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THEOLOGICAL *Studies*

Article

Theological Studies
2020, Vol. 81(4) 849–869
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DOI: 10.1177/0040563920984466
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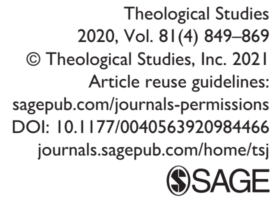

Imitating the Divine Interruption of Deteriorating Human Conversations: Speaking the Gospel in a New Language

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Abstract
Recent scholarship uses the metaphor of language to articulate why, even with good intentions, we Christians can hand on meanings and values at odds with the Christian message. Our "native" languages foreground our worlds, readily conforming our minds to the very realm we are called to transform (Rom 12:2). Related to the problem of "languages" is the brokenness of our conversations, themselves. Conversation can become a tool of destruction rather than a means of transformation. We Christians need a "new foundational language" in which to communicate the kerygma. This language is capable not only of communicating meanings and values that are faithful to the Christian message, but it is also capable of healing the very conversations we have by healing "the conversation that we are." This article suggests how we Christians can learn a new foundational language by unfolding the radical consequences of our Trinitarian belief.

Keywords
Thomas Aquinas, conversation, Frederick Lawrence, Bernard Lonergan, psychological analogy, Trinity, Functional Specialties, inner word, nonviolence, preaching

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Man [sic] has learned much since morning,

For we are a conversation, and we can listen

To one another. Soon we'll be song.[1]

Introduction: Communicating the Kerygma and "Foreign" Languages

Communicating the kerygma is challenging. It demands honesty as we examine our acts of speaking and listening. It also requires repentance for our shortcomings as conversation partners, including our contributions as a church to situations of hearts hardened against the Word of God.

Underlying and complicating these challenges is Frederick Lawrence's incisive observation about the "alien and alienating languages" in which we Christians speak the kerygma:

> In a time that is felt to be a period of almost unprecedented crisis, we Christians speak languages stemming from traditions whose meanings and values are at odds both with Christian faith and with Lonergan's foundational language . . . And when Christianity gets co-opted into supplying a legitimating veneer for meanings and values that are unchristian, then probabilities mount that even well-intentioned speakers and doers of what they think is the Word will not only not be doing so, but they will be unaware of the existential contradictions in which they are involved. The urgency becomes all the more pressing when we realize that 'they' are we ourselves.[2]

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1. Friederich Hölderlin, "Celebration of Peace," *Selected Poems*, trans. David Constantine (Eastburn: Bloodaxe, 2018), 123–30.
2. Frederick G. Lawrence, "The Human Good and Christian Conversation," in *Communication and Lonergan: Common Ground for Forging a New Age*, eds. Thomas J. Ferrell and Paul A. Soukup (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1993), 248–68 at 249. Language is used metaphorically, not literally. This Christian crisis of communication is embedded in the so-called crisis of modernity, which Leo Straus traces "from Carl Schmitt, semi-official theorist of the Third Reich, to Benedict Spinoza, Thomas Hobbes, and finally [to] Niccolo Machiavelli." See Thomas P. Harmon, "The Three Waves of Modernity and the Longer Cycle of Decline: Convergences in the Thought of Bernard Lonergan and Leo Straus," *Modern Theology* 32 (2016): 421–38 at 422; see also 428–33, https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12261. Of Machiavelli, Strauss writes, "Machiavelli opposes to the idealism of traditional political philosophy a realistic approach to political things. But this is only half of the truth . . . The other half is stated by Machiavelli in these terms: 'fortuna is a woman who can be controlled by the use of force.'" See Leo Strauss, "The Three Waves of Modernity," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays*, ed. and intro. Hilail Gilden (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 81–98 at 84. According to Strauss, the three waves culminate with the political implications of Nietzsche's third wave: the "totalitarian destruction of the 20th century." See Harmon, "The Three Waves of Modernity and the Longer Cycle of Decline," 437.
   Lawrence also traces the modern crisis to Machiavelli and his dismissal of virtue because it is "impractical" and "ineffective." See Frederick G. Lawrence, "Political Theology and

Languages carry our conversations along, including our conversations about the kerygma and our self-understanding as Christians. However, as Jeremy Wilkins explains, "a language is not a value-free, neutral medium. Our native languages structure our initial readiness to notice and feel, ask, conceive and accept, appreciate and decide . . . 'Language' in this sense is a synecdoche for the matrix of thought, perception, and feeling molded by a mother tongue and the orientations to meaning and value it embodies."[3] Languages also "foreground" our world by offering us ways "to interpret our desires and needs, conflicts and struggles."[4] We each have a native language, and this language can be foreign to the Christian language.

In the absence of a distinctly Christian language, we grasp at languages "foreign" to the gospel message, which ultimately domesticate its transformative power and obscure anything meaningfully distinctive about the Christian way of life. We experience the consequences of this crisis, for example, in the barrenness of many of our churches and the increasing difficulty we find in discerning the "relevance" of Christianity to our day-to-day lives and culture. The lack of a distinctly Christian language plays out, for example, in a lack of common meaning with respect to the symbol of the Cross. We use words from our tradition like "sacrifice," "suffering," and "forgiveness," but their meaning and value can be subverted by our native languages, which are already interpreting these themes for us in ways that can make the Cross more a tool of destruction than a means of healing and transformation, even if that is not our intention.

Lawrence suggests that the languages of liberalism and nihilism, in particular, have "invaded us,"[5] whether we fall on the right or the left. For example, there are two forms of liberalism that correspond roughly to conservative and progressive mindsets, but

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'The Longer Cycle of Decline,'" *Lonergan Workshop Journal 1* (1978): 223–256 at 240, https://doi.org/10.5840/lw197817.

3. Jeremy Wilkins, "The Fragility of Conversation: Consciousness and Self-Understanding in Post/Modern Culture," *Heythrop Journal* 59 (2018): 832–47 at 833, https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.12992. Wilkins is referring to Frederick G. Lawrence, *The Fragility of Consciousness: Faith, Reason, and the Human Good*, ed. Randall S. Rosenberg and Kevin M. Vander Schel (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2017), 240.
4. See Lawrence, *Fragility of Consciousness*, 240; Wilkins, "The Fragility of Conversation," 843.
5. Lawrence, "The Human Good and Christian Conversation," 257, 261. Lawrence articulates "three languages of modernity" that correspond to Leo Strauss's "three waves of modernity," in addition to the prior "*civilis conversatio*," and a fourth language that proposes a restorative way through the crisis. See Lawrence, *The Fragility of Consciousness*. Cf. Wilkins, "The Fragility of Conversation," 834. On liberalism, see also Lonergan, "The Role of a Catholic University in the Modern World," in *Collection*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, Collected Works 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 108–13 at 110. On nihilism, see Philip Boo Riley, "The Meaning of History: Leo Strauss and Bernard Lonergan on the 'Crisis of Modernity,'" *Logos: Philosophical Issues in Christian Perspective* 4 (1983): 71–100. Of Nietzsche and nihilism, he writes, "In a third state, which Strauss identifies with the radical historicism of Nietzsche, reason and theory are depreciated in the name of practice, and at the same time History is seen to yield not standards of good and evil but only power and manipulation" (as cited in Harmon, "The

"They both depart from the modern assumption that the chief concern or issue of modern politics is power."[6] Here, Machiavellian power (whether it be the power of money, force, shaming, manipulation, etc.) is to be contrasted with virtue and the ancient *civilis conversatio*. As Lawrence remarks, "Machiavelli ridiculed the centrality of moral and spiritual culture as utopian, and his liberal followers eliminated soulcraft from statecraft."[7] We Christians, when bereft of a language of our own, also sometimes think and speak in terms of power—negotiating to advance our own "Christian" agenda. These languages infect our very ability to have the most important conversations, like the *civilis conversatio* that asks, What is the best way to live together? In fact, these foreign languages deform the question, itself: What's in it for me or my group? What's the point of being good if it doesn't get you anything or anywhere?[8]

Most fundamentally, these foreign languages invade *the conversation that we are*.[9] To say that you and I are "conversational," is to say that "we have our world by word and cannot escape the fragile circle of becoming authentic through conversation and becoming capable of conversation through authenticity."[10] These are existential conversations—the conversations in which we make ourselves and our communities, the conversations in which we tell stories about who we are and who we hope to be. These conversations and their outcomes are intimately connected to the languages in which we conduct them.

Given the mounting possibility that, even with good intentions, we can misrepresent the gospel, it is central to the task of communicating the kerygma that we unlearn our native languages and learn a new foundational language. We do so, as Lawrence cautions, not by using different words or inventing neologisms, but by repentance and conversion. Learning this new language offers the possibility not only of more effectively communicating the kerygma, but more fundamentally of healing the broken and destructive conversations we have with one another. Included in the call to share the gospel is the call to listen and speak in a way that reflects what is best in us—the *imago Dei*. The conversation that we are mirrors the conversation that the Triune God is—Speaking, Word, Listening.[11] For this reason, the Christian belief in the Trinity calls us

Three Waves of Modernity and the Longer Cycle of Decline," 431, fn 39). As Harmon underscores, this third wave has its origins in the first wave that began with Machiavelli.

6. Lawrence, "The Human Good and Christian Conversation," 256. Lawrence calls these liberalisms "commercial democracy" and "socialist politics of compassion." They are followed by nihilism.
7. Frederick G. Lawrence, "Grace and Friendship. Postmodern Political Theology and God as Conversational," *Gregorianum* 85 (2004): 795–820 at 798.
8. See Lawrence, "The Human Good and Christian Conversation," 254.
9. See Hölderlin poem above in opening epigraph. This phrase from Hölderlin is an ongoing theme in Lawrence's work.
10. Wilkins, "The Fragility of Conversation," 832.
11. For conceiving the Spirit as Listening, see Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *The Triune God: Doctrines*, trans. Michael G. Shields, ed. Robert M. Doran and H. Daniel Monsour, Collected Works 11 (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2009), 639–85. Lonergan conceives of the Spirit as Listening for the same reasons that Aquinas conceives of the Spirit as Proceeding Love—both express the Spirit's dependence on the Word and the Father.

to have radically different kinds of conversations.[12] These conversations are what I call "quality conversations"—conversations in which our speaking and listening are born from a loving understanding, and in which we courageously raise questions together for the sake of self-transcendence, transformation, and friendship.

In what follows, I offer a way to reconceive our theological task of communicating the kerygma in light of these connected themes of language, conversation, and conversion. First, I focus on the essence and source of quality conversations. Second, I explore what can precipitate these quality conversations when we find ourselves in the midst of deteriorating conversations. In this second part, I will suggest how we can become "fluent" in this new foundational language for communicating the kerygma.

The Heart of Communicating the Kerygma

If we want to be leaven in the world by healing our destructive, deteriorating conversations through the gift of a new language, we have to first discern what makes for a quality conversation. Lawrence suggests that the heart of quality conversations spoken in the foundational Christian language is found in Thomas Aquinas's Trinitarian theology and his analogy for the divine processions, which Thomas names "intellectual emanations."[13] Understanding what these intellectual emanations are and how they operate within our own conscious is important because the emanations clarify the source of genuine speaking and listening: loving understanding. With Thomas, we can ask ourselves some of what Philip McShane calls the "eminently conversational questions": What we are doing whenever we are really speaking, whenever we are really listening?[14] If and when we sincerely speak true words and listen with gratitude, we imitate the Triune God.[15]

12. I have in mind Catherine Mowry LaCugna's argument and exhortation: "The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life." See Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1992), 1, 11, 17. Though I aim to retrieve the very Trinitarian theology she found problematic, I do so in agreement with her important insight and in an effort to discover the radical possibilities of the so-called "psychological analogy." These possibilities come to light through a creative retrieval of this analogy in terms of conversation. In thinking through the "practical" and radical consequences of Trinitarian doctrine, I have in mind not Machiavellian "usefulness" but what Lawrence calls the "eminently practical question" about the best way to live. Cf. Bernard Lonergan, "Theology and Praxis," in *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard J.F. Lonergan, S.J.*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe (New York: Paulist, 1985), 184–201.
13. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 27, a. 1c (hereafter cited as *ST*).
14. Philip McShane, *Music that is Soundless: An Introduction to God for the Graduate* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1972), 1–2, as cited in Lawrence, "The Human Good and Christian Conversation," 266.
15. See Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 93, aa. 6–7.

The Rise of the Order of Preachers

I now turn to the historical circumstances of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* in order to draw out the pastoral *telos* of his theology and to highlight a few ways in which he faced similar challenges regarding the communication of the kerygma.

A great need for preaching arose during the Middle Ages. Populations were booming and shifting to urban centers. Many people were unschooled in Catholic beliefs. Heresies were spreading. Poverty was rising, which "became a real strain on the Church's resources and a serious challenge to its ministry."[16] The lack of basic catechesis, the spread of heresy, and widespread poverty created numerous pastoral challenges. Fundamentally, the Church faced a crisis of communication that made it difficult to even understand and convey Christian meanings. The popular Christianity that had accompanied peasants to the cities "had preserved vital links with the mytho-poetic and folkoric-magic consciousness' of pre-Christian Europe."[17] As Gilles Mongeau observes, "The net effect of this popular religious mentality was often to bring the holy 'down' into the secular, to domesticate it and rob it of its genuine ability to challenge the faithful in accord with the Gospel."[18] Not unlike today, the ability to communicate the transformative power of the gospel was compromised because Christians spoke and thought in languages foreign to the kerygma.

Parish priests were often unsuccessful at preaching because they lacked the theological sophistication that the new urban environment demanded, and were often themselves given to the same domestication of the holy. Monks were called upon, but they also failed because of the disparity between their often extravagant manner of living and the message they sought to preach.[19] Finally, the content of the preaching was itself problematic. Medieval preachers often had recourse to non-scriptural "*exempla*," which were "fables that found their origins in popular life and mythology" and imagined, for example, the punishment of sinners, bleeding hosts, and the shape of the star that appeared above Christ's manger.[20] Dominicans advocated turning to the gospels instead. For example, Mongeau draws attention to Thomas's response to the Dominican Gérard of Besançon with questions borne from these *exempla*: "I do not think such frivolities ought to be preached, when there are so many sure truths to be taught."[21] The underlying issue is that the *exempla* reinforced rather than challenged

16. Gilles Mongeau, *Embracing Wisdom: The* Summa Theologiae *as Spiritual Pedagogy* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2015), 51.
17. Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, trans. Janos M. Bak and Paul A. Hollingsworth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), xv. I am indebted to Mongeau for this reference. See Mongeau, *Embracing Wisdom*, 52.
18. Mongeau, *Embracing Wisdom*, 53.
19. See Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 16. On the relationship between poverty and preaching, see Aquinas, *ST* 3, q. 40, a. 3.
20. Mongeau, *Embracing Wisdom*, 59–60.
21. As cited in Mongeau, *Embracing Wisdom*, 69. See Thomas Aquinas, *Opuscules*, 533.

the popular religious mentality that domesticated the holy and corporealized the spiritual.

As the Church struggled to respond to these challenges, Dominic sought to educate and provide orthodox, theologically-informed, and impoverished evangelists to preach and teach.[22] In an effort to reform Dominican education to better serve its pastoral and evangelical goals, especially regarding theological education, Thomas Aquinas was asked to run a *studium personale* at Santa Sabina.[23] It was to become the training ground for Dominican teachers, who in turn would teach theology to the Dominicans preparing to preach. During his time at Santa Sabina, Thomas encountered pedagogical deficiencies in existing theological texts. In response, he began composing the *Summa Theologiae*.[24] Thomas's *Summa Theologiae* is a text for Dominicans, not only historically but also theologically, because it is written from the perspective of the mixed life. Thomas's theology of the mixed life is expressed in his idiom for this life: "*contemplata aliis tradere*"—to contemplate and hand on the fruits of one's contemplation to others.[25]

Conversation and Friendship: The Mixed Life, The Life of Christ, and the Trinity in Thomas Aquinas's Theology

Like St. Dominic, Thomas believed that the quality of a Dominican's preaching was bound to the quality of his life.[26] Furthermore, the quality of a Dominican's preaching and his life both depended on the quality of conversation of which he is capable—with others, with God, with himself.[27] For Thomas, the measure of quality conversations is found in the aforementioned "intellectual emanations" of the inner word and of love (which, as will be seen, can also be conceived as listening). A brief foray into the technical term, "intellectual emanation," will help us appreciate what distinguishes quality conversations from destructive ones.

Conversation and Intellectual Emanations: An Introduction

Thomas's analogy for the Trinity in the *Summa Theologiae* depends on knowledge of oneself as a knower and lover full of wonder, which includes discovering within ourselves the intellectual emanations of word and of love that are analogous to the divine

22. See M. Michèle Mulchahey, *'First the Bow Is Bent in Study': Dominican Education before 1350* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1998), 8, 19.
23. Leonard Boyle, "The Setting of the *Summa Theologiae* of Saint Thomas," reprinted in *Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: Critical Essays*, ed. Brian Davies (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 1–24.
24. See Mulchahey, *'First the Bow Is Bent in Study'*, 278–80.
25. See Aquinas, *ST* 2–2, q. 188, a. 6c; 3, q. 40, a. 1 ad 2.
26. For example, see Aquinas, *ST* 2–2, q. 186, a. 3; q. 187, a. 5; *ST* 3, q. 40, a. 3.
27. See the later section, Conversation, Friendship, and the Trinity.

processions of Word and Love.[28] This kind of self-knowledge is at the heart of the Christian language. It discloses the essence and source of quality conversations, which mirror the conversation that God is (Speaking, Word, Listening): the intellectual emanations of the word and of the spirit of listening from *agape*. In this way, reflection on the Trinity is essential to the transformation of the language that we Christians speak.

An intellectual emanation is a particular type of procession that occurs within human consciousness.[29] There are two kinds of intellectual emanations. First, not only do we understand, but we also intelligently express our understanding to ourselves. This expression is called the intellectual emanation of the inner word. It is not only an intelligent expression of what is known, but also an intelligent expression that knows itself to be the faithful expression of its source. Secondly, not only do we love, but our love also proceeds with and because of understanding and affirmation. This procession is called the intellectual emanation of proceeding love.[30]

We can discover and pay attention to these intellectual emanations in our own experiences—most notably by noticing when they have yet to occur. For example, we need to express our understanding to ourselves in an inner word because this act of expressing is how we clarify for ourselves what we have understood. We experience this necessity of the inner word when something is on the "tip of our tongue."[31] We recognize that we have understood something, but we are not yet satisfied because we cannot articulate our insight to ourselves. We experience the emanation of the inner word once we arrive at a firmness of knowing precisely what we have understood. Similarly, the intellectual emanation of love is also most conspicuous when it is absent, as, for example, when we affirm the value of something, but do not pause to appreciate it or commit to it in some way. Until we do, we will feel restless.

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28. For self-knowledge, see Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 87, a. 1. For the analogy, see, e.g., Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 93, aa. 6–7: "Now the Divine Persons are distinct from each other by reason of the procession of the Word from the Speaker, and the procession of Love connecting Both. But in our soul word 'cannot exist without actual thought,' as Augustine says (*De Trin*. xiv, 7). Therefore, first and chiefly, the image of the Trinity is to be found in the acts of the soul, that is, inasmuch as from the knowledge which we possess, by actual thought we form an internal word; and thence break forth into love."
29. On intellectual emanations, see especially Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 27, a. 1; q. 34, a. 1; q. 90, a. 1; q. 93, aa. 6–8. See also, Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 4, a. 2 and *De potentia*, q. 9, a. 9. See also Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, eds. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, Collected Works 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), esp. 46–59 and 191–213. Cf. Matthew Levering, "Speaking the Trinity: Anselm and his 13th-Century Interlocutors On Divine *Intelligere and Dicere*" in *Saint Anselm—His Origins and Influence*, ed. John R. Fortin (Lewiston, ME: Edwin Mellen, 2001), 131–43.
30. See Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 87, a. 4.
31. For a concise treatment of the necessity of inner words for our understanding and knowledge of things, see Philip McShane, "The Hypothesis of Intelligible Emanations in God," *Theological Studies* 23 (1962): 545–68 at 555, https://doi.org/10.1177/004056396202300401.

With respect to the procession of love, we are concerned with the relationship between knowing and loving. In many cases, we fall in love with people in ways that are totally disproportionate to anything that has preceded the act of love. We experience such love as a gift. In other cases, our love proceeds because we have understood and affirmed the beloved's value of the beloved.[32] These latter cases exemplify the procession of love from understanding and its word. The procession of love is not only an intelligent love of what is known, but also an intelligent love that knowingly appreciates the event of speaking, itself—gratitude for the sincerity of the speaker and for the fidelity of the word to its source (the speaker's loving understanding) for revealing the beloved in this way.

In this way, we can conceive of the procession of love as gratitude or as listening—both underscore the restfulness of love that pauses to appreciate and hear not only the beloved's value, but is also grateful for the sincere speaking and faithful word that disclosed the value to us.[33] In terms of our intellectual emanations, listening depends on both the speaking of the word and the spoken word itself. Additionally, listening reflects its source in loving understanding. Listening is like love as a point of inner rest rather than a principle of external action. When we truly hear someone, we rest—we do not rush to speak or to solve problems. Listening is enough; it is the *telos* of genuine conversation because two people have become one in mind and heart—not only affirming one another's value, but also gratefully taking it to heart.

It is important to understand why these emanations/processions of word and of love are "intellectual." The inner word "reflects" the act of understanding from which it arises and on which it depends. Therefore, the inner word, like the act of understanding, is also intelligent. Similarly, insofar as knowledge can nourish love (insofar as affirming value can nourish gratitude), the procession of love/listening "reflects" the act of understanding and inner word from which it arises and on which it depends.[34] Therefore, the procession of love/listening, like the act of understanding and its word, is also intelligent. Both of these processions occur within us, and can be communicated in outer words and loving actions.

The main point relevant to quality conversations is this: Thomas names the interior processions of word and of love "intellectual emanations" because they proceed from unified acts of loving–understanding, each emanation reflecting—as faithful word or listening love—the loving intelligence from which they arise. That is, he names them intellectual emanations because they have a loving, intelligent source.

Lastly, it is important to underscore the fact that, for Thomas, intelligence that is also loving is what most properly images the Trinity. Following Augustine, Thomas

32. This love can occur, and often does, in an overall context of being in the state of love.
33. Conceiving these three relations at the heart of conversation as sincerity, fidelity, and gratitude is based on Charles Hefling, "*Gratia* and Graditude, Fifty Unmodern Theses as Prolegomena to Pneumatology," *Anglican Theological Review* 83 (2001): 473–91.
34. Occasionally, Thomas calls this second procession an "*inclination intelligibilis*," to express its distinction from the first type, while also underscoring its similarity. See Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 87, a. 4.

affirms that it is not just any inner word, but only a word breathing forth love—the *verbum spirans amorem*—that is like the processions of the Word and of Love in God.[35] This is a word that proceeds from an act of understanding that grasps the value of something (rather than or in addition to the idea or facticity of something). Speaking and listening can reflect our reasonableness and lovingness, and thus can reflect what makes us simultaneously most human and most like God.

Quality Conversations: The Intellectual Emanations of Word and Love

For Thomas, these kinds of intellectual emanations—words breathing forth love—are the heart of quality conversations: quality conversations reflect their source in human reasonableness and lovingness. However, not all words and listening emanate intellectually from loving understanding. Our words and our listening can proceed from other sources, too, and it is the source of their procession that ultimately distinguishes meaningful conversations from superficial, ineffective, or destructive conversations. For example, our words can proceed from fear or resentment, neither of which is a truly intelligent or loving source. People can weave narratives grounded in resentment. The narratives may contain elements of truth, but insofar as they neglect relevant questions and refuse to be open, they siphon off the transformative powers of understanding and love. Such narratives thereby contribute to the deterioration of our conversations. Similarly, our listening can proceed from a desire to manipulate, injure, or to simply have our turn to speak. Such listening is not an openness to be transformed through conversation but a desire to instrumentalize conversation to our own ends.

While these examples arise from my own reflections on conversation, Thomas speaks in surprisingly similar ways about words that do not proceed from intelligent, loving sources. In the *Prima Secundae*, Thomas identifies words that proceed not as intellectual emanations, but as sins.[36] For example, he refers to "idle words"—thoughtless words—which can even be mortal sins.[37] Later, in the *Secunda Secundae*, Thomas devotes five questions to the injuries words cause. Injurious words are not intellectual emanations because they proceed, at least in part, from unintelligent and/or unloving sources.[38] As he writes, "Words are injurious to other persons, not as sounds, but as signs, and this signification depends on the speaker's inward intention."[39] For Thomas,

35. See Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 43, a. 5 ad 2; q. 93, a. 7c. See also Augustine, *De trinitate*, 9.10.15, as found in Augustine, *The Trinity*, intro., trans., notes Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1991), 279.
36. See also Aquinas, *ST* 2–1, q. 71, a. 8 wherein he aligns his approach of sin with Augustine's definition of sin, "(Contra Faust. xxii) Sin is a word, deed, or desire against the eternal law."
37. Aquinas, *ST* 2–1, q. 72, a. 1 ad. 1.
38. See Aquinas, *ST* 2–2, qq. 72–76. For example, considering "reviling," Aquinas quotes Isidor, "reviling, properly speaking consists in words: wherefore, Isidore says (Etym. x) that a reviler 'is hasty and bursts out [*tumet*] in injurious words.'"
39. Aquinas, *ST* 2–2, q. 72, a. 2c.

injurious words are spoken against other people, with the intention of causing harm through dishonoring, deprecating, destroying friendship, shaming, or cursing. Thomas refers to these injurious words, not as he refers to the intellectual emanation of the inner word from the act of understanding ("*intelligere qua dicere*"), but rather, as "*malum dicere*"—to speak ill. When considering the act of reviling, Thomas locates the source and goal of ill-spoken injurious words in anger and revenge, respectively.[40]

Regarding the outer words we use in our conversations with one another, Thomas explains that "to speak [*loqui*] to another only means to make known the mental concept [*conceptum mentis*] to another."[41] Of course, speaking is much more than simply speaking out loud what you have conceived within, as anyone knows who has communicated something difficult. Through conversation, we share not only our inner words but also our inner lives. What we conceive within—at times conceived in love, at other times conceived in fear or resentment—is difficult to utter in the presence of another because its conception is intimate and personal. The discerning decision to communicate difficult truths—truths about oneself, about a relationship, about narratives we have woven—as well as the actual communication, are themselves grounded in a loving understanding that affirms the value of conversation, of sharing one's inner life with another, and of being open to the conversation partner for the sake of healing, reconciliation, or growth. However, the impulsive decision to communicate difficult truths about ourselves or others—for the sake of, for example, self-destruction or causing injury to others—and the actual communication of these truths are not grounded in loving understanding. Even if there is truth to what is spoken outwardly, the decision and action do not have their source in loving understanding, and so to speak under these circumstances is "*malum dicere*."

Thomas also explores the connection between listening and words. He likens the source of reviling words to foolishness: "According to the Philosopher (Ethic. vii, 6) 'anger listens imperfectly to reason': wherefore an angry man suffers a defect of reason, and in this he is like the foolish man. Hence reviling arises from folly on account of the latter's kinship with anger."[42] Additionally, Thomas reflects on the source of listening and its significance when considering listening as a sin. For example, in the question on backbiting, Thomas observes that listening to another's injurious words without resisting them is sinful. What differentiates sinful listening from holy listening is the source of the listening—rather than an intelligent, loving source, the source is, for example, "fear, negligence, or even shame."[43]

Conversation and the Mixed Life of Contemplation and Action: *Contemplata Aliis Tradere*

The intellectual emanations of word and love are also at the foundation of Aquinas's conversational account of the Dominican mixed life.[44] Thomas distinguishes the active

40. Aquinas, *ST* 2–2, q. 72, a. 4c.
41. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 107, a. 1c.
42. Aquinas, *ST* 2–2, q. 72, a. 4, ad. 2.
43. Aquinas, *ST* 2–2, q. 73, a. 4c.
44. See Aquinas, *ST* 2–2, qq. 179–89.

and contemplative lives according to their distinct operations. There is also an operation both lives share in common, namely teaching (of which preaching is a form). The mixed life is mixed primarily because its contemplative and active operations are mutually related.[45] For example, in the Dominican mixed life, teaching and preaching proceed from the fullness of contemplation. It is contemplative teaching (rather than active teaching) that integrates the contemplative and active moments of a Dominican's life. This integration hinges on the intellectual emanation of the *verbum spirans amorem*.

The inner word is one object of teaching. The other is the student.[46] The teacher's goal is to help the student form her own inner words that express his understanding. The student's inner words are the sign that she is truly learning and not just memorizing the material.[47] Without understanding, a student can only repeat the teacher's words or examples from memory, and lacks the flexibility and facility of expression that comes from understanding and makes conversation possible. We can imagine the absence of the inner word in the mere repetition of the *exempla* (fables) that Thomas sought to replace with the concrete intelligibility of the gospels. The *exempla* might pass from speaker to listener without the transformation of either person, whereas the contemplation of the Word incarnate bears real conversational fruit.

The teacher shares her own inner word with the student by means of outer speech, and in this respect, all teaching belongs to the active life.[48] Teaching can also belong to the contemplative life, and whether teaching belongs to the active or contemplative life hinges on the type of inner word the teacher seeks to communicate to students—practical or speculative. As Thomas writes, teaching "belongs to the contemplative life when a man conceives an intelligible truth, in the consideration and love whereof he delights."[49] A teacher can communicate these inner words so that others may also enjoy the wisdom, truth, goodness, and beauty these words express.

In the *Summa*, Thomas endeavors to form preachers in the kind of teaching that belongs primarily to the contemplative life because he seeks to form preachers in imitation of Christ. In a sermon on Luke, Thomas expresses the contemplative nature of Christ's teaching: "A preacher goes out from hidden contemplation and goes to the public [field] of preaching, for a preacher first ought to draw in in contemplation what he will pour out later on in preaching . . . This going out is very similar to the Savior's going out from the secret dwelling place of the Father to the public area of what is visible."[50]

People with the requisite gifts are called to a fuller knowledge of the mysteries of faith (drawing in) for the consolation, edification, and exercise of the faithful (pouring

45. See Aquinas, *ST* 2–2, q. 182, a. 3.
46. See Aquinas, *ST* 2–2, q. 179, a. 1c.
47. See Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 117, a. 1 ad 3.
48. Aquinas, *ST* 2–2, q. 181, a. 3c.
49. Aquinas, *ST* 2-2, q. 181, a. 3c.
50. Aquinas, *Sermon 9: Exiit qui seminat*, 3, as found in in *Thomas Aquinas: The Academic Sermons*, trans. Mark-Robin Hoogland, C.P. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 120.

out).[51] This fuller knowledge is the consideration of truth undertaken in contemplative study. It also includes nurturing the student's love of God. Thomas explains the reason for this exercise in charity in his commentary on John's gospel: ". . . For that person learns the word who grasps it according to the meaning of the speaker. But the Word of the Father breathes forth love. Therefore, the one who grasps it with eager love, learns."[52] This loving grasp is essential to the formation of people who will speak about God because true preaching is not ornamental language or *exempla*, but the communication of the inner word, which mediates the God known and loved.

In the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas's effort to form preachers who grasp the Word according to the meaning of the Father occurs especially as he transitions from the *Secunda pars* to the *Tertia pars*. He nurtures his students' growth not only in understanding and wisdom, but also in charity through a theological encounter with the gospel narratives of Christ's life. It is in contemplatively listening to the human life of the *Verbum Spirans Amorem* that we are most able to grasp the Word according to the meaning of the Speaker (the Father).

Conversation and the Life of Christ

The *Secunda pars* of the *Summa Theologiae* closes with a twofold exhortation: to choose the mixed life because it is an "exercise or school for the attainment of charity"[53] and to imitate Christ. The student is then brought to the *Tertia pars* to explore anew this Christ that he is called to imitate.[54] As Mongeau observes, the Christological questions, specifically questions 27–59 on the things "done and suffered by our Savior," draw the reader into the concrete intelligibility of the gospels through their narratives of Christ's life, which is intended as a model for preaching the Scriptures.[55] Thomas counters the

51. See Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Impugnantes*, prol; Thomas Aquinas, *The Sermon-Conferences, The Sermon-Conferences of St. Thomas Aquinas on the Apostles' Creed*. Trans. Nicholas Ayo (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 49; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1, c. 9, §2 (hereafter cited as Aquinas, *SCG*).
52. Aquinas, *Super evangelium S. Ioannis lectura*, 946 as found in Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John: Chapters 6–12*, trans. Fabian Larcher and James A. Weisheipl, intro. and notes Daniel Keating and Matthew Levering (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 37.
53. See Mark Jordan, "Thomas Aquinas on Bernard," in *Bernardus Magister: Papers Presented at the Nonacentenary Celebration of the Birth of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux: 1090–1990*, ed. John R. Sommerfeldt (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Studies, 1992), 449–60 at 458. Cf. Aquinas, *ST* 2–2, q. 184, aa. 1, 3, q. 186, aa. 1–2; q. 187, a. 2; 188, a. 1; q. 189, a. 1.
54. See Mongeau, *Embracing Wisdom*, 139.
55. Aquinas, *ST* 3, prol. In the second part of the Christology of the *Tertia pars* (qq. 27–59), Mongeau points out that Thomas "presents his material in a strictly narrative fashion, following the order of a particular biblical account" (Mongeau, *Embracing Wisdom*, 100–101). As Mongeau later explains, Thomas is leading the reader through a "theological investigation of the principal events that marked the existence of the Word made flesh . . ." in which he "proposes a 're-lecture,' a reading again, of the gospels in light of what has been presented concerning Christ in the first twenty-six questions (Mongeau, *Embracing*

tendency toward fables and non-biblical *exempla* that reinforced the popular religious mentality by drawing people into the life of Christ.

When considering Christ's manner of life and its relation to his mission, the first question Thomas asks is whether Christ should have "associated" (*conversari*) with people or instead should have led a life of solitude. Thomas maintains it was essential to Christ's mission that he abided with people and invited them into meaningful conversation, because he came as a teacher, a healer, and a mediator who shares the truth about his Father, seeks out the lost and sick, and offers people a way to God, respectively.[56] In this article, Thomas also reiterates the relative perfection of the mixed life, which echoes his sermon on Luke: "that form of active life in which a man, by preaching and teaching, delivers to others the fruits of his contemplation, is more perfect than the life that stops at contemplation, because such a life is built on an abundance of contemplation, and consequently such was the life chosen by Christ."[57] For Thomas, Christ chose a conversational life because conversation was essential to his mission, simultaneously a means and an end. It is this life and these quality conversations Dominicans seek to imitate.

Conversation, Friendship, and the Trinity

In Thomas's Trinitarian questions in the *Summa Theologiae*, the intellectual emanations of word and of love in us are the natural analogues for the eternal processions of Word and of Love in God, which consequently illuminate the divine missions.[58] As the basis of the analogical understanding of the Trinity, the emanations serve to facilitate the preacher's contemplative study of the Trinitarian mystery of faith. That said, it is in Thomas's Trinitarian anthropology that the relevance of Trinitarian doctrine to quality conversations and personal transformation is most obvious.

In Question 93 of the *Prima pars* on the *imago Dei*, Thomas advances what Frederick Crowe names "Trinification"—as the human person is deified through grace so too is she "Trinified."[59] According to Thomas, when we speak a word specifically about God, and that word breathes forth love, we are imitating God's own loving knowledge of Godself according to which the divine *verbum spirans amorem* proceeds (the word breathing forth love).[60] We are assimilated to the Trinity because God is the object of our knowing and loving, and because in speaking loving words about God, we are performing the very acts that are the reason we are *ad imaginem Dei*. Notice that not only must our acts have God as their object, but our words must breathe forth love.[61]

Wisdom, 172). This "re-reading" is ordered toward a personal transformation of the reader, in imitation of Christ, specifically by considering Christ's concrete humanity.

56. See Aquinas *ST* 3, q. 40, a. 1c.
57. Aquinas, *ST* 3, q. 40, a. 1 ad 2.
58. See especially Aquinas, *ST* 1, qq. 27 and 43.
59. Frederick E. Crowe, *The Most Holy Doctrine of the Trinity,* ed. Leo Serroul (Toronto: Regis College, 1970), 178.
60. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 93, a. 8.
61. For Thomas's development with respect to the *imago Dei*, see D. Juvenal Merriell, *To the Image of the Trinity: A Study in the Development of Aquinas's Teaching* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 1990).

The *verbum spirans amorem* is the heart of conversation, and conversation is essential to friendship. For Thomas, charity is nothing less than friendship with God.[62] (Recall that the Dominican life is an "exercise" in charity, and thereby, an exercise in friendship with God.) Conversation is the primary activity of friendship because it cultivates the oneness of mind and heart that friends seek. The contemplative "drawing in" of the mixed life is a form of conversation. As Thomas writes, "This appears to be especially proper to friendship: really to converse with the friend. Now, *the conversation of man with God is by contemplation of Him*."[63] Conversation with God and with one another in friendship is the path to our ultimate end, "which is the knowing and loving of God."[64] Thomas continues, linking this contemplation-as-conversation to Trinification by way of St. Paul: "We behold [God] when we rise from a consideration of ourselves to some knowledge of God, and we are transformed. For since all knowledge involves the knower's being assimilated to the thing known, it is necessary that those who see be in some way transformed into God."[65] We become like God through conversation with God, and are thereby prepared to share this conversation with others. These are the conversations of friendship, which arise from the desire to know and love our friends.

The foundation of the preacher's speaking about God is his performance of these operations whereby God becomes personally present to him as known and beloved (speaking words about God that breath forth love). We speak sincerely about God because of our loving grasp of God. We listen gratefully to the words that are faithful to who God is because they reflect that loving grasp. Our language is faithful to the kerygma because of this loving grasp. Not only do we love God, but we love the very speaking and words spoken because together they illuminate God in a new way for us. The preacher communicates this interpersonal presence precisely because outward speaking is the sharing of the interior *verbum spirans amorem*. In communicating the interpersonal presence, the preacher is communicating (sharing) friendship with God, helping others grasp the meaning of the Father's Word with eager Love.

Conversation and the *Summa Theologiae*

In the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas coordinates the mixed life, conversation, friendship, and the *imago Dei* through the intellectual emanations of word and of love. He invites his readers to imitate Christ's conversational life and accept the divine invitation to friendship. This invitation is "Triniform" (i.e., Trinitarian in structure) because it is offered to us by way of the conversation that God is—Speaking, Word, Listening. It is also "Trinifying"

62. Aquinas, *ST* 2–2, q. 23, a. 1.
63. Aquinas, *SCG* 4, c. 22, §2 (emphasis added).
64. Aquinas, *SCG* 3, c. 111, §2 (emphasis added). See *SCG* 3, c. 128, §2: "Again, the end of divine law is for man to cling to God. But one man may be aided to this end by another man, both in regard to knowledge and to love. For men are of mutual assistance to each other in the knowing of truth."
65. Thomas Aquinas, *In 2 Corinthians*, 114 (emphasis added).

(i.e., assimilates the human person to the Trinity) because accepting this invitation makes one more like the Triune God insofar as one comes to know and love God through conversation.[66] That is, "Trinification" is borne from a participation in the kind of listening and speaking that God *is*—listening and speaking that proceed because of loving understanding, and as such, constitute the basis of quality conversations.

As Lawrence suggested, Thomas uncovered the heart of quality conversations (what Lawrence calls "constitutive communication") in discovering the intellectual emanations at the heart of the *imago Dei*. Constitutive communication is the type of communication in which we constitute ourselves, personally and communally, especially as we seek to raise and answer the primordial socio-political question about the best way to live together. I now want to suggest how intellectual emanations are integral to thinking through our contemporary crisis of communication that seems to have forgotten this most primordial question, and how Trinitarian theology can help Christians develop a new "foundational language" for having conversations in a radically different way.

Intellectual Emanations as the Heart of Communication

Speaking about God cannot be pursued without undergoing exercises that help us listen deeply and speak true and worthwhile words. Yet too often our conversations break down, precipitating the deterioration of our relationships and society. These breakdowns compromise our ability to speak about God, for we might begin using foreign languages, and thus introduce meanings and values that are at odds with the kerygma. Moreover, if, at the core of our humanity and dignity, we are conversational beings in the image of God, then the quality of our conversations as Christians measures in part the quality of our Christian living and vocation. As theologians, our adequacy to the task of mediating divine meanings and values within our culture depends on whether we live up to the conversation that we are. It is not only the words we speak and to which we listen that mediate divine meanings and values, but also *how* we speak and listen, which depends on the source of our speaking and listening. With Lawrence, we can take up Hans-Georg Gadamer's invitation "to align our performance of living with what we are by nature through heightening our awareness of the demands of genuine human conversation."[67] The Christ whom Thomas called the Dominicans to imitate aligned his way of life with his identity and mission precisely by choosing a conversational life that communicated truth, forgiveness, and friendship with God.

Interruptive Events and a New Horizon for Conversation

In reflecting on my own conversations, I have realized that beyond coming to terms with what authentic listening and speaking are—and so appropriating intellectual

66. On conversation and interpersonal presence with the Triune God, see Aquinas, *ST* 1 q. 38, a. 1; q. 43, a. 3 ad 1; *SCG* 4, c. 22, §2.
67. Frederick Lawrence, "Hans-Georg Gadamer: Philosopher of Practical Wisdom," *Theoform* 40.3 (2009): 257–90 at 289.

emanations that proceed because of loving understanding—we must also ask how these transformative conversations come about. Only then can we become fluent in the new foundational language required to witness to the kerygma.

Existential conversations constitutive of who we are becoming—especially conversations of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation—are the most relevant kinds of conversations for our reflection. What often precipitates these conversations, and the conversion that accompanies them, is an event. Events *interrupt* our conversations, just as the Incarnation interrupted our human conversation as a whole. Grace can operate on us by working through these events—for example, the birth of a child, a looming divorce, or an imminent death. Like the event of the Incarnation, events like these can be touchstones of change because they displace our contracted horizons and they interrupt our dead-end conversations and destructive narratives in which our words proceed not from loving understanding, but from places of fear, jealousy, cynicism, despair, and violence.

The event of the crucifixion is the ultimate interruption of our conversations because in Christ's solidarity with each and every victim of sin, he witnesses to God's unlimited horizon and discloses the limitedness of our own horizons. In God's horizon, as Patrick Byrne explains, "Every person is valued and loved as having a role in the final value God intends. It is radically different from any limited, humanly devised horizon of personal relations which can find a value for only some, but not other, people and their deeds."[68] We need to be eschatologically oriented toward this unlimited horizon (which we are given through the gift of being in love unrestrictedly) in order to have conversations here and now that regularly promote self-transcendence rather than domination of the other or self-effacement. We need events like the Cross that disclose suffering and brokenness in order to challenge our contracted horizons, interrupt the conversations that have become "stuck" within them, and re-open us to the mutual self-mediation that comes with sincere speaking, faithful words, and grateful listening.[69] In other words, we need regular reminders to pay attention to the quality of our conversations. Some of us develop habits to this end. Most of us need to be interrupted, to be *wounded*. We need the "dangerous memory" of Christ crucified. And when we are engaging in the divine–human conversation, we need to be, as Johann Baptist Metz insists, "speaking about God within the *conversio ad passionem*. Whoever talks about God in Jesus' sense will always take into account the way one's own preformulated certainties are wounded by the misfortune of others."[70]

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68. Patrick H. Byrne, "*Ressentiment* and the Preferential Option for the Poor," *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 213–41 at 238, https://doi.org/10.1177/004056399305400202.
69. There could also be beautiful events, like the Resurrection and walking with the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus, that break open our limited horizons.
70. Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1998), 2. As quoted in M. Shawn Copeland, "Presidential Address: Political Theology as Interruptive," *CTSA Proceedings* 59 (2004): 71–82 at 75.

Events, both joyful and painful, are able to interrupt our conversations because they create what Rosemary Haughton calls "weak spots" in our barriers to God.[71] Divine love, never coercive and ever patient, breaks through these weak spots. At these weak spots, we are not relying on our own power, and so we are "prepared to listen, to pay attention to the voice of God speaking to [us]."[72] Events create weak spots because they invite us to pause and pay attention, which in turn can precipitate the questions we have been avoiding in our barrier-making. It is not always sufficient, when we have biases and barriers to asking relevant questions, that someone else simply pose the question to us, for example, "What was *your* role in creating this situation?"[73] We resist that question and even resent the questioner. Events, however, can create redemptive space in which we can finally hear our conversation partner. Only then can the long-forgotten, yet much-needed, question emerge personally: "What was *my* role . . .?" Events are experiences from which questions can emerge, illuminated by the light of our pain, joy, or connection and supported by our desires for reconciliation and wholeness. Experiencing meaningful events can rekindle our desires to know and love. These desires, in the form of questions, are the condition of the possibility of understanding from which authentic words and listening proceed. In this way, interruptive events are part of the process of mutual self-mediation and self-transcendence in which we grow in and through our interpersonal relationships and conversations with one another.

Conceiving of the Triune God as eternally conversational—as Speaking, Word, and Listening—and also conceiving of the divine missions as displacing the human conversation into the divine conversation by the events of the Incarnation, Cross, and Resurrection help us reconceive the communication of Christian meanings and values as the culminating fruit of Christian theology. Here, I have in mind what Lonergan names the "functional relation" of Systematics and Communications. This mutual relationship illuminates ways we can reconceive Communications by pointing us toward a systematic interpretation of interruptive events and redemptive conversations in light of our Trinitarian belief.[74] To renew the theological task of Communications,

71. Rosemary Haughton, "Divine Love Breaking Through into Human Experience," *International Review of Mission* 71 (1982): 20–28 at 22–23, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6631.1982.tb03119.x. The barrier is sin.
72. Haughton, "Divine Love Breaking Through into Human Experience," 23.
73. I use "bias" in Lonergan's technical sense of the word, according to which we consciously choose to avoid further relevant questions that may correct our understanding. See Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, Collected Works 3 (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992), 214–31 and 244–69.
74. Communications is the eighth and final specialty, in which "theological reflection bears fruit." It is the culmination of the speaking phase of theology, which itself began with listening. Communications is immediately preceded by Systematics. The differentiation of these two functional specialties is grounded in the differences between the conscious operations of experience and understanding, respectively. These second-phase theological operations are performed in a horizon transformed by grace. See Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2007), 125–45, 355.

we should seek to continue the mediation of divine meanings and values into human history through interruptive events. One of the primary reasons events imitative of the divine interruptive events are relevant is because of their relation to our existential awareness and to our experience. That is, interruptive events can awaken us to ourselves and others, and they primarily correspond and appeal to experience.

These events are critical for our communication of the Christian message for two reasons. First, we can creatively provide interruptive events in order to promote authentic conversations—retreats are popular examples, but to reach the broader culture, events of non-violent resistance or public expressions of repentance and/or solidarity are especially powerful. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. explains that nonviolent events, by awakening "moral shame" in the opponent, shift the probabilities toward redemptive and reconciling conversations constitutive of the "the beloved community" that integrates and values the dignity of each and every person.[75]

In addition to introducing new events, we can also help one another remember shameful events that have occurred in our shared history and in which we, as a Christian community, are implicated. For example, we can do so through the story-telling and truth-telling about the "histories of suffering" on which our nation is built, such as the Trail of Tears and the Middle Passage. Remembering these events is one of the duties Copeland invites American political theologians to undertake.[76] The stories of the despised, excluded, and poor can "offer us hope of forgiveness and reconciliation, of justice and peace" if we "allow them to interrupt, amend, and resonate in the stories of others."[77] For the privileged, listening to these stories can interrupt the selective narrative we have been telling ourselves as a church about our identity and mission.

The second reason interruptive events are crucial for communication of the kerygma is that events and the conversations they precipitate can become objects of reflection. We can help people identify such events and conversations, and facilitate their reflection through, for example, spiritual direction, discernment of spirits, or centering prayer and other forms of contemplation. This reflective process helps us to communicate Christian meanings and values constitutive of our community.[78] For example, insofar as we are attempting to communicate Christian meanings, by reflecting on the quality of our conversations we can uncover within ourselves the natural analogues for

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75. See Martin Luther King Jr., "The Power of Nonviolence (1958)" and "An Experiment in Love (1958)," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1991): 12–15 at 12 and 16–20 at 18. Cornel West reminds us that the basis of Dr. King's "radical love of white oppressors" is first and foremost his radical love of the unloved black people of our nation. See Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Radical King*, ed. and intro. Cornel West (Boston: Beacon, 2015), 4.
76. See Copeland, "Political Theology as Interruption," 80–81.
77. Copeland, "Political Theology as Interruption," 80–81.
78. In what follows, I have in mind how reflecting on our conversations and their precipitating events serves the ends of what Lonergan names cognitive, constitutive, and effective meaning. These are three forms of meaning that the functional specialty, Communications, seeks to develop. See Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 76–81 and 361–66.

divine processions, intellectual emanations.[79] We can also discover what it means to speak true and worthwhile words, and to listen with patience and gratitude. In this way, we can contemplate the Trinity and what makes us like the Triune God, thereby appropriating for ourselves in a more concrete and meaningful way the belief we profess in the Triune God and our own human dignity.

We are also invited to recognize that in any of our horizon-shifting conversations—ones that move us toward God's unlimited horizon—we spoke and listened beyond our capacities.[80] Perhaps we offered words of empathy and forgiveness, apologized, took responsibility for something, or admitted something in a moment of courageous vulnerability. Similarly, perhaps we were suddenly able to sincerely listen to someone's words—her pain, her anger, her shame—and truly appreciate the depth of their meaning. These experiences invite us to appropriate the gift of God's Spirit—unrestricted love—and how this grace works to heal and elevate our interpersonal relationships in and through our conversations and their preceding interruptive events.

We are also invited to appropriate the meaning of the Cross as the divine response to human suffering and evil when we reflect on how a conversation facilitated reconciliation, for example. We might also appropriate the meaning of the Cross when we reflect on the event that made the conversation possible—the event, itself, might have been evil (a murder, perhaps), but not in all its consequences. These reflections may lead us to personally affirm the value of absorbing suffering and overcoming evil through good. We can personally appreciate how events can become occasions for conversations that set our relationship on a new and stronger basis.

In fact, reflection on our conversations and their precipitating events can challenge us to embrace nonviolence as a way of life in imitation of Christ. Dr. King recognized that injustice and evil dehumanize people on both sides of the system, though for different reasons, and the only lasting way forward was through a re-humanizing reconciliation not unlike the life and passion of Christ. Christ's suffering and violent death exposes the depths of the violence of the human heart, which reaches even unto God. Yet, mere exposure is not the goal. Christ also discloses the way forward as the Cross becomes the Tree of Life. As Dr. King writes, "The cross is the eternal expression of the length to which God will go in order to restore broken community."[81] Like the Cross, from the nothingness of evil, nonviolence draws forth a merciful yet truthful redemptive space for the sake of healing and growth. This space re-imagines and re-creates from the elevated horizon of unrestricted being-in-love. Nonviolence provides evildoers with a way out—but the way is the redemptive suffering of the Cross. In these ways, reflection on our conversations "crystallizes the hidden inner gift of love into overt Christian fellowship" and "directs Christian service to human society to bring about the kingdom of God."[82]

79. This example pertains to cognitive meaning because it is concerned with developing understanding.
80. These examples pertain to constitutive and effective meaning because they are concerned with developing communal identity and mission.
81. King, "An Experiment in Love (1968)," 20.
82. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 362.

Conclusion: Having Conversations in Christianity's New Foundational Language

Reflecting on our conversations in the light of faith helps us communicate the reality of the Trinitarian mystery, uncovers how this reality is constitutive of who we are, and persuades us to live in imitation of the Trinity by continuing to have quality conversations that mediate grace and redemption into how we live together. Facilitating reflection on quality existential conversations that promote conversion and repentance is thereby one way to communicate Christian meanings and values. Reflecting on these conversations is also the way we *learn* a new foundational language. The conversations we have that promote self-transcendence and interpersonal presence are conversations that are *spoken* in this language. Actually appropriating these conversations and making explicit their normative pattern is becoming *fluent* in this language, while at the same time it is unlearning the languages we have been speaking whose meanings and values are at odds with Christianity. Fluency in this foundational language is essential to *communicating* the Christian message.

What does this language sound like? When an event interrupts our inauthenticity, we have the opportunity to raise questions we have been neglecting about our contributions to the situation in which we find ourselves or in which we have placed others. Raising these questions at long last, and answering them as honestly as we can—which we can do only with the help of our conversation partners, human and divine—begins to give us the language to express who we had become and who we hope to be instead. As Lawrence cautions, this foundational language does not arise from different words or neologisms, but from repentance and conversion. It is, I suggest, the language of taking responsibility for ourselves and asking for forgiveness when we have been the perpetrators. In situations in which we have been the victims, it is the language by which we transition from victim to survivor—the language of resilience, the language of asserting our dignity where it has been denied, the language of lament that resists and announces injustice, the language of extending forgiveness.[83] This is the language used, for example, in trauma recovery and active nonviolence. Foundational language sounds like Christ's prayers at Gethsemane and Golgotha: the language of solidarity, responsibility, resilience, lament, and forgiveness—the language that leads to new life.

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83. Lament is the third duty to which Copeland calls theologians, which can be a form of prayer and a practice of justice. See Copeland, "Political Theology as Interruptive," 81.

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