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The Council of Nicaea and the Import of Dialectic in a Synodal Process: Rereading the Council of Nicaea through the Thoughts of Bernard Lonergan

Thomas Kristiatmo [a,1]
[a] *Universitas Katolik Parahyangan, Bandung, Indonesia*

[1]Corresponding Email: kristiatmo@unpar.ac.id
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Abstract

Marking the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, the author wishes to present a reading of the Council as a theological event through the thoughts of Bernard Lonergan. The objective of the research is to discover how Lonergan's insights on ways to better grasp the truth can shed light on some novelty and its implications to the reading of the Council. Making use of hermeneutics and descriptive analytics, the author argues that the Council –when read as a theological event– will show a process of dialectic, one of the eight functional specialties proposed by Lonergan. These famous functional specialties reflect the four distinct levels of consciousness in which humans operate. Dialectic, as the fourth functional specialty, is an integral part of being Church today, especially now as we are moving together in a synodal process.

Keywords

Council of Nicaea, Bernard Lonergan, dialectic, synodality, Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Upon looking at the challenging theme of this International Conference on Theology, Religion, Culture and Humanities - "The Future of Faith: Exploring the Dispute and Legacy of the Nicaean Council in Asia" - I have chosen to specifically limit the scope of the essay to my area of research interest: post-Vatican II ecclesiology, Bernard Lonergan, and contextual ecclesiology in Asia (Indonesia). Another limitation I would like to apply has to do with the emphasis of my research. Although the title of the conference mentions the "dispute and legacy," I would only emphasize the latter, that is, the legacy. Hence, the title of this article is "The Council of Nicaea and the Import of Dialectic in a Synodal Process," to which I further clarify that this essay focuses on "Rereading the Council of Nicaea through the Thoughts of Bernard

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Lonergan." It goes without saying then that the objective of my research paper is to (re)read the Council with the help of Bernard Lonergan to discover some significant insight for our Church today.

This paper is divided into four parts. In the first part, a brief review of the Council of Nicaea as a theological event is presented, followed by the second part in which Lonergan's idea of dialectic as penned in his *Method in Theology* is introduced. In the third part, the connections between the Council of Nicaea, dialectic and synodal process are laid out. And finally, the fourth part serves as a skimpy sketch of a proposal on how to do ecclesiology today. This concluding part is an invitation to other researchers who might find it in their interest to advance the elements discovered in this writing.

THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA: A THEOLOGICAL EVENT

The year of 2025 marks the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea and, to commemorate this monumental event in the long history of the Church, numerous events are held in different parts of the world. One international event I had a chance to attend was at the Gregorian University in Rome (27 February - 1 March 2025), held in collaboration with the University of Münster. The event, as the first of two, was titled "The Confession of the Council of Nicaea: History and Theology." The second event will be conducted at Münster University on 15-17 October 2025. Presented by speakers from various universities in the world, such as Rome, Münster, Chicago, and Vienna, the conference I attended puts the emphasis on the two elements as mentioned in the title: history and theology. One speaker I found very insightful was Young Richard Kim from the University of Illinois, Chicago, who explored the Council from the perspective of heresiology. So fascinating was his presentation that I decided to look for the written resources. The quest led me to an *opus magnum* of *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, edited by Kim himself and published just recently in 2021. This comprehensive study of the Council is a contribution of numerous experts ranging from historians to theologians from different churches, and it is on this precious study that I base my brief review of the Council.

To set the background of the Council, a brief look at the Alexandrian Controversy is indeed necessary. New research has discovered that Athanasius's version of Arianism –linked too closely to Arius– was "a masterful rhetorical and political move" to "ensure the success" of Nicene orthodoxy, while the controversy

itself went on until the years after the Council.[1] Nevertheless, indeed, the positions of Arius that were condemned

> … included an apophatic theology that denied the knowledge and limited the vision of the Son of the Father, *creatio ex nihilo* with regard to the creation or begetting of the Son with the result of denying the traditional biblical names (Wisdom, Word, Image) that indicated shared or eternal nature, and the unchanged/changeable nature of the Son.[2]

With the support of Athanasius, Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria, accused those who held the position of contradicting the more traditional and orthodox view with regard to what we now term as consubstantiality. Apart from the role of Arius, recent studies suggest that at one point, actually, even one third of the presbyters were in opposition to Alexander and that the conflict was "less binary as well as more polyfocal and dialogical within the broad theological interests of varied clerical and lay constituencies."[3] Slowly, the problem spread beyond Alexandria.

It was at this point that politics became involved. Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, in his *De vita Constantini*, noted that "Constantine's desire to find a common religious platform remained in force down to the very end of his long rule" and hence Constantine's priorities were

> … a united judgment of all Romans that Constantine was the chosen ruler of a single Supreme God with whom he had a special relationship, combined with prayers to that God for the safety of the empire and Constantine's own dynasty.[4]

With that in mind, Constantine shared the same concern with bishops whose dioceses were affected by the Alexandrian controversy. However, the shared concern over unity was moved by different motivations. While the bishops were more concerned about orthodoxy, Constantine had a different motive. For him theological

[1] Rebecca Lyman, "Arius and Arianism: The Origins of the Alexandrian Controversy" in Young Richard Kim, *The Cambridge Companion to the Council* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 43.

[2] Rebecca Lyman, "Arius and Arianism: The Origins of the Alexandrian Controversy" in Young Richard Kim, *The Cambridge Companion to the Council,* 47.

[3] Rebecca Lyman, "Arius and Arianism: The Origins of the Alexandrian Controversy" in Young Richard Kim, *The Cambridge Companion to the Council*, 52.

[4] H.A. Drake, "The Elephant in the Room: Constantine at the Council", in Young Richard Kim, *The Cambridge Companion to the Council*, 117.

unity was more a means to achieve his own priorities. One thing for certain: at this stage, the emperor had to be involved. It can only mean that politics now "officially meddled" with the Council. The scene as described by Eusebius gives us a vivid picture of how strong the presence of the emperor was:

> When the whole council had with proper ceremony taken their seats, silence fell upon them all, as they awaited the Emperor's arrival. One of the Emperor's companies [sic.] came in, then a second, then a third. Yet others led the way, not some of the usual soldiers and guards, but only of his faithful friends. All rose at a signal, which announced the Emperor's entrance; and he finally walked along between them, like some heavenly angel of God, his bright mantle shedding lustre like beams of light, shining with the fiery radiance of a purple robe, and decorated with the dazzling brilliance of gold and precious stones.[5]

This strong presence was also underlined by the language that he used while giving speech to the bishops: not in the colloquial Greek but in Latin, the language of power and law. However, Eusebius also noted that the emperor spoke Greek when participating in the discussions. This shows the different roles that Constantine played: as the emperor doing his official tasks, he spoke in Latin; and while participating in discussion, he put himself as equal with others by speaking in Greek. That being said, the impact of Constantine's participation remained blurry. The continuing Alexandrian controversy until years after the Council might be the sign that the political unity that the emperor had wished for was far from being realized. And yet, the example that he set, that is, imperial initiative to end theological disputes became a hallmark for future rulers.[6]

To go into further details regarding what was going on behind the scenes of Nicaea is certainly beyond my ken. I would instead emphasize that out of at least the two factors above, we now have, within our concern, the outcomes of the Council of Nicaea: the Nicene Creed and the 20 canons. The Nicene Creed is clearly declaratory, not liturgical, and it was a conciliar pronouncement which "had two related purposes, to publish the belief of the majority (which was apt to be represented as the tradition of the fathers) and to isolate the dissident minority who might then suffer the penalty

[5] Eusebius, *De vita Constantini* 3.10, as quoted in H.A. Drake, "The Elephant in the Room: Constantine at the Council", in Young Richard Kim, *The Cambridge Companion to the Council*, 117.

[6] H.A. Drake, "The Elephant in the Room: Constantine at the Council", in Young Richard Kim, *The Cambridge Companion to the Council*, 131.

of excommunication or deposition."[7] The origin of the Creed is still debated although it was thought to be a local church somewhere in Syria or Palestine or perhaps Jerusalem.[8] Although it originated in the Eastern tradition, there was some Western influence as well. Tanner notes that the use of the Greek word "homoousios" was preceded by Tertullian, who had already spoken of *unius substantiae* (but not *consubstantialis*!).[9]

Moreover, the context of Nicaea's 20 canons, which became the first code of canon law for the universal Church, was predominantly Asian. Tanner suggests that

> ...a number of the canons appear to have been based on those of earlier local councils in Asia Minor, notably the councils of Ancyra (modern Ankara) in 314 and Neocaesarea in 315/324.

Furthermore, he adds,

> It covered a wide range of issues concerning both laity and clergy: conditions for ordination, morals and status of clergy; hierarchy among bishops; baptism and eucharist; reconciliation through various forms of penance; holding of regular local councils; deaconesses; posture in prayer.

And finally, Tanner concludes by stating, "All this was given to the universal Church by Asia rather than the West."[10]

After a brief reference to the behind-the-scenes of the Council and its outcomes, is it then safe to say that the Council of Nicaea is indeed an event? Saying that something is an event amounts to saying that something happens. Therefore, one can then add that there is a "before" and "after" of that particular event; there is always a sense of "before" and "after" when one understands something as an event.[11] It is clear that the Council of Nicaea *is* an event. One can go and carry some research to discover

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[7] Mark J. Edward, "The Creed", in Young Richard Kim, *The Cambridge Companion to the Council*, 136.

[8] Cf. Norman Tanner, *The Church in Council: Conciliar Movements, Religious Practices, and the Papacy from Nicaea to Vatican II* (London-New York: I.B. Tauris), 2011, 10-11.

[9] Cf. Norman Tanner, *The Church in Council*, 11.

[10] Norman Tanner, *The Church in Council*, 11.

[11] John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge-London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), 2008, 3.

various data regarding many different events leading to Nicaea and so many other events that directly or indirectly were caused by the Council of Nicaea. To this idea I would like to add the adjective "theological," in that my reading of the Council is primarily theological with the intention to read the systematic theology behind the event of the Council of Nicaea. Thus, careful attention will be given to the process of how a certain theological statement was gradually discovered through the Council. To achieve the purpose, a tool is needed. And that tool is one crafted by Bernard Lonergan, a Canadian theologian.

DIALECTIC AND THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

It is extremely challenging to thoroughly explain Lonergan's idea of what dialectic is in a few pages, primarily because his ideas are an organic whole. To understand one part requires understanding almost every other part. However since the focus of this article is on the application of the dialectic to a reading of a theological event, it is deemed to be enough that an overview of his two chapters of *Method in Theology* be laid out: chapter 5, "Functional Specialties" and chapter 10, "Dialectic." For Lonergan, dialectic is one vital process in the eight functional specialties.

"Functional specialization distinguishes and separates successive stages in the process from data to results," writes Lonergan.[12] Generally, it is an attempt to discern and to make a judgment of the data that one has obtained. This can apply in any field of research. Lonergan, however, focuses on theology. In doing theology, theologians work in different specializations. The first step is of course to collect data and once they are collected, more steps are needed. Every step taken is a functional specialty. One has to keep in mind that

> It is to be noted that such functional specialties are intrinsically related to one another. They are successive parts of one and the same process. The earlier parts are incomplete without the later. The later presuppose the earlier and complement them. In brief, functional specialties are functionally interdependent.[13]

[12] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, in Robert M. Doran & John D. Dadosky (eds.), *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan Vol. 14* (Toronto-Buffalo-London: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 122.

[13] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 122.

In such an interdependence, Lonergan then proposes that there are eight functional specialties: research, interpretation, history, dialectic, foundation, doctrines, systematics, and communication. The first four are theology *in oratione obliqua*, in which theologians harken the past; and the latter four are theology *in oratione recta*, in which theologians "enlightened by the past, confronts the problems of his own day." The eight functional division is derived from "the fact that our conscious and intentional operations occur on four distinct levels and that each level has its own proper achievement and end."[14]

The table below summarizes Lonergan's idea of functional specialization:

FUNCTIONAL SPECIALIZATION

Level of transcendence		***Retrieving the past***		***Moving into the Future***
Be Responsible **(decision)**	↑	**DIALECTIC**	↓	**FOUNDATIONS**
Be Reasonable **(judgment)**	↑	**HISTORY**	↓	**DOCTRINES**
Be Intelligent **(understanding)**	↑	**INTERPRETATION**	↓	**SYSTEMATICS**
Be Attentive **(experience)**	↓	**RESEARCH**	↓	**COMMUNICATIONS**

[14] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 128.

This diagram presents the basics of Lonergan's functional specialization, derived from the level of transcendence. The column on the left shows the different levels of human consciousness, which is divided into four: the level of experience, the level of understanding, the level of judgment, and the level of deciding. This structure of consciousness is there and all we need to do is "self-appropriation."[15] Once the process of self-appropriation is done through "heightening consciousness", one is aware of the presence of the four levels of consciousness. For each, Lonergan has the transcendental precepts: be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, and be responsible. The arrows going up in the second column are the movement that theologians do when they retrieve the past: they would have to go from research, interpretation, history, and dialectic (the third column). The fourth column has these arrows going down: theologians reverse the direction in doing theology. Once dialectic is done, foundations, doctrines, systematics, and communications follow. Now In this schema, dialectic has a pivotal role. It is the critical point in which theologians judge the truth.

But what is this "dialectic" in the Lonerganian sense? To begin with, dialectic deals with conflicts.[16] By this, Lonergan means that out of multiple sources in theology, be it magisterial or of tradition(s) or of theologians, there may be differences which cause conflicts. Fresh data which are discovered may lead to different conclusions from the traditionally long held opinions. Different theologians may apply different methods derived from social sciences and they may even find contrary conclusions. In short, doing theology involves dealing with oppositions. These oppositions have to do with differences in horizons. The scope of one's knowledge and the range of one's interest are bounded by horizons.

> As our field of vision, so too the scope of our knowledge and the range of our interests are bounded. As fields of vision vary with one's standpoint, so too the scope of one's knowledge and the range of one's interests vary with the period in which one lives, one's social background and milieu, one's education and personal development. … In this sense, what lies beyond one's horizon is simply

[15] Cf. Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, in Frederick E. Crowe & Robert Doran (eds)., *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan Vol. 3* (Toronto-Buffalo-London: University of Toronto Press), 2005.

[16] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 220.

> outside the range of one's knowledge and interests: one neither knows nor cares.[17]

With these differences in horizon, theologians may come into conflicts with one another. The differences may be complementary, or genetic, or dialectical.[18] Complementary differences are those horizons which are recognized as insufficient in itself and hence each needs others. Life offers innumerable examples of such differences when various professions do their own part to technically contribute to the society: engineers, doctors, teachers, priests, preachers etc. Their expertises are needed for the functioning of a communal world. Genetically different horizons are those that are successive stages in some process of development in which "each later stage presupposes earlier stages, partly to include them and partly to transform them." This is clear as we look at our learning process. When studying theology, we should undergo the very first stage of learning, which is to learn the a-b-c of theology: the process of reading and memorizing to shape our own understanding within a certain limit of the horizon at that stage. As we advance, the horizon expands and a deeper understanding is obtained. We may read the same paragraphs of Aquinas but as we are more advanced in theology, our horizon has grown wider and we have a deeper understanding. The previous horizon is not contrary to the next. They are genetically related.

For the third one, I quote:

> … horizons may be opposed dialectically. What in one is found intelligible in another is unintelligible. What for one is true, for another is false. What for one is good for another is evil. Each may have some awareness of the other, and so each in a manner may include the other. But such inclusion is also negation and rejection. For the other's horizon, at least in part, is attributed to wishful thinking, to an acceptance of myth, to ignorance or fallacy, to blindness or illusion, to backwardness or immaturity, to infidelity, to bad will, to a refusal of God's grace. Such a rejection of the other may be passionate, and the suggestion that openness is desirable will make one furious. But again, rejection may have the firmness of ice without any trace of passion or even any show of feeling

[17] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 221-222.

[18] Cf. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 222.

> except perhaps a wan smile. Both astrology and genocide are beyond the pale, but the former is ridiculed, the latter is execrated.[19]

It is with the third category of differences that we have to apply dialectic. To be able to do dialectic, we have to undergo the triple conversion: religious, moral, and intellectual. Theologians doing dialectic should first of all make an interior journey and heighten their consciousness in such a way that they can differentiate the different levels of consciousness: experience, understanding, judging, and deciding. Doing dialectic has a lot to do with the third level: to judge whether something is true or not. However, in order to arrive at objective judgments, they have to grasp the insights that occur in the second level of consciousness. After making the judgment, a responsible decision should follow.

As our focus here is to read the Council of Nicaea as a theological event, we would not focus on how an individual theologian would to the dialectic. However, what is important here is that the dialectic involves a process of making judgment with the questions of reflection: *Is it?* Or *Is it not?* And the end result would be either "it is" or "it is not". When dialectic is conducted, we are moving toward a better grasp of the truth. Despite the personal dimension of doing dialectic, a community might serve as a help to do it better.

Now, let us come back to the Council of Nicaea. The convocation of the Council was primarily provoked by conflicts regarding several things. Among other things, traditionally and historically, the Alexandrian controversy was considered one of the biggest conflicts. To deal with the conflicts, Constantine convoked the bishops and gave them the opportunity to discern together: a dialectic was conducted in a community. The results, especially that which touches the issue of the Trinity and Christology, laid the foundation of the whole edifice of Christian theology. It is here that I would argue that the dialectic did happen in the council; it is because of this that I am convinced that the various parties involved discerned the matters dialectically.

DIALECTIC AND SYNODALITY TODAY

The dialectic that occurred at the Council read as a theological event is now being promoted in the idea of synodality, certainly with different historical contexts,

[19] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 222.

e.g.: no more anathemas, no more harsh words etc. A glimpse of the Final Document "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission" issued after the XVI Ordinary General Asembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2024 and Pope Francis's note may serve as a very brief background of synodality. In his note, Pope Francis emphasizes that the Final Document is "an authoritative orientation for the Church's life and mission" while at the same time "it is not strictly normative" and "its application will need various mediations." This very statement of Pope Francis actually underlines that dialectic has to be embraced while one is moving forward with this process of synodality.

Synodality should involve the dialectic process for at least these three reasons. Firstly, synodality is primarily "a spiritual disposition."[20] Synodality is not merely a technical process of decision making. It indeed has to begin with a journey to one's own interiority. Decision making involves the entirety of the whole human being capable of listening to the Holy Spirit. The Final Document furthermore adds that synodality "flows from the action of the Holy Spirit and requires listening to the Word of God, contemplation, silence and conversion of heart."[21] In other words, synodality begins with an interior, spiritual journey, with the world of interiority, from which one begins one's self-transcendence. Secondly, the Final Document confirms that synodality can only function if those involved recognize the primacy of grace.[22] The dialectic process in synodality goes beyond what human nature can achieve. While doing careful discernment, those that are involved should be fully aware of the cooperation between "*natura*" and "*gratia*." The Lonerganian three kinds of conversion can only happen when one the *natura* is open to the *gratia*. Thirdly, synodality involves a conversation. The element of dialectic is here most clearly when the Final Document states,

> Conversation in the Spirit is a tool that even with its limitations, enables listening in order to discern 'what the Spirit is saying to the Churches (Rev. 2:7).' Its practice has elicited joy, awe and gratitude and has been experienced as a path of renewal that transforms individuals, groups, and the Church. The word 'conversation' expresses more than mere dialogue: it interweaves thought and feeling, creating a shared vital space. That is why we can say that conversion is

[20] Final Document 43.

[21] Final Document, 43.

[22] Cf. Final Document, 44.

> at play in conversation. This is an anthropological reality found in different peoples and cultures, who gather together in solidarity to deal with and decide matters vital to the community. Grace brings this human experience to fruition. Conversing 'in the Spirit' means living the experience of sharing in the light of faith and seeking God's will in an evangelical atmosphere within which the Holy Spirit's unmistakable voice can be heard.[23]

Several points from the Final Documents highlighted above show that the idea of dialectic as proposed by Lonergan that has already been discovered by reading the Council of Niceae as a theological event is now confirmed in the idea of synodality.

AND ASIA?

Now let us direct our attention to Asia. A look at the study conducted by Edmund K. Chia may shed some light on the context of the continent in question. In his *Asian and Christianity and Theology,* he writes

> As is well known, one of the most pressing concerns of Christians in Asia is the fact that Christianity is perceived as a foreign religion, mainly in view of its association with colonialism. Therefore, from its very inception, the FABC dedicated itself to addressing this by insisting that the primary goal of its endeavors is the transformation of the Church *in* Asia so that it slowly becomes truly the Church *of* Asia. To that end, it postulates that the Asian Church has to embrace the theology of the triple dialogue, which is the dialogue of the Church with the cultures, the dialogue of the Church with the religions, and the dialogue of the Church with the poor in Asia. The triple dialogue is to be regarded as a way not only of doing theology in Asia but also by which the Church engages in its mission and relates with the rest of the peoples in Asia. In short, the triple dialogue is the way of being Church in Asia.[24]

With the context succinctly and precisely depicted in the quotation, it is obvious that since the 1970's the FABC, aware of the complexities of the context, has repeatedly mentioned that the challenges the Church in Asia has to face cover poverty, multiple religions, and multiple cultures. Later in my upcoming book chapter contribution "Inculturation, Globalization, and Cosmopolis, A Theological Reflection on Inculturation in Asia," I am adding another challenge: globalization. As if the three

[23] Final Document, 45.

[24] Edmund Kee-Fook Chia, Asian Christianity and Theology: Inculturation, Interreligious Dialogue, Integral Liberation (London-New York: Routledge), 2022, 46

aforementioned factors are not complicated enough, globalization exacerbates the challenges. Furthermore, globalization, especially in its economic dimension, has somehow widened the gap between the haves and the have-nots in the continent. To make matters worse, globalization has brought about more diversity in values and hence leaving one completely perplexed when it comes to making judgment of values. Against that very background, the Church has to learn from the Council of Nicaea as read through Lonergan and to keep conducting the dialectic to discern what praxis is best to address the complexity of the context.

A few words of caution now follow. Doing the Lonerganian dialectic is by no means moving in the direction of relativism because affirmations that result from the dialectic are objective in so far as the subjectivity of those involved are authentic. Hence in Lonergan's words, "Genuine objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity."[25] Next, in the process, one has to judge and the judgment should be an affirmation of the truth. While culturally, being assertive is often taken as being aggressive and hence Asians tend to show meekness, a passive-aggressive attitude sometimes comes to the fore. Even one can notice that oftentimes, conflicts at the theoretical (theological) level may turn into violence, especially when politics meddles.

I have to admit that the proposal here is still very rudimentary. More research and studies are needed to fill the gaps that one can easily find me wanting. However, I wish that more theologians working together with other experts in other disciplines and even in conversation and dialogue with all people from different walks of life can patch whatever loopholes that I have not yet covered. One thing is for sure: to walk together means to discern dialectically in order to better grasp the truth.

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[25] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 273.

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