THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD AND OF OURSELVES

By JAMES WALSH

BERNARD LONERGAN has recently pointed out that theology, the 'science of God', has, in the last few decades, undergone a sea-change. 'If theology has to be brought up to date', he says, 'it must have fallen behind the times'.[1] He argues that the traditional notion of 'dogmatic' theology was really a creation of late seventeenth-century theologians. It was introduced as a reaction to the origins of modern science, the beginning of the Enlightenment – the movement which has been called the rise of modern paganism. In opposition to the scholastic theology of an earlier era, 'it demoted the quest of faith for understanding to a desirable, but secondary and indeed optional goal. It gave basic and central significance to the certitudes of faith, their presuppositions and their consequences'; and more significantly, because it owed the mode of proof to Melchior Cano, a bishop and a spanish inquisitor, it was supported by the teaching authority and the sanctions of the Church.[2]

This conception of theology survived into the twentieth century, and even today is the only one accepted and understood by many. 'Understood' is the *mot juste*. All those of us who received our theological education in the seminaries of the 'forties or even the 'fifties recall how easily the theological thesis could be reduced to a paradigm: it could be memorized, particularly for examination purposes, with the help of mnemonics. Its conclusions, with the various grades of certitude, from 'defined faith' to the 'common opinion of theologians', were conclusions based on premises drawn from Scripture and Tradition. Many seminarians decided that moral theology, in terms of the confessional, was far more important than 'dogma', which need not be taken too seriously. After all, it was there 'in the book' to be referred to when needed. It was a

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[1] 'Theology in its New Context', in *Theology of Renewal*, Vol 1, (Montreal, 1968), pp 34ff.

[2] Cf Congar, Yves: 'Theologie', in *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique*, tome 29, cols 432ff.

deductive science, its syllogistic method easily mastered. For the rest it was a series of theological or dogmatic facts or opinions, which could be stored in the memory or in the notebook. The professional student of those years wished devoutly – and often vociferously – that this theology could be injected with real life: that it could be related to his future pastoral mission or to his own prayer and spirituality. Unconsciously, he was echoing the complaint of one of the greek fathers, more than a thousand years earlier: that the dogmatic books are an obstacle to the spiritual life of a man – they dessicate and destroy it.[3] Similar complaints were made in the high middle ages by the monastic theologians against the schoolmen. Theology with the latter had become largely a matter of logic and mechanical art: through the scholastic method, the 'disputation', theology had degenerated into a battle of words. The aim was no longer to seek and discern even God's manifest truth, but to fight over it and ensnare it.[4]

One feels that the greek fathers and the medieval monks would have agreed with Lonergan's own thesis – that theological method and pedagogy is only valid as long as it is inductive and empirical. Theology's task cannot be limited to investigating, ordering, expounding and communicating divine revelation. Its reflection must be an on-going process, precisely because revelation is God's constant 'entry into man's making of man'; so that theology 'must somehow mediate God's meaning into human affairs'.[5] It has to do, as the Council made plain in *Gaudium et Spes*, with the living Church in the world of today. If the content of revelation is the 'material' with and upon which theology works, this can never be reduced to a series of propositions, which tends to the abstract, the universal, the static. To say that theology is inductive and empirical is simply to say that it is reflection on christian living – that is, christian growth; and this is precisely how the Council, in its dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, describes Tradition:

> What has been handed down by the apostles comprises everything which contributes to the holiness of life and the increase of faith amongst God's people. It is the Church who perpetuates and communicates to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes, in terms of her life, her teaching and her worship. This

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[3] Cf Hausherr, Irenée: *Penthos: La doctrine de la componction dans l'Orient chrétien* (Rome, 1944), pp 123–32.

[4] Cf Leclercq, Jean: *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York, 7961), pp 245ff.

[5] *Loc. cit.*, p 41.

> tradition which comes from the apostles develops in the Church with the co-operation of the holy Spirit. *For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which are handed on.* This happens by means of the contemplation and reflective investigation of the believers, who meditate on these things in their hearts (cf Lk 2, 19. 51) through the intimate understanding of the spiritual things they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received the sure gift of truth along with the episcopal succession.[6]

The 'deposit of faith', so evocative in the past of the static image of a strong-box containing things so precious that they must be handled rarely, looked at only occasionally and then with the awe and reverence given to extremely valuable objects belonging not to oneself, but to another, is suddenly seen as part of one's own christian life and growth.

Lonergan goes on to consider what sort of foundation is needed for a theology which aims at being inductive and empirical in the manner described. He observes that conversion is fundamental to christian living; and he uses pauline language to describe what he means by conversion; 'When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world; the old order has gone, and a new order has begun'.[7] Theology is thus reflection on conversion, one which 'can supply theology . . . with a foundation that is concrete, dynamic, personal, communal, historical'.[8] When a person's relationship to God changes radically, it brings, or follows, changes that are personal, social, moral and intellectual. 'For though conversion is intensely personal, utterly intimate, still it is not so private as to be solitary. It can happen to many and they can form a community, to sustain one another in their self-transformation, and to help one another in working out the implications, and in fulfilling the promise of their new life'.[9]

Theology, then, though it needs the whole complex of the scholarly apparatus of today's academic world as it investigates all that the Church 'communicates to every generation', always begins from a 'happening', in the concrete circumstances of the christian man's life in community. The family, the parish, the prayer-group, the religious community: it is here that the knowledge of God is first and constantly communicated. Perhaps the clearest working-

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[6] *Dei Verbum*, 8. Italics mine. I make no aplogies for citing again a passage quoted in my recent article on Discernment of Spirits: Cf *Supplement to The Way* 16 (Summer, 1972), pp 55. [7] 2 Cor 5, 17. [8] *Loc. cit.*, p 45. [9] *Ibid.*

model of this theology was in the fervent monastic community of the very distant past. This is how Jean Leclercq describes it:

> A certain experience of the realities of faith, a certain 'lived faith', is at one and the same time the condition for and the result of monastic theology. The word experience, which has become equivocal in meaning because it has been abused in a certain recent period, should not, in this context, imply anything esoteric. It simply means that, in study and in reflection, importance was granted to the inner illumination of which Origen and St Gregory spoke so often,[10] to that grace of intimate prayer, that *affectus* as it is called by St Benedict, that manner of savouring and relishing the divine realities which is constantly taught in the patristic tradition. This means a christian thought perpetually residing in the interior of faith, never going beyond faith, never losing sight of faith, never departing from the practice of faith and which at every level remains an act of faith. This personal experience is closely linked with a whole environment; it is conditioned and promoted by the conventual experience of a community and it flourishes in the midst of this common fervour.[11]

In this context, one is dealing not simply, or even primarily, with faith which seeks to understand, to 'know *about*' God, but the faith which seeks to experience him. The monastic theologian was always concerned to distinguish two kinds of knowledge of God (*duplex Dei cognitio*[12]): knowledge about God – or 'God-talk', to use the modern phrase, and that intimate knowledge of a person which always involves a growing knowledge of the self.

For the monks, the *locus classicus* of this distinction was the second chapter of Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians. Whether or not they realized, with the modern exegete, that Paul, conscious of his failure at Athens to make an impact on his hearers,[13] deliberately changed his style of communication – 'my teaching and message were not in plausible philosophical language, but they were attended with convincing spiritual power, so that your faith might rest, not on human philosophy, but on the power of God'[14] – they

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[10] 'It is his voice which speaks aloud through the words of the apostoles; but he also speaks himself, interiorly, by illuminating the hearts of those who listen to him'. Gregory, *Moralia*, XXVII, 43. PL 78, 424.

[11] Le Clercq, *loc. cit.*, p 264.

[12] In simple terms, it is the distinction between speculative knowledge and that which comes through love.

[13] 'Paul's failure at Athens where he attempted to speak as a philosopher (Acts 17), probably prompted him to preach the gospel at Corinth in all its shocking realism without any attempt to play the *rhetor*.' *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 51: 18.

[14] 1 Cor 2, 3.

seized on Paul's elaboration of the difference between human and divine wisdom, and the revelation to the perfect, through the Spirit, of

> What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
> Nor the heart of man conceived
> What God has prepared for those who love him.[15]

Even before this, the Lord himself had indicated that the knowledge of God as person communicating himself to person is never the object of human learning:

> I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little ones. . . . No-one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.[16]

The 'wise and learned' here are not the pagan philosophers, but the official theologians of the Lord's time – the rabbis, scribes and pharisees: those who close the eyes and ears of their hearts, 'for fear they should . . . understand with their heart and be converted and be healed by me'.[17] In fact, Jeremiah had prophesied that when the new covenant is made between Yahweh and his people in the fulness of time, theological learning will have no place: 'Deep within them I will plant my law, writing it on their hearts . . . There will be no further need for neighbour to try to teach neighbour, or brother to say to brother, Learn to know Yahweh'. No, they will all know me, the least no less than the greatest – it is Yahweh who speaks'.[18] And this is the point of view which Christ adopts when speaking of the sending of the Spirit: it is he who will lead the disciple into the fulness of truth.[19]

Much of this has a very familiar ring today. Many bishops returned from the Council bemused by the 'new' theology, suspicious of it, and determined that it should not disturb the 'simple faith' of their people. Some have had their suspicions confirmed by the *succés de scandale* of books like *Honest to God* and *The Secular City*, and of the Death-of-God movement. There is a rearguard action, particularly by those who are convinced that the theological theses of their seminarian days are the perennial truths of faith, not only with regard to content but in their very mode of expression.

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[15] 1 Cor 2, 9.
[16] Lk 10, 21–22. Cf Mt 11, 25–27.
[17] Mt 13, 15. Cf Isai 6, 9–10.
[18] Jer 31, 33–34.
[19] Cf Jn 16, 13–14; 14, 26.

Modern theologians are the very people against whom St Paul warned us; they are the men who have gone right away from the truth – further and further from the true religion.[20] There are those who believe that there is only one sure antidote for the dangerous *New Dutch Catechism:* a return to the old *Penny Catechism* of the nineteenth century.[21] The issue is complicated by the fact that, at least in the western world, the people of God are no longer the illiterate or even the semi-literate that they were at the turn of this century. Yet the religious instruction that so many of them have received was a highly simplified version of the eighteenth century dogmatic theology, which became in course of time an equally over-simplified version of the apologetic designed to combat first the rationalism of the late nineteenth century, and then the modernism which followed hot on its heels. This 'theology for the simple and unlettered' is often over-larded with a piety which is not rooted in the faith which seeks understanding: one which belongs to an undeveloped christology and a truncated theology of creation and redemption – contaminated not seldom with a jansenist affectivity and constantly infected by the pelagian miasma.

It is not to be wondered at, then, that those catholics who have achieved a certain competence in the 'secular' world rebel against, or at least question, the clerical authoritarianism which wishes to impose an outmoded theology and mourns the passing of a piety geared to the illiterate. This is not to say the moderns are free from the pauline accusation that 'knowledge puffs up',[22] and that, in the current crisis, the truth that it is only the charity of Christ that can build up is more often honoured in the breach than in the observance. However, though the arid anti-intellectualism which has so often in the past been an easy answer to the dangers inherent in theological innovation[23] underlies much catholic 'conservative' reaction to the 'advancement of the theological frontiers', it is equally true that many moderns fail to see the relevance of the principle *Lex orandi, lex credendi;*[24] indeed, they fail to see the rele-

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[20] Cf 2 Tim 2, 16–18.

[21] This has recently been reprinted in England.

[22] 1 Cor 8, 1.

[23] 'The Spirit of Christ does not reign wherever the spirit of Aristotle is in the ascendant' *(non regnat Spiritus Christi ubi dominatur spiritus Aristotelis)*, was the reaction of one twelfth-century monastic theologian to the 'new learning'. Cf Callus, Daniel: 'The date of Grosseteste's Translations and Commentaries on the Pseudo-Dionysius', in *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale*, xiv (1947), p 200.

[24] Pope Pius XII, in affirming the very close connection between the liturgy and 'the principal doctrines taught by the Church as most certainly true', has some very pertinent

vance of prayer to theology at all.

There is great significance in the fact that those who are bewildered by or suspicious of the new theology (and, of course, of its method) are equally apprehensive of the liturgical reform; they tend to be found among the ranks of those who wish to retain the 'Tridentine Mass', and who are in no way moved by the new rites for baptism, death, or marriage. On the other hand, those among whom the ignorance of the theological tradition is bliss, will tend to turn the eucharistic liturgy into a modern 'party'. Whereas the truth lies between: the reformed eucharistic liturgy, which illustrates so clearly the traditional triad of the spiritual life – purification, illumination, union, and begins from the concrete situation of conversion,[25] is itself the act and the devotional expression of the 'mystery of faith' as it is taught in the Council documents.[26]

The new penitential rite, after assuring the people of God individually and collectively that they are endowed with blessing, grace and love of the Trinity of persons, actively present with those gifts of the new life, leads the assembly, already united in God, to personal forgiveness and reconciliation each with other, in and through Christ, who endowed his Church with his own power to forgive and to reconcile to the Father. In other words, each one is identified to himself and to others in the presence of God and his blessed, as an ecclesial person, incorporated into Christ the perfect man, but as yet incomplete, as needing that reconciliation which leads to transformation. The liturgy of the word, in its turn, its readings richer and more diversified,[27] is now a true breaking of the bread of holy Scripture. And the homily is an integral part of this process. It must be 'a proclamation of God's wonderful works in the history of salvation – of the mystery of Christ which is ever made present and active within us, especially in the celebration of the liturgy'.[28] There is a clear similarity here with the traditional contemplative process which begins with the prayerful reading of the word and continues with reflection and rumination – a sort of

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things to say about this principle, which he cites in its full form, *Legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*. Cf the Encyclical *Mediator Dei*, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, xxxix, no 14 (December 1947), cap. III. It is available in a translation published by the Catholic Truth Society (London, England).

[25] The introductory greeting and blessing at the beginning of the Rite is an acknowledgement that God 'lets his face shine upon us', turns to us that we might be empowered to turn towards him.

[26] *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2. [27] *Ibid.*, 35. [28] *Ibid.*

spiritual ingestion and digestion.[29] The ideal reaction is a highly personal one: but of the ecclesial self, linked to Christ and taught by Christ. It is the interior response – indeed a self-knowledge – noted by the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: 'Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us and explained the Scriptures to us? . . . Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread'.[30] The *anamnesis*, the acclamation and the reformed communion rite equally deepen our awareness of ourselves as ecclesial persons, members of the body of Christ who is now glorified, flesh and spirit, and in whose glorification we now begin to share by communion, even in our flesh. Now 'our homeland is in heaven, and from heaven we await a saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body. He will do that by the same power with which he can subdue the whlle universe'.[31]

The traditional contemplative vision of the Church, developed out of centuries of affective meditation on the inspired word of God by the great fathers and their heirs, the monastic theologians of the high middle ages, has always striven to preserve a balance between opposites. There is the modern heresy, recurrent through the ages, especially in those critical times when man makes a spectacular technological break-through: when he sees himself as 'the measure of all things', deifies his reasoning and creative powers, makes an idol of himself and turns God's creation into a plaything for his own gratification. There is the equally insidious temptation, seen in the various forms of gnosticism and 'freedom of the Spirit', in which men see themselves as the 'chosen souls' separated out by God as his special instruments or temples and given a freedom to do as they will; whilst the rest of mankind, the 'official' church included, are consigned to an outer darkness.[32] What the Fathers and the spiritual theologians of the middle ages saw was that to be converted and to possess the holy simplicity of God's children was far better than to be adroit in the manifold arguments and the subtle distinctions of speculative theology. As Leclercq notes, in emphasizing the role of *sancta simplicitas* in monastic theology, psychological

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[29] Cf Guiges II le Chartreux, *Lettre sur la vie contemplative* (Ed Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, *Sources Chrétiennes* no 163, Paris, 1970), pp 35, 68–69.

[30] Lk 24, 25–35. [31] Phil 3, 20–21.

[32] Cf Cohn, Norman. *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London, 1970); Colledge, Edmund 'Liberty of Spirit: The Mirror of Simple Souls', in *Theology of Renewal*, Vol II (Montreal, 1968), pp 100–117.

complexity, besides distracting one's attention from God, also jeopardizes that humility which gives a man the true knowledge of himself as he is: that is, in his relationship to God and to his fellowmen.[33] This, in fact, in spite of the modern tendency to depreciate the *Imitation of Christ*, is an anti-intellectualism identical with that of A'Kempis: 'I would rather feel compunction than know how to define it'.[34]

It is not that one should despise the philosopher, the man of science, much less the speculative theologian: all these are diligent students either of the book of the Scriptures of the 'book of God's creation'. It is simply that when the limits of human knowledge are reached – and all that can be known is the proper object of human knowledge – there remains a whole dimension of knowledge of itself limitless, open to the man who has been converted: that personal, intimate knowledge of God, which is the love poured out in our hearts. To know the world of men, to know oneself, to know God by the power of human reason: all this is indeed contemplation; but it is antecedent, preparatory to that contemplation which is union with God – in which God and the self are known in the one glance. As the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* puts it:

> All rational creatures, angels and men alike, have in them one principal working power which is called a knowing power, and another principal working power, which is called a loving power. To the first of these two powers, the knowing power, God, who made them both, is eternally incomprehensible. But to the second, the loving power, he is completely and fully comprehensible . . . so much so that one loving soul alone, by the power of love, can comprehend in itself him who is enough and more than enough to fill all the souls and angels that could ever be.[35]

Christ, says St John, knew what was in man;[36] and it is of his knowing and loving fulness that all who are in him receive.[37] 'After all, the depths of a man can only be known by his own spirit, not by any other man, and in the same way the depths of God can only be known by the Spirit of God . . . we have received the Spirit of God to teach us to understand the gifts he has given us. . . . We have the mind of Christ'.[38] So the new theologian begins to see

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[33] Leclercq cites the cistercian abbot and friend of St Bernard, William of St Thierry: 'Holy simplicity is an unchanging will in the pursuit of a changeless good. . . properly speaking, it is the will radically converted towards God, asking of the Lord one thing alone, seeking it fervently, with no ambitions to become complex by being scattered abroad in this world'. *loc. cit.*, p 254.

[34] I, 1.

[35] Ch 4.

[36] Jn 2, 25.

[37] Cf Jn 1, 18.

[38] 1 Cor 2, 10–16.

that all theology must serve contemplative prayer. He cannot do without the penetration born of love; otherwise he loses himself in a flood of God-talk. Whereas the contemplative loses himself in Christ, in order to find his true self. Nor is this the incomprehensible silence of a neo-platonic apophatism, but the pregnant silence of the word: 'Whoever really possesses the word of Jesus can sense also his silence, how he is perfect, how he works through his word, and is known through his silence'.[39] The knowledge of God and of ourselves is also the mystery of God – and of ourselves.

The theologian and the contemplative certainly share the same quest. The theologian needs to learn from the contemplative that the search for God can only properly be undertaken, is indeed only possible, by his invitation. To accept it is to be 'converted', to be 'turned' towards him. The contemplative needs to learn from the theologian that the search for God is human: it involves all that is human – the world, all humankind. Here we need one another, and all the human 'equipment' with which any man and every man is endowed. All this we need to know – and as far as our graced human capacities can take us in this search for knowledge. We need to know ourselves – our littleness and our greatness in grace. This is what Julian of Norwich saw, in the midst of the insights she received: particularly of the human Christ, in whom she saw Adam, and 'everyman that shall be saved'. The search and its end was revealed to her like this:

> I saw and felt that the wonderful plenty of his goodness fulfils all our powers, and with that I saw that his constant work in every kind of thing is so divine, so wise, so powerful that it surpasses all our imagination and all our thought, so that we can do no more than contemplate him with rejoicing, with a great desire to be entirely united with him, to enter his dwelling, to rejoice in his love, and to delight in his goodness.
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> An so by his loving grace we shall come to him in this present life in our own humble, persistent prayer, through many secret touches of loving, spiritual seeing and feeling, allotted to us so that our frailty can endure it. And this is performed, and will be performed, by the grace of the holy Spirit, until we shall die, longing for love. And then we whall

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[39] Ignatius of Antioch. Cited in Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Word and Revelation* (New York, 1964), p 170.

all come to our Lord God, with clear knowledge of ourselves and a full possession of God; and we shall all be endlessly hidden in God, seeing him truly, experiencing him fully, hearing him spiritually, breathing with delight the odours and tasting the sweetness of him. And so we shall see God face to face, plainly and in full.[40]

[40] From *The Knowledge of ourselves and of God* – a fifteenth century spiritual florilegium drawn from the writings of Walter Hilton and Julian of Norwich (edited by James Walsh and Eric Colledge, London, 1961), p 59.