual ecclesiology is what is needed to supplement it. Nevertheless, it seems clear that this supplementation is needed. I am happy to note that it is already underway in the work of Neil Ormerod, and that Fr. Robert Doran's current work is making strides in this direction. Already in *The Trinity in History*,<sup>11</sup> he is gesturing towards properly ecclesiological considerations, and the full, multi-volume, collaborative project of which he and several others are currently in the early stages, promises to include a more fully formed ecclesiology.

And I want to suggest that, in calling for a more robust ecclesiology in Lonergan studies, I am not just being a curmudgeonly ecclesiologist, throwing around elbows to make space for my field. Instead, given what Lonergan has to say about the centrality of ecclesiology for what he is doing—recall the mention of the mystical body at the end of *Insight* and the “knowledge of God and of all things as ordered to God...as he is known mediately through the whole Christ, Head and Members” from *Method in Theology*—I think that this ecclesiological supplement is also essential to a proper development of Lonergan's thought itself. In other words, Lonergan studies do not simply stand to gain an ecclesiology here, but rather a tool for their own enterprise.

### **A Corrective to Both Lonerganians and Ecclesiologists**

I would like to close by noting one further supplement, which I believe ought to come from ecclesiology, but instead perhaps needs to be directed towards ecclesiology as well. I say this because, despite progress, particularly *Lumen Gentium*'s use of the image of the church as people of God, *and* especially the fact that its discussion of the hierarchy unfolds within the

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<sup>11</sup> Robert M. Doran, *The Trinity in History: Volume 1: Missions and Processions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013). I should note that communal, and therefore, ecclesiological considerations may also be found in Robert M. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).



context of a consideration of the people of God as a whole, ecclesiology still tends to operate as a hierarchology.

At its best, ecclesiology will attend to the ecclesia in all its concreteness. It will attend to that gathering constituted by baptism and ordered toward eucharistic sharing and mission in the world. And this means attending not only to the hierarchical structure of the church, nor to lay ministry within the church, but also to the church in its aspect as the *congregatio fidelium*. It will attend to the faith and experience of ordinary Christian people. I point to the baptismal ecclesiologies of my own Anglican tradition, as a gesture towards doing this.<sup>12</sup> Now, baptismal ecclesiologies can tend to be imbalanced if they try to hang the entire weight of the church upon just one sacrament, and they can be appropriated for all sorts of mischief as well. Indeed, at times, they can be so focused upon the ministry of lay people within the church that they fail to attend to the understandings of ordinary communicants. In a different context, I could go into all of these and articulate my own understanding of how to better negotiate matters.<sup>13</sup> For now, let it suffice to say that insofar as these ecclesiologies foreground the fundamental importance of the baptized identity, and thereby the fundamental importance of all the baptized faithful they represent a step in the right direction, namely giving due regard to the understandings of the

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<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Ruth A. Meyers, *Continuing the Reformation: Re-Visioning Baptism in the Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 1997); Paul Avis, *The Identity of Anglicanism: Essentials of Anglican Ecclesiology* (London; New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 109–117; Louis Weil, “Baptismal Ecclesiology: Uncovering a Paradigm,” in *Equipping the Saints: Ordination in Anglicanism Today*, ed. Ronald L. Dowling and David R. Holeton (Dublin: Columbia, 2006), 18–34; Eugene R. Schlesinger, “Baptismal and Missional Ecclesiology in the American Book of Common Prayer,” *Ecclesiology* 11 (2015): 177–98.

<sup>13</sup> Note Avis’s concerns (*Identity of Anglicanism*, 109–117; “Is Baptism ‘Complete Sacramental Initiation’?,” in *The Journey of Christian Initiation: Theological and Pastoral Perspectives*, by The Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, ed. Paul Avis [London: Church House Publishing, 2011], 6–21; “Baptism and the Journey of Christian Initiation,” in *Drenched in Grace: Essays in Baptismal Ecclesiology Inspired by the Work and Ministry of Louis Weil*, ed. Lizette Larson-Miller and Walter Knowles [Eugene: Pickwick, 2013], 50–61); as well as Colin Podmore, “The Baptismal Revolution in the American Episcopal Church: Baptismal Ecclesiology and the Baptismal Covenant,” *Ecclesiology* 6 (2010): 8–38; Paul Gibson, “Baptismal Ecclesiology--Some Questions,” in *Equipping the Saints: Ordination in Anglicanism Today* (Dublin: Columbia, 2006), 35–44; Schlesinger, “Baptismal and Missional Ecclesiology.”

ordinary women and men, who by virtue of their baptism, are members of Christ's body, the church.

Lonergeran does acknowledge the importance of distinguishing between the realms of meaning of common sense, theory, and interiority, and notes that it is possible to move between these; allowing common sense, theory, and interiority to function in their own proper arenas and competencies. So far so good. He goes further to note that "because the gospel is to be preached to all, there must be sought the modes of representation and of expression appropriate to communicating revealed truth both to every brand of common sense and to every differentiation of consciousness....no one...is obliged to attain a more fully differentiated consciousness." And yet, he goes on to state that "no one with a less or a differently differentiated consciousness is capable of understanding accurately what is said by a person with a more fully differentiated consciousness."<sup>14</sup> I think that anyone without a background in Lonergan, who has endured a doctoral seminar with one or more Lonerganians can attest to this fact.

And here is the point. As helpful as it would be, the vast majority of the lay faithful probably aren't going to read *Insight*. And this means that if the thought of Bernard Lonergan is to bear fruit for ecclesiology beyond simply enriching the resources of the academic guild, ways of articulating these insights that can be appropriated by the faithful who may never self-appropriate need to be found. As we think about the church in our time, we must recognize that greater attention to the faith experience and the faithful understanding of the ordinary faithful is therefore incumbent both upon Lonergan studies and upon the discipline of ecclesiology.

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<sup>14</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 330.