

# BERNARD LONERGAN

## ACHIEVING PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Our materialistic, success-oriented culture places great emphasis on the external world of money, status, and power, while often neglecting the inner world of emotion, imagination, and reflection. The superficiality of this prevailing utilitarian philosophy has helped foster a counter-movement with a renewed concern for personal development. Thus our culture has produced a vigorous self-growth movement manifested in greater interest in self-help books, popular psychology, fitness programs, meditation techniques, holistic spirituality, and a host of other therapeutic approaches. While we can laud this movement for challenging the superficiality of the dominant culture, we should also question its tendency toward excessive individualism, faddish approaches, and shallow uses of the religious traditions.

In trying to overcome these narrow and superficial tendencies, we will find helpful guidance in the systematic approach to personal development advocated by Bernard Lonergan (1904 -1984), one of the giants of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Catholic theology. This reserved, intense brilliant scholar spent his adult life in academic environments, working out methodologies to guide human growth and theological reflection.

Born in Canada in 1904, Lonergan attended Jesuit schools in Montreal and entered the Society of Jesus in 1922. He studied philosophy in England from 1926 to 1930, followed by a three-year teaching stint in Montreal. After his ordination to the priesthood in 1936, he began doctoral studies in theology at the Gregorian University in Rome, completing his work in 1940. During the next thirteen years he taught theology in Jesuit seminaries in Canada before returning to the Gregorian, where he served as professor of theology for twelve years. In 1957 he published his great work, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Philosophical Library, 1957), which explored in great detail and depth the unvarying patterns he discerned in the process of human knowing. This work established his scholarly reputation and helped secure his appointment as an expert consultant at the Second Vatican Council. After surgery for lung cancer in 1965, Lonergan continued his teaching career at Regis College in Canada and at Boston College until his retirement in 1983, a year before his death.

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**“From a casual viewpoint, one would say that first there is God’s gift of his love. Next, the eye of this love reveals values in their splendor, while the strength of this love brings about their realization, and that is moral conversion. Finally, among the values discerned by the eye of love is the value of believing the truths taught by the religious tradition, and in such tradition and belief are the seeds of intellectual conversion.”**

----- Method in Theology

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During this period, despite his health problems, Lonergan published his other famous work, *Method in Theology* (Herder and Herder, 1972), which offers a highly structured approach to the theological enterprise, based on an analysis of its eight interlocking functions.

While Lonergan never received a great deal of popular acclaim during his lifetime, he did exert great influence within the ranks of professional theologians. The highly respected theologian David Tracy, commenting on Lonergan’s unparalleled interdisciplinary work, described him as “the greatest Catholic theologian North America has produced.” Lonergan is often compared with the other giant of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Catholic theology, Karl Rahner. Their perceptions of each other are revealing. During a 1970 interview, Lonergan commented succinctly: “Rahner emphasizes mystery a lot. I have a few clear things to say” (*A Second Collection*, p.229). Rahner, who seldom discussed theological questions directly with Lonergan, once indicated to me in a private conversation that, while he respected Lonergan greatly, he felt he had overemphasized method to the neglect of substance.

Lonergan did indeed concentrate on questions of methodology, while Rahner explored the mystery dimension of a whole range of theological topics. It is, however, Lonergan’s attention to process, patterns, approaches, and systems which make him valuable as we explore the question of personal development. He invites us to take seriously our own experience, to explore the way we function as knowers and lovers, and to discern the patterns involved in human growth.

### THE TRANSCENDENTAL PRECEPTS

Lonergan suggests four general principles, or “transcendental precepts,” to guide our development: be attentive by openly probing the full range of your experience; be intelligent by cultivating an inquiring mind and gaining insight into your experience; be reasonable by marshalling evidence and judging the validity of your insights; be responsible by acting on your valid insights. He also helps us understand the dynamic interplay among these four transcendental precepts. He cautions us, for example to keep the second and third steps in proper sequence by making sure we understand the relevant data and the possible alternatives on particular questions before making a judgment about them. By providing these general guidelines and inviting us to apply them to our concrete experience, Lonergan helps us avoid scattered and superficial approaches to personal development.

By the time *Method in Theology* appeared in 1972, Lonergan was making extensive use of the notion of “conversion” to interpret all aspects of human development. The word “conversion” is, of course, highly charged today because of its associations with evangelical Christianity. As a result, many people associate it with a sudden, once and for all turning from sin to a reborn life of commitment to God. This understanding puts emphasis on the private moment of encounter with God in the explicitly religious realm. Lonergan, on the other hand, understands “conversion” in a broader way, as a new beginning, a fresh start which leads to an ongoing process of growth in the intellectual, moral, and religious dimensions of life.

This interpretation of the conversion process is rooted in various aspects of Lonergan’s philosophical anthropology. We are, first of all, self-transcendent creatures, called to strive always for more knowledge, better values, and deeper love. Thus, while a conversion experience may be concentrated in a clear moment of decision, it is rooted in a continuing process of growth.

Second, our existence is composed of emotional, intellectual, and religious dimensions. We can, for example, feel sad over suffering and rejoice in accomplishment; ask questions and find solutions to problems; commit sins and act virtuously; search for ultimate meaning and utter prayers of gratitude. Conversions can occur initially in any of these dimensions, as we decide against stagnation and for progress in a particular area of our lives. Since the dimensions are interrelated and ultimately united in our single consciousness, we can achieve a fully authentic life only through conversion in all dimensions.

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**“Besides conversions there are breakdowns. What has been built up so slowly and so laboriously by the individual, the society, the culture, can collapse. . . . Values have a certain esoteric imperiousness, but can they keep outweighing carnal pleasure, wealth, power? Religion undoubtedly had its day, but is not that day over? Is it not illusory comfort for weaker souls, an opium distributed by the rich to quiet the poor, a mythical projection of man’s own excellence into the sky?”**

----- Method in Theology

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Finally, according to Lonergan's understanding of human existence, we are, at the same time, unique individuals and social creatures who function in various communities and institutions. Thus conversion, which is intensely personal, is not purely private. It brings insights which can be communicated and commitments which demand common action. A personal moral conversion, for example, may move an individual to join with others to work for social justice. Moreover, continued growth may depend on the challenge and support provided by various communities and associations.

Lonergan is also well aware that human existence is not a one-way process of growth. In addition to conversions, there are breakdowns. Our emotions can take us in destructive directions by prompting choices of pleasure over goodness. Self-deception can cloud our intellect and reinforce irresponsible decisions. Sin can impair our loving relationships with God and other people. Conversions call for continued effort, precisely because they are fragile and can be reversed.

Lonergan often insisted that his carefully worked out method should not be followed slavishly, but should function as a catalyst for creative responses. Thus, inspired but not constrained by Lonergan and borrowing suggestions from his many followers, let us explore four types of conversion: affective, intellectual, moral, and religious. This approach invites personal reflection and suggests Lonergan's enduring value as a guide for personal development.

#### VALUABLE EMOTIONS

**Affective Conversion** leading to a healthy emotional life is crucial to full human existence. Our feelings provide us with an initial response to the value and worth of persons and things. When we meet good persons, for example, our initial attraction prompts us to find out more about them in hopes of furthering the relationship. Emotions also help us focus our decisions and actions. Persons who feel great fear and revulsion over the prospect of nuclear war may be prompted to devote their time and energy to the peace movement.

On the other hand, emotions which are not properly handled can be destructive. Those who simply ignore their emotions are in danger of becoming cold, insensitive individuals who cannot relate in a truly human way. Repressing negative feelings often causes fatigue and bottles up positive emotions as well. Without an adequate understanding of the affective life, individuals are subject to self-deceptions and mysterious compulsions. Decisions dictated by hidden emotions are often flawed because they reflect unexamined and biased assumptions. When persons fail to search out the source of their deepest joys and most threatening anxieties, their religious lives suffer because they have neglected matters of ultimate concern.

Learning to deal with our emotions in a consistently healthy way requires a systematic effort. We must be in touch with what we are actually feeling in a given situation, instead of falling into a programmed response dictated by others' expectations. It is vital to recognize in ourselves strange or embarrassing emotions while searching for constructive ways to release them.

Precise identification and accurate naming of a wide variety of nuanced feelings provide us with greater power to deal with them. We should learn to distinguish, for example, positive and negative emotions elicited by objects, the intense and subtle feelings accompanying personal relationships, the often contradictory emotions attached to important symbols, and the affective states which motivate our behavior. It is especially important to differentiate appropriate and inappropriate emotional responses as a first step in managing and transforming those which are excessive or disproportionate. Honest communication about our feelings is also helpful both in identifying them and in finding healthy ways of acting on them. Such disclosures should always be governed by the law of charity, which looks to the well-being of others as well as ourselves. I find this analysis exemplified by the story of a middle-aged man suffering from anxiety and fatigue who consistently repressed his anger. After recognizing the destructive effects of this habitual repression, he decided to deal more openly with this frightening emotion. As a test case, he purposely confronted a co-worker who often angered him with his overbearing attitude. The encounter helped clear the air and convinced the man of the wisdom of this more open approach. He began to pay greater attention to all of his emotions by regularly sharing and discussing his feelings with his wife. This whole process of affective conversion has proven to be liberating and energizing for him and is now an important part of his quest for full personal development.

#### QUEST FOR WISDOM

In a culture which oscillates between a narrow rationalism and a soft romanticism, intellectual conversion is difficult but vital. We need to embark on a lifelong quest for wisdom which rises above both scientism, with its exclusive emphasis on the empirical method, and the new romanticism, with its celebrations of feelings and intuition to the exclusion of reason and logic. Wise persons who are intellectually converted recognize that knowledge does not arise simply from isolated observation of the objective world presented to the senses. They realize that knowledge grows within a community and that much of what we accept as true is based on faith. For them, knowledge develops from making valid judgments about the meaning of experience.

Wise persons seek an integrated understanding of life, which combines the theoretical with the practical, self-fulfillment with a concern for the common good, and knowledge of the highest principles with the light of love. Those who possess wisdom make good dialogue partners and constructive participants in a pluralistic society, because they seek truth without pretending to monopolize it. In short the life of wisdom represents the ideal toward which intellectual conversion tends.

The process unleashed by a decision to seek wisdom involves various tasks. In general, we are called to be more attentive to our experience. Those who are tempted by their busy routines to concentrate almost exclusively on practical and utilitarian concerns must pay special attention to the spiritual dimension of their experience. This could be done by keeping a journal, meeting with a spiritual director, engaging in serious conversation with a friend, and meditating regularly. Those who feel bored with themselves or limited by their lack of knowledge need to find intellectual stimulation by various means such as reading a good book, taking a course, meeting new people, and accepting new challenges. Intellectual conversion can be triggered and fostered by new experiences as well as by greater awareness of familiar routines.

The quest for wisdom also moves us to criticize all the forms of anti-intellectualism in our culture, including misgivings about intellectuals among ordinary people, the denigration of theology among religious enthusiasts, and the disdain for reason within the popular self-improvement movement. Converted persons understand that intelligence is a broader capacity than is reason, with its narrow focus on logical analysis. They cherish and foster the power of intelligence to probe, understand, and judge all aspects of our experience. Wise persons thus expose the limitations of anti-intellectualism by demonstrating that intelligence is a great ally in the process of personal development.

Wisdom can be cultivated. Some individuals make progress by concentrating on thoroughly understanding an idea or a proposition before making a judgment about it. A close reading of classic texts not only puts students in touch with the ideas of great thinkers but also teaches the art of critical thinking. In ordinary conversation, we have many opportunities to pass over to another person's viewpoint in order to catch the emotional tone and personal context of his or her comments. Finally, careful analysis of one of our particular failures in life often brings unexpected insights, reminding us in the process of the importance of using intelligence to transform our negative experiences.

An important aspect of wisdom is the ability to recognize the limitations of our insights. Not every bright idea proves to be valid or accurate. Thus we must learn to make reasonable judgments about our insights into the meaning of experience. In this way, intellectually converted persons acquire a sense of pluralism by recognizing the relativity of their own positions. They realize that much of knowledge is based on faith and that on many questions human beings cannot achieve absolute certitude but must rely on convergent probability. The quest for wisdom moves them to respect new data, to weigh all the evidence, and to revise judgments when necessary.

Individuals who tend to be opinionated and leery of pluralism can learn to be more tolerant and open-minded. Through wrestling with the great questions of meaning and purpose, we learn to accept the mysterious character of human existence which provides no simple and final answers to the matters which concern us most. By studying the history of disputed questions, we come to appreciate the diversity of opinion which has always characterized the human search for truth. Through travel, learning another language, and meeting people from diverse backgrounds, our horizons are broadened and our viewpoints are relativized. A healthy sense of self-criticism enables us to recognize the limitations of our own positions and to stay open to truth wherever it is to be found.

The decision to seek wisdom sets us on an exciting but demanding adventure. We are called to stay alert though tempted by indifference, to ask probing questions though prone to complacency, and to admit our mistakes though fearful of embarrassment. Nonetheless, intellectual conversion can bring a deep joy and quiet delight as we expand our horizons, sharpen our insights, and improve our judgments. Through this process we prepare ourselves to cooperate with others who treasure wisdom, so that we can move forward together on the journey toward greater maturity.

#### TURNING TO GOODNESS

Authentic personal development also requires moral conversion, in which we choose to pursue goodness and virtue even when they conflict with pleasure and satisfaction. Children who naturally seek self-gratification need rules and regulations to control their behavior. Individuals striving for genuine adulthood must assume greater responsibility for their actions based on inner convictions, moral principles, and habitual attitudes. Even after we have chosen to strive for goodness over satisfaction, we must still live out this decision in the real world of conflicting values and cultural bias. This requires constant attention to the task of ordering and focusing our values as well as unmasking social contradictions and imbalances. Moral conversion requires a change of heart which moves us to constructive action in accord with our ideals. It is a decision to be faithful to the transcendental principle: be responsible.

In order to live out our decision for goodness, we must move beyond legalism to a generous love. Legalism, which suggests a slavish adherence to external laws out of fear of punishment, leads to a minimalistic and negative morality. The Catholic legalist, for example, who goes to mass primarily out of fear of mortal sin, may worship in routine fashion and never discover the inherent value of wholehearted participation in the liturgy. Morally converted persons strive to act out of love without counting the cost. They come to know the truth of Karl Rahner's maxim that "love is true to itself only if it is prepared to give more tomorrow than today."

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**"Religious conversion is being grasped by ultimate concern. It is other-worldly falling in love. . . . It is revealed in retrospect as an undertow of existential consciousness, as a fated acceptance of a vocation to holiness, as perhaps an increasing simplicity and passivity in prayer."**

----- Method in Theology

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Enlightened individuals who appreciate the way authoritarianism can impede human growth are sometimes tempted to swing from legalism to antinomianism, in which a "do your own thing" morality prevails. Genuine moral conversion, however, calls us to avoid such a pendulum swing and to concentrate instead on developing a responsible freedom. Responsible behavior demands fitting responses to the call of God, the wisdom of the past, the needs of our neighbors, and the ideals in our hearts. Persons who have achieved authentic freedom do not follow their whims, but act on insight. Their moral decisions flow from intelligent consideration of many influences, including their intuitive responses, their own character traits, the consequences of their acts, the circumstances constituting the situation, and the example of good persons who have acted virtuously in similar situations.

Given our contemporary awareness of injustice and the nuclear threat, the process of moral conversion today must lead to the development of a social conscience which rejects ethical privatism and joins the struggle for liberation. Believers encased in privatism are concerned with saving their own souls by loving God and avoiding personal sins. Converted persons today must develop a broader vision, recognizing that love of God is essentially linked with love of neighbor; that sin has a social dimension because it fosters unjust structures and dehumanizing systems; and that work for justice is an essential element in spreading the gospel. The decision for goodness furthers the cause of authentic personal development, but always within the larger context of concern for the well-being of the whole human family.

Moral conversion prompts us to overcome vices which retard our growth and to cultivate virtues which give us the assured capacity to respond constructively in changing circumstances. Individuals who have made progress in the moral life are not always in a grim fight with their destructive tendencies. On the contrary, through discipline and the repetition of fitting behavior they often are able to perform good actions with little effort and great delight. Their strengths become integrated into a harmonious pattern so that virtue is second nature for them. The decision to pursue constructive values over pleasure inaugurates a lifelong effort to cultivate a whole range of virtues which facilitates a life of high idealism and service to others.

Furthermore, moral conversion encourages persons to appreciate the wisdom and ideals of their formative traditions, to immerse themselves in the life of a community, and to contribute to the good of the various associations which make partial claim on them. The moral life, even at its highest stages of development, is not confined to acting on general principles discerned by rational deduction but always includes a communal dimension. I recall a woman committed to the peace movement explaining how she was influenced by her parents, who preferred conflict resolution to the use of force; by the scriptures which proclaim peacemakers blessed; and by the leaders of her church who have called for an entirely new attitude toward war. She continues to be sustained in her efforts by the peace organizations she has joined, by the liturgy she attends weekly, by her friends who are also committed to the cause, and by her religion which teaches her that peacemaking is valuable even when results are meager. As the example suggests, moral conversion is clearly a call to live out a life story which reflects the best of communal ideals and is nourished by community life.

#### HE WHO SHARED OUR LOT

Religious conversion is at the very center of the process of personal development. Our efforts to achieve affective integration, to attain wisdom, and to live out our ideals are always limited, incomplete, and filled with failures. Thus our never-satisfied drive for self-transcendence raises for us the question of ultimate meaning and absolute value. Through religious conversion, we come to the conviction that life has meaning despite all of the absurdity which surrounds us, and that love will triumph despite all the evils which threaten us. We sense that the mystery which encompasses our existence is ultimately gracious, even though it remains incomprehensible. Our center of gravity has shifted from ourselves to the mystery which, paradoxically, forms the very center of our being.

Genuine religious conversion is experienced not as a personal achievement, but as the work of God who first loves us. We find ourselves in the hands of one who loves us without restriction or condition. This experience has the power to transform and liberate us. It calls us to surrender ourselves totally, to turn from sin to righteousness, to strive wholeheartedly for holiness, and to put aside idols my making God our ultimate concern. To under religious conversion is to fall in love with God. This free gift sets us on a lifelong journey filled with challenges and opportunities. Despite our sins, we believe we are loved. Despite our limitations, we know we must continually strive to deepen and extend our love for God and others.

For us Christians, religious conversion, which we believe is available to all human beings, is focused and mediated by Jesus Christ. He is the parable of God's love who teaches us about divine fidelity. He is life-giving spirit who floods our hearts with divine love. Individuals who experience Christian conversion accept Jesus Christ as the final prophet and absolute savior. They commit themselves to him, attempting to live out his message in their daily lives. It is in Christ that they perceive most clearly the unconditional character of God's love and experience most profoundly the call to make a wholehearted response. For Christians, religious conversion is not a theoretical acceptance of a new worldview or an intellectual adherence to a more enlightened theology. It involves, rather, a personal dedication to Jesus Christ, who shared our lot completely and triumphed over its worst evils.

Christian conversion calls for a total-person response which unifies and brings to a higher synthesis all aspects of personal development. Dedication to Jesus, who cast out the demons, frees us to face our most threatening emotions confident that they cannot destroy us and can even be mobilized for our personal growth. Handing our lives over to Christ, who addressed God as "Abba," enables us to surrender ourselves to the gracious mystery who calls each one of us to strive intelligently and wholeheartedly for full personal development.

This examination of conversion as the key to personal growth reflects one of the enduring contributions of Bernard Lonergan. His often difficult, tightly structured, and highly impersonal masterworks have a paradoxical power to encourage us to take hold of our lives rather than drift along, and to structure our spiritual growth rather than follow the latest trends. In this way we are open—as Lonergan often insisted—to the generous love of God "poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit" (Romans 5:5).

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How have you been influenced by the cultural movement which stresses self-growth and personal development?
2. What influence did Lonergan's training and life as a Jesuit have on his thought?
3. What is Lonergan's understanding of conversion and how does it guide personal development?
4. How would you apply Lonergan's advice to your own life?

#### SUGGESTED READINGS

*Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Philosophical Library, 1957). A detailed and demanding treatment which gives the philosophical foundations for Lonergan's thought and invites readers to probe their own process of knowing.

*Method in Theology* (Herder and Herder, 1972). Provides a systematic method for doing theology which appeals to professional theologians more than average readers.

*Collection*, edited by Frederick Crowe and Robert Doran (University of Toronto Press, 1988). Contains essays on a broad range of topics, including love and marriage and the role of the university, some of which are more readable than his major works; the introduction by Crowe is helpful in understanding Lonergan's thought.

*The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan*, by David Tracy (Herder and Herder, 1970). An excellent exposition of the dynamics of Lonergan's thought.