

# METHOD

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## LONERGAN AND RAHNER ON THE NATURAL DESIRE TO SEE GOD

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THIS PAPER COMPARES Karl Rahner's (1904-1984) theology of the supernatural existential with Bernard Lonergan's (1904-1984) articulation of obediential potency. There can be no doubt that Rahner made significant contributions to Catholic theology in the twentieth century, and on the nature/grace question he did move in the direction of escaping the older *duplex ordo* way of thinking.<sup>1</sup> However, Lonergan had at his disposal an understanding of world order which allowed him to posit the very thing that Rahner's position would not allow – a natural human desire for a supernatural end.<sup>2</sup> He proposed what he called a 'vertical finality' directing concrete things toward an end beyond the proportions of their nature. This notion allowed Lonergan to speak of 'obediential potency' in a unique way that avoided the problems of the post-Reformation theologians who, in his estimation, had failed to understand Aquinas adequately and who had thus set up the problematic as it had been taken up by Rahner and

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1 The twentieth-century discussion of the issue was prompted by the conclusion to Henri de Lubac's *Surnaturel: Études historiques*, (Paris: Aubier, 1946). This conclusion is available in English translation as Document 1 (pp.368-380) of David M. Coffey, "Some Resources for Students of *La nouvelle théologie*," *Philosophy and Theology* 11, no. 2 (1999): 367-398. See also Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Crossroad, 1998). Karl Rahner's response to de Lubac's position was "Eine Antwort," *Orientierung* 14 (1950): 141-145, in which he outlined his concern that de Lubac's position threatened the gratuity of grace. This article was republished, with a few minor changes, as "Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace," *Theological Investigations I*, trans. Cornelius Ernst, pages 297-317 (New York: Crossroad, 1982). It is here that the theorem of the 'supernatural existential' first makes its appearance.

2 This position was first outlined in a treatise, *De ente supernaturali: Supplementum schematicum* (translated by Michael Shields at the Lonergan Research Institute, Toronto, 1992; *College de L'Immacule Conception*, Montreal, 1946), composed for a course on grace that Lonergan was teaching [hereafter abbreviated DES].

the *nouvelle théologie*.<sup>3</sup> In his later work, even though he moved away from the earlier scholastic terminology of his earlier works, the notion of vertical finality can still be seen in Lonergan's explication of the levels of conscious intentionality and their interrelation with one another as found in *Insight*<sup>4</sup> and *Method in Theology*.<sup>5</sup>

Work directly comparing Rahner's supernatural existential with Lonergan's notion of obediential potency has for the most part not been forthcoming.<sup>6</sup> Knowledge of Lonergan's early theology of grace is largely confined to what one might call dedicated Lonergan scholars and was essentially absent from the Rahner/*nouvelle théologie* conversation. J. Michael Stebbins' work on Lonergan's understanding of grace before 1950 was of immeasurable help in this endeavor but, despite its value, the work dismisses Rahner's supernatural existential in a rather cursory manner without the in-depth comparison being attempted here.<sup>7</sup>

Our examination will begin by moving through Lonergan's understanding of the nature/grace relationship. First, we will examine his early position in two parts. Initially, we will see the basic position as presented in *De ente supernaturali*; then, we will examine another early treatise of Lonergan's that shows his understanding of how his position would manifest in the concrete. Second, we will briefly present Rahner's notion of the supernatural existential, relying principally on four points he outlined in his article, "Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace." Finally, we will compare more directly the two thinkers' positions, revealing both a similarity and a significant difference.

### 1. LONERGAN'S CHRISTIAN UNIVERSE

Lonergan came to his early understanding of grace as he sought to

3 Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Phenomenology and Logic: The Boston College Lectures on Mathematical Logic and Existentialism*, CWL 18, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 348-349 and 354-355.

4 Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, CWL 3, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

5 Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

6 The single example of which I am aware is Chapter 5 of Neil Ormerod's *Method, Meaning, and Revelation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000), although his treatment falls within a larger context and is not focused on the issue.

7 J. Michael Stebbins, *The Divine Initiative: Grace, World-Order, and Human Freedom in the Early Writings of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), xviii.