



MAIN ARTICLES

Retracing the Theological Logic of The Way to Nicea: Lonergan's Interpretation of Early Trinitarian Controversies and its Contemporary Relevance

*Rastreando a lógica teológica de O Caminho para Nicéia: a interpretação de
Lonergan das primeiras controvérsias trinitárias e sua relevância contemporânea*

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ABSTRACT: Beyond its historical scope, Bernard Lonergan's *The Way to Nicaea* offers a profound insight into the development of Trinitarian dogma. This article provides a methodological reading, demonstrating how the articulation of *homoousios* at the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) signifies a pivotal shift from symbolic to speculative consciousness. Through Lonergan's intentional operation of consciousness—experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding—we trace the dialectical transcendence of early theological positions. Athanasius's hermeneutical “rule” is presented as a concrete instance of this epistemological breakthrough. Furthermore, drawing on Lonergan's functional specialties, we argue that authentic dogmatic development, exemplified by the Nicene formula, necessitates a critical self-appropriation. Far from concluding theological inquiry, Nicaea inaugurates a dynamic and unfinished pursuit of understanding, driven by love.

KEYWORDS: Lonergan. *Homoousius*. Trinity. Dogmatic development.

RESUMO: Não se limitando ao seu caráter histórico, *The Way to Nicea* de Bernard Lonergan oferece uma profunda compreensão do desenvolvimento do dogma trinitário. Este artigo apresenta uma leitura metodológica, demonstrando como a articulação do *homoousios* no Concílio de Niceia (325 d.C.) significa uma mudança

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crucial da consciência simbólica para a especulativa. Através das operações da consciência intencional proposta por Lonergan — experienciar, compreender, julgar e decidir — traçamos a transcendência dialética das primeiras posições teológicas. A “regra” hermenêutica de Atanásio é apresentada como uma instância concreta desse avanço epistemológico. Além disso, baseando-nos nas especialidades funcionais de Lonergan, argumentamos que o autêntico desenvolvimento dogmático, exemplificado pela fórmula nicena, necessita de uma autoapropriação crítica do sujeito. Longe de concluir a investigação teológica, Niceia inaugura uma busca dinâmica e inacabada por compreensão, impulsionada pelo amor.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Lonergan. *Homoousius*. Trindade. Evolução dogmática.

Introduction

This work aims to highlight the essential connection between methodological questions and concrete theological analysis, as exemplified by Lonergan’s *The Way to Nicaea*, in order to understand what he intended to convey regarding doctrinal development linked with the Christian comprehension of the trinitarian dogma. This issue is far from secondary: the tension between doctrinal change and continuity lies at the very heart of the controversies that have historically divided the one Church of Christ. Analyzing the development of Trinitarian dogma within the context of the first ecumenical council offers valuable insights that continue to inform and illuminate contemporary theological research.

To address *whether* and *how* doctrinal development is possible, we must confront two fundamental problems. The first concerns the intellectual process itself—whether it permits certain “changes” in Christian teaching. The second involves identifying a valid criterion by which to distinguish authentic doctrinal development from false or illegitimate alterations. In other words, addressing the question of doctrinal development requires reflection on both the structure of intelligibility and the criteria for discerning valid development from corruption.

This presents a hermeneutical problem. The historical aspects of doctrinal development are not sufficient to deepen our understanding of confessional dogmas; we must also consider the intellectual process that leads to their definition. In the context of the First Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.), we witness not only a specific dogmatic development, but also the emergence of a more general notion of dogma itself. A new pattern takes shape, marking a shift from a rich tapestry of symbolic and scriptural language to the ontological and technical vocabulary characteristic of dogmatic theology.

That is why the context of the Council of Nicaea holds particular importance. The decrees of this council represent the first formal and official dogma—understood as a defined teaching of the Church that expresses its beliefs. These decrees were used liturgically, dogmatically and ecumenically. All subsequent councils appealed to Nicaea and positioned themselves as rightful interpreters of its teachings. For this reason, investigating the debate that enabled this doctrinal development is especially important for understanding not just the Trinitarian dogma but also—and more generally—the role of dogmatics in theology.

1 Tracing Lonergan's thought through his fundamental works

Bernard J. F. Lonergan was born in, 1904, in Canada. As a scholar, Lonergan took up the challenge of elevating theological reflection to meet the demands of his time (Crowe, 1995, p. 22). This endeavor required not only the assimilation of the scientific method but also a deep respect for the historical nature of rationality and an openness to the contributions of various sciences and philosophical traditions.

Among Lonergan's vast intellectual contributions, two works stand as foundational. *Insight* (1957) offers a systematic account of human cognition, guiding the reader toward self-appropriation through the dynamic structure of consciousness—experience, understanding, and judgment—anchored in the central role of insight. *Method in Theology* (1972), conceived as the culmination of his project to renew Catholic theology, introduces a fourth level of consciousness: deliberation, wherein value, freedom, and responsibility are thematized. This expanded structure becomes the basis for authentic methodological reflection in theology. The transition from *Insight* to *Method* thus reflects not only a theoretical development but also a deepening of theological responsibility in a complex and pluralistic world.

While these two major works of Lonergan are widely known and discussed by scholars, *The Way to Nicaea* (1964) received attentions and some rash critics. In our view, instead, *The Way to Nicaea* offers a unique contribution both to scholars and to contemporary theology. In this work, Lonergan is *doing* theology—rather than merely evaluating what theologians do or should do. In this sense, he is putting into practice what he had formulated before in *Insight* and would later better elaborate in *Method*. Examining his analysis of the Nicene dogmatic development in light of both, his previous—more fully philosophic structured— and later—more fully developed methodological framework— can provide contemporary theologians with a powerful tool for their own work.

2 A synthetic overview of *The Way to Nicaea*

Before delving into the analysis, it is important to outline the internal structure of this work. What we refer to as Lonergan's *The Way to Nicaea* corresponds to the preliminary section of his Latin course *De Deo Trino, Pars Dogmatica* (1964), which aims to reconstruct the dialectical process that led to the definition of the Trinitarian dogma at the Council of Nicaea. Divided into ten chapters, the text interweaves the question of how Christian dogma develops over time with the recognition that doctrinal formulation develops historically as the Church's understanding grows.

Framed by two far-sighted chapters, Chapter I and Chapter X, the analysis seeks to establish a representative position that condenses the theological stance of a group of theologians regarding the mystery of the Trinity.

In Chapters II-IV, Lonergan traces the theological maturation of early Christianity as it moves from the undifferentiated biblical consciousness of the Judeo-Christian communities to the conciliar articulation of Trinitarian doctrine. Chapter II explores how the apostolic witness, initially embedded within a unified religious experience, begins to give rise to reflective theological understanding, especially in response to internal and external tensions. Chapter III examines the doctrinal challenges posed by the Gnostics and other sects, highlighting how their speculative distortions of the apostolic faith forced the early Church to clarify its confession, particularly regarding the divinity of Christ and the unity of the Trinity. Chapter IV presents the conciliar response to these controversies, culminating in the formulation of *homoousios* at Nicaea. In Chapter V, *Subordinationism*, Lonergan (2009, p. 91) introduces the concept of a "dialectical process" in which rational reflection, when applied to the principles of faith, gradually eliminates contradictions in doctrinal formulations: "I firm belief in the revealed word of God gradually eliminated less exact conceptions" (Lonergan, 2009, p. 91).

Chapters VI-IX provide concrete examples of how this dialectical process unfolded in the development of the Trinitarian doctrine, especially in relation to the concept of *homoousios*. Chapter VI examines Tertullian's use of the expression *unius substantiae*, a Latin formulation that anticipate later discussions of consubstantiality, though without yet achieving full doctrinal clarity. Chapter VII turns to Origen, who, despite his foundational contributions, operates within a metaphysical framework that remains subordinationist. His insights, while significant, lacked the conceptual precision required to articulate the Son's full divinity in a manner consistent with orthodox faith. Chapter VIII anticipates Lonergan's methodological concerns by exploring the theological function of symbol and meaning. Here, he probes the dynamic relationship between language and faith, and the role

of theological judgment in the unfolding of doctrine. This chapter sets the stage for understanding how theological meaning is mediated through historical and linguistic forms. Chapter IX presents the pivotal moment: Athanasius's reinterpretation of *homoousios* becomes, for Lonergan, the decisive breakthrough. What he calls the "rule of Athanasius" (Lonergan, 2009, p. 195-199)—"What is said of the Father is also to be said of the Son, except that the Son is Son and not Father" (Athanasius, 4)—emerges as the hermeneutical key to resolving the ambiguities surrounding the term. By rearticulating *homoousios* in a way that is both theologically faithful and philosophically coherent, Athanasius transforms a contested term into a cornerstone of Nicene orthodoxy.

From this perspective, Lonergan underscores that doctrinal development is not a linear accumulation of propositions, but a dialectical process. It involves the gradual clarification of meaning through the interplay between faith and the intelligibility of available conceptual formulations. The adoption of *homoousios* at Nicaea thus represents not simply a terminological victory, but a methodological resolution—one grounded in the mutual illumination of reason and faith.

However, the significance of this dialectical process extends beyond the explicit formulation of the Trinitarian dogma. It also unveils the implicit philosophical shift from naïve realism to "critical realism" (Lonergan, 2017, p. 74; Meyer, 1989, p. ix-xv). Understanding this intellectual evolution enables contemporary theologians to grasp insights that neither Tertullian, nor Origen, nor even Athanasius, could fully apprehend at the time. In Chapter I, *Dogmatic Development*, Lonergan anticipates this development, which he later articulates in terms of a movement from undifferentiated to differentiated consciousness. The transition from an experiential pattern to a speculative one requires a corresponding transformation in language—from symbolic, poetic, and spontaneous modes of expression to a conceptual and technical language addressed primarily to the intellect. Ultimately, the dialectical process revealed in the development of the Trinitarian dogma exemplifies the shift from common sense to systematic understanding.

In Chapter X, *The Structure of the Anti-Nicene Movement*, the concluding section of *The Way to Nicaea*, Lonergan expands his analysis to a broader context in which any doctrinal development can be understood and evaluated through his method. This method focuses not merely on formulated doctrinal theories themselves, but on the operations of an intentional conscience that led to their formulation.

The Way to Nicaea should not be dismissed as merely a historical or preparatory work within Lonergan's corpus, nor should it be reduced to a simple historical narrative of events and theological writings. Rather, it represents a concrete application of his methodological vision—even before that vision

was fully articulated. Through his analysis of the development of the Trinitarian dogma, Lonergan offers an exemplary demonstration of how theological reflection, when guided by a dialectical and critically realist approach, can illuminate the complex interplay between faith, history, and reason.

3 Theological development and the emergence of speculative consciousness

Lonergan's perspective emphasizes the process of conceptualization rather than focusing solely on the final formulation of dogma. He distinguishes between two types of knowledge: personal knowledge, which arises from immanent cognitive operations—experience, understanding, judgment, and action—and knowledge rooted in common sense, which is based on trust in the credibility of others and is transmitted through liturgy, scriptural language, and the spiritual tradition of a particular ecclesial community.

From this foundational distinction, Lonergan outlines a process of intellectual development marked by appropriation and self-correction, wherein faith and personal knowledge mutually support and enrich one another. Without faith—understood as the reception of meaning within a community—every individual would be forced to begin the process of knowing anew, without any shared basis for communication or transmission. Within the horizon of common sense—particularly in the context of ecclesial belonging—our always-incomplete grasp of reality requires a continuous deepening of understanding.

This insight carries a practical orientation. Rather than proposing a new theory of knowledge, Lonergan calls for an *intellectual conversion*—a shift through which individuals become explicitly aware of the operations by which they come to know. This self-appropriation enables the subject to distinguish between knowledge shaped by common sense and knowledge that emerges from critical, intentional inquiry (Lonergan, 2017, p. 67-70; Sala, 2006, p. 64). At the core of this process is the invariant structure of human consciousness, which unfolds through a dynamic sequence: experience, understanding, judgment, and decision (Lonergan, 2017, p. 7-8; Angers, 1994, p. 31). Every act of understanding, regardless of whether it yields a technical formulation or a poetic expression, follows the same invariant structure.

In this light, theological speculation is not the creation of new truths, but a distinct mode of understanding the same truth. It represents a movement from common-sense apprehension to critical reflection. Common sense affirms the Christian faith in God through scriptural expressions such as: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in

the name of [one God] the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28,19) and “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10,30). The shift becomes manifest when a subject begins to ask: *How can God be one and, at the same time, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?*—a question seeking understanding; or *Is the term homoousios theologically appropriate?*—a question seeking a judgment, testing the validity of a doctrinal formulation.

Such questions signal a shift in consciousness: from experiential and symbolic frameworks to speculative and conceptual reasoning. When Athanasius asserts, “What is said of the Father is also to be said of the Son, except that the Son is Son and not Father”, in response to the Trinitarian question, his audience is not invited to rely on metaphors or analogies. Rather, they are called to enter a speculative mode of understanding, beyond the realm of image and experience.

Questioning plays a foundational role, as wonder is the starting point for all acts of understanding, judgment, and responsible action (Lonergan, 2017, p. 14-15). Awareness of the unknown generates a process in which the subject gathers data and seeks an insight that unifies the elements into a meaningful whole.

If this process yields a correlation between subject and object, the formulation typically remains descriptive, anchored in experience. However, when the inquiry seeks to correlate two distinct objects—such as the Father and the Son—consciousness shifts to a speculative level, seeking explanatory coherence through stable relational structures. The resulting formulation moves beyond description toward explanation, articulating the intelligible relations among realities.

Athanasius’s rule exemplifies this shift. He unites two predicates—drawn from ecclesial language—into a conceptual framework that exceeds the categories of common sense. The Trinity is not explained through material analogies. Rather, his formulation breaks free from the aporia of simplistic comparisons (e.g., three oranges and one orange juice), and establishes a new pattern of inquiry that invites the subject to think within a different horizon. His rule thus marks a decisive move toward speculative theology. Athanasius’s formulation allows us to recognize the Council of Nicaea as “a breakthrough—one that can be recognized as such only from the universal viewpoint” (Hefling, 1982, p. 142)

In this process, the organization of prior knowledge—shaped by common sense—and the assimilation of new data prepare the ground for the emergence of conceptual insight. Theology, in Lonergan’s view, unfolds through this ongoing dynamic of questioning, understanding, and judgment, always oriented toward deeper intelligibility and faithfulness to the mystery it seeks to articulate.

4 The Invariant Structure of Human Consciousness and Its Differentiation

When a person asks a fundamental theological question—such as *How is it possible for one God to be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?*—an unknown reality is objectified, relevant data is gathered, and the process of understanding is initiated. At this point, consciousness follows what Lonergan calls a generalized empirical method, progressing from data to insight, and from insight to reasoned judgment against the data.

In this light, dogma appears not as an isolated assertion, but as the expression of a conscious and intentional cognitive process. Its formulation results from a succession of operations: experience, understanding, and judgment. The speculative pattern of scientific theology seeks to articulate the intelligibility of Christian belief—not by producing new revelations, but by refining existing truths with conceptual clarity and avoiding misunderstandings (Danna, 2006, p. 40).

For Lonergan, understanding is not located in the starting point nor in the final dogmatic expression, but in the self-appropriation of the process through which meaning is reached. It is in the inquiry—and in the answers it generates—that understanding is constituted (Gilbert, 2006, p. 199). The invariant structure of consciousness provides the stable framework within which theological explanation takes place.

From this base, questions arise prompted by the description of the data collected that call for explanation. The subject asks, *What is this?*—questions for intelligence—, and seeks an insight that will organize the data meaningfully. Once an insight is proposed, questions for reflection follow: *Is it true?*—question for judgment—where the proposed understanding is verified against the original data. This movement from explanation to verification is essential for theological development.

When applied to different types of objects, this invariant pattern gives rise to differentiations of consciousness—that is, distinctions among realms of meaning according to the nature of what is intended. While the structure remains consistent, the mode of its expression shifts depending on the object under investigation (Triani, 1998, p. 110).

The first realm, that of common sense, is practical and context-bound. It operates through uncritical engagement with reality and is shaped by cultural norms, linguistic habits, and communal practices. Faith, at this level, is mediated by formulas—dogmatic, liturgical, disciplinary—that express divine realities in a way accessible to the community. As Lonergan shows in his analysis of Tertullian (Lonergan, 2009, p. 95-117), theological language here draws on imagery and sense-experience, remaining anchored in symbolic and intuitive frameworks.

The second realm, that of theory, emerges when the subject begins to question inherited formulations, seeking deeper intelligibility. Here, the guiding question shifts to *Why is this so?*—the hallmark of speculative inquiry. The aim is no longer simply to describe but to explain: to identify normative principles and intelligible relations between objects, independently of the subject.

This can be found in the case of Athanasius. After assembling scriptural affirmations of consubstantiality, he formulates his theological rule, “What is said of the Father is also to be said of the Son, except that the Son is not the Father”. The shift from imagery to conceptual structure marks the transition from common sense to theory, and from descriptive to explanatory theology.

The third realm is that of interiority, where the subject reflects not only on content but also on the act of knowing itself. Here, the question becomes *How do I know it?* The subject becomes present to oneself as knower, aware of their own operations of consciousness. The virtually unconditioned—a key concept in Lonergan—is grasped in this self-reflective act, as the subject affirms the truth of an insight through attentiveness, intelligence, and reasonableness.

This interior differentiation is crucial. For Lonergan, even Athanasius was not fully conscious of the shift he enacted between realms. It was not merely a clearer way of expressing doctrine, but a transformation of the very mode of inquiry. What was lacking in Athanasius was a reflexive awareness of this shift—a questioning of the questioning itself. Yet this is precisely what Lonergan identifies as the core of his methodological proposal for theology.

Such a shift—from common sense to theory, and from theory to interiority—is, for Lonergan, a form of intellectual conversion. It requires the subject to appropriate the dynamic structure of knowing and apply it intentionally. True theological method, then, lies in the self-appropriation of consciousness itself—in recognizing and mastering the operations through which human beings understand, judge, and act. *The Way to Nicea* is a concrete example of an analysis seeking to make explicit this dynamic.

5 Meaning and the invariant dynamics of consciousness

The analysis of conscious intentionality shifts the focus of interpretation from the text itself to the interpreter. In this framework, a text is not merely an autonomous bearer of meaning but a mediation of meaning—the product of two acts of self-appropriation: that of the author and that of the reader.

A text arises from the author's effort to be attentive, intelligent, and reasonable in formulating a coherent response to a particular object of inquiry. Yet, the text remains only potentially meaningful until it is read and understood—through the reader's own process of self-appropriation.

Both author and reader rely on the same invariant structure of human consciousness (Meyer, 1989, p. ix-xv; Walczak, 2008, p. 145-146). The author draws upon it to grasp and express meaning; the text becomes a mediated expression of that meaning, intended for communication. The reader, in turn, must engage that same structure—re-enacting, within their own operations of consciousness, the meaning the author sought to convey. This shared anthropological structure links author and reader across historical and cultural distance and grounds what Lonergan calls a “universal viewpoint” (Lonergan, 2017, p. 568): the cognitive operations of human understanding remain constant.

To interpret a text, then, is to identify the intended object, the relevant data, and the insight expressed. On this basis, the interpreter can evaluate: Was the author attentive to the relevant data? Was the insight intelligently formulated? Was the judgment reasonable in light of that data? The Nicene decrees are to be interpreted as expressions of meaning; to grasp their significance, the interpreter must engage them by means of the invariant structure of their own consciousness.

Correctly understanding is achieved when all relevant questions have been adequately answered. Yet the process does not stop there. The reader may go further, posing new questions by confronting the author's insights with additional data or alternative perspectives on the same object. Interpretation thus becomes not only a dynamic process of understanding but also a path to the subject's growth in understanding. The invariant structure of consciousness holds in creative tension the stability of method and the ever-expanding horizon of what is to be known.

Good questions open new horizons. They reveal that understanding is not static but developmental, deepening the dialogue between interpreter and text, between what is already known and what remains to be discovered. From this standpoint, one can appreciate the position of a committed believer who raises questions that Scripture may not explicitly answer, yet are fully coherent with its intent. In doing so, the believer—perhaps unconsciously—undergoes a shift to a new intellectual standpoint, where questioning becomes a tool for deepening the original meaning.

In this interconnected process, dogma is understood as a true interpretation that emerges from an ecclesial process of attentive observation, intelligent inquiry, and reasoned judgment—carried out within the theoretical realm to attain an explanatory grasp of a specific truth of faith. As mediations of authentic meaning, dogmatic formulations are inseparable from

the historical development of theology. The term *homousios*, for example, was initially received as a rupture with traditional ecclesial language and practice. Yet it marked a decisive transition, situating theology within a more theoretical and explanatory framework—extending its reach beyond immediate experience and symbolic expression toward conceptual clarity and logical coherence.

At the same time, every dogmatic definition becomes a point of departure for the interpreter's own process of self-appropriation. It invites the subject to engage in an active and reflective understanding—*within* or *from* the theoretical realm—in order to penetrate more deeply or to communicate more clearly the meaning of, in this case, the mystery of the Trinity.

6 Meaning and Method: reconsidering the role of scholarship in Theology

Given that *The Way to Nicaea* predates *Method in Theology*, the methodological division into the eight functional specialities had not yet been developed. As a result, the role of scholarship was not clearly presented as part of theology's mediating phase. Similarly, when Lonergan refers to his work as a "dialectical analysis", it is important to recognize that he had not yet articulated *Dialectic* as a distinct functional speciality. For this reason, before engaging with his analysis of the dogmatic development of the Trinitarian dogma, it is essential first to understand the framework of functional specialities that he would later propose as part of his theological method.

Method presents a new way of doing theology, one that divides the single task of theology into eight intrinsically related functional specialities, each following upon the other in a coherent sequence. Functional specialization serves the purpose of dividing theoretical labor, directing inquiry toward clusters of particular operations, and intelligently linking them into a coordinated whole (Sala, 2006, p. 63-66). In the collaborative movement from data gathering to communication, each phase processes the data in ways that inform and guide future action, without allowing any single stage or speciality to dominate at the expense of the others.

Two overarching movements can be identified within this process. The first—*theologia in oratione obliqua*—consists in the retrieval of what has been achieved in meanings and values. Here, data are gathered and assessed for relevance (*Research*), organized and interpreted (*Interpretation*), situated within their historical context (*History*), and critically evaluated in light of competing interpretations to discern the best explanatory account (*Dialectic*).

The second movement—*theologia in oratione recta*—begins with what has been already (conscious or unconscious) self-appropriated, as a synthesis of common sense and critically appropriated historical insight, that constitutes the horizon in which present-day questions will be addressed. This phase encompasses the process of intellectual, moral, and religious conversion (*Foundations*), articulates truths that are pragmatically relevant within the subject's horizon (*Doctrines*), integrates these elements into a coherent argumentative structure (*Systematics*), and adapts and communicates them in concrete contexts (*Communications*).

When Lonergan goes to the root of opposed positions regards the Trinitarian dogma, discussed by the scholarship—*Research, Interpretation, and History*—, he is doing *Dialectics*. For that, first we must understand the role of scholarship linked with the three first specializations and then understand what is properly happening in *Dialectics*.

The dynamic of theology *in oratione obliqua* poses questions such as: *What happened?*, *Why did it happen this way?*, *What other possibilities were available?*, and *Which possibilities were actually conceived?*. This initial phase of theological development is marked by the work of scholars, whose specialized efforts—employing distinct methodologies suited to each domain—contribute to a more precise understanding of what took place.

Research (Lonergan, 2017, p. 141-144) is the functional speciality responsible for collecting, organizing, and making data available for the subsequent phases. Its task is to gather these data in the most accurate way possible, so that ensuing theological reflection is grounded in reliable sources. Intentional consciousness engages with the texts of various traditions, aiming to identify documents relevant to a given topic, locate them in time and space, determine authorship, reconstruct original texts, and explain their variants. In the case of *The Way to Nicea*, this phase yields outcomes such as the collection of relevant texts, the use of critical editions, the identification of authorship, and the reconstruction of the text's compositional stages.

Interpretation (Lonergan, 2017, p. 145-163) is the functional speciality that deals with general exegetical operations, aiming to determine the most accurate meaning of a text. As such, the scholar's expertise must include the use of suitable exegetical tools. Outputs of this phase often include translations or thematic studies, such as "the concept of X in author Y". According to Lonergan, interpretation entails three core operations: understanding the text, judging the adequacy of that understanding, and expressing what one deems to be the correct interpretation. In other words, intentional consciousness, now directed toward the reliable texts supplied by *Research*, seeks their meaning and validates its interpretation in light of the textual corpus.

History (Lonergan, 2017, p. 164-183), as a functional specialty, is concerned with the writing of history and the methodological principles that guide it. Historical knowledge is conceived as the accumulation of complementary insights through which the historian achieves a mediated participation in the common sense of another time and place. This is made possible by the fusion of horizons: the horizon of the subject under study and that of the historian (Hefling, 1982, p. 158-159).

Those three functional specialties of *Research*, *Interpretation*, and *History* operate within the invariant structure of human consciousness. Their task is to construct a coherent set of complementary insights, each grounded in a differentiated pattern of intentional operations and sustained by technical language (Vélez Caro, 2008, p. 131).

As ways of knowing, common sense and scholarship are similar in that both involve a self-correcting process of learning that builds up a set of complementary insights but does not make the shift to theory. Thus the realm of scholarship—what scholars know—remains distinct from the realm of theory. Yet it is also distinct from the realm of common sense, insofar as scholarship involves its own proper mode of apprehension (Lonergan, 2017, p. 254-258). Becoming a scholar requires a differentiation of consciousness that is distinct both from the common sense and theoretical one. While not necessarily seeking universal explanatory principles (as theory does), scholars exhibit a differentiated consciousness resulting from the disciplined accumulation of specialized insights. As a consequence, scholarship operates within a specialized domain. The validity of its judgments, though, must be evaluated within the limits of its own competence. Only within this scope can such judgments claim objective weight and be properly assessed.

7 Dialectics and the Self-Appropriation of Trinitarian Meaning

The functional specialty of *Dialectics* (Lonergan, 2017, p. 220-249) addresses the concrete conflicts that emerge within the first three functional specialties, aiming to uncover truth—or, at least, to attain a higher viewpoint capable of yielding a more adequate and comprehensive understanding. It compares and evaluates the contrasting perspectives of historians, the interpretations of exegetes, and the emphases of theological investigations, treating these as potentially conflicting positions. Crucially, dialectics presupposes and depends upon the prior scholarly work of horizon-merging. The diversity of marginal or contrasting horizons invites consciousness to engage dialectical operations, seeking to identify the roots of divergence by analyzing the intentional operations of consciousness that have led to differing conclusions.

This functional specialty aims to grasp the diversity of horizons and to determine whether they are complementary, developmental, or dialectically opposed. Through attention to the operations of consciousness—and the potential distortions affecting them—it distinguishes authentic positions from counterpositions. In examining differing insights and judgments about a given theological object—be it a dogmatic formulation, a hermeneutical tradition, or a religious experience—dialectics seeks to discern the truth.

At this stage, two orienting questions guide intellectual inquiry: *Where is the truth?* and *What is at stake in this intellectual conflict?* This evaluative moment is retrospective: it engages divergent positions and critically examines the implications of each. By making explicit what questions were asked and how they were answered, Lonergan seeks to show how the mystery of the Trinity can be understood—not merely asserted, but known through intentional operations.

Dialectical inquiry (Lonergan, 2009, p. 107) begins by evaluating the internal coherence of an author's position with respect to attentiveness, intelligence, and reasonableness. This is precisely the approach Lonergan takes in his analysis of Tertullian's doctrine of *unius substantiae*. In some passages, the Latin Father affirms that the Father and the Son are both God, yet distinct; in others, he seems to suggest that the Father is the whole divine substance and the Son only a derived part. At this point, Tertullian's position appears internally inconsistent

Dialectics presses further with foundational questions: *Why does Tertullian think this way?*, *How does he know reality?* and *How is his concept of substantia shaping his theological understanding?* These questions uncover that Tertullian conceives divine substance in material terms—such that the Son is viewed as an emission or derivation from the Father, as if one single mass of dough were divided into two loaves. This projection of a materialist framework into Trinitarian theology exemplifies what Lonergan calls “naïve realism” (Lonergan, 2009, p. 213-225; Meyer, 1989, p. ix-xv). As such, Tertullian's position is not merely inconsistent—it constitutes a counterposition insofar as it rests on a distorted apprehension of divine reality.

This analysis clarifies the limitations of *unius substantiae* and reveals why, despite superficial similarities, it is conceptually distinct from the *homoousios* affirmed at Nicaea. A reasonable judgment, grounded in the invariant structure of human consciousness, is thus required—a critical realism capable of discerning the discontinuity between these theological terms.

Following this dialectical method, Lonergan not only analyzes Tertullian but also examines Origen and the Arians in order to illuminate the emergence of the Nicene doctrine. This trajectory is not merely chronological but reflects a progression in the differentiation of consciousness: from the

sensitive realm (Tertullian), to the idealism (Origen and the Arians), and finally to the theoretical (Athanasius and Nicaea).

Though space does not allow a detailed examination of each figure, a brief word about Origen and the Arians is essential. Asking, *Why does Origen think this way?* and *How does he know reality?*, Lonergan (2009, p. 127-133) identifies the central role of the *Idea* in Origen's thought: for him, reality is participation in an Idea—Ideas being ontologically prior to things. According to this Platonic vision, the Son participates in the Father as the one source of being. This leads to a clear subordinationism rooted in Origen's philosophical background. The Arians radicalize this logic: if the Son participates in the Father, then He must be a creature (Lonergan, 2009, p. 139). Both positions share a foundational concern—to identify the unique source grounding all reality—but do so in a way that ultimately undermines the Son's full divinity.

As already discussed, Athanasius' theological rule and the term *homoousios* mark a decisive development. Here, we may highlight their function as keys to dogmatic development. Faced with the inadequacy of both sensitive (Tertullian) and idealistic (Origen and Arians) positions, the theoretical realm manifests its full critical capacity: it challenges naïve realism, corrects idealistic abstraction, and delineates the mystery of the Trinity with appropriate conceptual precision.

8 Theologian as subject: conversion and authenticity in the Speciality of Foundations

The functional specialty of *Foundations* (Lonergan, 2017, p. 250-274) is constituted through the act of triple conversion and is therefore oriented by the desire for authenticity (Gugliemi, 2007, p. 9). This conversion marks a decisive transformation in the theologian: it demands critical self-examination aimed at uncovering what is inauthentic within one's own horizon and reorienting the subject toward human authenticity—that is, toward a differentiated horizon. This interior process awakens the awareness of the multiplicity of possible human horizons and grants the freedom to choose the one most conducive to integral human flourishing.

Building on the results achieved in the stage of *Dialectics*, the theologian comes to understand what others believe, the nature of their conflicting positions, and the roots of such conflicts. At this point, the question *How is it possible for one God to be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?* receives a significant response. In *Foundations*, however, the theologian reappropriates that response existentially, through the personal question: *What do I believe?* This shift signals a crucial turning point: the new horizon that emerges becomes the context within which intellectual, moral, and religious conversions are integrated and fully operative.

The functional specialty of *Foundations* thus confronts the subject with a fundamental choice between authenticity and inauthenticity—whether to orient oneself toward transcendence or to resist it. This transformation results in a converted subject who integrates the theological achievements of the previous stages into their own existential horizon. *Foundations*, therefore, is not simply a doctrinal or theoretical moment—it is a moment of self-constitution (Riley, 1980, p. 209-212).

For Lonergan, conversion unfolds in three fundamental dimensions: intellectual, moral, and religious. Intellectual conversion reorients the subject toward truth, through the appropriation of the transcendental method and the conscious affirmation of the intentional structure of knowing. Moral conversion reorients the subject toward the good, by overcoming personal or collective satisfactions in favor of values grasped as true. Religious conversion reorients the subject toward the ultimate good, through an existential surrender marked by openness, self-transcendence, and radical love (Sala, 2006, p. 70).

At this stage, the affirmation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as *homo-ousios* becomes not only a doctrinal conclusion but a personal confession of faith. It positions the theologian before the mystery with renewed understanding and carries implications for future theological, ethical, and pastoral decisions. It is a transformed consciousness that returns to Scripture, now informed by an interiorized grasp of the meaning contained in the dogmatic formulation of the Trinity.

The subject is transformed through the differentiation of consciousness that takes place in the process of understanding. Yet, this process is never complete—for the unfolding of understanding is unending. *The Way to Nicaea* serves merely as the prolegomenon to *The Triune God*, whose two volumes—*Doctrines* and *Systematics*—develop the dogma in its historical and speculative dimensions. From the moment the dogma is defined, the consciousness of the believer begins to formulate new questions. The love that draws the creature toward the Creator is expressed not only in prayer and worship, but also in the inexhaustible desire to understand more deeply the mystery in which one believes.

9 When the Church asked “how?”

Up to now, as suggested by the title of the work under analysis, we have traced the path that leads to Nicaea. It now remains to say a few words about the event itself. Following Lonergan, the Council cannot be understood merely as a chronological sequence of events, but rather as part of a broader process of growth in understanding—a development of consciousness that follows a shift through realms of meaning.

The Council of Nicaea did not emerge by chance. It was preceded by theological debate that altered the structure of inquiry, moving from the experiential level—"Master, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" (Mt 19:16)—to the theoretical level, marked by questions such as *How is it possible?* and *Is it true?* This transition reflects a differentiation of consciousness, in which understanding moves from experience to theory.

Until this point, we have considered these developments from the perspective of individual consciousness. At Nicaea, however, we witness a shift at the level of ecclesial theological consciousness (Pampaloni, 2015, p. 139-140). The challenges posed by Tertullian, Origen, and the Arians—particularly the question *How can one God be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?*—forced the Church to confront a theological dilemma intrinsic to the Christian faith: *how can $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$?* From the perspectives of both naïve realism and idealism, this equation seemed impossible.

The solutions offered by early theologians tended to simplify the problem by eliminating one of its terms. Tertullian's naïve realism, for example, emphasized *una substantia* but subordinated the Son by depicting the divine substance as being primarily the Father's, with the Son as a derived portion. Origen and the Arians, reflecting a form of naïve idealism, resolved the tension by affirming the full divinity of the Father while reducing the Son to something lesser. In both cases, the result was not a Trinitarian understanding, but a simplified $1 = 1$.

These approaches, grounded in the realm of common sense and structured by the pattern of experience, proved insufficient to articulate the mystery of the Trinity in a way that respected both Scripture and ecclesial life. Yet the question imposed itself—not only on individual theologians, but on the Church as a whole. It remains an existential and enduring question, posed to any believer who honestly reads the Scriptures and seeks understanding.

The reason Scripture does not offer a direct answer is that, although it intends the same intellectual object—God—it does so from a different realm of meaning: that of experience. The question, *How can one God be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?* belongs to the theoretical realm. At Nicaea, we witness an ecclesial moment in which *fides quaerens intellectum* demanded a shift to a speculative pattern of consciousness to deepen the Church's understanding of its own faith. At this stage, it is not merely the individual but the Church itself that is called to express its belief with conceptual clarity and to avoid misunderstanding.

In this light, Nicaea becomes a paradigmatic case of what called "a dialectic of fact...an incremental, self-correcting process capable of yielding true knowledge of reality" (Pampaloni, 2015, p. 103-131).

Let us pause to reflect: what we now call "the Church" began as a small group of individuals whose encounter with Jesus led them to proclaim

him as “Lord”. This first confession, both personal and communal, arose within the realm of common sense as a self-appropriated act of faith, understanding, and judgment. The Gospels emerged through a subsequent cluster of insights, within the same experiential realm, seeking to deepen that original mystery. Through narrative, metaphor, and theological argument, they aimed to communicate the formative experience of faith.

From this original profession and the Gospel tradition, we observe a clear development in the Church’s consciousness of its faith. From a Lonerganian perspective, Tradition is composed of insights, judgments, and values that shape both the intellectual horizon and the structuring of the community of believers (Komonchak, 1995, p. 89). Once the Church recognized that the four Gospels offered a true witness to Jesus and his revelation, it could no longer disregard them in subsequent acts of theological understanding. From that moment onward, all aspects of Church life—liturgy, sacraments, dogma, moral teaching—became inseparably linked to the Gospels.

These texts, as noted above, are bearers of meaning: they are the result of past acts of understanding and remain open to future acts of understanding. As long as the Church remains within the same experiential realm of meaning, its theological reflection continues as a process of self-appropriating the original proclamation: *Jesus is Lord*. Yet it is also possible for the community of believers to intend the same mystery by posing a different question: *How can we explain this experience in a way that can be understood?* This kind of question belongs to the theoretical realm and demands a different use of language and argumentation. Nevertheless, it remains a further stage in the ongoing process of theological self-appropriation.

Faced with an impossible—but central—question presented by Scripture to every sincere believer across time, the Church could not avoid articulating a position that both expressed the depth of the mystery and safeguarded it from misunderstanding. With the formulation of *homoousios*, the Church entered a new phase: just as it could no longer set aside the Gospels, it could no longer disregard dogmatic expression, which had acquired normative authority for future developments in the understanding—and proclamation—of the faith.

As with Scripture, the *homoousios* formulation bears meaning that each believer is invited to understand. Yet, unlike the experiential realm in which Scripture was formulated, this process of understanding unfolds within the realm of theory.

Viewing the Council of Nicaea through a Lonerganian lens allows us to recognize a decisive turning point in the life of the Church. It marks the moment in which ecclesial consciousness differentiates itself by moving from the realm of experience to that of theory. From this moment on, the Church is not only called to facilitate the believer’s encounter with the

Lord, but also to articulate the foundations of that faith—and the reality to which it refers—with conceptual clarity and theological precision.

Conclusion

Ultimately, *The Way to Nicaea* does not merely constitute a historical reconstruction of the Trinitarian dogma; rather, it inaugurates a concrete implementation of a theological method that seriously engages the intentional structure of human consciousness and the epistemic conditions of its authenticity. The trajectory from Tertullian to Nicaea serves not only as a diachronic account of doctrinal evolution but as a paradigmatic model of development wherein theological truth emerges through the dialectical interplay between the datum of faith, the questioning subject, and the mediating function of conceptual language.

This developmental process is by no means concluded; it is perpetuated in every subject who, confronted by the question of the triune God, undertakes the cognitive and existential responsibility of understanding, judging, and appropriating that truth in a more differentiated and authentic manner. Theology, in this light, cannot be reduced to the static preservation of propositional content; it is rather a vocation to the intelligibility of faith—a normative task of ongoing conversion and historically situated accountability.

It is in this horizon that Lonergan's proposal finds its critical edge: theology must be rethought as a personal and methodological act, constituted through intellectual, moral, and religious conversion, rooted in the invariant structure of human cognitional operations, and perpetually open to the inexhaustible mystery of the living God.

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