

INTERVIEW WITH FRANK GREANEY

Born in the United States, **Frank Greaney** belonged to the Society of Jesus for some twenty years. He studied philosophy at Louvain, at Maréchal's school. He took an interest in the thought of Lonergan from the moment *Insight* was published. He has translated some of Lonergan's Latin texts. He decided to establish himself in Montreal, where he was then studying. He is involved with the Thomas More Institute, of which he is still the director of the curriculum committee. During his teaching career, he has sought to incite the students to appropriate their own intellectual dynamic. He is presently doing research on the concept of love in the work of Lonergan.

Mr. Greaney, could you tell us a little about your origins, your education?

I was born in the United States, in Massachusetts. I entered the Jesuits at 19, in the New England Province. I was a student at Boston College for two years, and that was my first contact with the Jesuits.

I remained with the Jesuits for 22 years. I left the Society in 1971.

You had heard of Bernard Lonergan during this period?

In 1958, when I went to Weston College to begin theology studies, a fellow Jesuit lent me a copy of *Insight*. I began reading it in 1958, and I've been reading it ever since!

In 1958! You were one of the first readers!

It was the first edition. At Christmas that year, I asked my mother for the book and she bought me the student's edition. I have that still, and it's all marked up. I've since gotten myself three other copies.

I've been reading Lonergan for 45 years.

You began reading it on your own?

Yes. But I discussed it with a few colleagues. It was Bob Richards – who was very active in the Lonergan Workshops a few years ago, and who died very young – who lent me the book.

He knew I might be interested, because I had done my philosophy studies in Belgium, at the Jesuit College of Louvain, which was dominated by the disciples of Maréchal. I was trained in the Maréchal school of Thomism. The transition from that school to Lonergan was fairly easy. I found Lonergan much richer, his thought more experiential, than the philosophy that I had learned.

Had the American Jesuits already heard about Lonergan in the late fifties?

Small groups had discovered Lonergan. Joseph Flanagan was one of my colleagues.

At that time, in 1957, Lonergan had given a series of summer courses at Boston College. It may have been through these courses that the American Jesuits discovered him. Or it may have been through Joseph Flanagan, who had studied at Fordham with Robert Johann, who

had himself also studied at Louvain and who knew Lonergan's work. He was one of the invited speakers at the first international workshop on Lonergan held in Florida in 1970.

[While you were studying philosophy at Louvain, did you hear about Lonergan?](#)

One of my professors referred once to the *Verbum* article. It made no impression on me at the time. I didn't know who Lonergan was.

[So afterwards, in 1958, you began to discover Lonergan by reading *Insight*...](#)

A little later, in 1960 or 1961, I received copies of Lonergan's Latin works. *Divinarum personarum. De constitutione Christi. De Deo Trino, Pars analytica.*

I translated, for myself and my fellow students, the first chapter of *Divinarum personarum*, where Lonergan discusses theological method. I sent my translation to Lonergan, and he sent me a letter (which I still have) where he gives me permission to circulate my translation, but only within a limited circle.

My translation was printed in a Weston journal, the *Modern Humanist*, under the title *Theological Understanding*.

Other Jesuits subsequently used the translation in their teaching.

The reply which Lonergan sent me in March 1961, provides some information on him which is perhaps not known. He apologizes for the delay in responding to my letter (February). He says he had been unwell.

[Did you translate any other of Lonergan's Latin treatises?](#)

I translated a section of *De Constitutione Christi*, the one where he talks about "existentia" and where he refers to Kierkegaard. I translated it for my colleagues.

[Did you teach in the Jesuit order?](#)

Yes. At Holy Cross College, in Worcester, Massachusetts. I taught philosophy and I used a lot of Lonergan and Maréchal. I gave a course on metaphysics.

I then came to McGill University as a student in religious studies.

Then I taught theology for a couple of years at Worcester.

Then I came back to McGill to complete my dissertation, which was on Origen.

The first time I met Lonergan, we discussed Origen.

During that period, I was going through a personal crisis and eventually, I left the Jesuits and married.

While I was living at Loyola, I also met Father O'Connor, who invited me to lead discussion courses at the Thomas More Institute. In the first year, I refused because I had too much work, but the second year I accepted, in 1967-1968.

I led a course with Cathleen Going. That was my first contact with the Thomas More Institute. Since then, I've participated fairly regularly in the activities of the Institute.

[Had you met Father Lonergan at the time?](#)

I was at Loyola and I heard that Father Lonergan was visiting us. I went to his room and knocked at his door. He told me to come in. He was sitting in an armchair, reading the German edition of *Warheit und Methode* (Véritié et méthode) by Gadamer. He was waiting, as I was, for the supper bell. We talked about Origen and Maréchal. I think we also talked about Henri-Irénée Marrou. I don't know if he had read Marrou at the time. He was then working on *Method in Theology*. I had attended a series of lectures given by Marrou at Louvain, which were later published under the title *De la connaissance historique*.

That was my first meeting with Lonergan. I met him several times later, at the Thomas More Institute (where he came almost every year to lecture), but also at Holy Cross College where he received an honorary degree and where he also gave a lecture... It was, I believe, a lecture on the future of theology.

I also saw him once at a symposium on religious studies, near Boston, in a hotel. I went to hear him lecture. W.C. Smith was also on the program.

I remember one incident, at the Thomas More Institute. He was giving a talk to a group. One of the students challenged him: "I find the idea of insight too abstract." Lonergan was really upset. He said, "Insight is utterly concrete, utterly concrete!" Lonergan always emphasized the concreteness, the experiential nature, of his analysis of understanding, the fact that we understand our understanding precisely because it is a concrete experience.

I also remember a lecture Lonergan gave at Loyola, probably in 1968... He had already had an ablation of a lung. He had difficulty speaking. He sat and read his lecture from the book which had just been published, called *The Subject*, a lecture he had already given at Marquette. The material was fascinating, but the delivery was laboured.

[After your marriage, did you stay in Montreal?](#)

Yes. I got a job teaching at Vanier College.

I eventually became a Canadian citizen. My daughter was born. For a few years, I didn't have the time to get involved with the Thomas More Institute. But in 1977, there was a course on *Method in Theology*. I was invited to attend, which I did. After that, starting in 1978, I consistently either led a course or designed a course. Then I was asked to go on the board of directors. I still am. When Charlotte Tansey retired, the Institute formed a curriculum committee. I became the chair of that committee.

[In your career, did you make any use of Lonergan's thought either in the content or the method of your teaching?](#)

Mainly the method. Occasionally, the content. I sometimes gave my students short excerpts of Lonergan's writings.

[What did you teach at Vanier?](#)

Philosophy and Humanities. Humanities was a required course, philosophy was an optional course. For several years, I gave a course called "Realms of Meaning", which was based on Lonergan, but developed in my own style. The methodology was borrowed from Lonergan.

In my philosophy courses, I tried to follow the transcendental method, that is, leading the students gradually from the data to questioning, from images to ideas, to insights, eventually to judgment. For many years, I gave a course on ethics. I used a great deal of the spirit of *Method in Theology* in the course. But not the text. I was teaching, in other words, *ad mentem*, in the spirit of Lonergan.

I was always impressed by the fact that he conceived what he was doing as an enterprise that would be continued by others and applied by others in different areas. And I think that's still ongoing in various journals, workshops, lectures, etc.

[Did you have the opportunity of verifying the concreteness of the analysis proposed by Lonergan?](#)

I found out, by using it, that it worked. I had verified the process in my own experience: the questions. insight, further questions, judgment and so on. I found that students could do it, too. Even very young students, if they were led gradually, slowly, from one step to the other. I used a great deal of imaginative material to open up the questions. One of my favourite texts was a play by W. Gibson, *The Miracle Worker*, which is about Helen Keller, to introduce them to the whole idea of insight and specifically insight into the meaning of words. And they got it. I also used *Meno*, Plato's dialogue, where a slave boy must solve a geometry problem. I would take my students through the process, step by step. I used the same process to arrive at a definition of the circle. I would demonstrate the process of questioning and insight, then ask them find a tool in the classroom to make a perfect circle. Eventually someone would come up with the string for pulling down the shade to serve as a compass.

That caught their attention. And many of them told me they had studied mathematics and geometry and nobody had ever taken them through the intellectual process of arriving at a definition. They were given definitions and told to memorize them and plug them into formulas, but nobody had taught them how to arrive at a definition.

I always came away from that lecture on arriving at a definition, feeling that something important had been accomplished. The students were on the path of insight.

[You taught young college students in the seventies and eighties. Did you find that that method of reflecting on their own experience of self-transcendence was a good way of bridging the generation gap and cultural changes that were occurring at the time?](#)

I didn't think of it in those terms then, but looking back, we were looking for something that was fundamental, universal. Lonergan speaks of finding a common ground upon which people of intelligence can meet. I think that perspective can bridge the gap between the generations.

And it was a way of accommodating the multicultural mix of students at Vanier College. It's an Anglophone institution, but the majority of students are from twenty different ethnic backgrounds. But no matter what culture they came from, they could all relate to some of the ideas in my courses. They all knew what is meant by a question. They all knew that learning is a process of answering questions, that the question comes before the answers, not after.

This analysis of the intellectual process is therefore pertinent in a pluralistic context?

Yes. The analysis does not depend on any specific culture. It depends on language. Some of my students had language problems. But they could all relate to the story of Helen Keller. I would compare her experience of learning the meaning of signs with the struggle of second- and third- language students trying to learn English, trying to get the connection between their mother tongue and this new language.

When you speak about language problems, you mean the concepts of another language which didn't fit Lonergan's analysis?

No. I wasn't aware of anything but the usual problems in understanding English, the language of instruction at the College.

I was stressing that insight is at the heart of learning any language, and specifically the learning of the first language.

One section of my course, Realms of Meaning, dealt with religion. It dealt with the realm of transcendence, but I called it religion. We would look at certain symbols that were characteristic of the great religions and compare them in order to understand their symbolic meaning. And they could relate to that. They came from different religious backgrounds.

I would ask them to bring me pictures representing their tradition. To draw pictures to illustrate the ideas that we were discussing in class. Instead of showing them a video, I would have them make a video. Instead of showing them a poster, I would have them make a poster. Show me how you would illustrate, in a visual fashion, the different realms of meaning.

The use of visual methods of communication helped to overcome the language barrier. The students of Asian background, in particular, took naturally to visual images. The Chinese students made very compelling posters to illustrate themes being discussed in class. They had very original ways of showing the connections between the different realms of meaning. They would use geometric patterns or organic patterns (a tree, for example). Lonergan appealed to visual images, but he didn't use them himself.

Except for his famous diagrams on the blackboard...

Yes, that's true.

What about your personal appropriation of Lonergan's thought, was it important in your own personal life?

Yes, very much so. And even more so today.

When I was a student in theology, I was completely put off by the method of teaching. It was the old magisterial style, with theses and proofs. You had to learn the proofs, and repeat them. There were a few exceptions but by and large, that was the prevailing method.

When I discovered the texts of Lonergan, based on insight, I began to learn. When I was preparing for my final comprehensive exam in my fourth year, the exam covering the whole course of theology, instead of studying the theses, the professors' notes, the handbooks, I read *Divinarum personarum*, *De Deo Trino*, *De Constitutione Christi*, *De Verbo incarnate*, Lonergan's Latin texts. And I did well.

At that point I decided that instead of memorizing a lot of stuff, I would concentrate on learning. So in my own learning, it was extremely fruitful and it made me, I think, more sensitive and more critical in my own reading. I learned to ask myself questions: "Is it so? Is it really so? What does it mean? How did it come about?"

But lately, I've begun exploring the central theme in Lonergan's later works: love. This concept is less prominent in *Insight* than in *Method in Theology*, where it appears everywhere. I'm trying to trace the emergence of that theme in Lonergan's work. And it's been very meaningful. I have to go back into the Old Testament and the New Testament, and work through the books of Ceslas Spicq, a French Dominican, who wrote *Agapè dans le Nouveau Testament* and *Prolégomènes à l'étude de l'Agapè dans le Nouveau Testament*. He goes through the Old Testament, the Jewish literature of Jesus' time and then the New Testament. It's a fairly comprehensive work. I'm trying to relate that to what Lonergan is doing.

This project also has a lot of meaning for me personally, because when Lonergan started speaking about love, I could relate it to major turning points in my personal life – to my marriage, to the birth of my daughter. Until then, I had been aware of the language of love, but now I was experiencing it. In my previous education, charity was one of the infused virtues. Well, what does that mean? It was never related to experience. And Lonergan doesn't talk about charity, he talks about love. Just as Spicq, in his work, shows that *agape* in the New Testament covers the whole range of love, family love, marriage love, friendship, love of God, love of neighbour, without differentiation. And it's a new use of the term *agape*. It doesn't occur in classical literature. A creation of the New Testament.

Lonergan taught me to look for the underlying experience in everything.

[Even when dealing with dogmas?](#)

Even with dogmas. Dogmas come out of the experience of the first disciples, the early Christians. They have a historical dimension.

[You're more aware of that dimension?](#)

Yes. Lonergan highlights the development of doctrine. That's very liberating, although sometimes risky. In fact, Lonergan was once accused of heresy by a Spanish theologian. He wrote a very strong article in the Gregorianum journal on *De Constitutione Christi* in which he defended his interpretation, which was founded on the historical development of the doctrine. He shows, for example, that the doctrine of the two natures and the two wills only emerged gradually in the history of the Church.

[Do you think that today Lonergan could be accused of heresy?](#)

The present Vatican mentality doesn't seem to be open to historical development. If it were, I think there would have been progress in areas such as the understanding of human sexuality. An evolution in the understanding of marriage and homosexuality... In 1968, I was a Jesuit, I was hearing confessions. We were all hoping for some development in the area of birth control. Many married people were in agony. What could you do? And when *Humanae Vitae* came out, it was like a dash of cold water. This was one factor in my change of direction.

Lonergan never directly pursued some of the theological issues of his time. He avoided making statements which would have created trouble. But he talked a lot about the anti-historical trend, the marked opposition to change since the Council of Trent.

In Lonergan, we find a method that would allow theology to progress. But he taught theology in a very stifling context. He talked about the impossible conditions in which he had to work in his 25 years of teaching, sometimes with 500 students in a class!. He never got the opportunity to apply his method and his functional specialties to a precise area of theology. All of his theological work was done before he wrote *Method in Theology*. Fred Crowe wanted him to take *Method in Theology* and see how it would work out in the area of Christology. But after writing *Method*, Lonergan wanted to concentrate on economics.

I must say that he wasn't happy with the changes that occurred when Regis College was closed and the students were located in different places around the University of Toronto. It was one of the reasons he left for Boston. Subsequently, he gave lectures and wrote theological articles, of course, even if his interests had turned to economics.

[What are your favourite Lonergan works?](#)

What I am reading right now is *Method in Theology* and the articles and lectures just before and just after *Method in Theology*, because I'm interested in the emergence of love as a central theme in Lonergan's thought.

Whenever I have an appointment, I slip *The Subject* into my pocket. You can open it anyplace and read one paragraph and it brings back a whole world of meaning. Another one that I like very much is *The Response of the Jesuit*, a paper he wrote in 1972, for a conference on the Jesuits. He had been asked to give his views on the future of the Society of Jesus. In that paper, there's a passage where he talks about authenticity and self-transcendence. And that's a piece that I have given to students. Some of them can follow it. Lonergan talks about stages of consciousness, of emerging from the dream state into inquiring about things and going on from knowledge to love and he asks the question, "Does anyone ever really transcend themselves?" And the answer is "Yes, when they fall in love."

[What would be your evaluation of Lonergan's relevance to the contemporary world?](#)

I think the methodological works are relevant, more so today than they were when they were written. Things are more confused today. What we call postmodernism means, for people like myself, a lot of confusion.

We're in the presence of different religions, different cultures. We live in the age of globalization. This collaboration demands a common ground. I think Lonergan provides this common ground. Maybe not exactly in the way that he first presented it, but the notion of fundamental agreement on what we are doing when we are knowing, what counts as knowing, how we know when we know... these questions are very relevant. And people are not asking them. The reflection on knowledge, the reflection on the varieties of meaning, the importance of knowing what realm of meaning you're talking in when you talk. All the boundaries seem to be getting blurred. Lonergan helps me, in any event, to clarify and situate things like, is this author talking science, mysticism, history or fiction? The difference, which was very clear once between fiction and fact, is now blurred with reality TV. Is it fact, is it fiction or is it entertainment? It requires a constant vigilance to know what's coming at you, where it's coming from and what it's worth.

We must develop a critical sense, which I think Lonergan had. And I think particularly important today is what he had to say about judgment. I think it's sometimes overlooked. Even here, at the Institute, there's so much emphasis on insight, on understanding – understanding the text – that we sometimes forget to ask the further question, "Is it really so?" and go on to find the evidence for one interpretation over another and come to at least a probable judgment. I think the notion of probable judgment is pertinent. We have abandoned the quest for certitude in favour of the quest for the most probable verifiable interpretation or understanding.

[In the mass media, we have a kind of open market of opinions and no judgment...](#)

It's the same with the Internet. We have everybody expressing their opinions. Occasionally, someone will actually provide some evidence for their opinion, but this is exceptional.

[Have you published?](#)

No. Just small articles in intramural publications. Certain articles were disseminated at the Lonergan Workshops.

Since I've retired, I have the leisure to write. The project I mentioned will eventually become articles or a book. But I'm not worried about it. I'm learning as I go along.

I sometimes get distracted. For example, the question of the historical Jesus came up a few years ago. I had done work on that question in the sixties. I'm in the process of reading three volumes of J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*. It's the best I've found on the subject. It's the sort of book that Lonergan would have approved of. It's all there, the method, the data, the evidence, the degree of probability – the kind of scholarship which corresponds to Lonergan's vision.

I got into that because I wanted to see how Lonergan read and interpreted the New Testament. Mainly the New Testament, but Scripture generally. There are a few quotes that he keeps coming back to.

[Like Romans 5:5...](#)

Yes, Romans 5:5, "the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us". And also, going back to Gratia Operans, the text from Ezechiel about the heart of stone and the heart of flesh. There are certain texts like that that Lonergan seemed to gravitate towards. And they're mainly texts dealing with love.

[You can recall other anecdotes about Lonergan?](#)

A student relates that every morning Lonergan spent one-half hour reading and translating Greek tragedies.

He did this as a way of waking up his mental powers.

I only heard that from one source, but it corresponded to the kind of discipline Lonergan must have had, to achieve what he did achieve.