

Class 13 Systematics and Communications

1 Systematics as Understanding (the Function)

One is doing systematics whenever one is attempting to provide a synthetic understanding of what one has claimed to be true in Doctrines. 335: ‘The seventh functional specialty, systematics, is concerned with promoting an understanding of the realities affirmed in the previous specialty, doctrines.’ In Doctrines one judges what one holds to be true and worthwhile, formulating that judgment as much as possible in categories derived from reflection on conversion. And in Systematics one understands what one has judged to be true, formulating one’s understanding in categories similarly derived.

The key to the distinction, then, lies in the difference between understanding and judgment. ‘... understanding [is] the source not only of definitions but also of hypotheses, while it is by judgment that is known the existence of what has been defined, the verification of what a hypothesis proposes’ (335). Vatican I retrieved the notion of understanding, and of systematics conceived as understanding, when it taught that ‘reason illumined by faith, when it inquires diligently, piously, soberly, can with God’s help attain a highly fruitful understanding of the mysteries of faith both from the analogy of what it naturally knows and from the interconnection of the mysteries with one another and with [our] last end’ (DS 3016). Lonergan’s notion of systematics is derived from this statement. The principal function of systematics is precisely this understanding of the mysteries of faith.

Thus systematics *presupposes* doctrines. It is not an argument for or defense of doctrines, much less a proof *ex ratione theologica*. 336: ‘... doctrines are to be regarded as established by the addition of foundations to dialectic. The aim of systematics is not to increase certitude but to promote understanding. It does not seek to establish the facts. It strives for some inkling of how it could possibly be that the facts are what they are. Its task is to take over the facts, established in doctrines, and to attempt to work them into an assimilable whole.’

Primary among the doctrines whose understanding is promoted in systematics will be the mysteries that constitute dogmas. Among the functions of Systematics is the promotion of an understanding of those mysteries – Lonergan calls this, in fact, the principal function.

The understanding of revealed mysteries will be, as Vatican I has said, imperfect and analogous, synthetic and fruitful.

For Vatican I the analogies are drawn from what we know naturally. Thus the Thomist analogy for the Trinity, developed in great detail by Lonergan, is drawn from our natural knowledge of the procession of inner words from understanding and of loving decisions from understanding/inner word considered together. Thomas’s understanding of habitual grace is drawn from Aristotle’s presentation of the nature of habit. Thomas’s theological

understanding of actual grace (what he called *auxilium divinum*) is drawn from Aristotle's understanding of operation. In our time von Balthasar is suggesting analogues from art and drama for understanding some of the divine mysteries.

But no matter how illuminating the analogy may be, theologians are mindful of the fact that their understanding is imperfect. In the words of the Fourth Lateran Council, 'between creator and creature no similarity can be noted without a great dissimilarity being noted.' Or in Vatican I: 'The divine mysteries so exceed created intellect that, even when given in revelation and received by faith, they remain covered over by the very veil of faith itself.' In Lonergan's description of the psychological analogy, it provides a side door through which we may enter to enjoy a brief and fleeting glimpse of what the trinitarian processions might be. And the word 'might' is also important here: systematic understanding of divine mystery is hypothetical.

As synthetic, however, such understanding will bear on the interconnection of the mysteries among themselves and with what we can and do know from reason. Thus it will formulate theology's contribution to an integrated interdisciplinary understanding of reality.

Its fruitfulness will be intellectual and religious, but also practical. Thus today, I will argue, systematics will be a theology of history evoking the reign of God in persons, culture, and community. The general categories will constitute a theory of history, naming the realities with which the realities named in the special categories will be mediated.

In this first section on the function of systematics, and much more fully in *Philosophy of God, and Theology* (now reprinted in CWL 17), Lonergan conducts an all-out campaign for the reintegration of philosophy and theology in Catholic circles, and in particular for the reintegration of natural theology and systematic theology. In Aquinas they are distinguished but not separated, not divided into a philosophy department and a theology department. See 339-40: 'I am not proposing any novelty. I am proposing a return to the type of systematic theology illustrated by Aquinas' *Summa contra Gentiles* and *Summa theologiae*. Both are systematic expressions of a wide-ranging understanding of the truths concerning God and man. Both are fully aware of the distinctions mentioned above. Neither countenances the separation that later was introduced. If the aim of systematics is, as I hold, understanding, then it must present a single unified whole and not two separate parts that tend to overlook the primacy of conversion and tend to overemphasize the significance of proof.'

2 Talking about God (material from section 2, 'Closed Options')

Systematics is God-talk, and a basic problem today is whether God-talk is at all possible. A negative or apophatic theology prefers to say what God is not. Positively it is content to say that God is a transcendent unknown. But affirmative or kataphatic theology will make positive affirmations claiming knowledge of God by revelation or analogy or both. How is this possible? Is God an object?