

Lonergan, The Development of Doctrine and the Reception of Ecumenical Consensus

I write this contribution as somewhat of an “accidental” student of Bernard Lonergan. By that I mean that the corpus of Bernard Lonergan’s work has never been the primary focus of my work. The driving force behind much of my research has been the search for Christian unity, and the effort to overcome church-dividing doctrinal issues through the long and patient process of inter-church dialogue. The ecumenical movement is fundamentally a movement of renewal in the life of the church. In the course of attempting to reflect systematically on theology’s task in the service of growth towards unity, I have found it helpful to appeal to the thought of Bernard Lonergan, in particular to his reflection on *Method in Theology*.¹ I welcome the occasion of this workshop to return Lonergan’s theory once again and consider the specific question of the development of doctrine. These reflections are very preliminary in nature.

Far from proposing an exhaustive theory of the development of doctrine, Lonergan reflects on the lived experience of the church in the evolution of its corpus of dogmatic teachings. In his discussion of “dogmatic development” in *The Way to Nicea*, Lonergan observed that:

Within the ante-Nicene movement we have to recognize two distinct, though related developments. There is no doubt that those early Christian centuries produced a development in Trinitarian and Christological doctrine, but this doctrinal development contained within it another, more profound development: the development of the very notion of dogma. But this latter development was

¹ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990; Original version: Darton Longman & Todd / Herder and herder, 1972); For my application of Lonergan’s framework, see especially, “Lonergan and Ecumenism,” *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 521-538; the former is largely a distillation of *The Groupe des Dombes: A Dialogue of Conversion*. American University Studies, Series VII, Theology and Religion. Vol. 231 (New York: Peter Lang, 2005). See also “Dialogue and Method: Learning from the Groupe des Dombes,” *One in Christ* 38 (2003): 42-57. Elsewhere, I have attempted to apply Lonergan’s theory to the relationship between developments in church doctrine, including those influenced by ecumenical progress, and canon law: “The Collaboration of Theology and Canon Law in Light of Lonergan’s Theory,” *Studia Canonica* 40/1 (2006): 117-136.

implicit not explicit; the question was not sharply defined, methodically investigated and unambiguously answered. (...) But other dogmas had to follow, and then the historical investigation of dogmas, before the fact of dogmatic development itself could be clearly established.²

The conflicts of the early church concerning the doctrine of the Trinity gave rise, not only to progress in understanding the true nature of the Godhead. Whether or not they were explicitly conscious of it or intending it, the early Fathers of the Church were positing the fact of doctrinal development upon which others would reflect in retrospect. In our own day growth in theological agreement on questions that were once considered church-dividing is actively contributing to the development of doctrine. At the same time, the fact of inter-church dialogue constitutes an unprecedented context for such development. The “ecumenical advance” of the past century, and indeed the ongoing work of seeking theological consensus and considering the implications of growth in agreement for the life of the churches, places us before the fact of a qualitatively different kind of doctrinal development, the likes of which we have never before witnessed in the history of the church. While the true nature of this present development will only become clear as it unfolds and might only be assessed when one looks back from some future point in history, an appeal to Lonergan’s theory can help to illuminate the character of this new reality.

A New Form of Doctrinal Development

It is possible to discern two principal types of doctrinal development in the history of the Christian tradition. In the first millennium, the ecumenical councils witness to a transition from the symbolic world of the New Testament to the elaboration of a more precise language, adapting many of the categories of Hellenistic philosophy to clarify and

² Bernard Lonergan, *The Way to Nicea: The Dialectical Development of Trinitarian Theology*. Trans. Conn O’Donovan (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964), p. 13.

delimit the content of church doctrines pertaining to the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation in a somewhat contentious dialectical process. In Lonergan's words, the ante-Nicene movement "marks a transition from the mystery of God hidden in symbols, hinted at by a multiplicity of titles, apprehended only in a vague and confused manner in the dramatico-practical pattern of experience, to the mystery of God as circumscribed and manifested in clear, distinct, and apparently contradictory affirmations."³ Efforts to expand the realm of doctrinal precision through the integration of Aristotelian philosophical categories into theological doctrine flourished in the scholastic age of the high Middle Ages, extending their systematic application to the realms of sacramental and moral life.

Another significant transition takes place in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when the development of doctrine is conceived less as a matter of clarification in the face of conflict, and more as the unfolding of an idea⁴ or the rendering explicit in the form of new dogmatic declarations that which was already implied in the life and prayer of the church.⁵ John Henry Newman, who ushers in this new way of thinking about development with his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, described the foundation of the Christian faith as a "living idea." He understood doctrinal development as a "process ... by which the aspects of an idea are brought to consistency and form."⁶ The declarations of the Marian dogmas and the teaching of the First Vatican Council on

³ Lonergan, *The Way to Nicea*, p. 137.

⁴ The work of John Henry Newman is at the center of this approach. See *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame UP, 1989), especially chapter 1, "Development in Ideas," pp. 33-54.

⁵ Lonergan comments on these developments in *Method*: "Their sole effect was that the solemn teaching office now proclaims what formerly was proclaimed by the ordinary teaching office. Perhaps I might suggest that human psychology and specifically the refinement of human feelings is the area to be explored in coming to understand the development of Marian doctrines," p. 320.

⁶ Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, p. 38.

the infallible exercise of the papal magisterium are illustrative of this shifting paradigm. At the same time, a rise in historical consciousness and the concomitant study of the history of doctrines makes possible the emergence of both the skeptical critique of such developments by the likes of Adolf Harnack or Rudolph Bultman,⁷ and the first systematic reflections on the legitimacy, and indeed the necessity of these developments in the tradition.

In his study of the idea of doctrinal development, *From Newman to Congar*, Aidan Nichols observes that the earliest attempts to elaborate a theory of the development of doctrine were largely an *apologia* for Roman Catholic dogmatic teaching, a justification and defense against those who would reject such developments as a departure from the unadulterated message of Jesus contained in the New Testament. Other Christian churches regarded the new Catholic dogmatic teachings as a source of deepening divisions. The tone of Catholic thinkers was largely conciliatory, and the ecumenical motive of such a theory was clear. One hoped to win over Orthodox, Anglican and Protestants to the reasonable claims of the Catholic position.

According to Nichols, Catholic theology had achieved an important synthesis in the understanding of the historical development of doctrine by the middle of the twentieth century, through the efforts of figures such as Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Yves Congar. This balanced view is reflected in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, whose Dogmatic Constitution of Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) states,

⁷ Their approach to the history of religions and to the historical study of the biblical text respectively led them to conclude that the message of the Gospel had been corrupted by the introduction of Hellenist categories that were foreign to the Christian kerygma, and that Catholicism in particular, as seen the introduction of the doctrine of purgatory in the Middle Ages, or in the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception and later of papal infallibility in the nineteenth century, had broken ties with the original message of Jesus found in its purity in the New Testament. See Aidan Nichols, *From Newman to Congar: The Idea of the Development of Doctrine from the Victorians to the Second Vatican Council*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), pp. 6-13.

The tradition which comes from the apostles progresses in the church, under the assistance of the holy Spirit. There is growth in understanding of what is handed on, both the words and the realities they signify. This comes about through contemplation and study by believers, who “ponder these things in their hearts” (see Lk 2, 19 and 51); through the intimate understanding of spiritual things which they experience; and through the preaching of those who, on succeeding to the office of bishops, receive the sure charism of truth. Thus, as the centuries advance, the church constantly holds its course towards the fullness of God’s truth, until the day when the words of God reach their fulfillment in the church (DV 8).⁸

Nonetheless, in the post-conciliar period, Nichols claims the possibility of maintaining the “serenity and confidence” of that balanced view has been undermined by a shifting of paradigms on three significant fronts: namely, the increasing pluralism and specialization of theology, the increasing complexity of hermeneutics, and the necessity of attending to the process of the reception of church doctrine.⁹ My general thesis is that the effort of sustained interchurch dialogue is contributing today, in yet unrecognized ways, and in a manner that has yet to be fully received and integrated into the theological culture and doctrinal expression of the various Christian churches, to a new synthesis in the understanding of the development of doctrine which begins to address the new challenges indicated by Nichols.

Lonergan’s thought on the development of doctrine marks the advent of a new approach to understanding doctrinal development founded upon an understanding of the dynamics of conscious intentional operations. In *Method in Theology*, Lonergan alludes to the engagement of theologians in ecumenical dialogue as concentrating primarily in

⁸ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils. Vol. 2*. Edited by Norman P. Tanner (Washington, DC:: Georgetown UP / London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), pp. 971-981, at p. 974. All subsequent citations of the conciliar texts are drawn from this edition.

⁹ Nichols, *From Newman to Congar*, pp.266-277.

the functional specialties of dialectic and doctrines.¹⁰ This is an important clue to the way in which dialogue is not simply concerned to uncover the facts of revelation and their interpretation and history. It is reflective task, an activity of discernment, of deliberation, and of what Lonergan refers to as judgment of value. It is not merely a cognitive or intellectual task, but involves the conversion of whole persons and whole communities. Thus, the work of theological reflection takes place within a context of living prayer and fellowship.

The unprecedented character of this activity lies in the fact that all churches who enter into such a process must display a fundamental readiness to revisit the judgments of the past. They are revisiting areas where it they had once thought to have “brought definitive closure to a particular theological debate.”¹¹ Indeed, the very fact that Christians can today engage in such an undertaking implies a dramatic shift from considering one another’s positions as simply heretical or erroneous counter positions, to the basic supposition that the doctrinal achievements of each church – even if we persist in a concern that they might be “deficient” in some way¹² – nonetheless represent a genuine attempt to receive the inner Word of God in fidelity to the gospel of Christ and the teaching of the apostles. We now listen to hear beyond the divergent outer word

¹⁰ Lonergan, *Method*, p. 367; also p. 129-130.

¹¹ Cf. Robert M. Doran, *What Is Systematic Theology?* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 33. My reflections on doctrines and on categories are largely informed by reflections in this work.

¹² This is the outlook retained in the Decree on Ecumenism: “Though the ecclesial communities which are separated from us lack the fullness of unity with us that flows from baptism, and though we believe they have not retained the full reality of the eucharistic mystery, especially because the sacrament of orders is lacking ...” [Communitates ecclesiales a nobis seiunctae, quamvis deficiat earum plena nobiscum unitas ex baptisate profluens, et quamvis credamu illas, praesertim propter sacramenti ordinis defectum...], (*UR* 22). The frequent translation of *defectum* as “lacking” or as an “absence” of the sacrament of orders is a regrettable inaccuracy. “Deficiency” comes closer to the original the Latin expression, which aims at retaining the positive affirmation of partial or imperfect communion.

represented in the doctrinal expressions of our partner a reception of the inner word that binds us together.

This initial judgment contains within it the presupposition that diverse Christian churches, in given historical and social contexts, and often in response to particular crises – including ecclesial conflict – or pastoral needs, have functioned as distinctive interpretive communities in their efforts to formulate the outer word of church doctrine. Thus, the partners engaged in dialogue can expect to receive new insights from one another’s unique penetration into some aspect of the inner word. The Second Vatican Council’s Decree on Ecumenism anticipated this development when it recognized the legitimate variety that exists, even in “the theological expression of doctrine.” Referring especially to the appropriation of revelation in the Eastern and Western traditions, it acknowledges the need to take account of the ways the churches “have followed different methods, and taken different steps, towards their understanding and confession of God’s truth” (*UR 17*). Further, the Decree welcomes the discovery that at times “one tradition has come nearer to a full appreciation of some aspects of a mystery of revelation than the other, or has expressed it to better advantage” (*UR 17*). In a common search for the truth, then, it must be recognized that a fuller appropriation of the inner word of revelation will integrate the insights of the very best efforts of all concerned to express the riches of the mysteries of faith as they have been variously received by the churches through the ages. This reality is perhaps most evident in the results of the liturgical renewal which has marked the Western churches in the past half century. And while there may be ample evidence of a fruitful cross fertilization in the work of individual theologians, there is

reason to suggest that there is some hesitancy to receive any such developments in church doctrine.

Dialogue and Dialectic

By engaging in the process of dialectic, ecumenical partners work to distinguish the manner in which the diverging horizons of their respective church doctrines may be complementary, genetic or dialectical. Along the way, they may find it necessary to repent humbly of the fact that in many instances, through misunderstanding, misrepresentation and the lack of conversion which deeply marked the moments of controversy in our shared history, our churches had actually mistaken counter-positions for positions, and positions for counter-positions.¹³ Such judgments are the result of working together at the task of critical history to discern what was going forward in past determinations, and what aspects of truth might have been left behind, forgotten and lost from view.¹⁴ Such an acknowledgment creates a new horizon within which the doctrinal expressions of the past must be reinterpreted and the formulation of doctrine must be carried forward in the future. At the same time this active engagement in dialectic prepares what Lonergan has described as “the purification of categories – the elimination of the unauthentic” and begins to generate the special theological categories required to articulate the horizons of common faith.¹⁵

¹³ See Lonergan, *Method*, p. 251.

¹⁴ The notion of “forgotten truths” was explored by Karl Rahner in, “Forgotten Truths Concerning the Sacrament of Penance,” in *Theological Investigations* Vol. II. Trans. Karl-H. Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1963), pp. 135-174.

¹⁵ Lonergan, *Method*, p. 292. Lonergan makes it clear that the elimination of the unauthentic can only be effected “in the measure that theologians attain authenticity through religious, moral, and intellectual conversion.” Again, it is essential that the rigorous theological work produced through the activities of a dialogue commission is grounded in the experience of sincere fellowship and common prayer.

Another point to consider, though space does not permit me to develop it adequately here, is that in the search for a mutually agreed expression of common faith, theologians engaged in dialogue are in fact searching for a set of categories that are transcultural, and apt to mediate between the inherited categories

As I have suggested elsewhere,¹⁶ the statement of ecumenical consensus by an ecumenical commission has a foundational character or fulfils a role similar to the operations of what Lonergan has described as the functional specialty of foundations or “conversion.” The explicitation of consensus or convergence can be seen as an effort to delineate in ecumenically receivable language a new common horizon for understanding the truth of the faith we share. Such affirmations, though often misunderstood and in recent times regrettably discredited,¹⁷ are intended to promote a process of conversion in the life and teaching of the churches. They are the result of a common search for the truth of our common faith. Engaging together in the evaluative process of rereading, reinterpreting, and re-receiving the inner word of God requires an act of ecclesial self-transcendence and of growth in ecclesial authenticity. Each church strives to appropriate the mystery of faith more fully and to better harmonize the outer word of church doctrine and life with the inner word of revelation, a word that is can never be the sole or complete possession of a single Christian community. While the goal is a common re-appropriation of the tradition, this is never to be confused with a uniform expression of

of each tradition. This entails an evaluative judgment concerning the transcultural nature of the inherited categories employed in the articulation of each church’s doctrine, including whether, in the contemporary context, they continue to refer to or to mediate effectively the inner core of faith. See Lonergan, *Method*, p. 284: “... both with regard to transcendental method and with regard to the gift of his love we have distinguished between an inner core, which is transcultural, and an outer manifestation, that is subject to variation. Needless to say, theological categories will be transcultural only in so far as they refer to that inner core. In their actual formulation they will be historically conditioned and so subject to correction, modification, complementation. Moreover, the more elaborate they become and the further they are removed from that inner core, the greater will be their precariousness.” On this point, the contribution of Ivo Coehlo to this Workshop is most helpful.

¹⁶ See especially, “Lonergan and Ecumenism,” and *The Groupe des Dombes*, Conclusion.

¹⁷ Cardinal Avery, once himself a pioneer in ecumenical dialogue, recently characterized the work of ecumenical dialogue as an attempt to “harmonize the doctrines of each ecclesial tradition,” or as willing to settle “for the lowest common denominator,” or again as being ready to sacrifice one’s denominational convictions on the altar of political correctness. In his view, the methods of seeking theological consensus or convergence have exhausted themselves and should be set aside. Avery Dulles, “The Search for Unity Since 1957: A Catholic Perspective.” A paper presented in the context of “On Being Christian Together: The Faith and Order Experience in the United States. US Faith and Order Commission 50th Anniversary Event, Oberlin College, July 19-23, 2007. This paper has since been published as “Saving Ecumenism from Itself,” in *First Things*. http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=6081.

church doctrines. Nonetheless, it must be recognized by all that a fuller integration of past achievements of the wider Christian tradition is the condition for all future developments of both theological and ecclesial doctrines.

Differentiated Consciousness and Differentiated Consensus

An adequate appreciation of the foundational character of ecumenical consensus statements requires a fully differentiated consciousness and, whatever one's epistemological position, at least enough critical realism to differentiate between the meaning of the inner word and the doctrinal expression of one's own denominational tradition, (or as John XXIII noted in his opening address at the Second Vatican Council, between the substance of faith and the way it is expressed). Among the recommendations issued by the Ninth Forum on Bilateral Dialogues held by the World Council of Church's Faith and Order Commission, is the encouragement for dialogue teams "to look behind the terminology which each side employs to the theological frameworks within which this terminology finds its meaning."¹⁸ Progress in theological agreement requires moving beyond what Lonergan refers to as naïve realism or even doctrinal realism, and entry into a spirit of critical realism.

The reception of ecumenical agreement has at times been impeded by both an over zealous attachment to the theological categories of the dogmatic achievements of one's own tradition, in a kind of resistance to the world mediated by meaning. Consensus statements are taken, not as a horizon of meaning within which to reconsider past achievements and correct or complete the expression of church doctrines for the future,

¹⁸ "Many Ways to Christian Unity? The Ninth Forum on Bilateral Dialogues: The Breklum Statement," p. 4, at <http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p2/breklum-statement.pdf>.

but as competing doctrines to be juxtaposed with truly orthodox expressions of faith.¹⁹

On the other extreme, the utility of theological spadework and intellectual achievement is seriously questioned or dismissed in a retreat into a naïve realism unwilling to accept anything more than the vague symbolism of the New Testament, or into the ascetic world of experience based in the realm of praxis and giving priority to common witness.²⁰

An important indicator of the fact that ecumenical dialogue is actively contributing to the development of church doctrines can be seen in the efforts of the churches to correct the misjudgments of the past. Such developments are the product of genuine conversions – religious, moral, intellectual – and demonstrate that we are on the way to undoing the effects of evil and decline in our halting attempts to express the mystery of faith in time conditioned human language. Among the examples of a critical re-evaluation of past theological achievements one might consider the decision of the 2004 synod of the Christian Reformed Church of North America regarding the

¹⁹ A certain tendency to seek doctrinal uniformity was evident in the Vatican's initial "Observations" concerning the agreement on "Eucharistic Doctrine" developed by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Observations on the ARCIC Final Report," *Origins* 11 (1981-82): 752-756. In its official response to ARCIC's *Final Report* the Vatican disagreed with the assessment of the commission and requested further clarifications, "before it can be said that the statements made in the Final Report *correspond fully to Catholic doctrine* on the eucharist and ordained ministry" (emphasis mine). See "The Official Catholic Response to the Final Report of ARCIC I," in *Common Witness to the Gospel: Documents on Anglican-Catholic Relations 1983-1995*. Jeffrey Gros, E. Roseanne Elder, and Ellen K. Wondra, eds. (Washington, DC: USCC, 1997), pp. 69-77, no. 30, at p. 76. See also "Requested Clarifications on Eucharist and Ministry," in *Ibid.*, pp. 114-122. A similar trend was evident in the reaction of many Lutheran theologians in Germany on the eve of the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith by representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church.

²⁰ This latter tendency is what Nichols identifies as the challenge of "hermeneutics" to the synthesis of understanding in the development of doctrine. It is characteristic of liberationist trends in theology, which give priority to the role of experience, especially to the perspective and to the voice of the oppressed and the excluded. I am sympathetic to the perspectives of Robert M. Doran to the effect that the preferential option for the poor ought to be recognized as a constitutive doctrine of the church (Cf. *What Is Systematic Theology?*, pp. 40-41). While ecumenical dialogues focus primarily on those doctrines which have been the object of controversy and division between the churches, this should not minimize, in any way, the significance of such perspectives. Indeed, the heightened awareness of the church's mission to work together for transformation of society and for the liberation of all makes it all more urgent for us to arrive at a consensus on matters of sacramental theology and ecclesiology.

Heidelberg Catechism. Where the Heidelberg Catechism taught that that the Catholic celebration of the Mass “at bottom, is nothing less than a denial of the one sacrifice and sufferings of Jesus Christ, and an accursed idolatry” (Q. and A. 80), dialogue on eucharistic doctrine and contemporary liturgical renewal enabled Reformed Christians to understand that this was not, in fact the case. The 2004 synod voted to amend the catechism and include a note affirming, “The Mass, when celebrated in accordance with official Roman Catholic teaching, neither denies the one sacrifice and suffering Jesus Christ nor constitutes an idolatry.”²¹ In this case contemporary doctrinal consensus served as a criteria and a corrective for judgments born in the polemics of the past. Similarly, a number of Presbyterian Churches have dissociated themselves in recent years from several affirmations in the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Second Helvetic Confession, and the Westminster Confession, a series of sixteenth and seventeenth century confessional texts which condemn and mischaracterize the sacraments and ministry of the Catholic Church.²² Such decisions are an effective recognition that, though diverging in the manner of expression, and though perhaps still short of full doctrinal agreement, the doctrinal expressions of the ecumenical partner is a

²¹ See Christian Reformed Church of North America, *Acts of Synod 2004*, Article 47, “Report of the Advisory Committee 7, Interdenominational Matters,” p. 566. http://www.crcna.org/site/uploads/uploads/2004_acts.pdf. For the annotation to the catechism, see: www.reformed.org/documents/Heidelberg.html.

²² E.g.: “Report of the Assembly Committee on Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations to the Presbyterian Church (USA) 216th General Assembly (2004),” recommendation” “Specific Statements in the 16th and 17th century confessions and catechism in *the Book of Confessions* contain condemnations or derogatory characterizations of the Roman Catholic Church: Chapters XVIII and XXII of the Scots Confession; Questions and Answer 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism; and Chapters II, III, XVII, and XX, of the Second Helvetic Confession. (Chapters XXII, XXV, and XXIX of the Westminster Confession of Faith have been amended to remove anachronous and offensive language. Chapter XXVIII and the French Confession does not have constitutional standing.) While these statements emerged from substantial disputes, they reflect the 16th and 17th century polemics. Their condemnations and characterizations of the Catholic Church are not the position of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and are not applicable to current relationships between the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Catholic Church.” (Item 06-06, no. 1, p. 4).

sincere attempt to receive the mystery of the Word in fidelity to the Scriptures and the teaching of the apostles.

Perhaps the clearest expression to date of a clearly differentiated consciousness can be found in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith²³ signed in 1999 by representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, and in the approach of “differentiated consensus” modeled by this accord. This same agreement was also affirmed by the Methodist World Council in Seoul, Korea, in July of 2006.²⁴ The Joint Declaration demonstrates how agreement on the basic truths of the doctrine of justification allows the churches to consider “the remaining differences of language, theological elaboration, and emphasis in the understanding” (no. 40) and explication of Lutheran and Catholic expressions of this doctrine in a new light. Past theological achievements, in particular the doctrinal condemnations of each tradition are judged in light of this new consensus: “The teaching of the Lutheran churches presented in this Declaration does not fall under the condemnations from the Council of Trent. The condemnations in the Lutheran Confessions do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church presented in this Declaration” (no. 41). Similarly, the horizon of common understanding establishes the framework within which future expressions of Lutheran and Catholic doctrine must be developed. The attention of Catholics has been drawn in a new way to the centrality of the doctrine of justification in the Pauline corpus. Another immediate consequence of this agreement has been initiation of a joint study of

²³ http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/l-rc/doc/e_l-rc_just.html.

²⁴ See “Report From the Coordinator of Ecumenical Dialogues (Dr. Geoffrey Wainwright),” and “The World Methodist Council and the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” World Methodist Council, Seoul, 2006, http://worldmethodistcouncil.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=46&Itemid=67.

the practice of indulgences, an area where questions persist regarding a practical culture of “works righteousness.” For their part, Lutherans will be more attentive in future to the transformative power of justifying grace and to the active participation of the faithful in response to God’s free gift of grace.

The approach of differentiated consensus adopted by the Lutheran – Catholic Commission on Unity enables us to consider that, in the light of a shared understanding of the common meaning of the doctrine of justification, the diversity of Lutheran and Catholic doctrine ought to be understood, not as reflecting a divergence on the meaning of the mystery of God’s unmerited gift of grace, but rather, a diversity of special theological categories. The joint affirmation of the basic truths of this doctrine in mutually agreed theological categories helps to mediate between these two worlds of experience and grounds the possibility for a harmonious development in the future articulation of doctrine by each church. One ought not to expect that this new horizon of common faith will be received in the same way by each church or that future Lutheran or Catholic expressions of this doctrine will uniform. Due to both the diversity of their histories, yet also the diversity of their contemporary experience, these shared special categories will now interact with the data of consciousness and historical experience in the unique context of each church.²⁵

²⁵ “It is to be stressed that this use of special categories [i.e., their acceptance in doctrines, systematics, communications] occurs in interaction with data. They receive further specification from the data. At the same time, the data set up an exigence for further clarification of the categories and for their correction and development. In this fashion there is set a scissors movement with an upper blade in the categories and the lower blade in the data. (...) So, as theology is an ongoing process, as religion and religious doctrine themselves develop, the functional specialty, foundations, will be largely concerned with the origins, the genesis, the present state, the possible developments and adaptations of the categories in which Christians understand themselves, communicate with one another, and preach the gospel to all nations.” *Method*, p. 293.

Development in Retrospect and the Future Reformulation of Church Doctrines

The long and patient effort of dialogue is proving that it is possible to mediate across the spectrum of different sets of the inherited special theological categories of ecumenical partners and to confirm a unity in diversity on key elements of church doctrine. As well, the growing body of ecumenical agreed statements on a host of issues is contributing to the development of a shared horizon of agreement on the constitutive meaning of foundational mysteries of the Christian faith. Perhaps the most significant effort of this sort that is presently underway is the Faith and Order Commission's attempt to elaborate a common statement on the Nature and Mission of the Church.²⁶ One should not underestimate the power of this horizon, when properly received, to become a powerful force for the deepening of authentic communion. The work that remains to be done is the active transposition of this new horizon and its integration into the categories of each ecclesial tradition. Such a process entails the onerous task of re-evaluating each one's doctrinal tradition and refining the living expression of faith and practice. The examples cited above indicate that through such deliberation – an integral aspect of the process of reception – a number of churches have reassessed the systematic meaning behind a number of church doctrines which reflect past achievements and convey the

²⁶ See Faith and Order, "The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement," at http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p2/FO2005_198_en.pdf. Robert M. Doran notes: "In a discussion period at the 1962 Institute at Regis College, Toronto, on 'Method in Theology,' Lonergan expressed a conviction that the sacraments and the church are two areas in systematic theology in which an enormous amount of work needs to be done. In fact, he said, there is needed even doctrinal developments in these areas... There is then the field in which the categories are not yet fully developed. For example, categories as to the instrumental causality of the sacraments; they have to be developed more fully. There is also *everything regarding history and the mystical body, and the church*; these need further development.' (Emphasis added.)" In *What is Systematic Theology?*, note 23, p. 222. One might reasonably argue that the ecumenical endeavor has been contributing precisely to such development in the past half century.

judgments of each denominational church with respect to the doctrinal expression of other Christian churches. Such acts of reception have been largely retrospective.

Perhaps the greater challenge to the reception of the expanding horizon of mutual understanding is in allowing it to perform a constructive role in the positive reformulation of church doctrines with a view to the future of a reconciled church. The Decree on Ecumenism is unambiguous about this responsibility when it refers to the “continual reformation” of which the church is needful: “Thus if, in various times and circumstances, there have been deficiencies ... *even in the way church teaching has been formulated* ... these should be set right in the proper way at the opportune moment” (UR 6).

Three Shifts Affecting Future Doctrinal Development

Let us now return to the observations of Aidan Nichols, that the easy acceptance of the notion of the historical development of doctrine once achieved in the mid-twentieth century, was being seriously destabilized by the end of the century by the rise of increasing pluralism in theological disciplines and approaches, by the introduction of experience and contextual perspectives to hermeneutics, and finally, by the growing awareness of the complexity of reception in the process of teaching church doctrines.

Development in a Pluralistic Context

The challenge posed by the plurality of theologies in a world church is raised by Karl Rahner. Rahner saw doctrinal development as moving in two directions, one expanding (reflective knowledge) and the other simplifying (simple consciousness) with

a reciprocal relationship between the two. Somewhat like Lonergan, he conceived of doctrinal development as the coming to consciousness of faith in the subject of the church, and as rooted in human experience. Writing before the Second Vatican Council he explained,

It is not as if all dogmatic development must always move in the direction of multiplying individual assertions. Just as important, indeed, strictly speaking still more important, is the development in the line of simplification, toward an ever clearer view of what is really intended, towards the single mystery, an intensification of the experience in faith of what is infinitely simple and in a very essential sense obvious.²⁷

The history of dogma is therefore characterized by both expansive and intensive moments. In the years following the council Rahner was indeed preoccupied with the new consciousness of pluralism which hailed the emergence of a world church,²⁸ he emphasized the need for simplification and called for a major shift in the teaching role of the magisterium, declaring, “We have arrived at a state, then, on which the possibility of any really *new* definitions being produced by the Church’s teaching authority is at an ‘end’.”²⁹

This is not, as Nichols has suggested, “a less optimistic assessment the future of the idea of doctrinal development itself.”³⁰ Rahner was responding to the notion that the infallible teaching office of the pope entailed “a continual process of the formulation of *new* doctrinal positions” in a process of development which leads to an increasing

²⁷ Karl Rahner, “Considerations on the Development of Dogma,” *Theological Investigations* Vol. IV. Trans. Kevin Smith (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), p. 26.

²⁸ See Karl Rahner, “Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council,” in *Theological Investigations* Vol. XX. Trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 77-89.

²⁹ Karl Rahner, “On the Concept of Infallibility in Catholic Theology,” in *Theological Investigations* Vol. XIV. Trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury, 1976), p. 74.

³⁰ Nichols, *From Newman to Congar*, p. 266.

quantity of defined church doctrines.³¹ Further, he observed that in recent times the magisterium “has been occupied with marginal areas in the hierarchy of truths of the Christian faith.”³² For Rahner, the time had come for the papal magisterium to assume a prophetic role in the reformulation of the core of the Christian faith, in a practice which would heighten its character as a service to the unity of the church. He called for a return to the “basic substance of the Christian message”³³ in a manner that would enable a fuller appropriation of the faith by men and women of our age. These observations are not born in a spirit of pessimism, as Nichols suggests, but in a realistic assessment of the potential for reformulating the Christian faith and for bringing to life in new ways the central tenets of Christian doctrine. Rahner extends his reflection into his later proposal for the reunification of the churches, when he suggests that in a reconciled church, the papal teaching office would not “consist of ever-new differentiations of the original substance of faith,” but rather in “the clarification, appropriate to the situation, of *the* substance of faith already contained in the ancient creeds.”³⁴

Lonergan was certainly attuned to the challenge posed to the unity of faith by multiple differentiations of consciousness and different common sense worlds. He points to a similar need for simplification in church doctrine when he suggests, “because the gospel is to be preached to all, there must be modes of representation and of expression appropriate to communicating revealed truth to every brand of common sense and to

³¹ Rahner, “On the Concept of Infallibility,” p. 72.

³² Karl Rahner, “Magisterium and Theology,” in *Theological Investigations* Vol. XVIII. Trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983), p. 72.

³³ Rahner, “Magisterium and Theology,” p. 72.

³⁴ Heinrich Fires and Karl Rahner, *Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility*. Trans. Ruth C. L. Gritsch and Eric W. Gritsch (New York: Paulist / Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p. 89.

every differentiation of consciousness.”³⁵ The integration of the mutually agreed expression of faith represented by statements of ecumenical consensus or convergence, which reflect a renewed clarity and use of the symbolic categories of the New Testament and of the early tradition of the church, provide the basis for such simplified and appropriate expression of the gospel. The re-expression of church doctrine in these terms would reflect a second naïveté, a fresh experience of encounter with love of God revealed to us in Christ and poured into our hearts by God’s Spirit.

Perhaps the most notable call for such a simple re-articulation of the core of Christian doctrine in recent times is that made by Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity. Kasper has recently noted the need for a new “fundamental ecumenism” that will be more capable of speaking to younger generations who are “no longer interested in the old controversies,”³⁶ and for whom ecumenical engagement remains an obscure business carried on in an arcane academic language by a few specialists. A “fundamental ecumenism” would make the heart of the Christian message more accessible to younger generations by adopting a “new elementary vocabulary.” Such a vocabulary, ought to become a common language for the churches in the expression of the core doctrines.

The Challenge of Hermeneutics

Nichols identifies a second challenge to the contemporary development of doctrine in the new priority given to diverse contextual perspectives – including those of the poor and oppressed, of women, and of various cultures – as described by the work of

³⁵ Lonergan, *Method*, p. 330.

³⁶ Walter Kasper, “The Current Ecumenical Transition,” *Origins* 36/26 (2006) 407-413, at 413.

Edward Schillebeeckx. Much hard theoretical and critical work remains to be done, not only to reformulate and develop Christian doctrines in ways that are meaningful for contemporary men and women, but also to explain systematically the responsibility to do so in a manner that will provide a clear accounting for the grounding of both our common understanding of the faith and the contemporary reformulation of church doctrines in relation to the witness of scripture, to the authoritative interpretations reflected in the works of early Christian writers, ecumenical councils, confessional statements, to their historical evolution and to contemporary knowledge and experience, and of the reasoned judgments to which this gives rise. In short, some mutually agreed hermeneutical criteria will have to be developed in order to discern those developments which constitute genuine progress and advance in understanding from those which inevitably lead to decline.

The challenge raised by the integration of development in contemporary learning into church doctrines is profound, as can be seen from the extreme polarization not only between the Christian churches, but within each one, as they attempt to come to terms with new moral questions. The issue of hermeneutics is widely recognized today as a significant one that must be faced by all the churches together. It is significant that the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches identified the need for a study of hermeneutics in light of the churches' responses to the consensus statement on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.³⁷ This work on hermeneutics and on authority

³⁷ Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: WCC, 1982); Max Thurian, ed. *Churches Respond to BEM* Vols. 1-6 (Geneva: WCC, 1986). A fruit of this study process is the text, "A Treasure in Earthen Vessels: An Instrument for An Ecumenical Reflection on Hermeneutics," at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/iv->

continues today. There is much more at issue than the interpretation of Scripture, or even the dynamics of Scripture and tradition. The larger hermeneutical question underpinning the tension surrounding such questions is the role of contemporary experience and more specifically the larger question of the appropriate relationship of general categories to the special categories of theology and church doctrine. The divergence of the Augustinian and Aristotelian streams of thought, famously unresolved in the thirteenth century, continues to dog Christian theology and doctrine in our day. The deepest roots of such conflict may lie, not only in various differentiations of consciousness or worlds of common sense, but as Lonergan has observed, in a lack of conversion and a continued resistance to an empirically grounded hermeneutic rooted in critical realist perspective. He observes that this lack of conversion is especially “perilous” when, “as at present, we there is going forward in the church a movement out of classicist and into modern culture.”³⁸ We are still very much in the throes of this transition, a fact which makes it essential to arrive at greater clarity and precision in both the expression of church doctrine and on the criteria for discerning genuine unity of faith.

Development and Reception

The third shift in the understanding of doctrinal development in the contemporary context identified by Nichols, as he draws from the reflections of Yves Congar, is that of reception. At the risk of stating the obvious, Congar himself would readily recognize the act of re-evaluating past articulations of church doctrine, and of re-articulating the faith in light of growth in ecumenical agreement as an activity of reception. Unity and consensus

[interpretation-the-meaning-of-our-words-and-symbols/a-treasure-in-earthen-vessels-an-instrument-for-an-ecumenical-reflection-on-hermeneutics.html](https://www.loyalpress.com/interpretation-the-meaning-of-our-words-and-symbols/a-treasure-in-earthen-vessels-an-instrument-for-an-ecumenical-reflection-on-hermeneutics.html).

³⁸ Lonergan, *Method*, p. 330.

of faith, both diachronically – as expressed in the *sensus fidelium* of the whole people of God – and chronologically – in the truth mediated continuously through the outer word of Scripture and tradition remain a fundamental criteria for the authenticity and the authority of church doctrine. A challenge which must be faced within the Catholic Church in particular, is the extent to which the exercise of the teaching office by the magisterium is in tune with the living faith of the laity, and thus, a reflection of the consciousness of faith of the whole church. While the Second Vatican Council affirmed the co-responsibility of the laity for the life and mission of the church, and the revised Code of Canon Law proposed a number of structures for a more robust synodal life, their implementation has often been half-hearted.

At stake here is the very authenticity of the church, as a self-constituting subject. The internal structuring of the church is essential for this process of self-constitution and communication. These same structures are essential to the process of reception, which is essentially a two-way process. The lived experience of the whole people of God ought to inform the magisterium as it seeks to express the living faith of the church. Similarly, the teaching of church doctrine must be received through a structured process which informs the church's prayer, witness, and service to humankind. If church doctrines are to truly reflect the consciousness of the whole church, effective structures and the lived experience of synodality are a necessary condition for the authenticity of their development. In addition, it is becoming increasingly clear that in the formulation of church teaching, it is no longer possible to work from within an exclusively confessional context – the perspectives of ecumenical partners must be considered. Only then can church teaching be said to reflect the *sensus fidelium* of all Christians.

In future greater agreement will be required concerning the reliable means for the verification of the existence of such consensus through the synodality of ecclesial life, and for ensuring the continuity of constitutive meaning in the formulation of church doctrine through accountability to the authoritative witness of traditional confessions of faith understood within a shared ecumenical horizon. A considerable amount of groundwork has already been done in these areas through the study of communion ecclesiology. Finally, it must be understood that what is fundamentally at issue in the appropriation of ecumenical consensus is not the mere reception of a body of agreed statements, but the re-reception and renewed appropriation of the core of the Christian faith by all the churches. The application of such a renewed consciousness in an intentionally structured process of reception is essential if the churches are to engage, as Lonergan has suggested, “not only a process of self-constitution but also a fully conscious process of self constitution.”³⁹

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³⁹ Lonergan, *Method*, p. 364.