Conversion and the New Evangelization: A Perspective from Lonergan

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A key legacy of the pontificate of Pope John Paul II was the concept of the new evangelization. This, amongst other things, was seen as a response to rising levels of religious indifference especially in countries that share a Western culture. This paper discusses the new evangelization in the light of two seminal ideas from the work of Lonergan, namely conversion and transcendence. It argues that these perspectives help explain and enrich the concept of the new evangelization. The second part of the paper explores some of the factors that can assist conversion, especially religious conversion.

Introduction: Conversion and Evangelization

The weakening of religious identity amongst young people from so-called mainstream Churches is a well-described phenomenon in a number of Western countries. Whilst not hostile to religion, many young people do not seem to be very interested in increasing the strength of their religious affiliation or in exploring new spiritual paths. Smith and Denton in their landmark study encapsulated this mentality well when they wrote:

The majority of U.S. youth appear to believe that it is okay for others to be eclectic seekers, but they themselves are not particularly interested. They seem happy being part of the tradition they were raised in, which to them looks largely satisfactory even if it is not terribly central or important.
In response to this new cultural reality Pope John Paul II developed the concept of a new evangelization which was aimed at reanimating those Catholics who had lost a living sense of the gospel. In analyzing both the need for the new evangelization and how it can best be implemented, the writings of Bernard Lonergan offer valuable insights.

The current estrangement of many Catholics, especially younger ones, can be analysed in a number of ways. One critical dimension of this is a greatly diminished sense of the role of God in everyday life. Many could be described as having an acquaintance with God, without this relationship ever developing to a deeper, more profound level. The God that many envisage is a theistic conception, a God who exists in some ineffable form, a God who inhabits some type of moral universe and values upright behavior, but one who is defined by remoteness from everyday life.

Lonergan proposed a different conception of the Divine and linked it closely to the act of conversion. He provided a very powerful metaphor for describing the goal of the religious quest. Lonergan spoke of true conversion as being in love with God, which has many parallels with human love, “for the love of God, being in love with God, can be as full as dominant as overwhelming and as lasting an experience as human love”. It follows that if someone is in love then he or she is likely to manifest this love in ways that overlap with an overwhelming sense of conversion. The act of falling in love transforms the person. Conversion, like falling in love, has a direct impact on life, where the whole focus of the person shifts to one who is loved. Absence of this love, on the
other hand, could be another way of conceptualizing the loss of the sense of the gospel which has led to the need for the new evangelization. Conversion can be seen, therefore, as one way of overcoming the estrangement from God and providing another way of realizing the new evangelization. The notion of conversion, therefore, is of critical importance and requires further investigation.

In his discussion of religious conversion, Carrier made a classical distinction between exogenous and endogenous conversion. Exogenous conversion is linked to some external event which “upset[s] and reorientate[s] the fundamental attitude of the subject”. Endogenous conversion, which is the process written about most eloquently by Newman in his Apologia, is an interior process leading to a transformation of consciousness marked by an almost simultaneous disintegration of the previous self with new insight and understanding emerging. Lonergan’s sense of conversion falls within the endogenous category. Endogenous conversion can be an almost imperceptible movement, but it remains one which is active and engages all aspects of the person. Although it can be imperceptible, conversion makes a radical difference to how persons see themselves, others and their place in the world. It echoes the Pauline theme of the new creation: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old one has passed away and, behold, the new has come”. Conversion is the culmination of a long process and is intimately associated with the culture in which people are embedded. In light of the elusiveness and importance of endogenous conversion, an examination of contemporary
culture can shed light on how the new evangelization can be better understood and then implemented.

The New Cultural Situation: Self-Transcendence and Conversion

Lonergan argued that contemporary culture had moved away from the premises and assumptions of earlier times, and this required a reformulation of many of the suppositions theologians brings to their task. This alteration of the cultural matrix in which Christianity exists is almost an inevitable part of Church history;

Changes...occurred when the first Christians moved from Palestine into the Roman Empire...when the Empire succumbed to the Dark Ages...when the medieval Church built its cathedrals with their schools and founded universities...when Scholasticism yielded to Humanism, the renaissance, the Reformation and the Counter reformation.

Lonergan experienced Catholic culture in Canada, England, Italy and elsewhere prior to the Council. He described his early formation as being very much in the classical mode, even though this culture was under serious challenge, especially outside the Catholic world of the early twentieth century. He argued that contemporary culture had changed from a classical to an empirical matrix. The change in culture that he is concerned with is a movement over hundreds of years. For Catholicism though the
“massive breakthrough” from classical to a modern empirical culture occurred at the Second Vatican Council.\textsuperscript{xvi}

Classical culture is normative and abstract.\textsuperscript{xvii} It does not conceive of itself as a culture among many but the one that all should aspire to, “the only culture any right-minded and cultivated person would name [as] culture”.\textsuperscript{xviii} In the classical era, which began to seriously erode from the beginning of the seventeenth century, theology was directed to a clear and, in some sense, objective goal. Theology was viewed within the wider framework of culture that allowed the educated person to “assimilate the substance of the cultural superstructure and to follow intelligently and critically the work of pioneers”.\textsuperscript{xix} In an empirist culture, by contrast, individuals need to ascertain for themselves “the set of meanings and values that informs a way of life”.\textsuperscript{xx} The great communal worldview that was sustained in classical culture no longer has the strength to bind individuals together. Religious affiliation, to give one example, becomes a loose connection, one that does not result in either strong intellectual or emotional bonds. The individual does not develop strong and sustaining relationships that allow for serious reflection, and thus the goal of much human striving is to find and then to sustain supporting networks. This type of affiliation can be contrasted with what Lonergan envisaged as the goal of human development.

Empirist culture often subverts the individual quest for enduring and non-conditional meaning. This is especially so when considering how people see themselves in relation...
to others and to other worldviews. For Lonergan, the ready answer to the challenge of living in contemporary culture was to cultivate self-transcendence, which he saw as the ultimate realization of what it means to be an authentic human being.\textsuperscript{xxi} Self-transcendence can be seen as involving a cognitive aspect, a type of knowledge that allows the individual to see beyond their immediate horizon and ask whether what is being presented to the intellect is in fact so. All human knowing occurs within a context, a \textit{Weltanschauung}, and apart from this it loses sense, significance and meaning. Further, the sweep of one’s horizon is proportionate to one’s self-transcendence.\textsuperscript{xxii}

Self-transcendence is operationalized by four closely related levels of consciousness: the empirical, the intellectual, the rational and the responsible.\textsuperscript{xxiii} The empirical is the level of direct sensate experience, and also involves perception, imagination and speech. This level of consciousness is directed toward attentiveness to both the outer world and how the individual interprets this world. The intellectual level is based on enquiry and understanding and how understanding is expressed. This level of consciousness allows access into the world of meaning. It marks a distinction between the human world of the mind and that of purely responding to sensory data. The rational level moves beyond comprehension and understanding to the question of truth. The rational is directed toward whether what we are reading, thinking about or discussing is correct. It moves beyond the statement of ideas and theories toward whether or not these notions are grounded in truth and reality. The responsible level of consciousness moves beyond the previous three, in that it is directed toward action. Given consideration, understandings
reached and judgments made, what is the course of action to be followed? In other words, what is the responsible path to take given prior knowledge? The interplay between these different levels of consciousness and intentionality leads to a heightened sense of interiority, where there is a renewed emphasis on reflection and deliberation. Interiority is not, however, an end in itself but rather allows for a renewed engagement with the world based on methodical exigency. An interior reflectivity leads to what Lonergan calls a “moral transcendence” which is concerned about objective value and seeing the world as being composed of moral agents.

Self-transcendence is at its most transformative when it is linked to the process of conversion. For Lonergan conversion is at the heart of the study of religion, “For religion is conversion in its preparation, in its occurrence, in its development, and also, alas, in its incompleteness, its failures, its breakdowns, its disintegration”. Conversion can be described in at least three senses, each of which can be seen a modality of self-transcendence. Firstly, there is intellectual conversion which Lonergan describes as arising from the responsible level of consciousness: “it is the type of consciousness that deliberates, makes judgments of value, decides, acts responsibly and freely”. Intellectual conversion is the radical clarification which allows the individual to see knowledge as much more than seeing or perceiving the world of immediacy. This world is only a small part of knowledge, especially if knowledge is conceived as mediating meaning. A deeper sense of knowledge includes experiencing, understanding, judging and believing. Lonergan here describes knowledge in a broad sense, and it
does not especially pertain to religious topics and themes. By following these operations, however, we are adhering to what he termed “the inbuilt law of the human spirit”.xviii First comes experience, to which the individual must attend. This leads, after reflection, to understanding. Understanding, however, is not an end in itself. It leads to further enquiry and checking what has been learned. The natural end of this process of enquiry and validation is judgment or decision. We can see this sense of knowledge in Lonergan’s theological method. Lonergan was critical of much of Catholic primary and secondary school education in his youth, as laying too much emphasis on acquisition of information in a regulated and unreflective manner.xix What was needed was more emphasis on higher order cognitive skills which did justice to the empirical basis of modern consciousness, which favoured the concrete over the abstract and purposeful change over stasis.

The key task, then, in contemporary Catholic theology is to replace the shattered thought forms associated with eternal truths and logical ideas with new ones that accord with the dynamics of development and the concrete style of learning.xxx Lonergan used the term “new learning” to describe the modern field of education. The new learning involved whole new disciplines, the explosion in modern languages and the increasing specialization of even traditional disciplines.xxxi In all forms of education the scope of the content required a new approach to human understanding. In laying out a generalized method in theology Lonergan categorized a number of process or functional specialties that are both mediated and mediating. In terms of the functional specialties, theology
needed to move from discovery and probing, which are termed first order functions. xxxii
These functions, research, interpretations, history and dialectic lay the foundation for mediating theology. Mediated theology on the other hand arises from foundations, doctrines, systematics and communications.

Moral conversion involves basing one’s actions not on some expedient principle but on values that transcend the self. Lonergan likened this to moving from a childlike consciousness where one is compelled by others to act in a certain way, to a more adult posture where decisions such as to choose a certain action are a reflection of the autonomy of the individual. Conversion occurs when this autonomy is directed toward values and not satisfaction: “moral conversion consists in opting for the truly good, even for value against satisfaction when value and satisfaction conflict”. xxxiii This marks a shift from making decisions based on the external other to the originating self, and from a particular value to values in general. Like the standard definition of conscience, moral conversion is not simply knowing what the right thing is. It also involves doing the right thing.

Religious conversion should not be seen as the final phase of the conversion process, following intellectual and moral conversion, although each process can lead to a sublation of the other. xxxiv It is, however, the most profound aspect of conversion as it is directed to the ultimate concern. It is a total and permanent self-surrender. xxxv It does not imply a fixed and total inner transformation, but anticipates future periods of stress and
alienation, even complete reversion: “Besides conversions there are breakdowns. What has been built up so slowly and so laboriously by the individual, the society, the culture can collapse”.

Religious conversion brings the inner sense of having come into a profound relationship with God, a bond that once established can never be passed over lightly, much less forgotten.

Lonergan, following Aquinas, identified religious conversion as operative grace where the heart of stone is replaced with a heart of flesh.

This brief overview of some of Lonergan’s theological methodology leads to the conclusion that the idea of conversion is central to his thought. The great metaphor of religious conversion as falling in love with God in total self-surrender offers a valuable point of discrimination. It would seem that many Catholics fall short of this profound relationship with God, a conclusion that although expressed in different language is central to the notion of the new evangelization. It is, therefore, apposite to consider some factors that assist with conversion, especially religious conversion, as these are critical to better realizing the new evangelization.

Need for Community

Lonergan saw the community as a place where the love of Christ can grow. He used the well-known analogy of faith as a seed needing fertile soil to flourish. Religious
conversion is usually not a decisive moment, but rather the culmination of a longer process. It is aided by the support of others. Once reached it is rarely an unchequered path with no doubts or second thoughts. These could be alleviated, however, by a supportive community.

As Charlie Brown needs all the friends he can get, so Christians need all the help they can get. Great saints are rare, and even they call themselves vessels of clay. The need of teaching and preaching, of rituals and common worship, is the need to be members of one another, to share with one another what is deepest in ourselves, to be recalled from our waywardness, to be encouraged in our good intentions.\textsuperscript{xxxix}

Without community the Christian has no place to live out his or her convictions and to see others bearing testimony to the reality of God in their lives, as Dulles pointed out, Christianity is propagated “by the testimony of transformed lives”.\textsuperscript{xl} Religious belief is in a perilous position if it remains an abstract notion in a cultural milieu which places much more emphasis on the concrete and the immediate. Without embodiment it can be seen as irrelevant and other worldly in the worst sense of the word. One way to overcome this perception is to stress the communal aspect of Christian life. In regard to the functional specialties, most of these are intimately connected with fellowship. The theological method that Lonergan proposed is not meant to be acted out in solitary isolation. Indeed it needs the input of others to provide the substance for judgment and intelligibility.\textsuperscript{xli}
Community is also critical because it is one agent that provides what Lonergan calls “common meaning”.\textsuperscript{xlii} He describes meanings as having four functions - cognitive, efficient, constitutive and communication”.\textsuperscript{xliii} The last two of these have special relevance for common meaning. Constitutive meaning is the meaning expressed in social institutions and human cultures. It is meaning that can be reinterpreted, but gives shape to daily life through religion, art, language, science and literature. Constitutive meaning shapes identity as it helps shapes consciousness. Knowledge of God, for example, has a clear cognitive sense, that is, for Christians it can be expanded upon by reading the Scriptures or by reflection on the experience of the early Church. It is also constitutive in that it brings with it a sense of being in relationship with God, which alters how the world and the individual’s place in it is observed. Communicative meaning concerns how meaning is communicated intersubjectively. This involves not just individual exchange but intergenerational transfer through training and education. From a conjunction of constitutive and communicative meaning, we can see the importance of community for common meaning. Common meaning has a number of dimensions. It can be formal or actual and can be expressed in the common understanding, common judgment, and common commitments of a variety of communities. Without a sense of community, however, common meanings are imperiled not just in the present but also well into the future.

As it is only within communities that men are conceived and born and reared, so too it is only with respect to the available common meanings that the individual grows in experience, understanding, judgment, and so comes to find
out for himself that he has to decide for himself what to make of himself.\textsuperscript{xlii}

A religious community is not different from any other, in that it needs to provide a community where members can encounter the common meaning of the group. For a religious group this common meaning would be conveyed intersubjectively through shared worship, prayer and rituals, amongst other things. This development of common meaning is more than religious socialization, but socialization is an important aspect of what communities do to sustain and encourage commitment over successive generations:

A rich store of common meaning is not the work of isolated individuals or even of a single generation. Common meanings have histories. They originate in single minds. They become common only through successful and widespread communication. They are transmitted to successive generations only through training and education.\textsuperscript{xlii}

From Lonergan’s perspective, changes in socialization patterns would be viewed with alarm, since the void could be filled in other ways. The need for community in Lonergan’s thought is normative, and if religious communities do not provide this then individuals will be formed by other communities. The new evangelization does not assume that many have totally lost their sense of being part of a wider Catholic community. What seems to have occurred is that other communities, be they virtual or actual, which may be quite removed from the faith community, are taking an increasing hold on many Catholics. Lonergan conceived of modern culture as one which allows for a variety of expressions and which is characterized by fluidity. One of the challenges for
the Church is to adapt to this culture, and to be prepared to accommodate the needs of a variety of people with diverse interests and differing senses of community. This is implicit in Longeran’s conception of the movement from classical to empirical mindsets. Failure to adapt to an empirical culture and adopt new methods leads to culturally inappropriate methods of communication. One of the vestiges of classical culture, according to Lonergan, is its identification of the proclamation of the gospel with a particular normative culture. In classical thinking this culture is superior to others and proper education involves learning to be at home there. In the modern world, however, the Church needs to recognize a plurality of cultures and communities within these cultures and to speak in culturally appropriate ways to different groups. If this is not done then the initial encounter with the gospel, the foundations of the encounter with the Christian message, will be severely impaired. Rather, the process of communication must be robust and involve concerted effort and planning.

For ours is a time of ever increasing change due to an ever increasing expansion of knowledge. To operate on the level of our day is to apply the best available knowledge and the most effective techniques to coordinated group action.

There is a sense that this activity will require persistent effort and may not always be fruitful. This is not because of any lack of intelligence, but because the current cultural multiplicity does not avail itself of one approach or one methodology. This is more easily understood in terms of the mission ad gentes where the differences between, for
example, European culture and that of a typical mission area such as equatorial Africa provide a stark contrast.

**Awareness of the Cultural Context for Evangelization**

The proclamation of the gospel always takes place within a particular cultural context. This is not to deny that in an increasingly global culture many countries share cultural similarities which are often more apparent than any differences. As the United States bishops point out, the pervasive influence of media ensures a commonality of language and increasingly of meaning:

> And what should we say about the cultural globalization produced by the power of the media? Everywhere the media impose new scales of values which are often arbitrary and basically materialistic, in the face of which it is difficult to maintain a lively commitment to the values of the Gospel.\(^{xlviii}\)

In providing a contextualization of theology, an articulation of the active and distinctive cultural forces at work in particular regions is of fundamental importance. To take one example, Kelly, writing from an Australian perspective, proposed a number of “limit situations” that frame the environment in which theological engagement takes shape in that country.\(^{xlvi}\) Perhaps the most critical of these situations is the isolation in which the nation was formed, and which continues to exert an influence on national consciousness.
Related to isolation is the theme of migration, which sees Australia as a land shaped by the stories of many who have journeyed vast distances and endured much hardship, in many forms, to come to this new land. Many shun any strong expression of the communal in favour of much more private expressions of spirituality and are also intrinsically suspicious of authority and its claims on individual autonomy. These factors lead to an almost national reticence when it comes to discussing the metaphysical dimensions of life.\(^1\) Without historically strong institutions which could act as carriers of meaning, the Australian psyche has never had the intimate link to religious memory that typifies many European nations. The connections with religion, when they existed at their strongest, were heavily influenced by allegiance to socio-cultural class. Certainly the predominant Irish sub-culture was a strong influence on Catholic life, but this allegiance was predicated on a sense of the Irish as the underdogs in Australian society. When this stigma was removed, beginning in the post-war era, one of the strongest shapers of Catholic identity lost much of its formative power. Due to the isolation of Australia and its “newness” as a nation, other cultural forces were not in place to provide a strong religious orientation to the seeker, or to those connected with any particular faith tradition. The new evangelization in Australia cannot, therefore, rely on any appeal to an oppressed minority but must rely on other factors if it is to be successful.

A consideration of cultural factors gives theology a reference point, especially as it seeks to evangelize or re-evangelize a nation with a distinctive past. Some comments have been made here from the context of Australian culture. The larger point, however, is that
an engagement of a particular culture must proceed on the basis of an understanding and sensitivity to that culture. In terms of assisting conversion, the question arises as to how the proclamation of the gospel may be better achieved in a particular cultural context.

**Recognizing the Significance of Language**

One of the fruits of an engagement with culture is that communication can be enhanced due to a greater sensitivity to how meaning is mediated in specific settings. The language of discourse, for example, becomes an important consideration. Tacey proposed that the secular or non-religious person, as well as the lapsed Catholic, may be invited into a new understanding of the Western religious tradition, if only more meaningful language could be found. A new language, though, can only be formulated if it remains faithful to the tradition’s sense of what is important, indeed vital. A call for a new language cannot rest on the supposition that the Church has at its disposal a multitude of forms and modes of expression which can be altered and shaped to meet innumerable contexts. The core of the Church’s message is to a large extent fixed, and so a new language must seek a new modality of expression within prescribed limits. In terms of Lonergan’s method this is dogma, one of the sources on which communication is based. Dogmatics are not, however, fundamentally reshaped by communication. It also needs to be kept in mind that the audience for this new language is one which is becoming increasingly distant from the religious meta-narrative. A language which assumes prior knowledge runs the risk of not being grounded in the lived experience of the hearer. This is another
manifestation of the new Catholic mentality, which is not premised on a reappraisal of prior knowledge and experience but rather on awareness that many have had little or no experience of religious socialization or enculturation.

How then can this new language be framed? Any consideration of this question needs to be based on a compelling understanding of contemporary culture. This can result in differing responses. Kung, for example, called for a language that speaks to those who did not see themselves as theologians or “dogmaticians”.

All those with almost no religious upbringing are engaged in a permanent quest for themselves, for identity, security, community and meaning, and at the same time, openly or in secret, are looking for religious experiences. If they often fail to find them, this is largely the fault of theology and preaching which is still too much in the head choked with dogma and pastorally inefficient: theology for theologians, dogma for dogmaticians.\footnote{\bibref{61}}

Kung made a strong point about the need for clarity in the communication of meaning. He also acknowledged that many people today have no religious background to speak of. Kung gave an example of the need to refine dogma to a barer, less technical form when he discussed the Trinity in the following terms:

In the light of the New Testament, no more is required than that the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit should be interpreted in a critical and differentiated way for the present. The ‘heart’ of Christian faith is not a theological theory but belief that God the Father works in revealing,
redeeming and liberating way in us through his Son Jesus Christ in the Spirit. Any theological theory must not complicate this basic statement; rather, it must be seen simply as an instrument for clarifying it against differing cultural horizons.

One can see here a strong desire to present a message which is amenable to the modern person, one without a great interest or desire for complex theology. There is more than an echo here of the new evangelization’s sense of proclaiming a clear message and one which is directed to the personal transformation of the hearer. It is also cognizant of a wider culture where individuals have many options and wish to hear what is being offered to them in fairly explicit terms. There is, however, a tension with stressing an encounter with Christ in the absence of a faithful presentation of the person of Christ as revealed in the Church’s teaching and collective memory. Placing too much emphasis on experience as opposed to hearing about, comprehending and responding to Christ runs the risk of leaving people ignorant of basic Christology. This in turn jeopardizes the encounter with Christ, which is at the heart of conversion.

Kung’s somewhat minimalist approach to the Trinity can be compared with Kasper's position on what the Church needs to do to engage youth and young adults in contemporary culture.

In the face of the radical challenge to the Christian faith, help will come not from a feeble, general and vague theism but only from a decisive witness to the living God of history who has disclosed himself in a concrete way through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.
Kasper’s sense of culture and the language needed to respond to it seems to have much overlay with the concerns of the new evangelization, as it remains centred on a Christological core. This core is not “feeble, general or vague” but concrete. In this way we can see how sensitivity to culture need not negate a strong proclamation of Christ. This is a theme that was well treated by Pope John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio*.

This proclamation is to be made within the context of the lives of the individuals and peoples who receive it. It is to be made with an attitude of love and esteem toward those who hear it, in language which is practical and adapted to the situation.\(^iv\)

Here Christ is presented not as an abnegation of culture but as its fulfillment. For those engaged in the new evangelization the study of a culture can never be seen as an end in itself, but as a means of better presenting the person of Christ in a variety of contexts. Due to the fragmentation of culture the language with which the gospel is communicated needs to be modulated to suit the needs of diverse groups. For example, the culture of a remote indigenous community is quite different from that of affluent, urbanized youth and young adults. A further challenge is to realize that, even within micro-cultures, individual discourse may change over relatively short periods of time. In the case of urbanized affluent youth, new technology and the accompanying language, are likely to be very significant factors in determining how one might most effectively communicate with that group. Moreover, given the rapid pace of technological change, forward planning in this regard is difficult if not impossible. This fluidity is one reason that
Lonergan stressed the need for active co-operation between Christians and experts in other fields. With the explosion of knowledge in empirist culture, no one person can have a sufficient grasp of all that needs to be known in order to communicate effectively, much less challenge others with a proclamation of the gospel. Christians are, therefore, required to learn what they can from others and to work in serious partnerships with a range of people who can assist them in creating a new and engaging language which is more open to the possibility of conversion.

**The Need for Authenticity**

Lonergan underlined the importance of authenticity in these terms: “man’s deepest need and most prized achievement is authenticity”. Lonergan defined authenticity in at least two ways, the first having a personal sense. “Authenticity is realized when judgments of value are followed by decision and action, when knowing what is truly good leads to doing what is truly good”. Authenticity, like conversion, is not a fixed state but one which requires sustained effort on the part of the individual.

Authenticity also has a communal meaning. Here the actual life of a community should reflect its teachings, and its integrity should be expressed in both word and action. This is another example of community having a strong, positive influence. The classical sense of culture, with its implicit sense of authority, has been subverted in the West for many years, and in the Catholic community in particular, in a dramatic fashion, in the period
after the Second Vatican Council. In this new empirist era people look for and value authenticity in communities but do not readily accept any inherent sense of credibility in institutions.

Lonergan described authenticity as pivotal in the effective communication of the Christian message:

Those then that would communicate the cognitive meaning of the message must, first of all, know it… Next they must live it. For without living the Christian message one does not possess its constitutive meaning; and cannot lead another to share what one oneself does not possess. Finally, those who communicate the effective meaning of the Christian message, must practice it. For actions speak louder than words while preaching what one does not practice recalls sounding brass and tinkling cymbal.

For Christians, this authenticity moves beyond the intellectual to a close, enduring and deeply transformative relationship with Jesus Christ: “In the Christian, accordingly, God’s gift of love is a love that is in Jesus Christ. From this fact flow the social, historical, doctrinal aspects of Christianity”. Christ is understood as the fullness of humanity and divinity as expressed in the great conciliar decrees of the patristic period. If Christians do not manifest to outsiders a close connection to Christ the conversion process may be severely curtailed. The natural movement to conversion, in Lonergan’s thought, often begins with a natural interest and curiosity about who Christians are and why they live in this way. If those who have some connection to the Church do not see
the reality of Christ’s love in those who profess to be Christian, they are unlikely to reflect, judge and then decide to pursue the Christian life in more earnestness. Lonergan captured this sense of the importance of the group as both a means of conversion into the group, and to those already part of it of belonging in a more personal and committed fashion when he wrote:

Conversion involves more than a change of horizon. It can mean that one begins to belong to a different social group or, if one’s social group remains the same, that one begins to belong to it in a new way. Again, the group will bear witness to its founder or founders whence originated and preserve its high seriousness and mature wisdom.\textsuperscript{lxii}

Authenticity also relates to the tradition as a whole. Lonergan spoke of authentic and unauthentic tradition. He defined authentic tradition as being faithful to its original message and seeking to “repeat the original message afresh for each age”.\textsuperscript{lxiii} An authentic Tradition also embodies and promotes conversion. An unauthentic Tradition by contrast does not point toward conversion or seek to reinterpret the message of Christ for today. Rather it is a diminution of Tradition. Lonergan’s description of unauthentic Tradition is quite pointed; “it may consist in a watering down of the original message, in recasting it into terms and meanings that fit into the assumptions and convictions of those that have dodged the issue of radical conversion”.\textsuperscript{lxiv}

Utilizing Carriers of Meaning
A faith community without vigorous and vital carriers of meaning is unlikely to facilitate conversion. Community is one significant “carrier of meaning”. Lonergan listed a number of others and only the most relevant of these are discussed here. Symbols are another significant carrier of meaning. Lonergan defined symbols as “a real or imaginary object that evokes a feeling or is evoked by a feeling”. One of the chief functions of symbols is to provide a real and concrete expression of the meanings that underpin a community. They also provide a bridge between the cognitive and the world of emotion and feeling. Symbols give shape to the affective response to religion, and as such are critically important in both maintaining and expressing religious meaning. Dulles even goes so far as to say, “without symbols, no revelation could be effectively communicated”. For a religious community, therefore, the significance of symbol cannot be overstated. The world of younger Catholics, however, is one where the experience of symbol, although not negative, lacks both power and frequency. One manifestation of this is the loss or marginalization of many symbols, especially those associated with ritual action. This can be as simple as the lack of exposure to religious art, or at a deeper level the loss of ritually significant actions and practises. Without encountering religious symbols, the process of conversion is impaired.

At an even more basic level meaning is carried by language, so-called linguistic meaning. Lonergan conceived this function as one of the most significant consequences of “the Greek discovery of the mind”. In language meaning finds its
Language is able to convey meaning on a number of levels such as the ordinary, technical and literary. Literary language can be seen as an abstraction to an ideal. For a specific community it can involve deep and lasting levels of meaning. Literary language is precise and is the language of a particular opera or work. The precise meaning here is difficult to abstract and it is full of allusion and “floats somewhere in between logic and symbol”.

Ordinary language is the discourse that enables people to carry on day to day activities in pursuit of their own good and the good of others. This language lacks permanence and responds to the needs and habits of the day. Eventually a technical language emerges which is more decisive, and as such is the particular language of experts or initiates within a particular subgroup of the community. In a religious sense it would involve discourse about the meanings, symbols and rituals that are associated with a particular group. An example that is important for Christians is the technical language that surrounds the identity of Jesus as defined at the Council of Chalcedon. It is important that members of a religious community develop a certain level of sophistication about such technical issues, as these often convey the deep meanings which the community regards as important and also that distinguish them from others. It is in this technical area that many younger Catholics today experience pronounced deficiencies. Rymarz gave a good example of the lack of technical language competence in a study which researched Catholic adolescents’ understanding of Jesus. If the technical language is
not developed then the Christian narrative can never be engaged with at a level that is likely to lead to adult comprehension.

Of all the steps in Lonergan’s method, communication is perhaps the most relevant to the new evangelization. The earlier discussion recognized that many of the carriers of meaning that have assisted the Church in the past to communicate its message have been weakened. The task of communication is certainly a difficult one, and requires constant effort and planning. In order to facilitate this process it may be necessary to alter some of the assumptions that have guided theological enquiry in recent times. Dulles noted three prominent styles of theology. The first two propositional-linguist and experimental-expressive can be equated to scholasticism and modernism and, he argued, are outdated because they no longer address the cultural milieu in which most Christians find themselves. Dulles proposed a third type which he called ecclesial-transformative. This style of theology is characterized by a number of features. It looks to the transformation of the individual, but a transformation that takes place within the ecclesial community, so it runs counter to the excessive individualism of the age. It also suggests replacing the dominant hermeneutic of suspicion which has had a widespread adherence in theological circles, with a hermeneutic of trust. This trust should be directed most especially toward the Church’s major constitutive symbols. These symbols represent more than affective meaning. They are pivotal in conveying the cognitive content of the faith tradition. It is this area which seems to be underdeveloped in many younger Catholics today. The task of building up these symbols is difficult as many have an
already well developed critical disposition that is particularly suspicious of religious claims. The situation, especially in the Catholic Church, is far different from even a few decades ago. Then, perhaps in reaction to the movement from a monopolistic expression of culture where meaning was assimilated in an uncritical fashion, many in Catholic circles sought to better integrate experience and the foundational aspects of belief by encouraging a critical attitude to constitutive symbols. Very few today have an equivalent initial attitude. Nichols put it well when he commented, “When, as now, cognitive skepticism about morals and faith tend to rule, it is important to show how firm epistemic commitments in these areas may still be responsible human acts”\textsuperscript{lxxviii} A post modern consciousness is well attuned to deconstruction of meaning. What is needed is a hermeneutic that builds up meaning principally by seeing connections in what appear to be unrelated areas.\textsuperscript{lxxix} This is a difficult, challenging and to some extent countercultural task but one which is assisted by the cultivation of trust in the symbols of the Church.

\textbf{Concluding Comments}

Lonergan provides another powerful conceptual metaphor for understanding the new evangelization, namely the need for thinking about it in terms of conversion. The idea of conversion as a transformative action is a story that has often been told in Christian history. It perhaps explains why St Paul can be seen as a great patron of the new evangelization, because in the life of Paul we see the radical change from persecutor of
the Church to lover and promoter of Christ. In a discussion of types of conversion, Dulles drew a distinction between what he called two schools of fundamental theology. The first sees the act of conversion as a primary act of grace that can occur even in the unevangelized. The other sees conversion as the direct consequence of reflection on demonstrated historical facts through the use of reason. Dulles tried to bridge the gap between these two poles by stressing the importance of Christ in the act of conversion. Just as Christ is central to both an understanding of the new evangelization and the Church as *communio*, an encounter with Christ is the decisive act in conversion. Even if transcendent conversion has been experienced, conversion to Christ “is a radically new discovery requiring the heuristic process here described as conversion.” Dulles described the role of the mediating community as critical in this conversion process. This is a point often stressed in the writings of Lonergan. One feature of the post-conciliar Catholic world is the sense that much of Catholic communal life has almost disappeared, and has not as yet been replaced with much that is sustainable. This is a critical deficit and one which needs to be addressed with some urgency. It is worth noting that Paul in his proclamation of the gospel understood well the need for a sustaining community where faith could grow and lead ultimately to a conversion of the individual to become not so much a follower of Christ as his disciple.


4 Smith and Denton, *Soul*, 162, describe this attitude as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism”.


7 Carrier, *Religious Belonging*, 70.


11 Cor. 5:15, NRSV.


14 For biographical information on Lonergan’s life and teaching career see Kerr, *Catholic Theologians*, 105-121.


xxxiii Lonergan, Methods, 240.


xxxv Ormerod, Faith Development, 240.


xxxvii Fallon and Riley, Religion and Culture, 241.


xlii Lonergan, Methods, 135.

xliii Lonergan, Method, 79.

xliv Lonergan, Method, 77-79.

xlv Frederick E. Crowe, Bernard Lonergan and the Community of Canadians: an Essay in Aid of Canadian Identity, (Toronto: Lonergan Research Institute, 1992), 12.

xlvi Lonergan frequently quips that the classical culture is marked by the ability to speak in Latin to write in Greek and reads Hebrew, see Lonergan, Topics in Education, 16.

xlvii Lonergan, Methods, 367.


lvi RM, 44, See also RM, 39, “She [the Church] respects individuals and cultures, and she honors the sanctuary of conscience. To those who for various reasons oppose missionary activity, the Church repeats: Open the doors to Christ!”. 


lxiv Lonergan, Method, 362.


lxvii Lonergan, Method, 269.

lxviii Lonergan, Method, 162.

lxix Lonergan, Method, 162.
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lxv Lonergan, Method, 64.
lxvi Lonergan, Method, 67-73.
lxvii Lonergan, Method, 64.
lxviii “symbols obey the laws not of logic but of image and feeling”, Lonergan, Method, 66.


lxxi Lonergan, Methods, 70-73.
lxxii Lonergan, Methods, 90-93, “Linguistic argument has emerged as an independent power that could dare to challenge the evidence of the sense”, 91-92.
lxxiii Lonergan, Methods, 70.
lxxiv Lonergan, Methods, 72.
lxxvi “At its real root, then, foundation occurs on the fourth level of human consciousness, on the level of deliberation, evaluation, decision. It is a decision about whom and what you are for and, again, whom and what you are against”, Lonergan, Methods, 268. In Lonergan’s schema the second phase of theology, where theology is mediated, contains the elements of foundation and doctrine, but these depend on an adequate initiation in the first phase so that decisions that are made reflect a sophisticated understanding.


lxxix Dulles, Craft, 58.