Method in Catholic Theology

My title has to be understood in the light of my terms
of reference. The invitation, so kindly extended to me, was
to speak, not on the history of theological method, not on
the opinions that are held ∧by others at the present time, but on the
method I happen to employ in my work as a theologian. My
paper, then, was to have the character of a report.

Of my notions on method the most basic is the heuristic
structure, and I shall begin by illustrating this notion,
first from elementary algebra, and then from the ~~problem~~ matter in
hand.

Books on elementary algebra abound ∧or, at least, used to abound with exercises,
in which one was supplied with certain numerical data and
asked to discover other numbers. In solving these problems
the trick was to begin from the unknowns. One named them
~~x~~ $\underline{x}$ and $\underline{y}$. Once that was done, the decisive step had been
taken. One had only to read the problem ~~again~~ carefully
to discover that its wording could be translated into
equations relating $\underline{x}$ and $\underline{y}$, and solving the equations was
an automatic affair guided by a few simple rules.

Now, in the matter in hand, our unknown, our $\underline{x}$, is
theological method. But if we direct our attention to it,
we shall shortly discover that we can say a number of things
about it. Such statements, no doubt, will not give evidence
of any great profundity or originality of thought. But they
are like the equations used in ~~algebra~~ algebra. Singly,
they are insignificant; but together they ∧can lead us rather
rapidly, if not to a solution, at least to a grasp of the issues

involved. What, then, do we know about theological method?

First, we know its aim. It is concerned with the development, the advance, the progress of theology.

Secondly, our knowledge of the aim of method is generic. Method is not a matter of prophesying what the developed theology of the future is to be. On the contrary, that future is an unknown, and method is concerned with expediting the our efforts towards replacing present ignorance with knowledge.

                                                        cognitional
Thirdly, the notion of method is paradoxical. A method selects and orders means towards an end. When that end is known, it calls for no great sagacity to determine what means can be employed and in what manner they are best employed. But a cognitional method aims at an unknown end; its end is the knowledge we do not as yet possess. How can we hope to select and order means towards an end we do not know?

Fourthly, the paradox of cognitional method is not entirely new. It has occurred in other contexts. Plato, if I remember rightly, was puzzled by the possibility of inquiry. Either one knows the truth or one does not. If one does, inquiry is superfluous. If one does not, then inquiry is useless; for if one does not know the truth, how could one know one had reached it, even if inquiry brought one to it?

This, I think, gives us a first clue about the nature of method. A method is a method of inquiry. Both are concerned with the unknown; both aim at a future knowing of what now is unknown; both are involved in an apparent paradox that casts their very possibility in doubt. But while inquiry is spontaneous and natural, as is witnessed by

The meaning of the second is a little more recondite.
I believe that understanding occurs in three different mmf
modes. There is the intersubjective, symbolic mode, that
may be illustrated by understanding a smile or a frown.
There is the common sense mode illustrated by ordinary English
usage. Finally, there is the systematic mode that generates
the signs of mathematicians, physicists, chemists, and the
technical languages to which other sciences have recourse.
The significance of my second rule is that faith, in its
quest for understanding, moves from the intersubjective and
the m commonsense modes of understanding to the systematic.
In other words, the difference between the faith of the
ordinary believer and the faith of the the theologian is
not that the former does not understand while the latter does;
both understand their faith, but their understanding of the
one differs in mode from the understanding of the other.
Similarly, in the history of the Church, the difference
broumght about by the development of doctrine is a difference
due to a shift in the mode of understanding.

Common sense understanding involves no break from
In its structure commonsense understanding is a
continuation and dxevelopment of the intersubjective, xm
symbolic mode. In contrast, the systematic mode involves
a structural transformation.

My third rule grows out of the second and the first
and to explain

To explain my third rule, I must begin by noting that,
while the intersubjective mode develops into the commonsense
mode, and the commonsense mode is led naturally enough into
the systematic, still the latter transition involves r a
radical structural change that, commonly, is no more welcome
than was Socrates to the men of Athens. This change may be
illustrated, as I have said, by contrasting ordinary and
usage and a technical language set of signs. In ordinary
language, the subject is the centre of things. He is the
first person singular. The tenses take their meaning from
his present. The moods vary, as he simply states, or wishes,
or commands. Nouns, b verbs, adjectives, and adverbs abound,
                                              concern, the
provided what one has to say lies within the interests,
the skills, the occupations, and the amusements of the average
                                      or a technical language
man. In contrast, a set of technical signs accords no
   first person singular
the subject no privileged position in the universe; its
scope is not restricted to his interests; the understanding
it would communicate goes far beyond anything that obviously
is relevant to the basic questions answered by common sense
it would communicate, while it meets questions that common
sense inevitably asks, goes far beyond what common sense can
assimilate.

Now this shift in the mode and structure of understanding
commonly is resisted. It remains that whether one accepts
or rejects this shift, whether one approves or disapproves
of the objectification of the subject that occurs in systematic
understanding, none the less one can make significant discoveries.