

Guidelines for Theological Reflection

A central feature of Ignatian reflection is the integration of contemplation and service or action. Your time of study in the Graduate Program in Pastoral Ministries allows you an opportunity to contemplate more deeply the central story, beliefs and practices of the Catholic faith while also regularly bringing these into dialogue with your practice of service or ministry. While your professors may offer specific techniques of theological reflection, you will find that the premise is always the same: first, the *a priori* conviction that God is actively present in all things, including the human condition, and second, the dialogue between what is learned, what one does, and who one is. The aim of the dialogue is to assist rather than block the active presence of God in all things—to bring greater glory to God (that is the English meaning of the Jesuit motto, *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, that you often find on campus buildings).



Your life, your ministry, and your critical study of the Catholic faith are all therefore necessary subjects of theological reflection. A reflection can begin with any one of these three, but should engage them all in a kind of disciplined and non-judgmental conversation. Here are some sample approaches:

1. Begin with critical study. Begin with a central idea learned in a paper, project or course. The idea should be a significant theological concept. How did you come to understand this idea? What impact does your new understanding of the concept have for your practice of or commitment to ministry? How and why is this important to you in your personal life, given your particular set of life experiences, commitments, feelings, imagination?
2. Begin with your ministry. Begin with a regular responsibility of or a specific case from your ministry. What question or insight does this work prompt in you? What specific theological concepts have you learned that might help you address this question or enrich your work? How do your personal ideas, experiences, commitments, or feelings hinder or enhance your growth, with regard either to the people with/for whom you minister or to the new theological ideas you are encountering?

As you consider the theological tradition or concept, the ministerial situation with its various participants, or yourself, it is important to withhold judgment at first in narrating your observations. This is because your judgments are well-practiced and often “volunteer” themselves before you have time to sit with the situation and come to some new insight. They can also block you from observing the situation or incident clearly.

Specific practices and models follow.

Killen & De Beer's Model for Theological Reflection Adapted to Ministry

Beginning with a Ministry Situation

1. Narrate the situation
Select a situation from your ministry that you yourself experienced. Narrate it on paper or out loud, answering "who, what, when, where, how." Refrain from judging yourself or others in this narration.
2. Identify physical sensations/feelings
Attend to your physical sensations when narrating the situation, and identify one or two central feelings that emerge most strongly. This reveals the "heart of the matter."
3. Let an image emerge
Sit with the feelings until an image emerges. Probe the image gently: How might God be calling you through it? What is broken or sorrowing in it? What possibilities for newness and healing are present or implied?
4. Connect to the tradition
To what does the image take you in the Christian tradition—what theological idea, practice, story, object? Probe it as you did the image: How might God be calling you through it? What is broken or sorrowing in it? What possibilities for newness and healing are present or implied? Are there themes or connections between your insights from the image and from the tradition?
5. Moving from insight to action
What emerges for you from the conversation between image and tradition? Is there a new action towards which you are called? What will you do differently if in a similar ministerial situation again?

Beginning with the Tradition

1. Narrate the tradition
What is the story or teaching about? What is the heart of the matter? Try to set aside what you think you know about the piece of tradition or Christianity in general. Try to see with fresh eyes; let it be unfamiliar.
2. Let an image emerge
Sit with the tradition until an image emerges that somehow captures the "heart of the matter." The image need not be literally connected to something in the story or tradition.
3. Move from image to ministry
Let the image lead you to a situation that you yourself experienced in your ministry. Narrate it as non-judgmentally as possible. What were your thoughts and feelings in the situation? What had you thought about it before, and does the image alter your view?
4. Return to the tradition
Move back to the original tradition you explored. Do you see anything new in the idea, practice, story, object? Has your attitude toward the tradition changed? Do you hear it differently now? How might God be calling you through it? Is there something broken or something healing as you reflect on the tradition? Are there themes or connections between your insights from the image and from the tradition?
5. Moving from insight to action
What emerges for you from the conversation between the tradition and your ministry experience? Is there a new action towards which you are called? What will you remember if in the situation again?

Killen, Patricia O'Connell and John De Beer. *The Art of Theological Reflection*.
New York: Crossroad, 1994.

Mahan, Troxell & Allan's Seven-step Process for Theological Reflection

1. Presenting the Case Aloud

The presenter writes a two page paper and reads the paper aloud to his/her theological reflection group. The presenter sets the background, describes an incident, and shares his or her analysis and theological reflection. The case is read aloud so that the group can hear the interpretation and emphasis of the presenter. The participants make a note of any questions or insights they have.

2. Clarifying the Information

The group then asks clarifying questions before analyzing the situation. "Clarifying questions might focus on: the order of events, the relationships, the feelings and attitudes of those in the case, or the degree of emotional, imaginative, and intellectual intensity." (p. 29) The presenter may also add further clarification. "Our central question is, Do we understand the presenter's description of what happened?" (p. 121)

3. Sharing Personal Wisdom

The presenter is silent during this stage and engages in listening. The group participants bring their own experience to the case and are asked what the case elicits in them. For example, the case could evoke powerful memories or emotions which may aid the reflection or be a distraction. The connections that surface are acknowledged.

4. Pooling Professional Wisdom

Each member of the group brings professional and educational histories to the group. Members of the group may draw upon issues of race, class, gender, social or psychological theory, film or literature, when reflecting upon the case.

5. Claiming the Wisdom of the People of God

At this stage there is explicit focus on theological reflection, although the entire process is informed by theological questions and the work of the Spirit. Points to consider are:

- a. Particular theological themes or concepts that assist with reflection;
- b. Various biblical stories or images that may help illuminate the case; and
- c. Themes from Ignatian spirituality that might assist with reflection upon the case.

6. Reflecting on the Presenter's Ministry

The group reflects on the performance of the presenter. What has he or she done well? Are there suggestions for further work in the presenter's situation or in the presenter's self-understanding? "What implications are to be drawn for ministry in the future?" (p. 121)

7. Evaluating the Process

The presenter is invited back into the conversation and asked: "What has been most helpful in this process? What insights have you gleaned?" (p. 32)

Mahan, Jeffrey, Barbara B. Troxell and Carol J. Allen.
Shared Wisdom: A Guide to Case Study Reflection in Ministry. Nashville: Abingdon, 1993.

Christina R. Zaker's Model for Theological Reflection in a Parabolic Mode

Parables are a technique to prompt new insight for theological or spiritual growth. They do this by a hook or a **strangeness that invites** us in to a new way of envisioning reality. This makes them conversational—we **have to respond**. As John R. Donahue says, parables are “a question waiting for an answer, an invitation waiting for a response.” They tease us ultimately into a **self-critique**, interpreting our lives and actions in a prophetic manner that prompts us to greater concern for the marginalized other. They offer through these dynamics a kind of theological method of reflection all their own that can be fruitfully applied to any story from our own lives.

1. Begin with the familiar

Begin with a narrative that one participant brings to the table. This can be any narrative from one's life, work or ministry.

- Read or tell the narrative.
- Dialogue about which pieces of the story are familiar to each of us, addressing the tradition, context, feelings, insights, scriptures, etc. Each person speaks from their own context, their own tradition.
 - What is familiar?
 - Why is it familiar? What makes sense about how the characters acted?
Answering this helps us uncover all the obvious and underlying ways we think and respond to a particular incident.

2. Focus on what surprises or shocks

These elements point to the inadequacy of the boxes into which we tend to put things, and invite us to pursue the surprise. We might ask within the group:

- What surprised us and why?
- How are we invited to see this situation as good news for the marginalized?
- How is God's presence or absence revealed and how might this jar us to act differently?
- What is inadequate about our way of seeing the world?
- If we weren't surprised, should we have been? What should have been done differently to allow God's grace or good news to break through?

3. Acknowledge the invitation

Each person has to formulate their own response to the invitation, if they can accept the challenge. As John Dominic Crossan states, it takes “a willingness to be parabled” (*The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* [Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge, 1988] 39). What will we do, who will this serve, how will this cultivate the good news?

Christina R. Zaker. “[Parable as a Lens for Theological Reflection](#).”
Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry 35 (2015) 55-67.