

Lonergan's understanding of 'Communication', his influence on McLuhan, and their imprint on Evangelisation

1. INTRODUCTION

Bernard Lonergan defines theology as that which “mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix.”¹ The aim of this essay is to analyse Lonergan's understanding of the role of such a mediator in a digital-culture.

Similar to other sciences, a theological task needs to pass through a lifecycle where the four levels of human self-transcendence can be used to retrieve the past and plan the future. These are being (i) attentive, (ii) intelligent, (iii) reasonable and (iv) responsible.”² Inspired from these four, Lonergan proposes eight specialities which he termed as ‘functional specialities,’ in order to theologially discern a situation. He notes that each function is intrinsically tied to the other seven.³

A systematic view of Lonergan's functional specialities is outlined in Figure 1 below. The arrows indicate how one learns about the past in an upward direction and move into the future in a downward movement.⁴

¹ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology, Method in Theology*, 2nd, reprint ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 1972).

² Tad Dunne, “Lonergan, Bernard,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2005.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Matthew Charles Ogilvie, *Faith Seeking Understanding: The Functional Specialty, Systematics, in Bernard Lonergan's Method in Theology*, Marquette Studies in Theology (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001).

<i>Level of Transcendence</i>		<i>Retrieving the Past</i>		<i>Moving into the Future</i>
<i>Being Responsible</i>	↑	Dialectic	↓	Foundations
<i>Being Reasonable</i>	↑	History	↓	Doctrines / Policies
<i>Being Intelligent</i>	↑	Interpretation	↓	Systematics / Plans
<i>Being Attentive</i>	↑	Research	↓	Communications / Implementations

FIGURE 1 –LONERGAN’S FUNCTIONAL SPECIALITIES⁵

By **researching** the theologian explores what data is relevant to the issue at hand.⁶ Secondly, when **interpreting** the meaning of data, the theologian understands what the authors of the data *truly* meant. Thirdly, the theologian is tasked with finding an actual meaning in a **historical** context and how theology addressed the culturally-enriched scenarios. This process results in “conflicting conclusions”⁷ which are studied through **dialectic** techniques where the theologian attempts to understand the past and prepare to plan the future. A future demands a conversion and through such steps faith is communicated to others. To do so, four functional specialities are outlined. Firstly, the **foundations** on which knowledge, morality, and holiness would be based are identified.⁸ This is followed by

⁵ Tad Dunne, “Method in Theology: A Summary of the Views of Bernard Lonergan, from His Book, Method in Theology,” 2008, [http://web.archive.org/web/20171013120304/http://users.wowway.com/~tdunne5273/Lonergan-Method in Theology.pdf](http://web.archive.org/web/20171013120304/http://users.wowway.com/~tdunne5273/Lonergan-Method%20in%20Theology.pdf).

⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁷ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*.

⁸ Dunne, “Method in Theology: A Summary of the Views of Bernard Lonergan, from His Book, Method in Theology.”

merging the “truths and values into a coherent whole,”⁹ hence into **doctrines**. Thirdly, such truths are then organised into a **systematic** methodology on how to act. Ultimately, the theologian is tasked to **communicate** one’s faith and to “produce a model of persons that fully incorporates our social and historical dimensions and that gives a framework for speaking of sin and salvation.”¹⁰ It is in “this final stage that theological reflection bears fruit” and without which “the first seven are in vain, for they fail to mature.”¹¹

2. COMMON MEANING AND ONTOLOGY

According to Lonergan, the formal constituent of a community is a common meaning, where a common field of experience is shared and complementary ways of understanding are experienced. This process of evoking a common meaning is an ongoing cycle of people sharing “the same cognitive, constitutive, and effective meanings.”¹² Borrowing Winter’s thought, Lonergan posits that through such a process, the individual discovers oneself since the self gesticulates, the other respond interpretatively and thus the “self discovers in the response the effective meaning of his gesture.”¹³ On such an elementary process, a common language can be built through which acquired knowledge is shared, social patterns are formed through education, and ultimately a community is built. Failure to reach a common meaning can result in a division tantamount to “no more than a diversity of culture and the stratification of individuals into classes of higher and lower competence.”¹⁴ Such a division arises due to one not self-transcending and thus lacking being their true self as the former is the result of the latter.

⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹¹ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 355.

¹² Ibid., 368.

¹³ Ibid., 357.

¹⁴ Ibid., 329.

“Conversion is the way to self-transcendence.”¹⁵ Thus, un-trueness to self, results in alienation and resorting to ideologies to fulfil the void within. Dunne notes that theologians in a dialectic function focus on the background (cultural, historical, etc.) and “engage in a mutual exposure of horizons among themselves.”¹⁶ Such a dialogue aims to identify “overlooked, ignored, or suppressed” questions which deteriorate the religious belief.¹⁷ Lonergan, however is interested in the dialectic function as affecting situations in community life. Like how a common meaning splits a community, so can the power of dialectic demonstrate itself as possibly splitting the community into radically opposed groups. Lonergan furthers that if a situation is guided by the light and darkness of dialectic, the result will be incoherent fragments and poorly proportions. Such a situation may be worsened by a divided community, differences in opinions, and policies that continue to be emphasised through criticism of one’s actions.¹⁸

3. SOCIETY, STATE, CHURCH

A traditional sociological view looks at society as a pursuit of a common aim where humans living in total isolation from others is minimised. Both the Church and the state are “named ‘perfect’ societies on the ground that each in its own sphere possesses ultimate authority.”¹⁹ On the other hand, a sociologist or a social historian would look at any occasion where there is a togetherness of human beings as social. If one sees such a view as a merely material view of society, Lonergan counters by adding the structure of the human good as a formal component. Earlier in the book, Lonergan discusses ‘the structure of human good,’ which stands on three levels:

¹⁵ Ibid., 357.

¹⁶ Dunne, “Method in Theology: A Summary of the Views of Bernard Lonergan, from His Book, Method in Theology,” 6.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*.

¹⁹ Ibid., 331.

- i) “The needs and capacities of individuals”²⁰: each act within a society by each individual tends towards cooperation resulting in instances of the particular good;
- ii) Plasticity and perfectibility are demonstrated in training in order to assume roles and “tasks within already understood and accepted modes and styles of cooperating”²¹ in order to function of the good of order;
- iii) Individuals are considered as free and responsible beings, able to choose self-transcendence or alienation in order to note “the terminal values they bring about in themselves and encourage in others.”²²

This structure ensures that through cooperation all the personal needs are satiated. Lonergan terms the social structure of the good as a ‘universal phenomenon.’²³ Through interdependence and its intensification, this structure can be furthered. This intensification would lead to appreciate society as an international network, while nations, regions and cities thought of as parts of society.²⁴ The ideal basis of society is community, which community may take its stand on a moral, a religious, or a Christian principle. The moral principle states that each individual is responsible for their own actions and collectively responsible for the world produced – a theory which he terms ‘the basis of universal dialogue.’²⁵ What Lonergan is hinting here can be easily mapped to the ecological understanding of Pope Francis in *Laudato Sii*. The religious principle is the “inner gift of God’s love”²⁶ onto which the

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Mary Utzerath, “Full, Conscious, and Active Participation: The Laity as Ecclesial Subjects in an Ecclesiology Informed by Bernard Lonergan” (Marquette University, 2011).

²⁶ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*.

Christian principle builds by adding the “outer manifestation in Christ Jesus and in those that follow him.”²⁷

Despite such ideals, community is still imperfect. The larger and more complex a society becomes, the more training needs to be offered in order to offer full and responsible freedom. Training reduces ignorance and incompetence, which together with alienation and ideology destroy society from within.

Hence, in order to cope with an imperfect community, “society develops procedures and agencies.”²⁸ Spontaneity of human nature creates bodies which in a democracy are subject to the sovereignty of the states. Such bodies train personnel, offer roles and set tasks within accepted frameworks.²⁹ Individuals, groups and organizations are needed to “persuade people to intellectual, moral, and religious conversion” to systematically work “to undo the mischief brought about by alienation and ideology.”³⁰ And herein lies the role of the Christian Church.

4. AGAINST A SELF-ABSORBED CHURCH

One of the main things which Pope Francis fears, is a Church which is self-absorbed and self-referential. In his own words: “[t]he evils which appear throughout history in Church institutions are rooted in this self-referentiality – a kind of theological narcissism.”³¹ It is with this spirit that I believe *Evangelii Gaudium* should be read. Against this self-absorption, the Church is tasked to ‘communicate’ in a Lonerganian sense: to share the Good News in order

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Bernard Lonergan, “Lecture Notes: Communications” (Dublin: bernardlonergan.com, 1970), 3.

²⁹ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*.

³⁰ Ibid., 361.

³¹ Cardinal Bergoglio quoted in Thomas Berg, “Evangelii Gaudium: Exhorting a Self-Referential Church,” *Catholic News Agency*, 2013, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/column/52752/evangelii-gaudium-exhorting-a-self-referential-church>.

to promote conversion. Similarly, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis suggests that the path towards sharing the Good News is to have a personal encounter with the “beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead.”³² It is through this social dimension of evangelization which Lonergan’s words must be read.

Lonergan clearly outlines the *telos* of communication: “to be effective it needs to persuade man to take control over his nature.”³³ Thus communication is successful only when a change of heart, a conversion, is brought forward.³⁴ Furthermore, this success, is the measuring tape of how successful the other first seven functional specialities were.

However a question arises: In a hyper-connected society, which Marshall McLuhan describes as a ‘global theatre,’³⁵ is the Church still able to communicate?

McLuhan suggested that the electric age transformed the world back into an oral culture, where information is again shared through communal participation, as opposed to the printing age. Hence, in a digital age, McLuhan may be extended to note that it is the “pope’s spoken word that counts, the word that he utters, not the encyclical.”³⁶

The influence of Lonergan on McLuhan is strong.³⁷ Hence, studying this connection of these two thinkers of the 20th century should shed light on our understanding of media and how the Catholic Church can flourish in the digital age.

³² Pope Francis, “*Evangelii Gaudium*” (Rome: Vatican Press, 2013), para. 36.

³³ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*.

³⁴ Ligita Ryliškytė, “The Promise of the Pandemic and the (Becoming) Totus Christus,” *Theological Studies* 82, no. 3 (September 1, 2021): 464–86, doi:10.1177/00405639211033323.

³⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, ed. W Terrence Gordon, Elena Lamberti, and Dominique Scheffel-Dunand, Reprinted (London: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

³⁶ Michael Higgins, “Prophet of the Electric Age,” *Commonweal Magazine* (New York, 2011).

³⁷ McLuhan Galaxy, “Was Marshall McLuhan Influenced by Bernard Lonergan, SJ in Writing Understanding Media (1964)?,” 2014, <https://mcluhangalaxy.wordpress.com/2014/11/23/was-marshall-mcluhan-influenced-by-bernard-lonergan-sj-in-writing-understanding-media-1964/>.; Angela Ann Zukowski, “McLuhan and Babin: Profiles of 20th Century Media Prophets,” *Momentum* 42, no. 2 (2011).

According to Eugene Gorny, the digital human has lost much of the concept of personhood. She adds that a new virtual self is emerging, and this new self, is a new media object. On a material level, computer-related operations such as copy and pasting, filtering, and hiding are all new trends which are forming the new digital self. This self is seen as a database of items of different kinds, each hiding a narrative.³⁸ Such a new self, is not a self which we bear when logging online, it is the transformed sense of self which society is embodying. In a nutshell it is a functionary self. It is in this alarming scenario where I believe the importance given by Lonergan for self-discovery is to be read. For Lonergan, “conversion is the way to self-transcendence”³⁹ As Benigni said in his show on the Ten Commandments,⁴⁰ the self learns about itself when it helps the neighbour. Loving the neighbour is the opposite of selfishness, and selfishness is the “enemy of the Self, like a thorn in the throat of the eater.”⁴¹ Nadia Delicata furthers that “Catholic or not, this Good News of an ethic of reciprocity and responsibility, the willingness to self-sacrifice for the other, is hardly an ‘ideal’, or a ‘religion’, or a ‘philosophy’, but the only recipe for living a decent, human life together on a fragile planet.”⁴²

This understanding is seen also in the Pope’s message on the 48th Communications Day where he notes that “effective Christian witness is not about bombarding people with religious messages, but about our willingness to be available to others.”⁴³ According to the

³⁸ Eugene Gorny, “The Virtual Self: Self-Representation and Self-Knowledge on the Internet,” *Сетевая Словесность*, 2007, <http://www.netslova.ru/gorny/vs.html#2>.

³⁹ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*.

⁴⁰ Roberto Benigni, *The 10 Commandments*, Rai TV (Rome: Gloria.TV, 2014).

⁴¹ Marilyn Hughes, *Selfishness and Self-Will: The Path to Selflessness in World Religions* (Lulu.com, n.d.), 62.

⁴² Nadia Delicata, “Pope Francis: The ‘Media Darling’ a Year Later,” *Zuntier.Com*, 2014, <http://web.archive.org/web/20140315210520/http://zuntier.com/2014/03/pope-francis-media-darling-year-later/>.

⁴³ Pope Francis, “Message of Pope Francis for the 48th World Communications Day: Communications at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter,” *Vatican* (Rome: Vatican Press, 2014).

Pope, we ought to learn a culture of authentic encounter - a culture of true dialogue, which echoes what Lonergan hints at by affecting situations in community life.

Lonergan sees every member of a society as being responsible for their own actions and collectively for the world produced. This religious principle is termed as the inner gift of God's love, which may be referred to as Christianising society. This sociological view resonates Sartre's idea that "individuals have the power to change history, especially through group struggle."⁴⁴ This view is exactly how Jesus himself saw the Christian in society: as salt and light.

Herein lies the crux of Lonergan's work: conversion throughout the communicative process. He moves from religious pietism to ways of changing the receiver. Communicating the faith "is not merely Christianizing media-technology or scientific techniques, but rather an encounter with the living Christ."⁴⁵ Theology should not only be a cognitive subject, but should be communicated in a spirit of self-giving in order to love the other, especially in a fragmented, individualistic, and tribal digital age. Given that the fragmented self has a disoriented ethical conscience, faith is tasked to communicate a joyful encounter with the living Christ. Like how God communicated himself, we are tasked to communicate ourselves "with one another and with our Triune God."⁴⁶ Pope Francis furthers; "(w)e know that evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of man's concrete life, both personal and social."⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Heter Storm, "Sartre's Political Philosophy," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, n.d.

⁴⁵ Christine Anne Mugridge, "John Paul II's Theology of Communication" (2008).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Pope Francis, "Evangelii Gaudium," para. 181.

In this sense communication, being “the central content to theology,”⁴⁸ should always aim at converting oneself *and* then the other, in that order. Thus, in line with McLuhan’s understanding, I believe that it is the act of communication which is to be highlighted rather than the content of what is communicated.⁴⁹ Only then can the recipient be invited to conversion and when this happens, communication can truly be deemed as successful. Through communication one needs to explore the ways of self-transcending oneself, and in so doing love the other. In remembering the universal call of sainthood, the Christian ought to feel the urge to communicate faith in a spirit of dialogue as expressed in *Evangelii Gaudium*.

On a final note, it is with this spirit of evangelisation that I believe we can truly live in an ever-smaller world which is evermore shrinking through digital technologies. It is only through a communication which is truly attentive to the signs of time, is directed to enact a sense of conversion first and foremost in the communicator, and with a true sense of being open to the other, that one can speak of true evangelisation. Only by *truly* communicating and living Theology, that we can fight the prevalent spirit of individualism.

⁴⁸ John Sullivan, ed., *Communicating Faith* (CUA Press, 2010), xxvi.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, xxv.

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