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LONERGAN AND  
POST-CONCILIAR ECCLESIOLOGY

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IN THIS PAPER I am not going to attempt a review of the flourishing field of theology devoted to an understanding of the Church. To try this in one lecture would be certain to result in a superficial survey. Instead, I wish to take the proposal that Bernard Lonergan made in the last chapter of his *Method in Theology*, namely that the Church be considered "a process of self-constitution within worldwide human society," and, after briefly explaining the notion, to show how it can ground an approach to three of the most important discussions in Roman Catholic ecclesiology since the Second Vatican Council.

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Lonergan formally introduces the topic of the Church in the last chapter of *Method in Theology*.<sup>1</sup> (There are, of course, categories [terms and relations] presented earlier in the book that can be exploited in an ecclesiology.<sup>2</sup>) Lonergan begins the chapter with short sections on meaning and ontology. After summarizing what he had said earlier about the cognitive, constitutive, communicative, and effective functions of meaning, he turned to common meaning as the formal constituent of community. The four functions of meaning were then applied to community the genesis of whose common meaning is "an ongoing process of communication, of people coming to share the same cognitive, constitutive, and effective meanings." Lonergan then offered a clarification of three terms: society, state, church. Society was once conceived as "the organized collaboration of individuals for the pursuit of a common aim or aims," a notion that underlay traditional discussions of Church and State as two "perfect societies," that is, autonomous in their own spheres.

<sup>1</sup>Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 355-68.

<sup>2</sup>See my *Foundations in Ecclesiology* (Loneragan Workshop, 1995).

societies," that is, autonomous in their own spheres. Lonergan preferred to borrow from sociologists and social historians an empirical notion of the social as "anything that pertains to the togetherness of human beings, which in our day increasingly yields the idea of a single worldwide human society," with sovereign states simply "territorial divisions within human society." This provides the larger context in which to think about the Church.

"The ideal basis of society," Lonergan went on, "is community," which can be based on moral, religious, or Christian principles. The moral principle is individual and collective self-responsibility and grounds universal dialogue; the religious principle is God's gift of his love and grounds interreligious dialogue; the Christian principle adds to the inner gift of God's love "its outer manifestation in Christ Jesus and in those that follow them," and this grounds Christian ecumenism. But community is always imperfect. To the ignorance and incompetence that make it difficult for many to achieve a fully responsible freedom are added the individual, group, and general bias that lead to human decline.

To offset this decline and to ground and constantly to renew community within general human society and within states, Lonergan continued, there are needed "individuals and groups and, in the modern world, organizations that labor to persuade people to intellectual, moral, and religious conversion and that work systematically to undo the mischief brought about by alienation and ideology. Among such bodies," Lonergan drily adds, "should be the Christian church."<sup>3</sup>

The Church is then described as "the community that results from the outer communication of Christ's message and from the inner gift of God's love." The focus is on the message whose meaning is cognitive – what is to be believed; constitutive – crystallizing "the hidden inner gift of love into overt Christian fellowship"; and effective – "directing Christian service to human society." To communicate the message to others requires that those who do so themselves know the message (cognitive), live it (constitutive), and practice it (effective). On this basis, Lonergan can write the paragraph pertinent to our purpose today:

<sup>3</sup>John Coulson criticized this introduction of the Church as bureaucratic: "...in describing the task of the eighth or 'major' specialty – communications – Lonergan rarely rises above what might be called the language of middle-management"; "Front-Line Theology – a Marginal Comment on Newman and Lonergan," in *Looking at Lonergan's Method*, ed. Patrick Corcoran (Dublin: The Talbot Press, 1975), 189. One does get the impression that by the time Lonergan reached chapter 14, he was eager to be done with his book on method. This final chapter has something of the character of an outline; the prose is often telegraphically concise, and there is little in it to warm the cockles of anyone's heart.

Through communication there is constituted community and, conversely, community constitutes and perfects itself through communication. Accordingly, the Christian church is a process of self-constitution, a *Selbstvollzug*. While there still is in use the medieval meaning of the term, society, so that the church may be named a society, still the modern meaning, generated by empirical social studies, leads one to speak of the church as a process of self-constitution occurring within worldwide human society. The substance of that process is the Christian message conjoined with the inner gift of God's love and resulting in Christian witness, Christian fellowship, and Christian service to mankind.

(The last sentence should be noted, lest anyone think it Pelagian for the Church as a process of *self-constitution*: the substance of the process, Lonergan says, is the Word and the grace of God.<sup>4</sup>)

This description has no doubt confused many people. Not only does the old meaning of the word "society" still linger in their minds, but they are more used to thinking of the Church (and, for that matter, other social relations and bodies, e.g., institutions) in terms of something more solid than process, as an almost tangible, visible, reality in the world, a community, a people, an institution, etc.<sup>5</sup> They may also think that to speak of it as a "process of self-constitution," a *Selbstvollzug* (self-realization) is singularly uninformative. So let me try to tease things out.

<sup>4</sup>Two quotes indicate well that Lonergan was aware of the full theological richness of the Church. Speaking of what a Christian existentialism might mean, he wrote: "That is the existing of one whose heart is flooded by God's love through the Holy Spirit given him or her (Romans 5:5). It is a being-in-love manifested, to the discerning, in joy and peace, patience and kindness, goodness and fidelity, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22). It is a being-in-love that is eschatological, looking toward a last end in hope, that responds with faith to the preaching of the gospel, that joins with all the faithful in desiring and praying for and contributing to the human destiny we name salvation, a salvation that consists in God's gift of himself to us in this life and, more fully and overtly, in the next." A paragraph later he expands on the theme: "For it is authentic Christian experience that is alive. It is that experience as shared by two or more that is intersubjective; that, as shared by many, is community; that, as transmitted down the ages, is historic; that, as intended for all Christians, is ecumenical and, as intended for all men, is universalist; it is the same experience, as headed for an ultimate goal, that is eschatological. So a single human reality, in its many aspects, and through its many realizations, at once is alive and intersubjective, communal and historic, ecumenical and universalist and eschatological"; Bernard Lonergan, "A New Pastoral Theology," in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 17, *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1965-1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 221-39, at 232.

<sup>5</sup>This would consider the Church as something already out there now real, instead of as a unity, identity, whole characterized by certain features.

I was once on a university campus and on the door of a room I was passing was pasted a sign that read: "EVENT IN PROGRESS", meaning, I suppose, that one shouldn't enter and disturb the meeting. I thought that might make a good description of the Church: "EVENT IN PROGRESS."<sup>6</sup> Here is why.

First of all, for Lonergan meaning has a constitutive function. Meaning and value are part of what makes a person the distinct individual that he is; his personal horizon is a construction of meaning and value. But this is also true of larger human realities:

Just as language is constituted by articulate sound and meaning, so social institutions and human cultures have meanings as intrinsic components. Religions and art-forms, languages and literatures, sciences, philosophies, histories, all are inextricably involved in acts of meaning. What is true of cultural achievements, no less is true of social institutions. The family, the state, the law, the economy are not fixed and immutable entities. They adapt to changing circumstances; they can be reconceived in the light of new ideas; they can be subjected to revolutionary change. But all such change involves change of meaning – a change of idea or concept, a change of judgment or evaluation, a change of the order or request. The state can be changed by rewriting its constitution. More subtly but no less effectively it can be changed by reinterpreting the constitution or, again, by working on men's minds and hearts to change the objects that command their respect, hold their allegiance, fire their loyalty.<sup>7</sup>

For Lonergan, community is a construction within the world constituted by meaning and motivated by value. His view goes against the tendency to reify it – to forget that it is the product of human activity<sup>8</sup> – and insists that it exists because certain events take place within the subjectivity and intersubjectivity of several people. They have some experience in common; they understand it in common or complementary ways; their common judgments yield a common world; on the basis of these common experiences, understandings, and judgments they commit themselves to common goals. This is what makes an aggregate of people a

<sup>6</sup>Fifty years ago there was a discussion within ecclesiology as to whether it was more appropriate to speak of the Church as "event" or as "institution," a distinction there is reason to question. Institutions, after all, exist only as events in progress.

<sup>7</sup>*Method in Theology*, 78. One might think of the current debate on what constitutes a marriage.

<sup>8</sup>See the notion of reification in Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1967). 89: "the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something else than human products – such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will."

community, and community begins and ends with common meanings and values. In John Searle's language, the ontology of community is subjective.<sup>9</sup>

But community can continue to exist only if and to the degree that events of meaning and value continue to occur and continue to be shared. It is not a fixed reality; it has no existence outside the acts of shared meaning that link its members. The communication of meaning and value constitutes community, and community realizes itself through continued communication. A community can be described, then, as a process of self-constitution. Community is process, community is event.

An Italian ecclesologist, Severino Dianich, has constructed an entire treatise on the Church on the basis of an analysis of the Church as an event of communication.<sup>10</sup> The primary event that gives birth to the Church is the communication and appropriation of the message about what God has done in Jesus Christ. On Pentecost, Peter interpreted the extraordinary events as signs of the messianic age; he then narrated the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and ended with the solemn announcement: "Let all the house of Israel know most assuredly that God has made both Lord and Messiah this Jesus whom you crucified," and by faith, repentance, and baptism that day were added about three thousand souls (Acts 2:14-36).

Another text describes the genesis of the Church even more succinctly; it is the first verses of the First Epistle of St. John. They begin almost with a stutter: "What was from the beginning; what we have heard, what we have seen with our own eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have touched – about the word of life – and the life was made known and we have seen and now testify and announce to you, the life eternal which was with the Father and has appeared to us." And then the essence: "What we have seen and have heard we announce to you, so that you also may have fellowship with us, and this fellowship of ours is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. And we write these things to you so that our joy may be fulfilled" (1 John 1:1-4).

Here the apostles are inviting others into fellowship (*koinonia*) with themselves on the basis of what they experienced and are now announcing – the word of life; they are offering others the opportunity to believe and thereby to enter into fellowship with them because of the eternal life that appeared to them, and the fellowship that the apostles already enjoy is not just another human fellowship: it is fellowship with the Father and the Son. The *koinonia* basic to the

<sup>9</sup>John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup>Severino Dianich and Serena Noceti, *Trattato sulla Chiesa* (Brescia: Queriniana, 2002).



Church is constituted by the communication and appropriation of the message about Jesus Christ.

That is the basic communication that makes the Church exist as a community across generations; in fact, it is the basic communication that gives birth to the Church every day.<sup>11</sup> Where that event occurs, the Church comes to be; where that event does not take place, the Church does not exist; where that event has ceased to take place, the Church has ceased to exist. The continued communication and appropriation of that message is the process by which the Church realizes itself – makes itself a reality in the world constituted by meaning and motivated by value. The Church is “a process of self-constitution occurring within worldwide human society.”

One great advantage of this approach is its concreteness. The Church’s genesis, self-realization, is an event within this world, a distinct moment in mankind’s self-realization. There are larger dimensions of the event, of course: the message about Jesus Christ has roots in the story of his people and their God; the community yielded by the communication and appropriation of the message about Christ began almost two millennia ago, exists in many other places and among many other peoples all over the world, and will be brought to perfection as the Kingdom, that is, the people blessed by the immediate presence of God. But even when expanded out to its full universality, to include all the saved from Abel to the last of the just, the Church remains something concrete: it consists in human beings brought together by the message about Christ received in faith thanks to the inner gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup>The Venerable Bede expressed this self-constitution: “Everyday the Church gives birth to the Church.”

<sup>12</sup>Consider the concreteness of this text of Augustine: “The house of God is itself a city. For the house of God is the people of God; because the house of God is the temple of God. And what did the Apostle say? ‘God’s temple is holy, which you are’ (1 Cor 3:17). The house of God is all the believers, not only those who now exist, but also those who were before us and have fallen asleep, and those who will be after us, those who have still to be born until the end of the world, innumerable believers gathered into one, numbered by the Lord, however, about whom the Apostle says: ‘The Lord knows who are his own’ (2 Tm 2:19); those grains which now groan among the chaff, which are to form a single mass, when at the end there is a winnowing (Mt 3:12); the whole number of holy believers, who are to be changed from being men to being equal to the Angels of God, to be joined with the Angels who now do not wander but await us when we return from our wandering; all of us together make one house of God, and one city” *En. in Ps. 126, 3; PL 38, 1668-1669.*

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A first advantage of this approach is that it enables one to make a basic distinction that puts some order among the various images and concepts of the Church that are sometimes put into competition with one another: People of God, Body of Christ, Temple of the Holy Spirit, mystery, sacrament, communion, etc. These are all concepts that either have been presented in the books of the New Testament or have arisen out of efforts to understand Christian community. Some of them are instances of what Lonergan said required the elaboration and application of “special theological categories,”<sup>13</sup> that is, dimensions of the Church that are “objects proper to theology” and do not “come within the purview of other disciplines as well as theology.” But besides the effort to understand such concepts as elaborated in the Scriptures or in the Tradition, there is also the question: to what do these concepts refer; what are they describing? The easy answer is that they refer to the Church, but what is meant by this “Church” that is the referent of the variety of images and concepts?

I believe the question can be answered by a primary notion of the Church, one that is suggested precisely by reflection on the Church as an event of self-realization. It is the idea of the Church as the *congregatio* (*convocatio, communio fidelium*), the Church as the assembly, community, or communion, of believers. This notion is primary in both a sociological and a theological sense. Sociologically, it identifies the meanings that constitute this human community and distinguish it from all others: this community consists of people brought together because of a common faith in what God has done in Jesus Christ. Theologically, apart from God’s grace, there is nothing prior to faith, the beginning of justification, as the Council of Trent called it. All of the sacraments presuppose faith; Aquinas called them *sacramenta fidei*, and he also said that the strength of the whole edifice of the Church was the strength of its faith.<sup>14</sup> All of the relations that constitute the community that is the Church presuppose communion in the grounding and centering faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is to this community, so constituted and defined, that the other concepts of the Church apply. It is this community that is the People of God, the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Spirit, communion in divine mystery, sacrament, sign

<sup>13</sup>*Method in Theology*, 282, 288-91.

<sup>14</sup>“*Fides est sicut fundamentum, ex cuius firmitate tota firmatur ecclesiae structura*”; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Colossians*, ch. 1, l. 5 (Marietti n. 57).

and instrument, of salvation. Efforts to explore the meaning of these concepts must include efforts to show what they mean as descriptions of that community of believers. Hans Urs von Balthasar once published an essay entitled "Who are the Church?" Long before, and much more concretely, Augustine had asked, with reference to an image of the Church as a "fruitful vine": "*Sed in quibus?*" In whom is this true?<sup>15</sup> And of any other image, description, concept, model of the Church it is possible, and necessary to ask, "Of whom is this true? In whom is this a reality? And how is it true of them?" Such questions are necessary if ecclesiology is not to be a study of abstractions.

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A second set of questions to which is pertinent this emphasis on the Church as the assembly of believers that results from a process of self-constitution concerns the relationship between local Churches and the so-called universal Church. The matter has been an object of great debate since the local Church has become the focus of ecclesiological attention in the decades after the Second Vatican Council.<sup>16</sup> The Council itself did not develop a full theology of the local Church; in fact, its perspective was largely universalistic; but in its statement about particular eucharistic communities and about the need for the Church to embody itself in the variety of cultures, it laid some foundations on which a large number of theologians have built.

This development has aroused fears in some, not least of all in Joseph Ratzinger and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, of a one-sided emphasis on particularity that ends in considering the local Church as an entity sufficient unto itself. As a response, the man who is now pope and the Congregation he used to head repeatedly defended the priority of the universal Church over the local or particular Churches. They spoke of an ontological priority, of a universal Church that preexists creation and gives birth to particular Churches. In the course of discussions about this matter – including the question who could possibly be in a Church that preexists creation? – Ratzinger clarified this to mean the preexistence of God's intention of a Church that is universal in its

<sup>15</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Who is the Church?" in *Spouse of the Word (Explorations in Theology, II)* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 143-91; Augustine, *En. in Ps 127*, 11; PL 38, 1684).

<sup>16</sup> See Joseph A. Komonchak, "The Local Church and the Church Catholic: The Contemporary Theological Problematic," *he Jurist*, 52 (1992): 416-47.

scope; he now calls it "teleological priority": protology is eschatology, as some scholars put it. He also defends the historical priority of the universal Church, seeing in the account of the events of Pentecost the creation of a Church that is already universal and that then gives birth, first, to the local Church of Jerusalem and then to all other particular local Churches. This grounds the Congregation's claim that the universal Church is, historically, the mother of all the particular Churches.

Many find the fear to which this position is a response exaggerated. Only a very few theologians who have written on the matter defend the priority of the local Church. The vast majority of ecclesialogists think that the question of priority is itself poorly posed and indicates an inadequate understanding of the realities under consideration. Almost all of them agree on two statements: (1) the universal Church is not the result of a federation of preexisting local Churches; (2) the local Church is not simply an administrative subdivision of a preexisting universal Church. They try to retain the nice balance that is found in two statements in *Lumen gentium* 23, where it is said, first, that the particular Churches are formed in the image of the universal Church, and, second, that the universal Church exists in and out of the particular Churches. The first statement seems to assign a priority to the universal Church, which supplies the image other Churches must follow. The second statement seems to imply a priority to the local Churches since it is not only in them but out of them that the one universal Church exists. Most ecclesialogists think the only way properly to address the issue is to say Yes to both statements and then to try to understand how they can both be true.

Although Ratzinger vigorously denied this, more than a few observers regard his position as simply a more sophisticated way of defending the universal authority of the pope and the Vatican, so little theological valence does he give to the local Church. A decade before Ratzinger began to set out his position, Louis Bouyer had a position like that in mind when he criticized a view that sees the Church from the outset as "a sort of enormous apparatus of global reach, a '*Gesellschaft*' destined to establish branch offices everywhere, which for this purpose would deploy a centripetal network for systematic evangelization, so as little by little to set up a chain of cultic or charity 'stations.'" Against a view to which modern ecclesiology often approximated, Bouyer went on:

St. Peter did not found the Church by rushing right away to Rome, as to the center of the ancient world, in order to establish there a network of committees that might then methodically implant their subsidiaries

throughout the universe. He founded the Church, on Pentecost, by announcing the risen Christ to those around him, by himself baptizing or having his apostolic collaborators baptize "those who came to believe," by having them share in the first celebrations of the eucharistic banquet, and by thus involving them in a common life of thanksgiving and of charity. The Church of all times and all places was founded, then, in a first local Church, the Church of Jerusalem, and it has been propagated from then on in other local Churches, similar to it, as if by cutting and planting.

Against the modern view, Bouyer insisted that the Church "proceeds from essentially local communities and, truly speaking, has never had actual existence except in them: in *"Gemeinschaften"* where concrete people concretely live a common life of shared faith, of unanimous prayer, of communion in praise and charity. Everything else in the Church is only in the service of these communities and has no real spiritual existence except in their actual life." Bouyer suggests that Catholic ecclesiology could learn from Congregationalists "who deny to the Church any existence apart from the concrete 'congregations' in which believers come together to hear the Word, to pray, to celebrate the Lord's Supper, and thus to be involved in a life, indissolubly communal and personal, of faith and charity."<sup>17</sup> These are the persons and the communities *quibus constat Ecclesia*, to use Augustine's phrase quoted below, in whom the Church consists. An "ontology" of the Church requires study of the subjectivity by which a person becomes a Christian through faith, hope, and love and of the intersubjectivity by which believers are brought together as assemblies. There is no suprapersonal entity above and apart from these believers and their assemblies. The *Ecclesia universa* is the communion of all such believers and their assemblies, and this communion is an event within a shared consciousness, the communion that results from or, rather, consists in, the common faith, hope, and love that God's word and grace enable and effect.

The basic question, I believe, is: Where, in whom, and how does the Church come into being today? When the question is translated into the terms employed by Lonergan, and developed in some independence by Dianich, it asks: Where, in

<sup>17</sup>Louis Bouyer, *The Church of God, Body of Christ and Temple of the Spirit* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1982), 278-79. See also p. 281: St. Paul and his contemporaries "never envisioned the 'Church' as a generalized abstraction, detached (or detachable) from every concrete assembly of worship and charity, nor as an organization of these 'Churches,' envisioned independently and separately." For St. Paul the Church "is never an abstraction nor, still less, some sort of organization which, while capping all these assemblies, could be conceived as having existence outside them."

whom, and how does the event of communication that is the *Selbstvollzug* of the Church take place? And the answer to that seems to me to be obvious: It always occurs locally, in a specific place and time, as one or more persons announce the Good News of what God has done in Jesus Christ, and it is received in faith by one or more persons. The Church is not constituted by the divine initiative in Word and grace alone but also by the free human response created by that Word and that grace. As such, it is always a concrete reality: *this* group of men and women, at *this* time and place, within *this* culture, responding to the Word and grace by which God gathers them into Christ. It is not an abstract Word that is preached and accepted in faith, but a Word that illumines a particular situation, responds to particular questions, and is expressed in particular languages, symbols, gestures, rites, etc. Redemptive grace also is always concrete, an overcoming of particular instances of sin, a liberation from particular bonds and addictions. The Church that comes to be through faith, hope, and love is not a realm beyond culture, history, and society, but a concrete manifestation in human communities of particular places, times, and cultures of the one transcendent and redemptive grace of God.

Now, I insist, this is *not* to consider the universal Church something secondary, something derivative. The divine initiative itself is universal in purpose and scope, both the divine Word and the divine grace. But it is to say that what is called the universal Church is the communion of all the local Churches; that is, it is a *concrete universal*. If one wishes to take the parish as the typical small community, then a diocese is the communion of such local communities of faith, and the one Church is the communion of communions of local communities. Apart from the local Churches the universal Church does not exist; it is, as Pope Paul VI said, an abstraction, an *ens rationis*. Apart from the local Churches, the so-called universal Church does not act. The one who presides over the universal communion may urge "the Church" to do such-and-such, or to avoid such-and-such, but the Church only does what he urges or avoids what he counsels against only if and to the degree that the local Churches do it or avoid it.

Yves Congar has illuminating comments that point up the consequences of the shift when the Church ceases to be considered the assembly of believers. He was writing about the notion of the Church as "Mother."

To the Fathers the Church was the "We of Christians"... Jerome writes: "The Church of Christ is nothing else but the souls of those who believe in Christ." In the juridical ecclesiology of the modern age, the aspect of the Church as made up of believers has been almost entirely forgotten in



favor, almost exclusively, of the aspect of the Church as making believers. The Church is considered as the suprapersonal reality which mediates the salvation of Christ to men. The latter are nothing more than her children; she is set up over them. Of the two dialectically opposed viewpoints from which the Fathers contemplated the motherhood of the Church, one has been evacuated, namely that according to which the believers are seen as giving birth to the Church...When the Church is no longer considered as made by believers, but is seen chiefly as a mediating institution, then the mission and motherhood of the Church are seen as being exercised in the external valid acts of the established ministry instead of being drawn from the Christian character of love and prayer by which her members are living.<sup>18</sup>

Something similar, it seems to me, takes place when the universal Church is considered to have a priority that sets it over and against the local Churches. In Ratzinger's view the universal Church takes precedence at every point. While he says that it forms the local Church in its own image, he gives scant attention to the fact that it is itself formed by the local Churches. The relationship has ceased to be dialectical. As, in Congar's description, a suprapersonal motherhood of the Church neglected the subjective acts of believers, so today the dimension of the one Church as constituted by the subjectivity of the many Churches is being neglected to the degree that the only thing being stressed is their being *ad imaginem Ecclesiae universalis*.

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Another topic in ecclesiology that may be illumined by the approach we have been pursuing is the question of sin and the holy Church. The question, sometimes posed as whether the Church itself may or must be said to be sinful, was already

<sup>18</sup>Yves Congar, "Au lecteur," in Karl Delahaye, *Ecclesia mater chez les Pères des trois premiers siècles: Pour un renouvellement de la Pastorale d'aujourd'hui* (Unam Sanctam 46; Paris: du Cerf, 1964), 10; an English version can be found as "Mother Church," in Joseph Ratzinger, et al., *The Church Today* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1967), 38. Here are three texts in which Augustine describes the ecclesial dialectic by which Christians are at once children of the Church and themselves Mother Church: "The Church is to herself both a mother and her children; for all of those of whom the Church consists, taken together, are called a mother, while those same individuals, taken singly, are called her children" (*Quaestionum Evangeliorum*, I, 18:1; PL 35, 1327). "All the Christians hurrying together to Church are said to be children rushing to their mother, even though the one who is called mother consists of those same children." (*De diversis quaestionibus*, 59, 3; PL 30, 48). "We are called children of that mother even though she consists of us" (*Ibid.*, 75, 2; PL 40, c. 87).

being agitated before Vatican II and was an object of debate at the Council itself. The Council avoided calling the Church itself sinful and was content with the neat phrase "*sancta simul et semper purificanda*" (at once holy and always in need of being purified), spoke of the Church's having always to pursue the path of repentance and renewal, and admitted possible failures in its activities, etc. After the Council John Paul II became so intent on admitting the failures of Christians in a host of areas that he was accused by some in Rome of "mea-culpism"; the Pope generally avoided the term "sinful Church," although in one talk he did speak of the Church as at once "holy and sinful."

The reigning interpretation seems to be the one proposed by Charles Journet: "The Church is without sin but not without sinners."<sup>19</sup> In a large degree this interpretation rests on the view that the Church has a personhood of its own distinct from the persons of its members; Journet was of the view that to speak of the Church in terms of its members is to use a restricted, even an impoverished, sense of the term.<sup>20</sup> It is the Church in its full sense that is unfailingly united to Christ as Body to Head, that is indefectibly holy in its being and in its activity. To it belong individual Christians in virtue of that in them which is holy, which lives by supernatural charity; in that in them which is unholy, however, they do not belong to the holy Church. They may be said to be members of the Church, but their sin is theirs and not the Church's. In that sense it can be said that the Church is without sin but not without sinners.

A passage in Journet's writings illustrates rather well the difference between this view and the way in which Augustine and Aquinas approached the question. In his commentary on the Apostles' Creed, at the point at which he was explaining the holiness of the Church, St. Thomas continued to make use of the notion of the Church as the assembly of believers: To explain why the Church is said to be holy he passed easily from "Church" to "the faithful of this assembly," and he said that the latter are holy first because "washed in the blood of Christ," second, because of "a spiritual anointing that makes them holy," third because of the indwelling of the Holy Trinity, "since any place where God dwells is a holy place," and, fourth,

<sup>19</sup>See a collection of his papers in Charles Journet, *L'Église sainte mais non sans pécheurs* (Paris: Éd. Parole et Silence, 1999).

<sup>20</sup>See Charles Journet, "On Three Ways of Defining the Word 'Church' and on the Corresponding Ways of Assigning her Causes," in *The Church of the Word Incarnate*, vol. I: *The Apostolic Hierarchy* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955), 45-59.

because they are called by his holy Name.<sup>21</sup> Notice how concrete this is. That the Church is holy means that the faithful who are assembled in it and as it are holy.

But in a move that I think was quite unconscious, so habituated was he to view the Church as distinct from its members, Journet wrote: "The Church is holy," wrote St. Thomas, "because it washes believers in the blood of Christ, as is said in the Apocalypse, 'He loved us; he washed our sins in his blood, and he has made us kings and priests for God and his Father,' and in Hebrews: 'Jesus, having to sanctify the people by his blood, suffered outside the gate.'"<sup>22</sup> What in the biblical texts and in Aquinas's commentary is the work of Christ, in his saving passion, Journet attributes to the Church in her sanctifying, sacramental role, and the Church which Aquinas had identified with believers as the recipients of that great act of redemption, has now been set over and against believers to the point that it is now the Church that washes believers clean.

The concreteness of Aquinas's approach is also apparent when he says that "to be the glorious Church, 'without spot or wrinkle,' is the final goal to which we are being drawn by the passion of Christ. This will, therefore, be the case in the state of the homeland, but not in the state of the journey during which 'if we say that we do not have sin, we deceive ourselves' (1 John 1:8)."<sup>23</sup> Journet, on the other hand, believed the Church to be already without spot or wrinkle.

One can see how the traditional view, represented by Aquinas, corresponds to an approach to the Church as the community that results from the "process of self-constitution" we have explained as the communication and reception of the Gospel. The process and its result are something quite concrete: it consists in the assembly of believers. This assembly is holy because it consists of people blessed beyond merit by God in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. But what might be called the objective holiness of God's justifying and sanctifying love has to be lived out in a response of love for God and for one's neighbor. The Church will be as holy as are its members, and the Church in the singular will be as holy as are the individual Churches in which alone does it exist and act.

<sup>21</sup>Note, not so by the way, that Aquinas's notion of holiness is very biblical here; it does not refer to an ethical quality, but to the fact that the holy God has blessed it in the ways described; that is why the Church is said to be holy.

<sup>22</sup>Charles Journet, *L'Église sainte mais non sans pécheurs* (Paris: Éd. Parole et Silence, 1999), 50.

<sup>23</sup>Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, III, q. 8, a. 3, ad 2m. Augustine was just as concrete. If the Pelagians admit that they were sinners, he asked them: "How then is the Church of this time without stain and wrinkle, since you are its stain and wrinkle?" (Sermon 181; PL 38, c. 980).

The authenticity in which this holiness consists in the maturing and developing person is, of course, an ongoing thing:

So human authenticity is never some pure and serene and secure possession. It is ever a withdrawal from unauthenticity, and every successful withdrawal only brings to light the need for still further withdrawals. Our advance in understanding is also the elimination of oversights and misunderstandings. Our advance in truth is also the correction of mistakes and errors. Our moral development is through repentance for our sins. Genuine religion is discovered and realized by redemption from the many traps of religious aberration. So we are bid to watch and pray, to make our way in fear and trembling. And it is the greatest saints that proclaim themselves the greatest sinners, though their sins seem slight indeed to less holy folk that lack their discernment and their love.<sup>24</sup>

That is why, Lonergan says, "there is always a great need to eye very critically any religious individual or group and so discern beyond the real charity they may well have been granted the various types of bias that may distort or block their exercise of it."<sup>25</sup>

The quote calls to mind Lonergan's outline of a dialectic of history in terms of progress, whose principle is intelligence, of decline, whose principle is the irrationality that is sin, and of redemptive recovery, whose principle is the converted self blessed by the word and grace of God. Lonergan developed the analysis of evil in terms of individual, group, and general bias, and he did not think the analysis without relevance to the Church: "Not only is there the progress of mankind but also there is development and progress within Christianity itself; and as there is development, so too there is decline; and as there is decline, there also is the problem of undoing it, of overcoming evil with good not only in the world but also in the church."<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps it is not necessary to dwell on individual sins, familiar enough to us all. But it is worth noting that Lonergan does not exempt religious leaders from this sad fact; in fact, one of the three ways in which he sees a particularly perilous threat to the unity of faith is "when the absence of conversion occurs in those that govern the church or speak in its name," a subject, as I have remarked elsewhere,

<sup>24</sup>*Method in Theology*, 110.

<sup>25</sup>*Method in Theology*, 284.

<sup>26</sup>*Method in Theology*, 291.



on which the literature is not great.<sup>27</sup> We Catholics have in recent years become all too well aware of the possibility of sin in our religious leaders. (This is an important point because many people have misunderstood the statement that the Church itself cannot be considered sinful to be referring to the hierarchy or to the "institution," which is certainly mistaken.)

The analysis in terms of group bias can also be verified within the Church, not only among various groups – religious orders (one could think of the Chinese rites controversy), various kinds of movements, theological schools, bureaucratic centralization (monopolizing the selection of bishops), clerical careerism ("the shabby shell of Catholicism"<sup>28</sup>), etc. – but also in various defensive postures and policies adopted to preserve the Church's own prerogatives, whether in the Middle Ages and at the Reformation,<sup>29</sup> the creation of that separate little world of Roman Catholicism,<sup>30</sup> the decline into inauthenticity, which then becomes canonical, in religious orders, theological traditions, etc. ("Unauthenticity can spread and become a tradition."<sup>31</sup>)

Finally, there is the general bias that common sense, with a dash of holiness, suffices for the Church to meet its redemptive responsibilities. "If one does not attain, on the level of one's age, an understanding of the religious realities in which one believes, one will be simply at the mercy of the psychologists, the sociologists, the philosophers, that will not hesitate to tell believers what it really is in which they believe."<sup>32</sup> This is perhaps where one might place Lonergan's insistence on what happens when intellectual conversion and differentiations of consciousness do not accompany religious and moral conversion,<sup>33</sup> or when

<sup>27</sup>*Method in Theology*, 330. I have developed some ideas on this in "Authority and Conversion, or: The Limits of Authority," *Cristianesimo nella Storia*, 207-29.

<sup>28</sup>*Method in Theology*, 327.

<sup>29</sup>"If from no other way at least from experience we have learned that professions of zeal for the eternal salvation of souls do not make the persecution of heretics a means for the reconciliation of heretics"; Bernard Lonergan, *A Third Collection*, 106.

<sup>30</sup>Newman: "We are sinking into a sort of Novatianism, the heresy which the early Popes so strenuously resisted. Instead of aiming a being a world-wide power, we are shrinking into ourselves, narrowing the lines of communion, trembling at freedom of thought, and using the language of dismay and despair at the prospect before us, instead of, with the high spirit of the warrior, going out conquering and to conquer."

<sup>31</sup>Collected Works, vol. 17, 87.

<sup>32</sup>*Method in Theology*, 351.

<sup>33</sup>After discussing the necessity of pluralism in communications, Lonergan pointed up its difficulties: "On the one hand, it demands a many-sided development in those that govern or teach. On the other hand, every achievement is apt to be challenged by those that fail to achieve. People

divine healing is thought sufficient without human creativity, when the Church's redemptive action is not matched by its constructive action.

For just as the creative process, when unaccompanied by healing, is distorted and corrupted by bias, so too the healing process, when unaccompanied by creating, is a soul without a body. Christianity developed and spread with the ancient empire of Rome. It possessed the spiritual power to heal what was unsound in that imperial domain. But it was unaccompanied by its natural complement of creating, for a single development has two vectors, one from below upwards, creating, the other from above downwards, healing. So when the Roman empire decayed and disintegrated, the Church indeed lived on. But it lived on, not in a civilized world, but in a dark and barbarous age in which, as a contemporary reported, men devoured one another as fishes in the sea.<sup>34</sup>

Already in *Insight*, Lonergan regretted the fact that Catholic apologists always seemed in the unfortunate position of arriving at the latest scene of battle "a little breathlessly and a little late."<sup>35</sup> His "Epilogue" to that book ended with a brief description of what theology might contribute to empirical human science and of what empirical human science has to contribute to the rescue of mankind.<sup>36</sup> It is surely significant that *Method in Theology* ends with a similar preoccupation now stated in terms of the need for the Church to become "a fully conscious process of self-constitution," which I take to mean that the Church has to understand itself as an event of meaning within worldwide human society and to undertake there a redemptive and constructive role. What this means Lonergan immediately sets out:

But to do so it will have to recognize that theology is not the full science of man, that theology illuminates only certain aspects of human reality, that the church can become a fully conscious process of self-constitution

with little notion of modern scholarship can urge that attending to the literary genre of biblical writings is just a fraudulent device for rejecting the plain meaning of scripture. Those with not taste for systematic meaning will keep repeating that it is better to feel compunction than to define it, even if those that attempt definition insist that one can hardly define what one does not experience. Those, finally, whose consciousness is unmitigated by any tincture of systematic meaning, will be unable to grasp the meaning of such dogmas as Nicaea and they may gaily leap to the conclusion that what has no meaning for them is just meaningless" (*Method in Theology*, 329-30).

<sup>34</sup>Bernard Lonergan, "Healing and Creating in History," *A Third Collection*, 107-108.

<sup>35</sup>*Insight*, 733.

<sup>36</sup>*Insight*, 743-47.

only when theology unites itself with all other relevant branches of human studies.

The integrated human studies that Lonergan proposed, “correspond to a profound exigence in the contemporary situation.” marked by “ever increasing change due to an ever increasing expansion of knowledge.” But to meet this challenge, the Church will have to embark “on a course of continual renewal” that “will remove from its action the widespread impression of complacent irrelevance and futility.”<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, he was not in favor of reducing the philosophical and theological training of Jesuits who would be pursuing “professional” studies:

Without that development [the one philosophy and theology can effect in the Jesuit] only too easily will they tend to be not only specialists in other fields but also secularists, unable to bring their special knowledge within a Christian context and so give the Christian community (in its effort to sublimate the whole of human living) the advantage of the technical knowledge they possess and the community wished them to attain. Unless Christian specialists are something of generalists, they are like the seed that does not fall into the ground to die but itself remaineth alone.<sup>38</sup>

These last considerations bring us back to the statement that the Church is a process of self-constitution *within worldwide human society*. “Worldwide human society,” of course, is what human beings have made and are making with their individual and collective decisions. That achievement of common meaning and value bears all the marks of human grandeur and misery, and its misery needs healing if the greatness is to be achieved and sustained. As Christ represented God’s intervention in man’s making of man, so the Church is the community of people in the world that is supposed to be the instrument of Christ’s healing word and grace and to make a constructive contribution to reversing human evil and advancing human progress. The Church undertakes this task, however, in quite specific and concrete communities of faith, hope, and love, communities that are themselves subject to the dialectic of authentic greatness and inauthentic misery. But this sad fact should only be a reminder that nothing – no institution, no tradition, no sacramental system – nothing substitutes for conversion, intellectual, moral, religious, and Christian, the conversion that is at once the basis and the

<sup>37</sup>*Method in Theology*, 364-67.

<sup>38</sup>Bernard Lonergan, “Questionnaire on Philosophy: Response,” *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 17, 352-83, at 372.

fruit of “the community that results from the outer communication of Christ’s message and from the inner gift of God’s love.”