

2011

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## eCommons Citation

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# Jesus Founding the Church: A Perspective Drawing Upon Loewe and Lonergan

Dennis M. Doyle

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William Loewe, who directed my dissertation over twenty-five years ago, has influenced my own work deeply. My dissertation compared the positions of Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Bernard Lonergan on the relationship between religious belief and truth. In this essay I will try to express some of what I have learned from my director, both while writing my dissertation and in the decades since, about Lonergan and about theology. Taking up the issue of Jesus' founding of the church, I will focus especially on how Loewe's approach to Christology has influenced my own approach to an important issue in ecclesiology.

Loewe is one of several people who encouraged me to move beyond an explicit concentration in Lonergan studies and to make use of what I had learned in other areas. As he wrote, "the real demonstration of the value of Fr. Lonergan's work consists not in its exposition but in the creative, collaborative performance of the manifold tasks to which it so clearly urges."<sup>1</sup> Such tasks include not only intellectual activities but extend to the practical tasks needed to unfold the work of salvation in concrete ways. There is Lonergan-inspired work that needs to be done in theology as well as in Christian living, in political science as well as in political action, in economics as well as in business leadership.

Loewe's own work is recognizably Lonerganian in a way that involves more application than exposition of Lonergan's work. In some places the influence of Lonergan may be evident only to other Lonerganians. For example, in his 1984 article, "Myth and Counter-Myth:

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<sup>1</sup> William P. Loewe, "Toward a Responsible Contemporary Soteriology," in *Creativity and Method: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lonergan, S.J.*, ed. Matthew L. Lamb (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1981), 213-27, at 227.

Irenaeus' Story of Salvation," Loewe does not cite a single work by Lonergan. Yet the second sentence begins, "Once theology recognizes its task to be one of mediating between the Christian religion and the world of human culture . . . ." <sup>2</sup> Thus an identifiably Lonerganian starting point can be located in the essay. But it is even more evident to anyone connected with Lonergan studies that the entire essay, in which Loewe explores how Irenaeus' pre-theoretical contribution to christological tradition reflects a mythic form of consciousness that battles against the Gnostic myths, finds its background in Lonergan's discussion of the ongoing discovery of mind in the chapter "Doctrines" in *Method in Theology*. Finally, the climactic point of the essay, that "For Irenaeus the cross of Christ provides the key which unlocks the treasure hidden in scripture," can be connected to a Lonerganian Christology and soteriology that focus on the law of the cross. <sup>3</sup>

This is not to say that Loewe is in any way concealing the influence of Lonergan in his work. In the article on Irenaeus he cites his own previous article on soteriology that explicitly explains and documents the Lonerganian background of his operating terms and concepts. These two articles can be read together as part of a larger project in soteriology so that the Irenaeus article is really not so cordoned off from its roots as it might first appear to the reader who simply encounters it as a free-standing article in an annual volume of the College Theology Society.

## Dissertation Lessons

My dissertation was a study of Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Bernard Lonergan that compared their treatment of the question of religious truth. The specific focus was on how their

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<sup>2</sup> William P. Loewe, "Myth and Counter-Myth: Irenaeus' Story of Salvation," in *Interpreting Tradition: The Art of Theological Reflection*, The Annual Publication of the College Theology Society, vol. 29, ed. Jane Kopas (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), 39-53, at 39.

<sup>3</sup> Loewe, "Myth and Counter-Myth," 52.

differences on religious truth were reflected in the contrasting ways in which they fashioned a distinction between faith and belief. Smith found religious truth to emerge from interreligious dialogue within a context of a shared faith generating a corporate critical consciousness that transcended particular beliefs. Lonergan found the attainment of religious truth to be linked with faith, understood as seeing through the eyes of love, as it issues in belief. Belief is based upon a judgment of value by which one accepts the judgments of fact and the judgments of value that are handed on through a religious tradition. Smith's position was *avant garde* if not trendy. Lonergan's position, itself future-looking and ingenious, remained a way by which theologians could help to guide the faithful transmission of what they themselves had received.

The third of four sections of my dissertation was devoted to explicating Lonergan's understanding of the relationship between faith, belief, and truth. It was in this section that I had to do the most re-writing and re-casting. It was not just a matter of writing clearer sentences and paragraphs with fewer typos and grammatical errors. It was more a matter of responding to Loewe's criticisms concerning my rudimentary grasp of what Lonergan was about. Loewe had me perform two major rounds of revision of this segment. I had to move from my semantic and conceptual entry point into Lonergan's definitions and their immediate interconnections to a fuller understanding of how these meanings and concepts played out within the framework of Lonergan's overall project.

Both major revisions of my third section involved returning to the texts and trying to achieve a deeper grasp of what Lonergan was about. Lonergan himself had written of the years that he had spent reaching up to the mind of Aquinas. I had to spend a couple of years reaching up to the mind of Lonergan. I am not claiming to have attained the heights. I am claiming that

after two major revisions in response to Loewe's criticisms I had a respectable grasp of what Lonergan was about.

Loewe led me to the insight that for Lonergan the current task of theology was the performance of a transposition of truths grasped within one context into a new dynamic context. The prior context was one in which a particular culture had been understood as normative. The new context is one of cultural pluralism. In the prior context, theoretical formulations had come to be taken as absolute and permanent. In the new context, the relationship between the realms of theory and common sense had to be grasped from an examination of the realm of interiority. The permanence of meaning as well as the truth of prior understandings had to be distinguished from the particular ways in which they had been expressed.

The ability to transpose the meanings understood in the prior context into the new, dynamic context depended upon the authenticity of one's religious, moral, and intellectual conversion. One's own religious, moral, and intellectual conversion remained connected to the religious, moral, and intellectual conversion of one's community. As grounded in conversion, the attainment of objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity.

In *Method in Theology* Lonergan gave only one explicit example of transposing a theological concept from the prior context to the new context. What had been labeled in a rather objectified manner as "sanctifying grace" in the prior context needed to be appropriated in the new context as the dynamic state of being in love with God. This transposition was central to Lonergan's overall project. Grasping this allowed me to see that both Lonergan's definition of faith (the knowledge born of religious love) and his definition of religious belief (the acceptance of the judgments of fact and judgments of value of a religious tradition) involved a transposition of earlier theological categories whose definitions had tended to become reified.

In the prior context faith had been the supernatural virtue by which one believes. Belief had been the act of faith. In the new, dynamic context, faith takes on an explicitly existential element. Faith sees through the eyes of love. Belief, which entails the acceptance of what is objectively true, requires a judgment of value rooted in authenticity. Communities of people who are authentically converted live out their experience of being in love with God. These people see through the eyes of love. Such sight leads them not only to accept as true the judgments of fact and the judgments of value upon which their religious tradition is based, but also to appropriate the meanings of these judgments with proper understanding.

Many contemporary thinkers, including some theologians, tend to regard a reliance on religious belief as uncritical because one must accept what one has not arrived at for oneself in an immanently generated manner. Lonergan, however, treated belief as a form of knowledge. Although belief is not immanently generated knowledge, it is still a legitimate form of knowledge that is rooted in a judgment of value. One makes a reasonable judgment to believe. In the case of religious belief, the underlying judgment of value flows from the faith which is itself rooted in love. Religious belief requires more than “pure” reason, but it is by no means unreasonable or uncritical. Vigilance against the irrational continues to purify the religious believer’s understanding.

Lonergan described how in the usual process of coming to know something, understanding will precede judgment. In this regard, questions of meaning precede questions of truth. When it comes to belief, however, the reverse is the case. One accepts as true something which one does not know for oneself. Lonergan emphasized that belief, including religious belief, constitutes a kind of knowledge. But it is a kind of knowledge in which the embrace of

truth is basically prior to achieving a fuller understanding. One accepts the doctrine of the Trinity without comprehending it, yet Christians can grow in their understanding of this truth.<sup>4</sup>

A consideration of the eight functional specialties into which Lonergan categorized theological tasks can offer further exploration of how knowledge can precede understanding in matters of belief.<sup>5</sup> The first four specialties constitute what Lonergan called the mediating phase of theology, the pursuit of knowledge prior to conversion and prior to an embrace of an explicit tradition as revelatory. These four are Research, Interpretation, History, and Dialectics. The second four functional specialties constitute the mediated phase, the phase that is based in conversion and the embrace of a tradition. These four are Foundations, Doctrines, Systematics, and Communications. The first four functional specialties correspond with the Lonerganian levels of conscious operations labeled experience, understanding, judgment, and decision. The second four functional specialties also correspond with these levels of conscious operations, but in reverse order: Foundations is linked with decision, Doctrines with judgment, Systematics with understanding, and Communications with experience.

This reversal of ordering explains why in Lonergan's *Method in Theology*, the seventh functional specialty of Systematics, which corresponds with meaning and understanding, comes after the sixth functional specialty, Doctrines, which corresponds with truth and judgment. This ordering is in contrast to the second and third functional specialties of Interpretation and History, in which what corresponds with understanding and meaning precedes judgment and truth. In the first four functional specialties, coming to grasp a range of possible understandings comes before making judgments concerning truth and prior to a deeper grasp of meaning through further

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<sup>4</sup> See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), especially 115-19; 347-51.

<sup>5</sup> See Lonergan, *Method*, 125-45.

understanding. In these second four functional specialties, the acceptance of revealed truth expressed as doctrine precedes further attempts to achieve systematic understanding.

The second four functional specialties are not thereby uncritical or fideistic, for at least three reasons. First, each functional specialty remains interconnected with the tasks and standards of all the functional specialties, including the earlier ones that are explicitly critical. Systematic understanding of doctrine remains dependent upon what is arrived at in interpretation and in history. Theologians are not licensed to ignore history or science because they are operating in a different functional specialty. Second, systematic understanding of doctrine is further critically linked with the authenticity of the religious, moral, and intellectual conversion of the individuals and communities within which the meaning of doctrines are appropriated and lived out. Third, belief, when grounded in an authentic judgment of value, is not uncritical.

One embraces or remains within a particular religious tradition because of a judgment of value, in this case, a belief. This belief is possible because one sees with the eyes of love. One sees with the eyes of love because one is in the dynamic state of being in love. One can engage in belief because it is good to believe. One can believe in a religious tradition because through one's eyes of love one sees that it is good to believe in that tradition. Religious beliefs constitute a world of meaning in which believers live. The initial judgment of the truth of a tradition's beliefs is a judgment about the way of life in which the tradition issues, the visions it inspires, the institutions it engenders, the good it brings about, and the love that it manifests. Surely one is also attracted by an initial sense of the truth of the basic judgments of fact and judgments of value that constitute the tradition's world of meaning. One can spend the rest of one's life coming to a fuller lived realization of the truth and meaning of these basic beliefs.

Loewe challenged me to move my understanding of Lonergan from the level of the semantic and the conceptual to the level of method. What took me to this more sophisticated understanding was the insight that the theological task being called for by Lonergan was basically one of transposition of beliefs from the prior context to the new context of cultural pluralism, and that the ability to perform such a transposition was the fruit of religious, moral, and intellectual conversion. Religious beliefs remain claims to truth. The subjective, existential, and communal dimensions of making religious truth claims are brought to the fore.

Lonergan's approach to theology is to be contrasted with approaches that begin with an antipathy between theology on the one hand, and history, the human sciences, and the natural sciences on the other hand. The best of human knowledge obtained through the most critical of academic methods has its place in the larger theological enterprise. The first four of Lonergan's functional specialties are dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge in an academic and critical manner.

Lonergan's approach to theology is equally to be contrasted, however, with approaches that would take a so-called purely academic point of view, such as an historical reconstruction of religious events, as the starting point for all theological tasks. On the contrary, once a theologian moves into Lonergan's final four functional specialties, those four that correspond with the tasks that have usually been thought to constitute "theology," the most basic task that the theologian is performs is the appropriation of a religious tradition as it informs the life of a religious community. Academic integrity as well as authentic conversion serve as necessary prerequisites and ongoing guides and supports for this most fundamental task of appropriation.

Post-Dissertation Lessons

Earlier I made the claim that Loewe's work is Lonergan-saturated in a particular way that moves more in the direction of application than in the direction of exposition. In the years since writing my dissertation, I have been influenced by the way in which Loewe's application of Lonergan goes beyond the transposition of neo-Scholastic categories to a more thoroughly reconstructive approach to Christology and soteriology. If Lonerganian theology were to be mostly about the transposition of neo-Scholastic categories into the new context of cultural pluralism, then Loewe would be engaging in sideshows. The law of the cross was not a major operative category in the neo-Scholastic manuals. The retrieval of Irenaeus' soteriology would not be of immediate relevance.

In recent decades it has become ever more clear that theology's contemporary tasks involve more than simple transposition. As Loewe put it in an article about the theological use of historical Jesus studies, "The rapid collapse and near disappearance of neo-Scholastic manual theology after Vatican II left Roman Catholic theologians with a massive task of reconstruction."<sup>6</sup> Loewe draws upon the work of John Calvin to describe how an older paradigm in Christology, one in which the neo-Scholastics drew upon Chalcedon for their basic starting point, has given way to a newer paradigm that, starting with Jesus' ministry, seeks to recapitulate the entire tradition with a view toward mediating that tradition within the contemporary context.<sup>7</sup>

Lonergan's *Method in Theology* offers theologians support for the massive task of reconstruction that the present context calls for. What I have come to see more clearly in the decades since I wrote my dissertation is that Lonergan's identification of this task with the transposition of neo-Scholastic categories in the new context of cultural pluralism was itself a

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<sup>6</sup> William P. Loewe, "From the Humanity of Christ to the Historical Jesus," *Theological Studies* 61 (June 2000), 314-331, at 314.

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, 314-15. See John P. Galvin, "From the Humanity of Christ to the Jesus of History: A Paradigm Shift in Catholic Christology," *Theological Studies* 55 (March 1994), 252-73.

very time-bound connection. It made sense when the bulk of existing theology existed in neo-Scholastic texts. It made sense when Lonergan was addressing himself mainly to priests and seminarians who had been steeped in neo-Scholasticism. The focus on transposition was a way of assuring that basic truths would remain true even as they were being appropriated into the new context. Through the sixties and early seventies, when Lonergan was writing *Method in Theology*, such a transposition was the main task of the day for Roman Catholic theology.

Even by the time I was writing my dissertation in the early eighties, however, the theological scene had shifted dramatically. The neo-Scholastic synthesis had basically collapsed. There were rapidly fewer and fewer theologians who had been formed in that mould. How could theology most basically consist in a transposition of what was known and lived out in a neo-Scholastic context if that context itself had come to exist only in relatively rare pockets of the theological world?

I want to be clear that I am speaking here of my own growth in perception and not of some lack of foresight in Lonergan. It was I, and not Lonergan, who still needed to come to grasp that method as transposition was more his way of explaining the theological project to a significant particular group at a particular point in time than it was the eternal way to carry out that project. My focus on transposition in my dissertation was legitimate because I concentrated on what Lonergan was doing when he developed his position on the relationship between faith and belief. Theology today, however, by continuing to take seriously a much wider range of sources, is indeed about a more thorough task of reconstruction.

Reading Loewe's work has helped me to grasp and articulate this difference. Loewe's acknowledgement of a fundamental theological shift gives the results of historical Jesus research

a legitimate place but does not pivot around such results. In summing up this particular point, Loewe relies upon the Lonerganian-influenced work of David Tracy. Loewe states:

Faith, as Tracy argued, is response to Jesus encountered through the mediation of community and tradition as God's self-communication in the present, and what norms the tradition is the apostolic witness to Jesus in his religious significance as the Christ. Hence, given both the nature of historical-Jesus constructs and the nature of Christian faith, appeals such as those of the Jesus Seminar to the "historical Jesus" as the real Jesus that should norm Christian faith are misguided. "The historical Jesus" constitutes neither the ground nor basis for Christian faith, nor is it the norm of Christian faith. Certainly no historical reconstruction can prove the appropriateness of Christian response to Jesus as God's self-presence, although, as Tracy, Galvin, and Dulles concur, the results of research on the historical Jesus can serve to clarify and perhaps confirm certain presuppositions of the confession of Jesus as the Christ.<sup>8</sup>

Loewe's work here gives me a model by which I can acknowledge more fully the radicality of the contemporary shift in theology and still raise critical questions, from a Lonerganian perspective, concerning how that shift is carried out.

Jesus' Founding of the Church.

Loewe's appreciation of both the theological usefulness and the limitations of historical Jesus research in christology inspires my own approach to an important question in ecclesiology,

I had lunch with a couple of young theologians recently at a theology conference in England. I mentioned to them something about Jesus founding the church. One of them said flatly that one cannot say that Jesus founded the church. As we started to disagree about this

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<sup>8</sup> Loewe, "From the Humanity," 329-30. For Loewe's fuller explanation of Tracy's position, see 319-21.

point, he invoked Lonergan. He said that Lonergan shows us that theology must be grounded in historical consciousness. Historical scholarship has shown us that Jesus did not really intend to found a church. What we call the church actually developed decades after the life of Jesus.<sup>9</sup> The other young scholar explained to me that Lonergan gave theology an empirical starting point, and that the taking seriously of historical research was called for by that empirical starting point.

I objected strongly on two counts: first, I argued, one can indeed say that Jesus founded the church. To be critically-minded is to be careful about what one means and does not mean by such a statement. One needs to clarify that one does not mean things that would contradict the best in historical-critical scholarship.

Second, I declared (remember that this was a lunchtime conversation) that Lonergan would agree with me. For Lonergan the shift to an empirically-based method in theology still included an appropriation of classic doctrines. The Catholic theologian as a converted subject operating in the final four functional specialties will articulate the basic doctrines of Catholic Christianity and attempt to understand them systematically and to communicate them within the context of Catholic and other communities. The articulation and understanding of doctrines will be critical, ecumenical, and faithful in accordance both with the rational standards that apply to all functional specialties and with the religious, moral, and intellectual conversion lived out by the individual theologian within that theologian's community. I argued that any attempt at a full scale historical reconstruction represented an effort limited to the first four functional specialties.

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<sup>9</sup> In his theological writings before becoming Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger identified the rejection of Jesus' founding of the church as a key element in what he labeled "ecclesiological relativism." See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "The Ecclesiology of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*," 123-52, at 144-49, of *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005 [original German book, 2002]). At that time Ratzinger explicitly identified Leonardo Boff's *Church: Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*, trans. by John W. Diercksmeier (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985 [original Portuguese book 1981]) as an example of "ecclesiological relativism" linked with a faulty interpretation of the "subsists in" passage of *Lumen Gentium* #8.

A fuller theological approach must include also an appropriation of a tradition's faith claims, with an eye toward legitimate doctrinal development, which includes an explanation of what those claims mean if they are not to contradict either reason or faith.

Jesus Christ's founding of the church is obviously an issue that can evoke a deeply felt response from me. I still agree with the basics of what I had blurted out, but I wish now in a calmer moment to recognize more of the complexities of the matter, to be more explicit about what an historical approach has to offer theology, to acknowledge the ecumenical concerns of those who dismiss the idea of Jesus founding a church, and finally to present my own position in a more persuasive manner.

Even those who emphasize the limitations of what historical Jesus research can contribute to theology might think that Jesus' founding of the church is precisely the type of issue that historical research can help to clarify. One is even tempted to see the question as one that is more properly historical than theological. Did He or didn't He? There is a scholarly consensus that Jesus foresaw his own death as ushering in the Kingdom of God as the end of days. Jesus is not thought to have laid intentionally the groundwork for a particular church organization to develop.

Some theologians experience the claim that Jesus founded the church as especially problematic because of what they take to be its implications for ecumenism. Accompanied by polemically-shaped versions of the marks of the church, the claim about the church's founding became prominent and hotly contested during the time of the Reformation. The debate was all tied in with the arguments about which church is the one true church. On the Catholic side, these claims were linked with exaggerated and unverifiable assertions about direct links between the apostles and the historical lines of bishops and popes. To continue to affirm the truth of a phrase whose meaning has altered substantially carries an awkwardness at best; at worst it appears to be

misleading and obfuscating. If for centuries the primary meaning given to the claim was that Jesus built his church upon the rock of Peter, and that the lines of bishops and popes can be directly traced back to the apostles, and if those understandings have now become historically problematic even for Catholics themselves, should not the claim itself be acknowledged to be problematic? In our times, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Dominus Iesus* (2000) with its strict interpretation of the “*subsistit in*” passage of Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* appeared to some Catholics as well as to a number of other Christians to indicate that contemporary Catholic teaching still misuses the concept of the church that Christ founded in a way that is exclusionary to non-Roman Catholic Christians. For this reason some theologians prefer to say that one can talk about various traditions and their connections with Jesus through the Holy Spirit, but on the matter of Jesus founding the church, it would be better to take one's cues from historical research and admit that, in the most basic ways that such a concept has been imagined, he did not.

### Addressing Historical Concerns

My own position is that it remains important to Catholic teaching to proclaim that Jesus Christ founded the church and that Catholic theology should seek further understanding of what that proclamation means (and does not mean). At the same time, I concede that the semantic and conceptual terrain is messy. For example, in non-theological educational and academic contexts, it can be appropriate first to acknowledge that the answer to the question of whether Jesus founded the church depends on what one intends to mean by the phrase.<sup>10</sup> In Catholic theological

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<sup>10</sup> This is the approach of Daniel Harrington, S.J. in the *Church According to the New Testament: What the Wisdom and Witness of Early Christianity Teach Us Today* (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 2001) 20-22. Harrington expressly clarifies, however, that he writes “primarily as a New Testament specialist. . . . While I am a Roman Catholic priest, I see my task here not as promoting or defending distinctively Catholic positions but rather as helping Christians

contexts, too, the affirmation that Jesus founded the church still needs to be followed by an exploration of what one means by the basic teaching. For example, if one means that Jesus envisioned the offices of pope and bishop in the structured ways that they developed in history, such a position runs counter to the evidence. If, however, one means that the community that Jesus formed around himself developed into what we know as the church, such a position is tenable.

I find the objection that Catholic claims surrounding Jesus' founding of the church should be dismissed because they represent a counter-reformational agenda somewhat ironically to have a flaw similar to that of my own tendency to focus on transposing neo-Scholastic categories. Instead of privileging such categories in order to transpose them, however, this objection highlights such categories in the interest of rejecting them. In either case, neo-Scholastic categories are given more attention than what they are due in the present context. One dimension of my response to this objection is to move to a fuller *ressourcement* that can go beyond neo-Scholasticism and beyond the counter-reformational tendencies of early modern Catholicism and beyond even the great treatises of the Middle Ages to include also scripture and the patristic witness. Another dimension of my response, beyond simply the number and range of sources, is to highlight that sources need to be interpreted by the theologian in accordance with an intellectual conversion that allows one to identify different forms of expression linked with various operations of human consciousness. This is a process that we observed in Loewe's Lonergan-inspired approach to the soteriological vision of Irenaeus.

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(and their friends) appreciate better what the New Testament says and does not say about the Church." Harrington is aware that there also exist further tasks designed to pursue a fuller theological understanding of what the church teaches.

In the patristic reception of scripture the church is envisioned as having many birth moments.<sup>11</sup> Jesus' founding of the church needs to be understood within the context of various highly symbolic claims that both connect the church with and distinguish the church from Israel. The church as part of God's eternal plan is pre-existent.<sup>12</sup> It is pre-figured in the Ark, in the Covenant, and in the Temple. It has its beginning in the Annunciation; the Incarnation; the baptism of Jesus; Jesus' various proclamations of the reign of God; the calling of the disciples; the leadership of Peter; the power of the keys; the call to lift up one's cross; the institution of the Eucharist; the designation of the disciples as friends and not slaves along with Jesus' prayer for their unity; the blood and water that flow from the side of Christ; Mary and John at the foot of the cross; various elements of the post-resurrection appearance stories; and the disciples inspired by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Such a list can be easily and greatly expanded.

Such religious statements and claims represent various forms of expression related to what human beings are doing when they are understanding and judging and intending. Any theological consideration of the various points of origin attributed to the church call for an exercise in symbolic consciousness. The various proposed birth moments of the church are not competing in a zero-sum game such that the naming of one rules out the legitimacy of all others. The way in which spirit-filled Christians wrote and interpreted scripture in the early Christian centuries connected the church with the will of God, be it through the Father, the Son, the Holy

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<sup>11</sup> Jean-Marie R. Tillard explains that even though the event of Pentecost dominates the thought of the patristic authors when addressing the origin of the church, that origin is identified also at other moments in New Testament witness and that in outline it goes back to Abraham when he was chosen to be the father of believers. See *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, trans. R.C. De Peaux (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992 [original French 1987]), esp. pp. 3 and 105.

<sup>12</sup> For this point and for the points that follow in this paragraph I rely on Thomas Halton, *The Church: Message of the Fathers of the Church*, vol. 4 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1985). 31-32; 35. Halton references Romans 8:29 as well as passages in Ignatius of Antioch and in Clement of Alexandria. Another good source for scriptural and patristic references can be found in the original footnotes to *Lumen Gentium*.

Spirit, the Spirit-filled apostolic witness, or Mary's "let it be." The divine origin of the church is related with Jesus Christ in various ways.

Ancient claims that Jesus founded the church can be linked with particular concerns that arose in particular situations. Such is likely the case with Matthew as well as with Irenaeus. Such concerns appear to be apologetic in nature. In Matthew, they protect against attacks on the God-given identity of the collective followers of Christ. In Irenaeus, they protect against the Gnostic threat to the apostolic heritage. As such, claims that Jesus founded the church are part of the apostolic witness in scripture and tradition. Such claims cannot simply be limited to the Reformation and to the counter-reformational tendencies of early modern Catholicism.

Has contemporary historical research overturned such claims? We can approach this question in a way that parallels Loewe's approach to the issue of Jesus' intentionality in regard to his own consciousness of his divinity. Loewe holds that Christian faith is based first of all in "Jesus as he is known through the witness of Scripture and the life of the community of his followers."<sup>13</sup> Speculative historical reconstructions are not the basis of faith, but within limits they can be helpful to theology. There is no clear historical consensus concerning how Jesus understood his own identity. There is a wide range of speculation, some of it honestly a challenge to traditional Christian doctrine. Loewe does not attempt a sure-fire historical reconstruction of what Jesus actually thought. In the face of sensationalist reconstructions that paint a picture of Jesus diametrically opposed to traditional understandings, Loewe is one among numerous scholars who argue for the more likely possibility of the following scenario: Jesus had a very intimate experience of God as Father or Abba.<sup>14</sup> He saw himself in a very special way as

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<sup>13</sup> Loewe, *Introduction to Christology*, 206.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin, 1993), 238-81; N.T. Wright, *Who was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993) 97-103; Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (New York: Paulist, 1994); and Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and*

God's representative and he foresaw his own death and even his resurrection as being tied to the ushering in of the reign of God. He envisioned the apostles as judges over the twelve tribes of Israel and himself as over the apostles. He spoke in a way that placed his own authority above the Law of Moses. It is a credible position to hold that Jesus' self-understanding was very likely in continuity with the ways in which Christians came to understand and express his identity and mission in Scripture and in Tradition as the decades and centuries passed.

Taking seriously what historical studies have to offer theology, Loewe's approach avoids exaggerated claims about Jesus' self-consciousness of his divinity while offering an understanding of Jesus that can arguably fit with both theological and historical concerns. Jesus' own self-understanding is not eliminated entirely, but neither is a historical reconstruction placed over against traditional witness concerning him. On a commonsense faith level, Jesus' self-understanding is taken to be in harmony with what tradition says about him. On a theoretical level, the theologian recognizes that access to Jesus is mediated through centuries of faith-based witness up through the present.

Can the will of Jesus remain at the foundation of the church even as challenges to exaggerated claims about Jesus' explicit intentions are addressed?<sup>15</sup> Avery Dulles emphasized that Jesus formed around himself a community of disciples, and from this community the church

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*Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Loewe gives a theoretical yet brief and accessible explanatory account of how Jesus' self-awareness could be continuous with later Christian doctrine in *The College Student's Introduction to Christology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 82-85.

<sup>15</sup> Francis Schüssler Fiorenza offers what is likely the most comprehensive study of the question of Jesus and the founding of the Church in *Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1985). He points out weaknesses in developmental approaches that rely upon a reconstruction of Jesus' consciousness and instead offers a hermeneutical approach that explores the connections that early Christians made between the church and its understanding of Jesus. I find Loewe's attention to Jesus' self-consciousness to be not in contradiction with Fiorenza but rather to be a careful claim concerning what can be plausibly held on a commonsense level worked out within a hermeneutical framework compatible with that of Fiorenza. I intend my use of the phrase "the will of Christ" not to suggest a psychological reconstruction of exactly what Jesus thought but also to be in harmony with the approach of Fiorenza.

developed.<sup>16</sup> This emphasis is in line with scriptural and patristic witness without including problematic claims about Jesus explicitly intending to designate particular offices and functions. It is an approach that takes seriously historical criticism yet can still take its place within a symbolic consciousness that recognizes a large number of “birth moments” of the church throughout the Old and New Testaments. It can explicitly link Baptism and the Eucharist to Jesus’ formation of this community. It allows for the connection between later, spirit-led developments and the will of Christ. It connects with the contemporary emphasis on the church as a community of disciples. It is a more than credible position to hold that the church that emerged in the early Christian centuries is the continuation of the community that Jesus himself formed.<sup>17</sup>

Historical studies can and legitimately have influenced the formulation of Catholic theology and official Catholic teaching concerning Jesus’ founding of the church. Francis Sullivan, for example, traces significant lines of continuity in the transmission of apostolic authority. He recognizes, however, that historical evidence simply does not allow one to conclude definitively that the episcopacy understood as a differentiated office consolidating various powers exercised by presbyters had emerged within the time of the writing of the New Testament.<sup>18</sup> Rather, Sullivan finds that various forms of authority were present in the early church. By the second half of the second Christian century, there had emerged a church-wide system of bishops of local churches in communion with one another. In the face of the Gnostic

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<sup>16</sup> Avery Dulles, *A Church to Believe In: Discipleship and the Dynamics of Freedom* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 8.

<sup>17</sup> One of the best books developing this position is Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimensions of Christian Faith*, trans. John Galvin (Philadelphia and New York: Fortress Press and Paulist Press, 1984 [original German 1982]). The substance of Lohfink’s extensive study is in harmony with Dulles’ position as briefly outlined above. Still, Lohfink’s rhetorical strategy is somewhat different. He finds the question as to whether Jesus really founded a church to be posed in the wrong way [p. xi]. I can sympathize with his approach, but I still find that as a theologian I must ask: how can Catholic teaching about Jesus having founded the church best be understood? Lohfink’s book provides a comprehensive answer to this question.

<sup>18</sup> Francis Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church* (New York: Newman, 2001), 217-230.

threat, the relatively quick emergence of this church-wide authoritative structure was received by Christians as God-given with deep gratitude. The survival of the church depended upon it. Sullivan argues that this Spirit-guided development is an integral dimension of the maturing of the church that is comparable to the determination of the canon of scripture, and in that sense remains valid today.<sup>19</sup>

Roger Haight agrees with Sullivan to a point. Haight accepts that the development of the monoepiscopacy can rightly be claimed to have been necessary as well as to have been divinely inspired. He disagrees with Sullivan, however, that the episcopal structure of the church is binding on all Christians of all times.<sup>20</sup> Haight makes a distinction between a structure being divinely willed and a structure being historically necessary. He finds Sullivan's argument to justify the episcopacy as a legitimate structure but not as a necessary structure.

Haight's language about Jesus' founding of the church needs to be sifted through carefully. Haight is explicitly developing what he calls a transdenominational ecclesiology from below.<sup>21</sup> He is able to say that once historical qualifications are made, "Jesus remains the founder of the church."<sup>22</sup> Yet Haight also distinguishes between, on the one hand, the Christian movement and the ecclesial existence it constitutes and, on the other hand, various particular church structures and denominations. The Christian church with an organized structure does not emerge until sometime after AD 100.<sup>23</sup> For Haight, what Jesus founded was the Christian movement or the church understood in a broad, transdenominational sense. Various structures or patterns of organization can lay claim to being divinely willed and even in particular cases

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<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.*, 230.

<sup>20</sup> See Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History*, 3 vols. (New York: Continuum, 2004, 2005, 2008), vol. 1, p. 193 n. 104; vol. 3, 45.

<sup>21</sup> See Haight, *Christian Community*, vol. 3, 3-27.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>23</sup> See Haight, *Christian Community*, vol. 1, 74.

historically necessary, but not in an exclusive manner that would rule out other divinely willed structures and patterns of organization. Haight uses the phrase “subsists in” in a manner that is directly in tension with the use of that phrase in *Lumen Gentium*. Whereas *Lumen Gentium* uses the phrase to speak of a special connection between the church that Christ founded and the Catholic Church, Haight speaks of the ecclesial existence that “subsists in” the many institutional forms of the various churches.

Haight insists that denominational ecclesiologies remain necessary and that his pursuit of a transdenominational ecclesiology in any way undermines that need.<sup>24</sup> His difference from Sullivan, however, suggests that he expects future denominational ecclesiologies to be built upon transdenominational presuppositions. Haight admits that his transdenominational approach is not grounded in a concrete, historical community. What is it, then, that does ground his approach?

I suggest that Haight’s approach from below builds primarily upon an historical reconstruction of the emergence of early Christianity. There is no distinction within Haight’s approach between a mediating phase of theology that relies upon common academic methods and a mediated phase that calls also for the appropriation of the faith of a concrete, particular community in accordance with its religious, moral, and intellectual conversion. Rather Haight describes the theological dimension of his study as bringing a level of perception and a type of language to his historically grounded approach that recognizes the activity of God and the effects of God’s grace. Haight claims to dismiss any type of reductionism, whether that be a historical reductionism that ignores the divine dimension of the church or a theological reductionism that ignores the historical dimension. Haight does not sufficiently include, however, the perspective of the religious insider as insider, the perspective of the converted subject appropriating the doctrines of a particular community within the lived context of that particular community.

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<sup>24</sup> See Haight, *Christian Community*, vol. 3, p. viii.

Haight's groundbreaking and challenging has performed a service by raising many important questions for contemporary theology. I cannot pretend that more traditionally-minded theological approaches have adequately addressed these questions, particularly those about the church founded by Jesus, in any final way. With Lonergan in mind, however, I would like to see more inquiry into these questions that takes seriously the role of the theologian as a faith-based appropriator of a lived tradition. With Loewe in mind, I would like to see more reliance on the faith-witness of the church and less reliance on historical reconstruction as the basis for theological work. Haight's attempt to use two languages, that of history and theology, to gain a range of insights into what is basically a historical reconstruction, falls short of being a theologically adequate method.

### Interpreting *Lumen Gentium*

A question remains about how to interpret the treatment of Jesus' founding of the church in *Lumen Gentium*. This question takes us right back to the question of the extent to which historical reconstruction can serve either as a basis or as a corrective for faith claims. The founding of the church appears in *Lumen Gentium* in five places. In paragraph #5, the church is inaugurated when Jesus preaches the coming of the kingdom of God, and the mission of inaugurating the church throughout the world is given when the risen Lord pours out his spirit upon the disciples. In #8, the church that Christ founded is said to "subsist in" the Catholic Church, governed by the successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him, though elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside its visible structure. *Lumen Gentium*

#9 speaks of Jesus' founding of the new Israel which is the church. Paragraphs #18-20 portray Jesus Christ as instituting a variety of offices in the church and willing that the successors of the apostles shepherd the church for all time. Paragraph #48 speaks of the founding of the church in terms of the risen Christ establishing his Body which is the church by pouring out his Spirit upon his disciples.

Paragraphs #18-20 may appear on the surface to stand in contradiction with the results of contemporary historical research concerning whether Jesus envisioned a church with the particular offices that gradually emerged. I read #18-20 as offering a kind of first-order narrative, not an academic treatise that draws upon scripture and tradition to emphasize the continuity between the church that develops in history and the will of Christ. Still, however, the wording is careful:

. . . [apostolorum] *successores, videlicet episcopos, in ecclesia sua—usque ad consummationem saeculi pastores esse voluit* [18].<sup>25</sup>

... he willed the successors [of the apostles], which one can understand as bishops, in his church—to be shepherds until the end of the world [18].<sup>26</sup>

The use of *voluit* – “he willed” – can be read as being directly in reference to the successors of the apostles, whatever shape that succession might have taken. The phrase, “which one can understand as bishops,” should be read as a parenthetical clarification concerning what shape the succession indeed took, rather than as a description of precisely what Jesus had envisioned.

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<sup>25</sup> Norman Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils. Volume Two: Trent to Vatican II* (London and Washington: Sheed and Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990), 863.

<sup>26</sup> This is my own translation. Tanner translates *videlicet* as “namely.” My own “which one can understand as” draws on an etymological meaning of *videlicet* as “permitted to see.” Even the word “namely,” however, can be read as connoting something similar to my translation.

Still, this sentence and the ones that follow do suggest more about the intentions of Jesus than a strictly historically based approach could arrive at. Historical reconstruction, however, is not the basis of Christian faith. It is to be hoped that most educated people of faith realize that first-order narrative accounts are not intended to be police reports of what actually happened. Few Catholics today hear stories about Adam and Eve as if they were eye-witness testimony. Catholics believe that the gospels faithfully tell us what Jesus said and what he did, but they also realize that variety in the accounts can reflect differences in the situations of the communities that produced them. I find it best to read *Lumen Gentium* #18-20 in the light of #5 and in conjunction with various other passages that link the church not only with Christ but also with the Father and the Holy Spirit. I read the “subsists in” language in the light of all of these others and tend to favor interpretations of the passage that recognize a real and significant but not entirely unrestricted ecumenical openness.

I make these hermeneutical maneuvers because I find the claim that Jesus founded the church to belong to contemporary Catholic teaching as well as to scripture and tradition. For all of the many qualifications that need to be made, it still makes a difference whether Christians believe that the church is something willed by Jesus Christ himself. If sometime in the future Christian churches and communities by the grace of God reach more palpable forms of full visible communion, the founding of the church by Jesus will remain an important part of the church’s heritage. It can be hoped that future claims about Jesus founding the church can be based on research that is significantly less polemical and more ecumenical than in the past.

What Would Lonergan Do?

So, what would Lonergan (or, for that matter, Loewe) do?

I have discussed things that I have learned from Loewe and Lonergan both during and after writing my dissertation. Lonergan's first four functional specialties take an empirically-based starting point and develop positions based on the best that human reason and interpretation can offer. Religious, moral, and intellectual conversion provides a bridge to the final four functional specialties. The empirical, the rational, and the hermeneutical are never left behind but rather continue to operate at full blast. Once one begins to speak in an explicitly theological manner, however, one appropriates the teachings that have been handed down within one's religious tradition. One attains an horizon within which one can understand what the basic claims of one's tradition mean. One can articulate these doctrines in a manner that acknowledges legitimate doctrinal development. One can seek a fuller understanding of how they fit together with each other and with the world in which one lives. And one can live out these truths within the context of a community whose basic meanings and values are constituted by the realities to which the community gives witness. Loewe has helped me to read Lonergan in a way that calls me to be open to radical change and radical action even as I strive to appropriate faithfully the truths handed down in tradition. Most often the intellectual dimensions of these changes, I find, are in the form of new formulations and new understandings rather than in the casting off of inconvenient truths.

I am still a bit bothered, however, about the way I had responded to those two young theologians at the conference in England with a defensive outburst. I must take most seriously what Lonergan said about the way in which conflicts should be worked out within the fourth functional specialty, "Dialectics." He wrote:

Now the task of dealing with these conflicts pertains, not to the methodologies, but to theologians occupied in the fourth functional specialty. Moreover, the theologian's

strategy will be, not to prove his own position, not to refute counter-positions, but to exhibit diversity and to point to the evidence for its roots. In this manner he will be attractive to those who appreciate full human authenticity and he will convince those that attain it. Indeed, the basic idea of the method we are trying to develop takes its stand on discovering what human authenticity is and showing how to appeal to it.<sup>27</sup>

This passage reminds me of how my attempts to refute the position of my young theologian friends, as well as my current approach, do not display sufficient appeals to human authenticity. I need to get in touch with Bill Loewe, the facilitator of deep and authentic intellectual conversions, and see if he can help me with this.

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<sup>27</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), 253-54.