

Richard M. Liddy, *Startling Strangeness: Reading Lonergan's Insight*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 2007. pp. vii-251. \$64.95, cloth; \$38, paper.

Startling Strangeness: Reading Lonergan's Insight reveals both the formative power of teachers and the transformative power of texts. In the case of this inviting and engaging book, the teacher is Bernard Lonergan, S.J. (1904–1984), and the text is his *magnum opus*, one of the most important, yet overlooked, philosophical works of the twentieth century, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*. Monsignor Richard Liddy, University Professor of Catholic Thought and Culture and Director of the Center of Catholic Studies at Seton Hall University, provides a fruitful way into the riches of *Insight*.

Liddy, of course, would encourage interested parties to read *Insight* itself. Yet, what makes his presentation so effective and accessible to a variety of audiences is the way it situates Lonergan's philosophical program within the context of Liddy's autobiographical narrative. Recognizing that this mode of presentation might strike the reader at first glance to be "the height of arrogance" (xix), the author clarifies that his intention is to share his paradoxical experience of "startling strangeness" and "coming home" (xvii) and to invite readers "to think about their own implicit philosophy, their own operative notion of themselves" (xii). In this light, Liddy presents his readers with a friendship offering in the deepest sense, inviting us to see what he sees, and to love what he loves. "And for one who has glimpsed," he writes, "the infinite act of understanding behind every act of human understanding, the whole enterprise is bathed in and motivated by a transcendent dimension" (xx).

The book is composed of three parts. Parts One and Three are heavily narrative in focus. Here, Liddy narrates his encounter with *Insight* in the context of his own upbringing in a New Jersey Catholic family of the 1940s and 1950s and his experience of studying in Rome during the Second Vatican Council, the place where he first encountered his beloved teacher, Bernard Lonergan. Furthermore, he shares memories of Lonergan, examples of their correspondence over the years, and the testimony of others. More significantly, he captures the power of experiencing what Lonergan later termed an "intellectual conversion" and the correlative experience of "startling strangeness." Such a breakthrough involves an insight into the incoherence of idealism and materialism, and a deep grasp that knowing is not simply "taking a good look" at the "already out there now real," but rather the unity of sensitive experience, understanding, and true judgment.

As a context for the aforementioned breakthrough, Liddy discusses the significant shortcomings of the neo-scholastic philosophy of his seminary days, a system rooted in a classicist account of culture and a classicist epistemology. According to Liddy, “the alienation that Catholics began to articulate in the 1960s had some of its roots in a view of knowing that kept them from linking their faith with all the complex dimensions of human knowing and human living. A false or inadequate knowledge of human knowing kept Catholics from knowing themselves and knowing others” (23). In short, according to Liddy, the “traditional neo-scholastic philosophy did not encourage thought” (23). In an era marked by “intimations of change”—revealed in his own encounter with thinkers outside the neo-scholastic tradition, such as Teilhard de Chardin, Kierkegaard, Newman, Bloy, Mauriac, Bernanos, De Foucauld, and Edith Stein—Liddy realized that the “perennial philosophical issues had been transformed into a new key” (25). This mood of change is expressed, for example, in the author’s account of reading Hans Küng at Castel Gondolfo.

Then, on the verge of the council, there was the young Hans Küng’s *Reform and Reunion*, a visionary view of the ecumenical possibilities of a renewed Catholic Church. I read that book at the villa of the North American College at Castel Gondolfo, the Pope’s summer residence, where all of us went for summer vacation. There, living in a room with three other classmates—David Tracy from Connecticut, Ray Wicklander from Chicago and Dennis Sheehan from Boston—we discussed late into the night what was happening in the church—and in us (33).

It is in the wake of his own experience of the shortcomings of neo-scholasticism, along with a heightened awareness of historical consciousness and global cultures, that Liddy encountered Bernard Lonergan. The author acknowledges the emergence of liberal and conservative camps as the Second Vatican Council marched on. It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that his encounter with Lonergan encouraged him both to jettison the study of Thomas Aquinas and to situate himself securely in the so-called “liberal camp.” In retrospect, Liddy expresses inspiration from Lonergan’s challenging observation in his essay “Dimensions of Meaning”:

There is bound to be formed a solid right that is determined to live in a world that no longer exists. There is bound to be

formed a scattered left, captivated by now this, now that new development, exploring now this, now that new possibility. But what will count is a perhaps not numerous center, big enough to be at home in both the old and the new, painstaking enough to work out one by one the transitions to be made, strong enough to refuse half-measures and insist on complete solutions even though it has to wait.

Lonergan's reference to "the old and the new" is a clear allusion to Leo XIII's important encyclical *Aeterni Patris*. Liddy acknowledges that at the time he identified with the "scattered left"; he later realized "a third alternative was needed" (38).

In many ways, this alternative was realized in Liddy's own reading of Lonergan's *Insight*. Part Two describes his reading of *Insight*, and hence involves a thick exposition of the major themes of the work. Here, the reader unfamiliar with Lonergan's thought may feel disoriented. Nevertheless, Liddy's lucid writing, his judiciously chosen passages, and his irenic manner may very well offset some of this disorientation. In the context of this journal, readers will discover (in this reviewer's opinion) that Lonergan has significant contributions to make to the ongoing challenge of articulating the unity of faith and reason in the twenty-first century, a challenge substantively offered by John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio* (1998). In fact, it is not too much of a stretch to think, for example, of Lonergan's challenge of self-appropriation (64–68), his account of the world process as emergent probability (91–95), and his understanding of the unity of knowing, being, and objectivity (chapters 8, 9, and 10) as meaningful parallels to John Paul II's rooting of philosophy in the existential call to "know thyself" (*FR*, 1–6), his exhortation to overcome the fragmentation of knowledge through the recovery of the sapiential dimension of philosophy (*FR* 81–83), and his challenge to overcome historicism, pragmatism, and nihilism and their respective denials of objective truth (*FR* 87–90). Furthermore, in terms of the unity of faith and reason, it is significant to note that Lonergan's chief philosophical work, as Liddy shows, offers a "proof" for the existence of God and a heuristic account of redemption in history in terms of the conjugate forms of faith, hope, and charity (chapter 12). Finally, readers of this journal may benefit from knowing that the trajectory of Lonergan's thought proceeded from attention to method in science, philosophy, and theology to a growing interest in method in the social sciences and finally in economics. He actually began studying economics as a young student and later returned to this field at the end of his career (231).

After attending Lonergan's funeral on November 29, 1984 at the Jesuit Church of Our Lady of Lourdes in Toronto, Liddy recalls thinking to himself: "What a tribute to this great man! I really hope that in the years to come the Church will recognize his humility, his holiness and his greatness" (233). While the thought of Lonergan certainly has impacted many Catholic intellectuals, many have also found his style off-putting and even alienating. Perhaps what is needed in response is the telling of a richer, deeper kind of story—the kind of story that Liddy has offered in *Startling Strangeness*: "And so, sometime around the spring of 1967, after wrestling with *Insight* for over a year, I had such a startling and strange experience as Lonergan speaks about. It is the clear memory of that experience some forty years later that has given rise to this book. For that moment opened up innumerable moments in my life and thinking. It was a turning point that precipitated a whole series of turning points" (xix).

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