

## A Framework for Theological Reflection

Theological reflection is the process by which we find meaning in our experience by connecting it to God's activity in the world. Learning to reflect theologically is one of the primary goals of Field Education. This is done specifically through case studies and journals to help you apply this discipline in your daily life. It is essential to your spiritual wellbeing and an important part of your development as a religious leader. As the resident theologian in your ministry setting, you will be expected to help others understand how God is working in their daily experience. Theological reflection is more a way of seeing the world than it is an intellectual discipline. Individuals will vary considerably in the ways in which they "do" theological reflection. God created us unique and our "TR" styles may be at least as varied as our Myers-Briggs types. For that reason, we present a framework for theological reflection with some hesitancy. Over time, you will form your own way of finding meaning by connecting your experience to the faith tradition.

The theological reflection process has five major elements:

1. Identifying - recounting the events, i.e., the facts of the case.
2. Exploring – describing the world within the story in experiential (emotions and thoughts) and theological terms.
3. Connecting – making connections between the story and tradition (scripture, liturgy, church history, theology).
4. Generalizing – drawing implications and conclusions.
5. Applying – acting on these implications and conclusions.

In a Field Education case study, we apply this process in a particular way.

- ❖ Identifying is describing the scenario without interpretation. These are the facts of the case.
  - ❖ Exploring is describing "what the world is like" within the scenario that has been presented. This is a creative, open-ended reflection through which the events of the case will be examined through several experiential and theological lenses. Much of this thought process will not be presented within the case study, but it forms an important backdrop from which the written theological reflection ultimately emerges. You can look at the world through your eyes or as you think another person in the story (a parishioner, your supervisor) would see it. There are several steps to this thought process. Take notes as you go through this process in preparing your case study.
- 1) What is this world (i.e., the world within the story) like? Use adjectives and nouns to describe emotions and thoughts.

- 2) Examine the world within your story through the perspective of major theological concepts, i.e., creation, sin, judgment, redemption. There are several questions that might shed light on this.

◆ Creation

- What is good and beautiful in this world?
- Where is growth possible?
- Where is God in this world?

◆ Sin

- What can go wrong in this world?
- What causes separation or isolation?
- What is destructive?

◆ Judgment/Awareness

- What gets your attention?
- What would indicate a change of heart or mind?
- Is there an “aha” moment here?

◆ Redemption

- What can be celebrated?
- What binds or mends this world?
- Where or how is healing possible?
- What gives hope?

- ❖ Connecting consists of making connections between your exploration of the story and the faith tradition.

- As you go through your list of the experiential and theological characteristics of the world within your story, does it remind you of a story from scripture? Something from liturgy or church history? A theological issue (e.g., ecclesiology, authority of scripture)?
- If, for example, it reminds you of a story from scripture, go through the same exploration steps with the pericope: describe the world within the story, and then examine the story from a theological perspective.
- When you find a good connection between your story and the faith story, the next step is to identify the one (or at most two) major issues or “framing questions” on which you want to base the theological reflection in your case study. These could be questions such as
  - ◆ What does it mean to be faithful in this context?
  - ◆ How does a loving God let this happen?
  - ◆ How is the Holy Spirit present in this situation?
  - ◆ What does this say about the role of the church in the world?

- ❖ Generalizing is the process by which you draw implications and conclusions. Based on the above analysis, the “theological reflection” portion of your written case study should identify the theological issue or framing question and discuss how the particular passage from scripture that you have explored (or theological issue you

have identified) informs your thinking about what happened in the scenario and what might happen next. Simply raising questions and then tossing Bible verses at them is not enough! Raise one framing question then reflect on how scripture (or tradition) relates to the scenario at hand. The exploration process should also help identify pastoral issues for discussion within your case study. You will also find ways to integrate your theological reflection with Field Education readings. Likewise, the “next steps” should flow logically from the process of exploring the story, connecting it to the faith tradition, and generalizing about what that connection means.

- ❖ Applying these conclusions relates not only to the “next steps” that you propose in your case study but also to how you will learn from this experience and apply it in future situations.