

---

**Bernard Lonergan's  
“Law of the Cross”:  
Transforming the Sources  
and Effects of Violence**

Theological Studies  
2016, Vol. 77(1) 77–95  
© Theological Studies, Inc. 2015  
Reprints and permissions:  
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0040563915619984  
tsj.sagepub.com  


**Mary Gerhart**

Hobart &amp; William Smith Colleges, USA

**Abstract**

In *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (1957) Bernard Lonergan described the dynamic of human history as “a compound of progress and decline [in which] the flight from understanding” results in violence. His philosophical analysis of this dynamic was complemented by a theological analysis, “Understanding the Mystery: The Law of the Cross” (1960), thought by many to be his most important theological work. This article reveals how he drew from reflections on mathematics and science for a comprehensive understanding of violence before, in, and after *Insight*.

**Keywords**

cross, faculty theory, law, mathematics, metaphor, mystery, psychology, science, transformation, violence

**W**e are surrounded by violence—so much so that we can become resigned and incapable of responding to daily accounts of the latest atrocities on TV news and in newspaper headlines: the massacre of nine parishioners in a South Carolina; the plight of refugees and immigrants from Syria, Africa and the Near East; the 25 student-teachers missing in Mexico. However appalling, all instances of

---

**Corresponding author:**

Mary Gerhart

Email: gerhart@hws.edu

violence are graphic reminders of the failures of human beings to prevent epic catastrophes. And laws, however well formulated against violence, are only half-way houses to abiding peace.<sup>1</sup>

Of violence everywhere there seems no end. Of ironies also there are many: Pope Francis's meeting with imams coincidentally at the same time as the Charlie Hebdo attack;<sup>2</sup> Paul Ricoeur's reminder that memorializing the defeat of violence may instigate new violence;<sup>3</sup> Middle East conflicts where politics have subsumed religious identities and motivations. Faced with pervasive violence, it is easy to think that "it was ever thus"—a response that can invite passivity so long as we are not the victims of violence—or condone violent retaliatory action as the only way to stop violence. A theological response to violence seems more urgently needed than ever.

The forthcoming publication of a translation of Bernard Lonergan's book-length *De Verbo Incarnato* is an opportunity to retrieve especially one chapter-length thesis, "Understanding the Mystery: The Law of the Cross"<sup>4</sup> for considering Lonergan's contribution to the study of the sources and the transformation of violence. On the one hand, because violence is a major threat to human well-being both locally and globally, violence can serve as a lens to understand an important text that might otherwise be obscured or ignored as a period piece of the 1960s. At the same time, the very

- 
1. An earlier version of this article was given as an Albertus Magnus lecture at Dominican University in Chicago on January 15, 2015 and discussed by the Chicago Science and Religion Group hosted by John and Carol Albright on March 18, 2015. I wish to thank Paul D'Andrea, Joan Parks, Leslie Casey, and Paul O'Hara for their helpful comments and David Schultenover and Paul Crowley for their gracious responses.
  2. Jean-Luc Marion, "L'islam doit faire l'épreuve de la critique," *Le Point* (January 11, 2015), [http://www.lepoint.fr/politique/jean-luc-marion-l-islam-doit-faire-l-epreuve-de-la-critique-120-12-0151-895795\\_20.php](http://www.lepoint.fr/politique/jean-luc-marion-l-islam-doit-faire-l-epreuve-de-la-critique-120-12-0151-895795_20.php) (accessed November 9, 2015).
  3. See the Epilogue, "Difficult Forgiveness," in Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History and Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004) 457. Ricoeur poses the question of double enigma when we represent the past: (1) holding a fault which paralyzes the power to act and (2) lifting this incapacity by what is called "forgiveness."
  4. Hereafter referred to as "The Law of the Cross" or Thesis 17. Regarding his translation of the title, Charles Hefling notes that "Lonergan gave the title 'Understanding the Mystery' [*Mysterii Intelligentia*] to this thesis in the index at the end of Part Five [of *De Verbo Incarnato*]; the subtitle [*lex crucis*] has been added because Lonergan often referred to the thesis in that way, for example in 'The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical-Mindedness,' written in 1966." *A Second Collection*, ed. by William F. J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 7. I am indebted to David Tracy for alerting me to Lonergan's theology of the cross and other resources and to Robert Doran for providing me with Charles Hefling's unpublished typescript translation of this text, i.e., the 17th thesis of *De Verbo Incarnato*, forthcoming in Vol. 9 of the *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto). Citations from the typescript henceforth indicated as T and those from the 1964 Latin publication as L.

imminence of violence can draw forth the meaningfulness and necessity of a theological response to violence for all, both perpetrators and victims of violence. The perpetuity of violence suggests that a humanist or post-humanist response is not enough. According to Lonergan, to be "just a human being" is "to forsake the openness of pure desire,"<sup>5</sup> an openness that paradoxically ends in so much violence. Violence gives rise to an avalanche of "whys" that push the boundaries of beginning and end, of cause and effect. However counter-intuitive a theological response to violence may seem in the immediacy of violent acts—and notwithstanding the danger that even good theology can be misunderstood, exploited, and misused—in the long run a theological understanding can strengthen our expectation that authentically religious responses to violence are effective as well as believable.

Lonergan's "Understanding the Mystery: The Law of the Cross" is the last chapter (Thesis 17) of his *De Verbo Incarnato*, originally a mimeographed textbook on Christology. This condensed interpretation of the meanings of Christ's crucifixion is at the heart of Lonergan's theological response to violence. He counted this work, written as a textbook manual—a genre largely unchanged, he noted later, since the Renaissance—among the "chunks" of his work that he thought to be "permanently valid."<sup>6</sup> It has been compared to the work of another major theologian, Martin Luther, who, with his understanding of the Hidden God, gave the name to what today we know as the "theology of the Cross."<sup>7</sup>

The text, "The Law of the Cross," taken as a whole is an appropriate lens for understanding violence and its transformation because the central focus in the text is on the crucifixion of Jesus and how the violence done to him was transformed into a lasting good. Although the event is not defined as violence in this text, it is implicitly understood that the crucifixion was a violent act in the sense of doing harm to and desecrating the sanctity of a person—in this case, a person understood to be God—a factor that complicates our understanding of violence, whether personal or global, whether local and present, or without discernible beginning and end.

The most adequate understandings of violence give due attention to its complexity and ambiguity. Sidney Hook's classic definition of violence emphasizes those factors as they appear in the considered judgments on situations involving violence and calling for legal resolution:

- 
5. Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1958) 729.
  6. In an interview at the First International Lonergan Congress in Florida in 1970, Lonergan described writing the text as a "practical chore," a technique for getting students in a large class to "get something out of [the lectures] by providing them with a thick book so that they'll be glad to have some map as to what's important." Philip McShane, "An Interview with Fr. Bernard Lonergan, S.J.," in *A Second Collection* 211–12.
  7. See, for example, David Tracy, "Martin Luther's *Deus Theologicus*," in *Luther Refracted: The Reformer's Ecumenical Legacy*, ed. Petyr Malysz and Derek Nelson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, forthcoming): "Through the scandal and stumbling block of the theology of the cross, Luther . . . explained that the *Deus theologicus* revealed to faith is paradoxically revealed *sub contrario* in Christ's cross."

In the social context, violence may be defined roughly as the illegal employment of methods of physical coercion for personal or group ends. It must be distinguished from force, or power, which is a purely physical concept having direction and intensity but, apart from human ends, no intention, and also from might, which has legal sanction and which expresses itself in the imposition of physical constraints as well as in the use of . . . effective social pressures, such as discriminatory economic, cultural and administrative measures. The use of physical coercion by duly constituted government, either as a method of defense or as a means of consolidating its rule, collecting taxes and the like, raises no particular problem of social ethics . . . but only a question of expediency. Physical coercion or the threat of [it] is of the very nature of state rule; there can be difference only upon its occasion and degree. The really troublesome issues . . . arise out of the problems faced by a politically subordinate group whether minority or not, . . . especially among those groups which have justified their revolt against the existing government on the ground that it has exercised terrorism against its own citizens.

Hook calls the attempt to meet violence with greater violence a spiritual predicament: “if violent action against human beings is wrong, is it any less wrong to use violent action against the human beings who practice it?”<sup>8</sup>

Hook concludes his article with a warning of two great dangers in the use of violence—dangers which are morally and theologically echoed in Lonergan. Hook first warns that the use of violence, “if not guarded against, may easily defeat the ends, no matter how exalted, of those on whose behalf violence is employed. Wide-scale use of violence results in a brutalization of those who employ it.”<sup>9</sup> This warning is echoed in Lonergan’s later work in the notion of moral conversion which involves the realization that our choices not only create the world around us but create the person that we are (or conversely, the person we become may destroy the world we think we want to create). Hook’s second warning regarding the use of violence is that the victors becoming the ruling power may become the new oppressors. This warning is ironically shadowed at the end of Lonergan’s chapter on the Law of the Cross: “There is danger too that [those who] learn the excellence of the cross . . . will not only imitate Christ in carrying the cross, but also follow Pilate and the Pharisees in forcing the cross on others.”<sup>10</sup>

8. Sidney Hook, “Violence,” in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. Edwin R. A. Seligman (New York: Macmillan, 1937) 264–67. For other definitions of violence which focus on diverse aspects of the phenomenon, see the following: Paul Beauchamp, “Biblical Violence” and Thomas E. Breidenthal, “Moral Theology,” in *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, ed. Jean-Yves Lacoste, vol. 3 (New York: Routledge, 2005) 1678–81; J. S. Oesterle, “Force and Moral Responsibility” vol. 5, 1004, and Sheila O’Flynn Brennan, “Violence,” in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* vol. 14 (New York: McGraw Hill, 1967) 690; Samuel Z. Klausner, “Violence,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, vol. 15 (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 268–71; Wolfgang Lienemann, “Anthropology”; Wolfgang Kersting, “Philosophy”; Wolfgang Lienemann, “Politics”; Jan-R. Sieckmann, “Law”; and Udo Friedrich Schmälzle, “Practical Theology,” in “Violence and the Use of Force,” in *Religion Past and Present: Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz et al., vol. 13 (Leiden: Brill, 2013) 339–41. See also Simone Weil, *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force: A Critical Edition*, ed. and trans. James P. Holoka (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

9. Hook, “Violence” 267.

10. The Latin is resonant: “. . . sed etiam Pharisaeos et Pilatum sequantur in cruce aliis imponenda.” *De Verbo Incarnato* 593.

In other words, no matter how one looks at it, violence is a double-edged phenomenon. If the use of violence or of resistance to violence is to be beneficial for the self and for others, it must be directed intelligently, self-critically, and lovingly toward the well-being of one's contemporaries. In Lonergan's work taken as a whole, violence has always been a part of human experience. It is always particular, that is, in a historical-cultural community, and at the same time, in relation to the universal—where "universal" is understood as whatever (in the useful definition of Sallie McFague) is not limited to particular times, places, people, or institutions even though only some may be paradigmatic.<sup>11</sup> Theologically, for Lonergan, this means that a personal commitment to avoid violence is not enough.

Today when the world's attention is on graphic eruptions of violence across the globe, it is timely to review Bernard Lonergan's work before and after his development of the notion of the law of the cross as a theological response to the phenomenon. His first contribution is to have provided a broad philosophical context for understanding the phenomenon of violence: at the end of *Insight*, for example, he argues for a recognition of the need for a theological understanding of violence in the face of the "limitations that imply man's incapacity for sustained development."<sup>12</sup> His second contribution is to have done a thick interpretation of the meanings of Jesus Christ's response to violence in the explicitly theological treatise, "Understanding the Mystery: The Law of the Cross." This interpretation of the crucifixion—regarded by many as the defining event in the life of Christ—throws new light on the issue of the transformation of violence. His interpretation also clarifies traditional soteriological concepts such as salvation and redemption.<sup>13</sup>

## A Review of Places in His Work Where Lonergan Actually Uses the Term Violence

The following are the key texts<sup>14</sup> of Lonergan containing specific references to violence or its transformation (in order of presentation, with publication dates of major sources asterisked):

11. Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 185.
12. *Insight* 630.
13. Soteriology has to do with the conditions for the possibility of redemption or salvation which, in a Christian sense, cannot be achieved by one's own doing alone and which are often regarded as being objective. Appropriate soteriological concepts in the religions vary historically and culturally: for example, "Other-power" in Taoism, "enlightenment" in Buddhism, "karma" in Hinduism.
14. "Insight Revisited," in *Second Collection* 263–78; *Insight*; "Redemption," in *Philosophical and Theological Papers, 1958–1964* vol. 6, ed. Robert C. Croken, Frederick E. Crowe, and Robert Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1996) 3–28; "The Law of the Cross"; "The Mediation of Christ in Prayer," in *Philosophical and Theological Papers, 1958–1964* vol. 6, 160–82; "The Transition from a Classicist World-view to Historical-Mindedness," in *Second Collection* 1–9; *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972) esp. 241–43.

1937–1938—Lonergan worked out a “theoretical analysis of history” (unpublished paper referred to later in “*Insight Revisited*”)

1957\*—publication of *Insight*

1958—“Redemption” (lecture at Thomas More Institute)

1960\*—“The Law of the Cross” (Thesis 17 of *De Verbo Incarnato*)

1963—“The Mediation of Christ in Prayer” (lecture at Thomas More Institute)

1966—“The Transition from a Classicist World-view to Historical-Mindedness” (lecture at Canon Law Society of America)

1972\*—publication of *Method in Theology*

1973—“*Insight Revisited*” (lecture at Jesuit Philosophical Association)

Let us think of Lonergan’s careful philosophical account—how violence in general comes to be a fact of historical process, together with his later theological analysis for redirecting and transforming violence into potentially healing and redemptive action—as a journey, one that is not strictly chronological.

Notwithstanding the importance of the three main sources (*Insight*, “The Law of the Cross,” and *Method in Theology*) as frameworks for understanding violence, the word “violence” appears only infrequently in Bernard Lonergan’s work. The word occurs five times in *Insight* (xiv, 210, 214, 225, 729) but not in the excellent index, although there are index entries for the related terms “breakdown” and “decline.” In *Method in Theology* the one indexed citation of violence, in relation to value-quality, occurs in his discussion of *ressentiment*, a term that describes the hatred an inferior may feel against the value-quality that a superior person possesses. And the word violence appears in several published lectures. Until we have a concordance of his complete collected works, we are unlikely to be able to know how many times he actually used the term “violence.” Whatever the final count, he used two names to refer to the source of the phenomenon of violence: Adam has the dubious honor of owning the “original” sin, which both stands for all the evils of the human species and is the hypothetical starting point for the human experience of evil, a starting point that resists an infinite regress of thought about violence. The second name, the surd, is for Lonergan an example of an inverse insight. As related to the common word absurd, the mathematical surd is an irrational number, a real number that cannot be represented as terminating or repeating decimals and therefore does not yield an expected intelligibility. Lonergan, who had a sophisticated understanding of both mathematics and science (both empirical and theoretical), used the surd as an analogy for a type of random and unexplainable evil, one for which proposed explanations are judged to be absurd, devoid of intelligibility.

Nevertheless, it comes as a surprise even to people who know Lonergan’s work well to find that the word violence does occur in the preface to his major work, *Insight*:

Insight into insight brings to light the cumulative process of progress. For concrete situations give rise to insights which issue into policies and courses of action. Action transforms the existing situation to give rise to further insights, better policies, more effective courses of action. It follows that if insight occurs, it keeps recurring; and at each recurrence knowledge develops, action increases its scope, and situations improve.

Similarly, insight into oversight reveals the cumulative process of decline. For the flight from understanding blocks the insights that concrete situations demand. Unintelligent policies and inept courses of action follow. The situation deteriorates to demand still further insights and, as they are blocked, policies become more unintelligent and action more inept. What is worse, the deteriorating situation seems to provide the uncritical, biased mind with factual evidence in which the bias is claimed to be verified. So in every increasing measure intelligence comes to be regarded as irrelevant to practical living. Human activity settles down to a decadent routine, and initiative becomes the *privilege of violence*.<sup>15</sup>

In this early passage on the dialectic of progress and decline—with violence being the outcome of the longer cycle of decline until it is reversed—we can detect a slight emphasis on decline. Indeed, in a later chapter Lonergan asks, “Why, then, is it that the longer cycle is so long?” His answers are graphic descriptions of human fallibility:

Why is that havoc of the longer cycle so deep, so extensive, so complete? The obvious answer is the difficulty of the lesson that the longer cycle has to teach. A convergence of evidence has to grow for the assertion that the longer cycle is to be met, not by any idea or set of ideas on the level of technology, economics, or politics, but only by the attainment of a higher viewpoint in man’s understanding and making of man (233).<sup>16</sup> . . . The present is ever a pattern of lags. No one can postpone his living until he has learnt, until he has become willing, until his sensitivity has been adapted.<sup>17</sup>

Lonergan extends his philosophical analysis of progress and decline in an explicitly theological direction in the epilogue to *Insight* when he writes “hopefully” of a “theory of development that can envisage not only natural and intelligent progress but also sinful decline, and not only progress and decline but also supernatural recovery.”<sup>18</sup> He added a footnote on the word “supernatural” in which he explains that he uses the word

not in its current meaning [i.e., something like the Merriam Webster commonsense definition, “an order of existence beyond the observable universe”—think of the film *The Exorcist*], but in the medieval theologians’ sense of a “technical term that referred to the [concrete or conceptual] . . . disproportion between nature and grace, reason and faith, good will and charity, human esteem and merit before God.”<sup>19</sup>

15. Lonergan, *Insight* xiv (my emphasis).

16. *Ibid.* 233.

17. *Ibid.* 689.

18. *Ibid.* 743.

19. *Ibid.* 725.

In a 1973 lecture, “*Insight Revisited*,” Lonergan recalls a time when he first thought of his model of the three elements—progress, decline, and recovery—that constitute his framework in *Insight* for his study of the cumulative process of the desire to know. He points out that the elements he designed in 1937–1938 for a theoretical analysis of human history were based “on the model of a three-fold approximation.”<sup>20</sup> There his concrete model was drawn from physics: how the “perturbed ellipses in which the planets actually move” is an “intellectual construction of reality” arrived at from two earlier approximations: (1) the law of motion, the constant velocity of a planet unless its motion is intervened, and (2) the law of gravity, the explanation why planets have elliptical orbits.<sup>21</sup> Lonergan draws the intriguing conclusion “that in the intellectual construction of reality it is not any of the earlier stages of the construction but only the final product” that is affirmed to actually exist. “Planets do not move in straight lines nor in properly elliptical orbits; but these conceptions are needed to arrive at the perturbed ellipses in which they actually do move.”<sup>22</sup>

The key term in this analogy is approximation—an approximation drawn between the successive discoveries of three planetary laws and the historical pattern of progress, decline, and recovery. This approximation of the process of becoming history is what actually goes on in “the intellectual construction of reality.” In this same 1973 text revisiting *Insight*, Lonergan extends this analogy between the construction of theories in physics and of theories of history to construction of theories in doing theology. Indeed, he refers to his theoretical analysis of human history as also a “rather theological analysis of human history”:

My first approximation was the assumption that men always do what is intelligent and reasonable, and its implication was an ever increasing progress. The second approximation was the radical inverse insight that men can be biased, and so unintelligent and unreasonable in their choices and decisions. The third approximation was the redemptive process resulting from God’s gift of his grace to individuals and from the manifestation of his love in Christ Jesus.<sup>23</sup>

Lonergan makes a non-specific reference to chapter 20 in *Insight* for this “whole idea” of his third “rather theological” approximation. It is worth noticing, however, that Lonergan had earlier made an even more striking use of this chapter, when in 1966, he paraphrases chapter 20 (again non-specifically) to introduce the theological concept of redemption as the *transformation* of violence.

This approximation of course also informs the redemptive process as described in “Understanding the Mystery: The Law of the Cross.” The major elements of this text—cross, law, and mystery—call for elaboration. Having introduced the framework for Lonergan’s theological treatment of violence, let us examine these three major elements.

20. As far as I know Lonergan made no other references to the model he “worked out” originally in 1937–38 other than the ones on pp. 271–72 of this text.

21. *Ibid.* 271.

22. *Ibid.* 272.

23. *Ibid.* 272.



## Elements of "Understanding the Mystery: The Law of the Cross"

### *The Cross as Verbal and Artistic Icon*

It may seem obvious why Lonergan chose the cross as the symbol of redemption. Christianity as a whole is identified more by the event of the crucifixion than by any other episode in the life of Christ as related by the apostles and evangelists in the New Testament Gospels and epistles. The fact that Christ as a human being who is also God was crucified and died on a cross—a most horrible death, reserved for criminals in his time—was a persistent theological conundrum. Lonergan cites the questions asked about the death of Jesus as God by the church fathers, summarized by Thomas Aquinas under the themes of incarnation/divinization, redemption, expiation, and sacrifice as well as the further questions of Anselm regarding satisfaction and of Bonaventure regarding the primary purpose of the Incarnation. (He dismisses Rupert of Deutz's question, whether the Son would still have become incarnate if Adam had never sinned, as being only about counter-factual possibility.)

Today these questions seem less demanding than the challenge of how to admire the "divine holiness" that Lonergan introduces toward the end of the text who also wills/allows Jesus Christ to be crucified:

Not without cause do the seraphim cry, "Holy! Holy! Holy!" (Isa 6:23), since the God who is utterly averse to all sin nevertheless permits sin in such a way that he is in no sense its author, and brings good out of evil in such a way that he sent his own Son to bear our evils with us and conduct us through death into the resurrection of life. [T 20; L 592]

This is the age-old contradiction of how a supremely good God can permit sins of violence.

The foundational conundrum is that God who is "averse to all sin . . . brings good out of evil in such a way" as the crucifixion. The fact that this conundrum is borne out in instances of unlikely, untimely, and unexpected transformations explains why the cross is today regarded by most people to be the central, even definitive, symbol of Christianity.

But it was not always thus. Although the cross is one of the earliest Christian symbols in Scripture and in ritual prayer from Paul onwards, the cross was not the earliest artistic representation of Christ. Indeed, in visual art the cross is not identified by art historians as being among the oldest surviving pictograms. In the catacombs, for example, the *ichthys* (fish) and the lamb are represented but the cross appears if at all as an "anchor cross," perhaps in disguise "concealed by a secret sign."<sup>24</sup>

Why do we not find the cross visually/artistically represented in early Christianity until the fourth century? One reason is that it may have been too dangerous for

---

24. F. van der Meer, *Early Christian Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1959) 121. The anchor cross may be related to Heb 6:19: "That hope we hold. It is like an anchor for our lives, an anchor safe and sure." (New English Bible, 1976).

Christians to identify themselves with the cross during the decades of persecution following his death. I remember, for example, a scene from the film *The Robe* in which one Christian identifies a stranger on the street as another Christian by surreptitiously drawing the image of a fish in the sand. It may also have been the case that the materials used to depict the cross were not durable. Whatever the reason, the most frequent early image used to represent the Christ was not the cross but the Good Shepherd in a form borrowed from classical art. Along with other surviving images—for example, the *Healing of the Paralytic* and *Christ and Peter Walking on the Water*—the image of the *Good Shepherd* was found about 235 CE at Dura Europos, famous as the site of a Jewish synagogue and an adjacent Christian house church, both decorated with fresco paintings. But the cross is nowhere depicted among any of these early images. One of the earliest certain depictions of Christ's crucifixion is on the original door of St. Sabina's church that dates only from ca. 430 CE.

In Eastern Orthodox churches, the dominant image continues to be the triumphant Christ risen from the dead. In the West the cross, even when it is not a crucifix—that is, when it is without an image of the body of Christ—is understood to refer to the event of the crucifixion. The cross is meaningful as well in the history of religions where it has multiple meanings: cosmic order, the *axis mundi* extending in continuity and connectedness, time intersecting with eternity, the human body.

The cross in Christianity has been criticized, notably by some theologians<sup>25</sup> who see it as associated with death, thereby fostering negativity and death rather than life to the extent, as Dorothy Soelle and others argued, of legitimating suffering. If dissociated from Jesus's life and resurrection, a Christology based exclusively or even primarily on the cross is almost sure to deserve this criticism.

To be sure, chapter 17, "Understanding the Mystery: The Law of the Cross," follows his treatment of other christological questions in the preceding 16 chapters. Nevertheless, it is clear by virtue of its place in *De Verbo Incarnato* that for Lonergan the essential meaning of the Cross is inextricable from both Jesus's earth-bound and his resurrected life with Spirit in human communities. The death of Jesus makes sense only in the context of his life and resurrection and is distorted if taken out of that context. In this text he refocuses the theological concepts and analogies by which the death of Jesus has been understood by major thinkers in the history of Christian thought.

### *The Cross as Mystery*

The title of Lonergan's treatise 17, "*Mysterii intelligentia*" translated freely or colloquially, could be "figuring out the mystery," or, in the medieval scholastic sense,

---

25. See Cynthia S. W. Crysdale's excellent edition of feminist perspectives in *Lonergan and Feminism* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1994). See especially Charles Hefling, Jr.'s "On the Possible Relevance of Lonergan's Thought to Some Feminist Questions in Theology" in which he discusses Lonergan's Christology in relation to his "Law of the Cross," on its implications for a contemporary broad-based soteriology (199–219).

"locating where the mystery lies." By understanding the "Law of the Cross" as "Mystery," Lonergan goes beyond his historical analysis and critique of the traditional aspects of the crucifixion: sacrifice, redemption, vicarious satisfaction, merit. For example, he understands sacrifice in two senses: first, in continuity with the sacrifice of the paschal lamb in Judaism and second, in the sense that Jesus's bloodshed removes the barrier caused by sin. Lonergan notices that each sense elicits a different religious thought and feeling. Redemption, for example, connotes paying ransom or buying back from enemies for a price. Anselm's understanding of the cross in terms of satisfaction originated in the sacrament of penance insofar as the efficacy of the sacrament requires restitution as well as contrition for the wrongs that one has done. In the 19th century, the notion of the vicarious was added to satisfaction to better understand Christ's satisfaction for the sins of human beings. Merit emphasizes the freedom with which Christ accepted his fate.

These aspects reinterpreted culminate in one way or another in Lonergan's treatment of the cross as mystery. He sees the "Law of the Cross" as mysterious in three senses:

First, the Law of the Cross proceeds from an infinite wisdom and infinite love, and like merely possible worlds, is therefore simply beyond created intelligence. Second, the Law of the Cross regards not only divine mystery but also the opposite mystery of human iniquity. In another [third] sense of the word, mystery, it is in the mysteries of the life of our Lord [and, we can add, of others like Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King—as well of millions of the children, women, and men wounded and violently displaced] that we contemplate, through sensibility and human feeling, how divine wisdom and goodness stand in relation to the mystery of human iniquity. [T 3; L 557]

Consequently, the thesis of the "Law of the Cross" as mystery seeks the intelligibility of the facts of the Son of God's incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection. What kind of intelligibility? Lonergan answers, "not a mere absence of internal incoherence, not an absolute necessity, not even a conditional necessity, but the positive fittingness or appropriateness actually found in revelation and tradition as ordained and willed by divine wisdom and divine goodness."

Nevertheless, Lonergan is most interested in the transformative aspect of the cross: the "Law of the Cross" reveals this infinite wisdom and infinite goodness to us in Christ and also . . . in ourselves in the sense that

[human beings] enjoy goods by participation [which include] that complex of capacities, skills, or habits, interpersonal relations, orientations, and cooperations through which particular goods come to be . . . The supreme good into which human evils are transformed is the whole Christ, Head and members, in this life as well as in the life to come, in all their concrete determinations and relations. [T 1; L 553-54]

In other words, the supreme good is a new community. Lonergan refers to some patristic theologians who contrasted Christ's life and death with the evils of human pride, for which good is to be achieved by getting power and exercising it. And he quotes

Irenaeus who taught in the early second century that “we are saved not by violence but by persuasion.” However, this is not to say that Lonergan advocated either passivity or pacifism.

Being saved by persuasion versus being saved by violence is a striking contrast and it compels us, I think, to see how Lonergan’s “Law of the Cross” is complementary to *Insight* and also calls for correlation with it. He writes,

redemption happens, not in the elimination of evils through power but in submitting to evils and, by God’s grace and good will, transforming them into goods. The most outstanding example [of this transformation] is in the death of Christ itself: Christ’s violent death [caused by and resulting from individual and societal violence] is made the means of salvation. [T 2; L 556]

Lonergan introduces the term “Law of the Cross” to bring together three steps. The first step is recognition of the evil of fault experienced as being caught up in the pervasive moral evils of one’s own time including all the legal and informal punishments built into the structure of society—homelessness, retaliatory murder in warring countries, cruel dehumanizing imprisonments, the global misery of poverty, the cultural genocide of North American aboriginal peoples. The second step is a voluntary transformation of punishment into good by various kinds of resistance and persuasion. Recent examples in our time include Nelson Mandela who moved from anti-apartheid revolutionary hatred to constructive politics and philanthropy in South Africa or the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The third step is God’s blessing of this transformation, experienced as some kind of participation in the spiritual Body of Christ. These are observable behaviors of people who have allowed the grace of the Holy Spirit to be effective in them and traditionally expressed as gifts of the Holy Spirit (wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, piety, and fear of the Lord) and fruits of the Holy Spirit (traditionally: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control). Today, other gifts might include being politically disposed toward the poor and vulnerable.

### *The Cross as Law*

I was initially surprised to find that, assuming the concordances of the Bible are accurate, this phrase, “law of the cross,” as such does not appear in the New Testament. The term “law” was understood especially by Paul in opposition to the Law as central to Jewish religion in the Hebrew Scriptures and therefore was unlikely to be linked to the cross. However, Rémi Brague noted in his study of the concept “divine law” that already at the time of early Christianity “Judaism . . . was in the process of refocusing around the notion of the law,” thus leaving the early Christian writers with the problem of posing a “relationship to a law that preceded it.”<sup>26</sup>

26. Rémi Brague, *The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea*, trans. by Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007) 209.

Notwithstanding the historical meaning of the law and its other uses in the New Testament, Lonergan has in effect created an unexpected metaphor by insisting that two terms ("law" and "cross")—conventionally understood as opposed—create a new meaning when they are stitched together.<sup>27</sup> In such a metaphor, the sense in which the cross is a law is not immediately obvious. Lonergan anticipates the difficulty by listing and then elaborating on three senses (with subdivisions!) of law as applied to the cross:

"Law" can be understood as a link that cannot be otherwise, as in logic and metaphysics. Again, "law" can be understood as a link which can be otherwise, but which in itself is positively intelligible or fitting and is, as a matter of fact, always verified in every particular instance [or experiment]. The natural laws investigated by the empirical sciences are laws of this second kind. Thirdly, "law" can pertain to the spiritual order in a way that is neither absolutely necessary nor verified in every particular instance. And this third sense has three subdivisions: (1) Law in the spiritual order can be just a precept and nothing more. There is nothing fit about it; what it expresses is the will and the exercise of power, rather than wisdom and right reason. (2) Law in the spiritual order can be a precept that is altogether good and appropriate, yet remains ineffective when it is not observed. Finally (3) law in the spiritual order can be a precept that is good and effective and universal even though it does not exclude the possibility of sin. [T 11; L 574]

Lonergan argues for the appropriateness of the cross as a law for three reasons: (1) because it links basic sin to the idea of punishment; (2) it moves a "voluntary transformation of punishment into good"; (3) it relates this transformation to the Father's blessing in the generality it has within the economy of salvation (*in hac oeconomia salutis*).

Lonergan concludes, "And such is the Law of the Cross"<sup>28</sup> as it is "observed" in Adam, in Jesus, and in us.

27. For this understanding of metaphoric process, see Mary Gerhart and Allan M. Russell, *Metaphoric Process: The Creation of Scientific and Religious Understanding* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1984) 119–20, and *New Maps for Old* (New York: Continuum, 2001) 45–48. In this instance, insisting that "Cross = Law" (i.e., forcing together two concepts firmly embedded in their respective fields of meanings) results in a tectonic reformation of meaning.

28. "The Law of the Cross." Elsewhere, in "The Redemption" 13–14, Lonergan regards the Law of the Cross to be empirical like the law of gravity in the sense that it is not mathematical, i.e. it does not grasp a necessity and could be expressed by another mathematical formula. (For Lonergan, mathematics consists of necessary relations because it is humanly created to be so. He notes that successful empirical scientists avoid claiming complete knowledge of their subject by always placing the achievement of that goal in the future.) Interestingly, his particular understanding of the Law of the Cross as empirical as distinct from mathematical invites analogies with similar notions of redemption in other religions, such as *sunyata* in Buddhism.

## The Intrinsic Intelligibility of the “Law of the Cross” as Transformation

As we have seen, Lonergan’s references to violence in *Insight* are minimally, sometimes only nominally, theological. He began working on *De Verbo Incarnato* only after completing *Insight* and published it as a textbook three years after the publication of *Insight*. Here is his own summary of Thesis 17 (which became the last thesis in *De Verbo Incarnato*):

Dei Filius ideo homo factus, passus, mortuus, et resuscitatus est, quia divina sapientia ordinavit et divina bonitas voluit, non per potentiam mala generis humani auferre, sed secundum justam atque mysteriosam crucis legem eadem mala in summum quodam bonum convertere. [This is why the Son of God became man, suffered, died, and was raised again because divine wisdom has ordained and divine goodness has willed, not to do away with the evils of the human race through power, but to convert those evils into a supreme good according to the just and mysterious Law of the Cross. (Hefling translation)]<sup>29</sup>

The term violence occurs neither in the thesis as quoted above nor in the complete text. Nevertheless, in a lecture entitled “The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical-Mindedness” six years later, Lonergan foregrounds an explicit connection between this text, “The Law of the Cross,” and the subject of violence. Here he quotes the memorable passage from the preface to *Insight* on the process of decline (i.e., “For the flight from understanding blocks the insights that concrete situations demand . . . Human activity settles down to a decadent routine, and initiative becomes the privilege of violence”). But instead of leaving violence after identifying it (as before), in 1966 he develops an argument on the need for a higher viewpoint: “If human historical process is such a compound of progress and decline, then its redemption would be effected by faith, hope, and charity.” Notice that here Lonergan has replaced the third term “recovery,” which he had originally used in *Insight*, with the term “redemption.” However, his most remarkable re-visioning of the cycle of decline in historical process is the following sentence in which he cites and paraphrases chapter 20 of *Insight*:

---

29. In this otherwise faithful translation of the thesis, Charles Hefling prefaces it with three words—“This is why . . .” This phrase, while not contrary to Lonergan’s wording of the thesis, may contrast with Lonergan’s reading of Anselm’s argument as being “not from necessity but from appropriateness or fittingness . . . Thus it is commonly thought that the Incarnation was necessary if there was to be an adequate satisfaction” (4). The addition of “This is why” at the beginning of the translation implicitly invokes the model of truth as coherence whereas the original text invites a reading according to the model of truth as manifestation. On the kinds of truth claims and the difference between a truth claim of coherence and one of manifestation, i.e., as “more fully disclosure–concealment–recognition,” see David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 29–30.

For the evils of the situation and the enmities they engender would only be perpetuated by an even-handed justice: charity alone can wipe the slate clean. The determinism and pressures of every kind, resulting from the cumulative surd of unintelligent policies and actions, can be withstood only through a hope that is transcendent and so does not depend on any human prop. Finally, only within the context of higher truths accepted on faith can human intelligence and reasonableness be liberated from the charge of irrelevance to the realities produced by human waywardness. (*Insight*, chap. 20 [his citation])<sup>30</sup>

In addition, with respect to the issue of violence, in this 1966 lecture he explicitly links his theological analysis of the just and mysterious Law of the Cross with his earlier analysis of the havoc perpetrated in a long cycle of decline ending in violence. Here is his statement: "There is in my book *Insight* a general analysis of the dynamic structure of human history, and in my mimeographed text *De Verbo Incarnato* a thesis on the *lex crucis* that provides its strictly theological complement."<sup>31</sup> In other words, Lonergan sets up an anticipation for a structural parallel between the three elements of progress, decline, and recovery in history and the three theological elements of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus understood thematically as redemption in terms of the law of the cross.

Let us notice his even more challenging summary of the Law of the Cross: "This analysis understands suffering and death as the result of sin yet inculcates the transforming power of Christ, who in himself and in us changes suffering and death into the means for attaining resurrection."<sup>32</sup> We must not miss Lonergan's astonishing claim here: namely, that sin, suffering, and death are transformed by the phenomenon of grace from being natural elements of life into elements of another kind of life—in himself and in us (i.e., potentially in all human beings).

Lonergan cautions that this massive and counter-intuitive transformation is not easy to understand. Lonergan often said he had used mathematical problems as illustrations of the operations of consciousness in *Insight* because they were simpler to understand and unencumbered with individual existential considerations. In his 1958 lecture, "The Redemption," he compared the difficulty of understanding the Redemption to understanding a math problem that has to use unthinkable imaginary, rational, and irrational numbers:

The redemption is not a simple but a complex intelligibility; and I use the word "complex" in the sense that the mathematician speaks of "complex numbers." The mathematician uses not only rational but also irrational numbers, not only real numbers but also imaginary numbers. And everything goes well, provided [the mathematician] does not mix them, provided he does not consider that they are all numbers in exactly the same sense and manner. Similarly with regard to the redemption, we must not think of it as something that will fall

---

30. Lonergan, "The Transition" 8.

31. *Ibid.* 7.

32. *Ibid.* 8.

into a single intelligible pattern. There is in this world the unintelligibility of sin. Sin is not something that is understood. It is not something for which you can give a reason. Why did the angels sin? Why did our first parents sin? Strictly, if there were a reason why, not simply a pretense or an excuse, it would not have been a sin. Sin represents a surd. It is the irrationality of a rational creature . . . Sin is not something that is; it is a failure. It is not something that is intelligible; it is an irrational. The divine will regards the good. The divine will permits sin. Consequently, in thinking about the redemption one must make an effort—and it requires an effort—to avoid the tendency to think that an explanation casts everything one can think of into a single intelligible pattern. In a consideration of the redemption one has to have in mind the existence—not of a simple intelligibility—but of the transcendent intelligibility of God meeting the unintelligibility of sin.<sup>33</sup>

In spite of its overall complexity, Lonergan claims that his particular understanding of Redemption as the Law of the Cross can be understood. He argues that the Law of the Cross has an immanent intelligibility in the same sense that phenomena understood in empirical science have immanent intelligibility.

What does he mean by immanent intelligibility? William Loewe provides a good scientific example:

It happens to be the case that apples fall from trees. Does the universe absolutely have to be that way? No. But given that it is that way, what sense does it make? With regard to falling objects, the answer is the law of gravity. The law of gravity expresses the immanent intelligibility of a contingent matter of fact.

Loewe then uses the analogy to explain the immanent intelligibility of Lonergan's Law of the Cross:

Lonergan asks, given a universe in which God saves through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, what sense does that make? What is the immanent intelligibility of that contingent matter of fact? In response Lonergan proposes something that he calls the law of the cross. The law of the cross, he suggests, expresses the intrinsic intelligibility of the what-sense-it-makes, of the many New Testament affirmations, with their varied imagery, of salvation through Jesus. If the New Testament supplies the fact, the law of the cross supplies the intelligibility of that fact. In form[,] the law of the cross is a three-step principle of transformation: something somehow turns into something else.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to there being an immanent intelligibility in the Law of the Cross, Lonergan maintains that the redemption is an "incarnate intelligibility."<sup>35</sup> For this Lonergan draws on Aquinas's analogy of how the vehemence of one's love may exclude the necessity of punishment for sin and even satisfy for another's sin. In other words, the Law of the Cross can be seen as a "coinherence"—in Christ and also in some sense in

---

33. Lonergan, "The Redemption" 12.

34. William P. Loewe, "Salvation from Sin: The Law of the Cross," in *The College Student's Introduction to Christology* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1996) 167.

35. Lonergan, "The Redemption" 10–11.



ourselves<sup>36</sup>— is, embodied in the behavior of living human beings.<sup>37</sup> On this point, his "blotter image" (see below) radically demonstrates the meaning of "coinherence."

In his last book, *Method in Theology*, Lonergan completes his understanding of transformation with the concept of conversion. No longer using faculty theory, Lonergan distinguishes three kinds of conversion—intellectual, moral, religious (and later, psychic conversion). Each involves a different kind of self-transcendence—a going beyond what we have been, toward a greater good—which happens in terms of the operations of consciousness. In intellectual conversion, for example, being alert carries us forward to asking questions, to affirming or negating the insights that appear and then to making decisions—that is, acting on the basis of our experience as an authentic knower. In moral conversion, the focus of our awareness is the question of what is truly good, and in religious conversion, being in love regardless of the price and without reservation. Beyond these kinds of transformations of consciousness, it is possible for persons to undergo a change in feelings, emotions, and aesthetic sensibilities.<sup>38</sup> Personal transformations are ongoing; they never necessarily stop unless we lose consciousness.

We see Lonergan wrestling with the central Christian theological issue and freely eliciting new understandings: how to speak intelligibly for his lifetime about a unique relationship—the possible relationship that human beings in historical communities, past and present and in particular, can have with the One here experienced as and called God, the God as revealed first to the apostles in human flesh and continually revealed in the Spirit to individuals. Theology sometimes appears to be addressing a perpetual public-relations problem: how to make sufficiently intelligible the historical and universal relationship between the cross and subsequent human lives, the event of God's love for human beings so vehement that Jesus Christ voluntarily died the way he did; how to understand this revelation of a God who was willing to suffer death rather than fight it by retaliation; how to understand that the event of the cross set in motion a force that reverses the desire for unintelligent retaliation.

## Conclusion

Tracing his journey before and after his thesis "The Law of the Cross" enables us to see Lonergan's work as all of a piece of development: his early working through texts of Augustine and Aquinas to find that what was most important was not their valuable insights into the Christian phenomenon. Rather, he was fascinated to find in their understanding the explicitly identifiable operations of consciousness that are the fabric of all understanding. This discovery enabled him to make the seemingly immodest

36. Lonergan, "The Law of the Cross" 14.

37. *Ibid.* 3.

38. He later acknowledged the possibility of a fourth, a psychic conversion. See Robert Doran, *Psychic Conversion and Theological Foundations* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 2006).

claim that if one thoroughly understands what it is to understand, one “will understand the broad lines of all there is to be understood.”<sup>39</sup> It is this wager that undergirds his confidence<sup>40</sup> in understanding who God is for human beings—and the Cross as the event, symbol and icon of the possibility of reversing the long cycles of decline which, otherwise unchecked, end in massive violence. Lonergan can be seen to have added a new concept—transformation—to the historical theological categories for understanding that event.

We began by taking notice of the coincidence in the timing in Paris with the meeting of Pope Francis with French imams and the terrorist attacks. Today in the face of a growing threat of global violence by some and preparation for a “holy” war by others, it is heartening to recognize other specific redemptive actions, such as the one described in an article entitled “Faithful Condemnation: Catholic–Muslim Forum” in a recent issue of the weekly *America*. At its triennial meeting, November 11–13, 2014, at the Vatican, the delegates to the Catholic–Muslim Forum, founded in 2008, condemned all use of violence to pursue ideological or religious ends. A joint statement stressed that “it is never acceptable to use religion to justify such acts or to conflate such acts with religion” and held up ways to build mutual understanding and respect: namely “to educate people on the incompatibility of faith and violence; [to] engage in interreligious dialogue; and, most important, [to] discover how both faith traditions can together serve the wider community.”<sup>41</sup> In his encyclical *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis has also made explicit the economic dimensions of the sources of violence: “Today’s economic mechanisms promote inordinate consumption, yet it is evident that unbridled consumerism combined with inequality proves doubly damaging to the social fabric. Inequality eventually engenders a violence which recourse to arms cannot and never will be able to resolve.”<sup>42</sup>

It is heartening to find that the religions are discovering sharable resources for reversing the long decline in which we find ourselves today. Knowing about these redemptive actions is a catalyst for finding our own ways of identifying and transforming the sources and effects of violence whenever we encounter them.

Nevertheless, Lonergan’s “Law of the Cross” reminds us that reversal of decline comes at a great price. In his 1963 lecture on “The Meditation of Christ in Prayer,” Lonergan suggests that referring our acts of living to Christ in prayer is similar to Christ’s becoming human in reference to us. “In both cases,” he says, “the fundamental theorem . . . is transforming evil into good, absorbing the evil of the world by putting up with it, not perpetuating it as rigid justice would demand. And that putting up

39. Lonergan, *Insight* xxviii.

40. From the Latin *con* (intensive) *fidere* (to rely on, to have faith in). *OED* I (Oxford: Oxford University, 1971) 511.

41. The Editors, “Current Comment: Faithful Condemnation: Catholic–Muslim Forum,” *America* 212 (January 8–15, 2014) 4.

42. *Evangelii gaudium* 60, as quoted in Paul Weithman, “Piketty and the Pope: A Dialogue Begun,” *Theological Studies* 76 (2015) 591.

with it acts as a blotter, transforms the situation, and creates the situation in which good flourishes."<sup>43</sup> This image, like any other, of course, can be misunderstood or misused. Transformation is never mindless nor is it mere imitation. Indeed, the failure to recognize circumstantial differences among different people and situations jeopardizes any attempt to replicate someone else's successful nonviolent overcoming of violence. What needs to be blotted up are feelings of vengeance, disproportion, or disregard for the other's humanity.

Lonergan's philosophical-theological confidence in creating a new concept, a new metaphor, and a new image for understanding the violent event of the cross matches his delight in quoting part of Augustine's response to a question people sometimes asked him: "How can God permit evil to exist in the world—could God not have done otherwise?" Augustine gave them this very short, very proper answer: 'Of course he could. But if he had done otherwise, it would make your foolishness unhappy all the same.'<sup>44</sup>

Lonergan himself had some answers to the question of what God could do.<sup>45</sup> But none seems so important as what God does do through Christ, for and in us, in a world burdened with violence.

### Author Biography

Mary Gerhart is Professor Emerita in Religious Studies at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, New York. A Templeton Award winner with her former colleague, the late Allan M. Russell, she has published numerous books, including *Metaphoric Process: The Creation of Scientific and Religious Understanding* (Texan Christian University, 1984), and *New Maps for Old: Explorations in Science and Religion* (Continuum, 2001) to be reissued by Bloomsbury this year.

---

43. Lonergan, "The Mediation of Christ in Prayer" 182.

44. Lonergan, "The Law of the Cross."

45. At the end of "The Law of the Cross," Lonergan gently discourages too ambitious a pursuit of an answer as to "why" violence exists: "Of course, those who reduce sin and punishment of sin to the serpent have not reached the ultimate 'why.'" Further questions, he notes, can be asked, like "'why God created the serpent.' Still, there seem to be many whose minds tire out long before they reach the ultimate 'why.' For their sake it is good to leave out the deeper matters and narrate those which are clearer."