Some basic Questions on Context:

Can a Religious Message Pass from One Context to Another Unchanged?

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The notion of context is something that we first come upon indirectly, somewhat as we come upon the notion of consciousness indirectly. Consciousness cannot be had by itself, but is, as the "con" indicates, an accompaniment of scientia or knowledge. Context, similarly, accompanies a text or an expression. It is made up of the words on either side of the text that we happen to be examining.

How big is that context? Is a sentence sufficient, or a book, or must we reach out to the whole universe? Or do we need to look at the context at all?

Our experience, day after day, has shown that it is often difficult or impossible to understand a word without knowing something of the context, though frequently one complete sentence suffices, as is shown by the practice of the larger dictionaries. For our purpose it will be more interesting to take as the centre of attention a message, which is given in any sort of expression (rather than just a word), and to define the context as everything outside that expression (or text), including, for instance, even the language in which it is expressed.

A first question concerns the contribution of the context to understanding the message which the expression is meant to convey. A second question concerns the possibility of conveying that same message in a different context, and there is a third main question about whether a new context, quite different from the context in which the message was first expressed, can,

besides simply accepting the message and allowing it to be conveyed, even throw new light on it and deepen our understanding of it, so that the message can be said to have expanded to fill the new context, while remaining essentially the same message.

An expression is not much good unless we understand it — it is the meaning of the words rather than the words themselves that count. And the same applies to the context, which can help us to focus on that meaning. The context itself must be understood. For this purpose it is helpful to understand the person who formulated that expression, as well as the audience to whom he was speaking. There is a whole network of insights and judgements and attitudes that are called on in order to penetrate and establish the meaning. The habitual possession of such a wealth of insights and of critical powers is what people praise when they refer to common sense. But common sense can cover only a limited field — as we find when a country boy is brought to the city and vice versa — so the work of scholarship consists in making the most of the scant evidence from fairly distant times and places in order to build up a nest of tiny insights and judgements that together constitute something of the common sense in which the speaker was immersed.

1. Communication

The ordinary interpreter, of course, wants to do more than merely understand the message. He wants to communicate it to others. In communication there is another context to be considered, the context of the new audience, and this may be very different from the context of the original speaker. Interpreting I take to be the art of expressing to one audience what was addressed to another. To convey the same message the words may have to be altered considerably.

Basically the interpreter, after reaching some understanding of the message, must grasp the degree of understanding in the audience. His new formulation of the message must cover the difference between what the hearers know already and what he hopes to help them know (see Bernard Lonergan, *Insight,* Longmans Green, 1957, p.556-7). Again we must recognize that the message is not in the words themselves. A single word may convey a whole wealth of meaning. Any Melbourne person will know what I mean when I say of someone that he is "as docile as Ditterich", while a wider audience of Australians will understand a term like "Lillee-speed".

The situation is similar should we move from such a process of communicating understanding, which is called teaching, to the process of proving, or to the process of persuading. There is no question of having to display what might be called "the whole evidence" for the truth to be proved — just the evidence that suffices to build upon the habitual set of judgements of the audience. And persuasion starts off from the framework of present audience attitudes and concentrates on developing these until the decision aimed at can be made with ease.

This may seem straightforward enough. But there are two common

tendencies that do not allow for these simple facts and lead to unfortunate constriction of our mental activity.

The first is to take it for granted that communication can be made only to people who already understand. In fact, of course, communication develops a new understanding and builds upon the understanding that the audience already possesses. The new understanding must, strangely, come from the hearer himself, but this new contribution is what the speaker was striving to arouse. No worthwhile message is bound by the confines of the hearer's context — it bursts out beyond these confines.

The other unfortunate tendency is a tendency to think unreflectingly that the message is bound up with the words used, and to suspect that it can't be the same message if it is put in different words. Strangely enough, the opposite can well be true; there are cases where to repeat the same words is conveying a different message, while to convey the same message it may be imperative to change the words.

Most people would concede that I am speaking about a definite and true fact when I say "I am here" — this is by no means empty, since it applies only to me, not to any of you, and fixes a definite place, as distinguished from all other places. Yet if I take one step a minute later and ask the person next to me to repeat the same message, referring to the self-same fact, he has to say something like "You were there" — altering, as you see, every one of the three words used to convey the message. If he repeats the same words "I am here" he is talking about an entirely different fact.

A case like this is by no means trivial. It proves the possibility of reaching a definite truth despite the relativity of the words that have been used to communicate it to an audience within a particular context. Whatever the explanation may be, we have a state of affairs here that has to be taken seriously and that can apply to very much more sophisticated cases as well.

2. The Use of Models

I have spoken of the interpreter's need to understand the context of his audience. As he moves from audience to audience he will have to repeat his investigations in order to understand the context of each new situation. A more ambitious man may try to take some short cuts. This is where models come in. A model is the product of an "anticipatory concrete inference", to use Lonergan's phrase (*Insight,* 47, cf. 147, 196, 206, 564, and *Method in Theology,* Darton Longman and Todd, 1972, p. xii, 284-5). It outlines the skeleton of a typical context to which one *might* have to communicate. A set of such models can give the interpreter exercise in adapting his message to a whole range of different types of context, leaving him far less at the mercy of chance.

The value of the models will depend on the range covered by their basic building blocks and the clarity of the initial distinctions between these building blocks. One possible set consists of what Lonergan calls the "realms of

meaning" (*Method in Theology,* 81-85). Each of these indicates a basic orientation of the person concerned — whether he is wholly immersed in common sense, or has been led by comparisons to enter the realm of theory in which there is a search for consistency, precision and communicability. Or a person might be less interested in practical life or scientific theory than in basic issues and origins and he may be led to philosophical questions through an identification of the distinct sorts of activity in his own consciousness. Or he may be absorbed by piety and overwhelmed by the love of God. Thus we have the four basic realms of meaning, each of which can be reached by the message when framed in an appropriate way: practical common sense, theory, interiority, religion. As they are not incompatible with each other, further models can be constructed out of two or three of these at a time, or even the whole four together — common sense, theory, interiority and transcendence. (Cf. *Method in Theology,* 271-6, 285-8).

There is scope here for demanding exercises: Take a religious revelation that has been communicated in the transcendent terms of worship, for instance, and transform it so that it can be expressed in the common sense terms of ordinary life. Or transform the same message into terms that can be given precise definitions and interrelated to each other, or into experiential terms that resonate within one's consciousness. These exercises would not be easy, nor would they be the work of a year or a decade. But we can see the possibility of doing them, and of greatly extending the ways in which the faith can be communicated.

It should be noted that any one of these realms of common sense, theory, interiority and piety can be recognized only by someone who has himself dwelt within this realm. He has nothing but his own experience upon which to draw — even if that experience itself needed the right stimulus, or the right question, before it started to develop.

The construction of such models of a range of possible contexts is, as I said above, by no means necessary for sound interpretation. Each new context that actually arises in practice could be studied intelligently and allowed for just when it occurs. But looking for models has definite advantages. Apart from the preparedness and flexibility this exercise can give, it can keep us alert to the problems of interpretation, so that we do not belittle them. It is true that we are unlikely nowadays to think that our message can be communicated only by getting the audience to learn our own language and educating them in our own mentality and our culture. But we still run the danger of thinking that we have succeeded when we have managed to learn well the language of the audience and grasped their frame of mind, even when we have done little to divine which aspects of our message are foreign to that audience or to devise ways of making a deep and genuine Christian contribution to them.

3. Permanence

So far I have been side-stepping a question that often comes up very early in any discussion about conveying a message to people in a new and different context — the question of generality and permanence. I postponed this

question because these qualities, while desirable in any communication are by no means essential. There are times when an expression as simple as a wink can convey a wealth of expression, but the connection between the wink and the message conveyed has no generality and very little permanence.

We have seen that we must draw upon the context in order to communicate a fact. Sometimes we have to draw very heavily on the context, as the background support to an expression which is quite minimal, such as a wink or a nod.

We have seen, too, that a distinction must be made between the dependence of an expression on the context and the dependence of the corresponding fact on the context. The fact or truth can be quite independent of the context, though the expression is not: The fact that I am here now remains true for eternity, even though its expression must soon change to "I was there then".

We have seen that we can transform an expression into another expression that serves to communicate an identical fact in a new context. In general, we can say that such transformation requires either (a) close familiarity with each context, or (b) a set of transformation rules, which are probably quite complicated — for instance the rules contained in a French grammar together with all the equivalences given in a French-English dictionary.

If the facts we are dealing with concern geometrical figures or sets of points on a plane, the context changes when we change the coordinate system, for instance by moving the axes parallel to their original position or changing from cartesian to polar coordinates. Mathematicians can give fairly simple sets of transformation rules for each of these changes.

But can we do better than this? Can there be expressions that do not need transformation, or that remain the same even after the transformation rules have been applied. An example would be the warning "stop!" which remains the same when put into French. Such expressions are called "invariant" by the mathematicians, and this term can be extended quite easily to cover other forms of communication. Note that invariance is a property of expressions, not of the facts to which the expressions refer.

Our simple example, "I am here now", can, in the present context be transformed into "Tom was in the tutorial room in Chisholm College at ten past two on 16th August 1978". This expression has gained enormously in invariance. It can be used not only by me, but by anyone who speaks English. It can be used not only today but on any day while the Gregorian calendar is in use. It can be used, not only here, but anywhere where Chisholm College is known, or its location can unambiguously be found.

The advantages of invariant expressions is that they greatly facilitate communication, and help to avoid misunderstandings. They may, however, be harder to understand in the first place, so that a common-sense person may be tempted to brush them aside as meaningless or full of jargon. It would be a mistake, however, to neglect them on such grounds. What has happened is

that many aspects of the context have been made explicit and incorporated into the expression.

It is interesting to ask how much the invariant expression adds to the common-sense one. The answer is not as simple as might seem at first sight. For the question normally implies another, unasked, question: How much is being communicated in each case? Communication concerns the message, the fact, while expression concerns merely an incomplete instrument of such communication. Communication depends on the expression and the context taken together, and requires an understanding of that context in the hearer. In the common-sense means of communication the understanding of the context will be a big task, though, of course, it will normally have been helped by years of ordinary practical living. In the more scientific means of communication there will be little need to rely on the context, and the main task will be to understand the expression itself, and the type of language used in it. So, while the expression, taken strictly by itself, has been greatly expanded, the fact communicated, or the message, has remained essentially the same. The direct contribution of the effort at securing invariance is not fuller understanding of the message but permanence and communicability, so that it can be understood accurately despite the cultural variations from age to age and from century to century.

When a body like the Church is involved in disputes about what in reality was the message entrusted to it and attempts to settle these disputes, there will be a natural tendency to forge a language that serves permanence and catholicity in this way, so we should expect the more solemn Conciliar statements to embody a degree of permanence that is not to be found in day to day preaching. But we should recall that this tendency was always subordinate to the main purpose of the Conciliar statement, which was to make a statement to which Christians were committed and which must be acknowledged by all sincere brethren as true. And truth is an entirely different thing from clarity, generality or invariance. Context is the matrix of truth, not its grave.

4. The Contribution of a New Context

It is time now to look at the third question I enunciated at the beginning: Can a new context deepen our understanding of the original message? At first sight this would seem quite impossible. It is easy enough to see that the *original* context makes a contribution towards understanding the text, since not everything could be expressed in the words that were used on that occasion. But a new context simply cannot serve in the same way. Being new, it cannot lead us back to the original message.

I think that the answer would probably rest there if the message were purely conceptual — nothing more than a general proposition or a set of general propositions. But the Christian revelation is not just a set of abstract propositions. It is a fact, an event, concerning a concrete person, and relating to other persons, and many of its propositions are particular and historical.

In such a case a quite different sort of contribution can usefully be made.

New questions can be raised, new aspects of the fact considered. And a new context can stimulate just this. A new audience may have interests that had never occurred to an earlier audience, or may have learnt skills of investigation that previously were not available. So new yet legitimate questions may be put to the original message and possibly lead to a deeper understanding of it. Yet it would not be correct to say that this deeper understanding, this new light that had been thrown on the message, made it a different message.

To return to the simple example I used earlier, an audience which learns that I am here may have an interest in physics that leads to questions about the notion of space underlying that "here", or about how one position could be related to another. Or they could have an interest in consciousness and some training in the analysis of the interior world and ask about what is meant by "I". Or they may get down to basic notions, wondering about "am" and "is" and "being" and so discover metaphysical aspects in the message. Such questions can focus attention on the message and really get more out of it.

Perhaps the most important elements in our contemporary context concern just such questions. Some continental philosophers have concentrated on the self and consciousness and have raised questions that had hardly been considered before, and so theologians have had to ask about the powers and limitations of the consciousness of Christ. Somewhat surprisingly, this does not lead away from scripture but helps discover many passages that are relevant, and that now can be understood more fully than before. The skills of historical investigation are another product of the last century or so, and they too can raise many questions about the Christian revelation that can be answered in a way that was previously quite unsuspected. So we can be optimistic: there is work for theologians yet.

5. The Key to Interpretation

If the audience can stimulate new inquiries that throw more light on the text that was first proposed for interpretation, then perhaps that other element in the context of the given text can similarly help to a fuller interpretation. I refer to the person of the interpreter himself. For he, too, is part of the present context. And this applies to each one of us. Nor does it relativize the burden of the text. It leads to the absolute more quickly, by opening our eyes to the full range of possibilities.

The potentialities of the human spirit in general, the potentialities of other particular men — teachers, writers, soldiers, craftsmen, are the potentialities of my own human mind and will. This is the key that cannot be taken away from me. Knowing myself, I know what authors, audiences, historical figures can do. I know their joy of discovery, their eagerness to communicate, their care in weighing evidence before committing themselves to an opinion. But I know the other side of their characters, too, likewise through reflection on my own. Their forgetfulness, their readiness to do a deal with confusion, their taking a chance with an assertion. I have, in myself, a basis from which theoretically, *any* message could be reconstructed.

Detective work is not unlike hermeneutics, and it seems that the detectives have already discovered the procedure I have just outlined. When questioned about his success as a detective, Chesterton's Fr. Brown said, "I had planned out each of those crimes very carefully . . . I had thought out exactly how a thing like that could be done, and in what style or state of mind a man could really do it. And when I was quite sure that I felt exactly like the murderer myself, of course I knew who he was." (G. K. Chesterton, *The Father Brown Stories,* Cassell, 1929, p.464). One of the methods implied by this was "absence of mind" (464): "I tried to clear my mind of such elements of sanity and constructive common sense as I have had the luck to learn or inherit" (584), thus constructing a genuine, even if largely negative model. A man's "only hope is somehow or other to have captured one criminal, and kept him safe and sane under his own hat" (466). What the interpreter has to capture is just one communicator, one prophet.