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Divide and Conquer: An Exposition of Lonergan's Two-Fold Approach to Evil

Timothy Burns

Abstract: Historically, the problem of evil has two sides. One half of the problem arises out of human freedom. Human beings make evil choices. On the other hand there are what appear to be natural evils. These are evils that are not the result of any human choice; babies are born with cancer and tsunamis kill millions of people. In this paper I examine Canadian philosopher Bernard Lonergan's approach to both prongs of the problem of evil. I look to determine whether or not his solution, which is based on an account of the conjugate forms of faith, hope, and charity; and culminates in a heuristic where forgiveness plays an essential role in moving beyond the problem of evil, can adequately address both sides of this complicated puzzle. In doing so I will also examine his three fold distinction between basic sins, moral evils, and physical evils as well as the claim that from the viewpoint of the unrestricted act of understanding the non-systematic vanishes.

Key Words: Problem of Evil; Lonergan, Bernard; Law of the Cross

Historically, the problem of evil has had two sides. There is the side that is caused by human wrongdoing. It is an undeniable fact that human beings make evil choices. One needs only to tune into the local news on a nightly basis to see evidence for this claim. The other half of the problem stems from what appear to be natural evils. Babies are born with and die from leukaemia; tsunamis wash out entire islands and kill thousands of people. At times the world can be an intolerable place to live. Bernard Lonergan joins the history of philosophy in distinguishing between these two facets of evil. He refers to them as basic sin and physical evil. For Lonergan, there is also the third category of moral evil. Since by moral evils he means the consequences of basic sin I will address moral evil and basic sin as one in this paper. ¹

What is unique about Lonergan's approach to this twofold problem is that he appears to sheer off one half, and dissolve the other. In this paper I will examine Lonergan's solution to the problem of evil as presented in his magnum opus, *Insight*. I intend to show that his approach cuts physical evil out of the problem all together and allows us to absorb the problem of basic sin. In order to prove this thesis I will first need to set up the problem of evil as Lonergan understands it. Second, I shall turn to physical evil and examine

his claim that 'from the viewpoint of unrestricted understanding the nonsystematic vanishes.' Finally, I will have to make explicit his notion of faith, hope, and charity as higher integrations of human living that enable us to absorb the evil created by people around us, and respond to it with profuse goodness, and thus absorb the second half of the problem.

In *Insight* the problem of evil only shows up when one attempts to answer the question of whether or not we have transcendent knowledge. On the one hand it would appear that we cannot have transcendent knowledge because human knowing, thus far, has been limited to proportionate being as what is to be intelligently grasped and reasonably affirmed. However, Lonergan writes, 'Knowledge is transcendent, in our present usage, inasmuch as it goes beyond the realm of proportionate being.' He identifies general transcendent knowledge as knowledge that God exists. But, how can we know that God exists? How can human knowledge move beyond proportionate being? Instead of examining Lonergan's proof for the existence of God directly, I will look to his analysis of causality as the movement in his thought that brings the problem of evil to the fore most evidently.

He begins his analysis of causality by drawing a distinction between internal and external causes. Internal causes are the central and conjugate potency, form, and act. 4 For example, the conjugate forms of a human being would initially mean that she is a physical, chemical, biological, sensitive psychological, and a rationally conscious being. These operate as internal causes for human beings. As a physical being I cannot help but be bound to the physical laws of the universe. If I fall from a plane I accelerate toward the face of the Earth at -9.8 m/s². As a chemical being I am bound by the chemical laws of the universe. The chemical processes of my body operate in a certain manner, and will react predictably when I introduce foreign chemicals like medicines or poisons. As a biological being the operation of my body requires certain vitamins and nutrients. If these are not to be had then the processes will begin to break down. As a sensitive physiological being I am aware of the environment around me through my senses. As a rationally conscious being I come to know the world around me through the formally materially dynamic structure of cognition, which involves experience, understanding, and judgment.

Next, he makes explicit external causes. He writes, 'External causes are efficient, final, and, exemplary.' Lonergan explains what he means by these through the example of a community divided by a river. This community sees a bridge as the solution to its problems and sets about to build one. The final cause is the use that the community will make of the bridge. The efficient cause is the work that goes into building the bridge. The exemplary cause of the bridge is the design that is understood by its developers, contractors, engineers, and architects.

This is how efficient, final, and exemplary causes are manifest in human work. But, if these are universally applicable principles then they are causes at work in the universe as a whole and not just in human endeavours. Lonergan maintains that these causes are not simply identifiable in human efforts but 'are instances of a principle capable of bearing human knowledge from the realm of proportionate being to that of transcendent being.' In order for it to do so we must look to his definition of being. First and foremost being is intelligible. Lonergan emphasises time and again that being is what is known through intelligent grasp and reasonable affirmation. Everything that is intelligible is being and anything outside of the realm of possible intelligibility is nothing. 'It follows that to talk about mere matters of fact that admit no explanation is to talk about nothing.'8 Therefore, when one speaks of existence in general it cannot be a mere matter of fact that admits of no explanation, or it would be nothing. It cannot be nothing because I do in fact know the world around me. I am able to intelligently understand and reasonably affirm it. It follows from this that one cannot confine human knowing to proportionate being without 'condemning it to mere matters of fact without explanation and so stripping it of knowledge not only of transcendent but also of proportionate being.'9 Proportionate knowledge is a fact; the intelligible explanation of proportionate knowledge requires transcendent knowledge, so transcendent knowledge is a fact.

The question now shifts. To put it in Lonergan's words, 'In what does our knowledge of transcendent being consist?' Proportionate being exists contingently. It is known through the grasp of fulfilled conditions in the process of judgment. Lonergan tells us that a transcendent being relevant to our problem must be self-explanatory and be able to ground the explanation of everything else, or we would be back into the problem of mere matters of fact that do not admit of explanation. What does this mean? It means that the ideas of efficient, final, and exemplary causality need to be worked out as they relate to the whole universe, not just human efforts.

We know proportionate being through intelligent grasp and reasonable affirmation. We begin with a conditioned being. For example, this paper will be written if and only if certain conditions are fulfilled. However, 'one misses the point of efficient causality if one supposes that it consists simply in the necessity that conditioned being becomes virtually unconditioned only if its conditions are fulfilled.' Why? This would lead to an infinite regress of *merely fulfilled conditions*. That is not enough. If a conditioned being is real then it is intelligible, if it is intelligible then it admits of some explanation. An infinite regress is not an explanation. It is an 'aggregate of mere matters of fact.' A circular argument or an infinite regress cannot provide for the intelligibility of a conditioned being. What is needed is an efficient cause that is 'itself without any conditions and can ground the fulfilment of conditions for anything else that can be.' 14 If the

forgoing is true and there are conditioned beings that have their conditions fulfilled, then because of the requirement of intelligibility their conditions are not fulfilled in some random manner. They must admit of some explanation. 'And so there must be an exemplary cause that can ground the intelligibility of the pattern in which are or would be fulfilled all conditions.' 15

So, we have a universe of proportionate being that is 'shot through with contingence.' Nevertheless, Lonergan reminds us that what is merely contingent that does not admit of any explanation is apart from being, and so the universe needs an ultimate ground. He insists that the ground of the universe cannot be contingent because it would be a mere matter of fact without explanation and could not ground the explanation of further contingent beings. It cannot be necessitated because 'what follows necessarily from the necessary is equally necessary.' But, it cannot be arbitrary either because only arbitrariness follows from the arbitrary. 'But what is neither necessary, nor arbitrary, yet intelligible, and a value is what proceeds freely from the reasonable choice of a rational consciousness.' Contingent being must be a reasonably realised possibility. Its possibility is grounded in the exemplary cause, its realisation in the efficient cause, but its reasonableness in the final cause.'

The problem of evil is now staring us in the face but it will be good to state it explicitly.²¹ The transcendent being, God, is the efficient, exemplary, and final cause of the contingent universe of proportionate being that we find ourselves in. The all good, all knowing, and all powerful God grounds the existence of a universe in which people commit murder on a daily basis. Societies perpetrate genocide, children die of leukaemia, and volcanic eruptions and mudslides cause thousands of deaths. How is this possible? Lonergan is not ignorant of this problem in fact he writes, 'since God is the first agent of every event and emergence and development, the question really is what God is or has been doing about the fact of evil.'²²

To return to what was stated previously the problem of evil historically has two facets. The first that I shall address is what Lonergan calls physical evil. These are evils that appear to admit of no human cause. He defines them as 'the shortcomings of a world order that consists, insofar as we understand it, in a generalised emergent probability.'²³ This presents a problem. It would seem to follow that God, as good, would will the world to exist in a different manner so that there were no physical evils. Does it even make sense to talk about short comings of a world that has as its ground a perfect transcendent being? Lonergan argues that it does. The key phrase in understanding Lonergan's solution to the problem of physical will be 'insofar as we understand it.'

Lonergan tells us that 'from the viewpoint of unrestricted understanding the nonsystematic vanishes.'²⁴ What does this mean? To

answer the question in a satisfactory manner requires a review of how the nonsystematic arises. What was needed was a way to relate knowledge of systematic laws that are applied to concrete instances through the process of abstraction. What was found were schemes of recurrence 'in which a happy combination of abstract laws and concrete circumstances makes typical further determinations recurrent, and brings them under the domination of intelligence.'25 This is how we understand the universe. Ours is a restricted act of understanding that understands what is intelligible as 'what is or can be understood.'26 Our understanding requires the act of abstraction. But the unrestricted act of understanding proceeds 'from a grasp of itself.'27 It understands everything about everything by understanding itself. There is no abstraction. 'It does not attempt the impossible task of relating through an abstract system the concrete patterns but grasps the lot of them in a single view inasmuch as it understands itself.'28 The existence of the nonsystematic is a result of a restricted act of understanding's abstraction from a world of emergent probability. Therefore, Lonergan's conclusion is correct, from the viewpoint of unrestricted understanding there is no nonsystematic.

Does this mean that there is no problem of physical evil? It is horrible that children develop and suffer and die from cancer. It is heartbreaking when thousands of people die at the hands of a natural disaster. Childhood leukaemia, tsunamis, sudden infant death syndrome, earthquakes, these are natural disasters but they are not evil acts. From a Lonerganian viewpoint this half of the problem of evil just is a result of how human beings understand the world. Perhaps the real problem is that we think there is a problem. We continually associate all pain and suffering with evil, when in fact it is not evil. It is as Lonergan puts it, 'the shortcomings of a world order that consists *insofar as we understand it* in a generalised emergent probability.'²⁹ If we could see things from the standpoint of the unrestricted act of understanding, if we could see with God's eyes, then we would understand. What is implied, but never explicitly stated is that we must have faith. Only if we have faith in God can we understand this half of the problem.

Since the first half of the problem has been cut off from the viewpoint of the unrestricted act of understanding all that remains of the problem of evil is what Lonergan refers to as 'basic sin' and 'moral evil'. By basic sin he means, 'the failure of free will to choose a morally obligatory course of action or its failure to reject a morally reprehensible course of action.' 30 Moral evils, as stated above, are the consequences of basic sin.

The other half of the problem of evil as understood historically is the half of the problem caused by poor human choices. From Charles Manson to the husband who drinks too much and abuses his wife, examples of evil perpetrated by human beings are not hard to find. But what does this say about the notion of causality that was outlined above? As we have understood

it the unrestricted act of understanding is the ultimate ground of the universe. It is the cause of causes and the first agent of every event. Lonergan states, 'Moreover, it follows that every created agent is an instrument in executing the divine plan.'³¹ If this is true does it not follow that God is the cause of all actions in the universe and therefore not only are human beings not free but God is ultimately responsible for all of the evil things that they have done?

It does not follow. To understand why will require an understanding of the irrationality of basic sin and the implementation of a new trivalent logic that Lonergan introduces to this problem. Lonergan contends that with regard to basic sin 'there is no intelligibility to be grasped.' This bold statement requires clarification. Basic sin consists in grasping what is right, and not doing it. In James 4:17 a similar definition is given. 'Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.' Lonergan asks us to grasp an inverse insight here. He asks us to understand that there is nothing to understand about basic sin. It is unreasonable, unintelligible, and irrational. It consists in a gap between our knowing and our doing that is a result of either a moral impotence or an evil will. But then I must protest. God is the first agent of every event therefore God is the source of my evil actions. On the contrary, evil is not intelligible.

It clearly cannot be in intelligible dependence on anything else. But what cannot be in intelligible dependence on anything else cannot have a cause; for it is correlative with effect; and an effect is what is in intelligible dependence with something else. Finally, if basic sins cannot have a cause, God cannot be their cause.³⁴

He does say that there can be excuses and extenuating circumstances when it comes to evil actions but there cannot be a cause.

So, evil actions cannot have a cause but, 'there remains the concrete fact of evil.'³⁵ What are we to make of this seeming inconsistency? We have a God that is all good, all knowing, all powerful, and has a good will. And yet, the world around us is evil. Bad things happen to good people. It seems that the evil prosper by their deeds and the good are punished for theirs. No wonder David said that he nearly stumbled when he saw the prosperity of the wicked.³⁶ Furthermore, God has created the world in such a way that human beings are allowed to exercise their will to bring about evil, to promote decline instead of development. If the problem of evil exists because of a gap between our knowing and our doing, why does God allow us to act irrationally? Why not create a world in which there is perfect mandatory exigence between our actions and our knowledge? Lonergan tells us, 'When a problem contains the irrational, it can be handled correctly only in a highly complex and critical fashion.'³⁷ He asks us to understand that in this case we

are not dealing with the simple law of non-contradiction. The logic that applies to this problem is not bivalent. There is not just evil, or not evil. It is not a matter of simply good or simply bad. In this case,

Besides what is positively and what simply is not, there is the irrational constituted by what could and ought to be but is not. Besides the being that God causes, and the nonbeing that God does not cause, there is the irrational that God neither causes nor does not cause but permits others to perpetrate.³⁸

This does not mean that God is not the efficient, final, and exemplary cause of the universe. What it means is that God does not interfere with human freedom. As Lonergan states in *Method in Theology*, 'God grants men their freedom, [and] wills them to be persons and not just his automata.'³⁹ God wills us to be perfect but does not interfere with our decisions. Our free will remains in tact. Free human will is a necessary condition for a good world. 'It is not evil but good to leave... freedom in tact, to command good indeed and to forbid evil, but to refrain from an interference that would reduce freedom to an illusory appearance.'⁴⁰ A world that was good because God willed it to be so and did not contain human freedom would be less good than a world that is so because humans have chosen to participate with God in the divinely ordained order of the universe.

This leads us to the next phase of our problem. How are we able to overcome the inconsistency in our knowing and doing that leads to basic sins and moral evil? How are we to get beyond what Lonergan refers to as 'moral impotence'? First I will explain what he means by moral impotence and then discuss how one can rise above it.

According to Lonergan, 'To assert moral impotence is to assert that man's effective freedom is restricted ... in the profound fashion that follows from incomplete intellectual and volitional development.' Man's number of possible choices that he could make is limited because he suffers from an incomplete development. One of the hallmarks of a developing creature is that it must live while it develops. You and I must think and choose and act while we develop emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually. But, we live in the world that is governed by an emergent probability. 'There are false starts, breakdowns, [and] failures ... the life of man is guided by an intelligence that has to develop and a willingness that has to be acquired.' So, we must develop the willingness to act in accordance with our knowledge, a willingness not to be irrational.

The idea sounds easy enough but it is not. 'The problem lies in an incapacity for sustained development.' We just do not appear to be able to do it. However, Lonergan is not so pessimistic. He contends that to talk about

a problem at all implies the existence of a solution. 'Evil is, not a mere fact, but a problem only if one attempts to reconcile it with the goodness of God; and if God is good then there is not only a problem of evil but a solution.'⁴⁴ He does not state a specific solution to the problem but outlines a heuristic structure of what the solution will look like.

He tells us that the solution to the problem will consist in 'introduction of new conjugate forms in man's intellect, will, and sensitivity.' These new conjugate forms are faith, hope, and charity elsewhere referred to as the theological virtues. However, human beings cannot simply develop these conjugate forms on our own. 'For the problem arises from the nature of the development.' They are 'in some sense transcendent or supernatural.' So let us now examine faith, hope, and charity.

Another word for charity is love. It is some type or species of charity that will bring about the willingness needed to overcome moral impotence. The ability to truly love one's neighbour as one's self is a gift from God. More profound than that is the love of one's family that becomes manifest in a willingness to bring about their good by getting up every morning and going to work to help to support them, to sacrifice by working two jobs and eighty hours a week to put your children through university. These are species of love that can only come as a gift from God, the charity of the self-sacrificing servant. Lonergan further outlines this as the will adapting to the irrationality of basic sin, by 'adopting a dialectical attitude that parallels the dialectical method of the intellect.' What he refers to here as the dialectical method of the intellect is the inverse insight he asked us to grasp above, that there is no intelligibility to be grasped in basic sin. 'The corresponding dialectical attitude of the will is to return good for evil.' Only a profound gift of love from God can enable a person to do so. So, charity works to bring about a good will.

But it is not just volitional development that is lacking, there is also the need for and incapacity to sustain, the development of the intellect. Just as charity perfects the will hope can perfect the intellect. What would it mean to do so? What would it mean to perfect the intellect? The goal of the intellect is the detached, disinterested, and unrestricted desire to know, and 'attainment of that objective is knowledge of God.' But other desires interfere with the pure desire to know. This interference can cause the despair that causes man to give up the unrestricted desire. Again it will not be anything that man can do but only God who can affect the necessary change in our intellect. 'The conjugate form of willingness that aids and supports and reinforces the pure desire is a confident hope that God will bring man's intellect to a knowledge, participation, and possession of the unrestricted act of understanding.' Hope! Hope against hope! It will be a God given confident hope that enables us to stay with the detached, disinterested, and unrestricted desire to know even in the face of conflicting interested desires.

But, hope is not knowledge. Hope is an expectation of knowledge. 'It is not the knowledge that we hope for but the knowledge we possess that will supply the will's hope with its object and assurance, and the will's charity with its motives.'54 What is needed is a new type of knowledge, a new way to reach certitude, namely faith. Lonergan states explicitly what he means by faith. 'By faith is meant the requisite conjugate form that the solution brings to man's intellect.'55 How will this affect the solution to the problem of evil? Remember that the solution to the problem will have to bridge the gap that exists between our knowing and our doing. That existence of the gap is the existence of the problem itself. Inasmuch as God is the creator of the universe, the efficient, exemplary, and final cause, if we acted in accordance with our knowledge, which consists in a grasp of the virtually unconditioned, we would be acting in accordance with our grasp of the divinely ordained order of the universe. But, we do not and so there is needed faith. And, 'because faith is a transcendent belief operative within a new and higher collaboration of man with God, the act of faith will be an assent of intellect to truths transmitted through the collaboration, and it will be motivated by man's reliance on the truthfulness of God. '56

Hence, we have a sketch of faith, hope, and charity and we understand them as developments of man's will and intellect but also understand that man is not capable of sustaining his development in a way that would bring about such conjugate forms, they are the gifts of God. It still remains to be seen how these new conjugate forms solve the problem of evil. This will be shown through a further examination of the heuristic structure of the solution and a discussion of the law of the cross.

In his book, *Theology and the Dialectics of History*, Robert Doran defines the law of the cross as 'a living out of the vision of the suffering servant of God in our time.' Lonergan's solution to the problem of evil lies along parallel lines. The solution to the problem of evil comes when I stop asking what is God doing about the fact of evil and ask; what am I doing about it?

The solution will be effective in the sense that it meets the problem of evil not by suppressing the consequences of man's waywardness but by introducing a new and higher integration that enables man, if he will, to rise above the consequences, to halt and reverse the consequences of ever less comprehensive syntheses in which theory keeps surrendering to practice, to provide a new and more solid base on which man's intellectual and social development can rise to heights undreamed of, and perpetually to overcome the objective surd of social situations by meeting abundant evil with a more generous good.⁵⁸

He calls on us to live the law of the cross. Be a self-sacrificing servant. To paraphrase words from scripture bless those that curse you, pray for those that despitefully use you, love them that hate you, meet evil with good, meet violence with peace, work for the kingdom of God on earth, and God's will be done. Evil acts call for us to respond with acts of love. How are we to do this? Not through any efforts of our own but through faith, hope, and charity.

In *Method and Theology* Lonergan writes, 'without faith ... the world is too evil for God to be good.'⁵⁹ But, if we will allow it and accept the gracious gifts of God faith, hope, and charity can surmount evil. 'Faith places human efforts in a friendly universe.'⁶⁰ It allows us to recognise that the world is not just an evil place but allows us to see things through the eyes of God, allows us to participate in the divinely ordained order of the universe by overcoming wickedness with copious goodness. This is aided by charity. 'If wrongs are to be not exacerbated, not ignored, not merely palliated but acknowledged and removed, then human possessiveness and human pride have to be replaced by religious charity... by self-sacrificing love.'⁶¹ But even this seems impossible because of the world in which we live, the horrible social decay that is prevalent in a time dominated by war, hedonism, and propaganda. There remains hope. 'It is not the promises of men but religious hope that can enable men to resist the vast pressures of social decay.'⁶² It is only by living the law of the cross and becoming a self-sacrificing servant that the problem of evil is solved.

Lonergan handles the problem of evil head on. He recognises the two historical facets of the problem and addresses each in turn. Physical evil is cut off from God's viewpoint. Physical evil admits to no human cause but rather is the result of emergent probability and God does not see emergent probability. From the viewpoint of the unrestricted act of understanding there is no such thing as the nonsystematic. Still, we must have faith. Finally, the second component of the problem of evil is absorbed through the introduction of faith, hope, and charity as higher integrations of human living. These enable the willingness needed to span the gap between our knowing and doing and participate with God in the divinely ordained order of the universe. This will only come to pass if we make ourselves willing self-sacrificing servants of God, who are eager to subjugate the evil encountered in the world to a more profound righteousness instead of proliferating it.

Notes

¹ B Lonergan, 'Insight: A Study of Human Understanding', in F Crowe & R Doran (eds), University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2005, p. 689.

² ibid., p. 672. ³ ibid., p. 707.

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<sup>4</sup> For a full discussion see Insight, chapter 15.
 <sup>5</sup> ibid., p. 707.
 <sup>6</sup> ibid., pp. 674-675.
 <sup>7</sup> ibid., p. 675.
 <sup>8</sup> ibid.
<sup>9</sup> ibid., p. 676.
<sup>10</sup> ibid, p. 678.
 11 ibid.
<sup>12</sup> ibid.
<sup>13</sup> ibid., p. 679.
ibid.,

14 ibid.

15 ibid.
16 ibid.

16 ibid.

17 ibid.

18 ibid.
<sup>19</sup> ibid., p. 680.
<sup>20</sup> ibid.
This paper is written under the working assumption that the transcendent
being corresponds with God. Space does not permit this to be worked out in
full. For a detailed discussion see Section 9 of Chapter 19 of Insight, which
is entitled, 'The Notion of God'.
<sup>22</sup> ibid., p. 709.
<sup>23</sup> ibid., p. 689.
<sup>24</sup> ibid., p. 672.
<sup>25</sup> ibid.
<sup>26</sup> ibid., p. 670.
<sup>27</sup> ibid., p. 673.
28 ibid.
<sup>29</sup> ibid., p. 689.
<sup>30</sup> ibid.
<sup>31</sup> ibid., p. 687.
<sup>32</sup> ibid., p. 690.
<sup>33</sup> James 4:17, King James Version
<sup>34</sup> ibid., p. 690.
35 ibid., p. 709.
36 Psalms 73:2-3, King James Version
<sup>37</sup> ibid., p. 690.
38 ibid.
<sup>39</sup> B Lonergan, Method in Theology, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, University of Toronto Press,
Toronto, 2003, p. 117.
<sup>40</sup> Lonergan, Insight, p. 691.
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<sup>41</sup> ibid., p. 650.
<sup>42</sup> ibid., p. 689.
43 ibid., p. 653.
44 ibid., p. 716.
45 ibid., p. 718.
46 ibid., p. 719.
47 ibid.
<sup>48</sup> ibid., p. 720.
<sup>49</sup> ibid., p. 721.
50 ibid.
<sup>51</sup> ibid., p. 723.
<sup>52</sup> ibid.
<sup>53</sup> ibid., p. 724.
<sup>54</sup> ibid.
<sup>55</sup> ibid., p. 751.
<sup>56</sup> ibid., p. 741-742.
<sup>57</sup> R. Doran, Theology and the Dialectics of History, University of Toronto
Press, Toronto, 1990, p. 113.
<sup>58</sup> Lonergan, Insight, p. 745.
<sup>59</sup> Lonergan, Method in Theology, p. 117.
60 ibid.
61 ibid.
62 ibid.
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Timothy Burns graduated in 2004 from Loyola Marymount University with a MA in Philosophy.