



TOOLS for THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Whenever we place our experience in dialogue with the sources of Christian faith, observing whether or not there is a 'fit' so that we might witness to our faith more effectively in our everyday lives, we are doing theological reflection.

When we undertake theological reflection on social justice issues and situations of injustice we attempt to shine the light of the Gospel on what is happening in our world. We seek to understand the meaning of these events in order to respond authentically. This is an important part of planning a Christian response to social justice issues and to situations of injustice.

SOME SIMPLE TECHNIQUES

Here are some simple techniques of theological reflection that can be used by small groups in school or parish contexts. They draw on the Scriptures and Church teaching and do not presume any theological education.

GROUP PRAYER

The simplest way in which we can undertake theological reflection is prayer.

When your group is considering a social justice issue or situation, you could pray together in the following way:

1. Use a symbol of the issue or situation as a prayer focus and provide participants with two or three points for reflection from Scripture or Church teachings.
2. Hold all of the people involved in the issue or situation in your prayerful concern ...
3. Pray for those who suffer because of the situation or issue.
4. Pray for those who have contributed in some way to the causes of the situation or issue, that they may be converted to more just ways.
5. Pray for decision-makers, that they may act for human dignity and the common good.
6. Pray that we may have the wisdom to discern appropriate action.
7. Consider inviting the broader faith community into your prayer. Perhaps you could ask that suitable prayers be included in the General Intercessions at Mass or during group prayer times, or post a prayer intention on a website or social media?

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

The Scriptures tell us that the Kingdom, or Reign, of God is already mysteriously present in the world, but is not yet complete.

The fullness of the Reign of God will come only at the end of time. In the meantime, we can 'read the signs of the times' discerning the in-breaking of God's Reign in our world. The Ignatian tradition calls this *finding God in all things*.

Create a prayerful, reflective setting and bring the issue or situation before the group. You could use symbols, a short video, or the data from your shared analysis.

Allow time for personal reflection before inviting sharing on questions such as these:

1. Where is God in all this?
2. Can we see signs of the Reign of God? What are they?
3. What values do the Gospels affirm and promote?
4. Who or what is supporting Gospel values in this situation?
5. Who or what is undermining Gospel values in this situation?
6. What do Gospel values call for in this situation?
7. How can we witness more fully to the Reign of God in this situation?

Variations:

- You could select one or two questions for reflection and sharing, or invite group members to rest with the question that attracts them on this occasion.
- If your group will be reflecting on this issue or situation over time, you might choose to use the different questions at each meeting.

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

Here is one way of drawing on the Scriptures in theological reflection:

1. Take some time for personal reflection on those passages of Scripture which come to mind when you reflect on this situation or issue.
2. How do these passages speak to the issue or situation?
3. Do some passages of Scripture that confuse or anger you in relation to this issue or situation? Do some console you, give you hope or make you feel empowered?
4. Invite members of the group to share their reflections.
5. Sum up the ways in which Scripture speaks to this issue or situation for your group.

Variations:

- Invite someone who knows the Scriptures well, or who is good at preaching in a way that connects the Scriptures to everyday experience, to accompany you in this exercise. Ask them to offer their reflections after all group members who wish to have shared their reflections.
- Invite someone who is deeply involved in the church's response to the issue or situation to share with you how the Scriptures speak to them in relation to the issue or situation. Such a reflection could be used as a stimulus for the group's own reflections.
- Use a concordance to help you to find passages of Scripture that might speak to the issue or situation with which you are concerned and distribute these to the group for reflection prior to your group meeting. (A Bible concordance is a kind of alphabetical index and some concordances can now be accessed for free on the internet. They can be found by typing 'Bible concordance' into a search engine.)

REFLECTION USING KEY PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

One way of drawing on tradition is to use some of the principles of Catholic Social Teaching as benchmarks or touchstones.

A brief explanation of four of the key principles that are considered to hold true always and everywhere is available at www.social-spirituality.net

The following questions may help you to place them in dialogue with the issue or situation that you are examining:

1. What is happening to human dignity?
2. Is the common good being promoted, undermined, or ignored?
3. How are decisions being made? How much say to those most directly affected have? Is the principle of subsidiarity being observed?
4. Do the relationships involved express solidarity?
5. Do the principles of human dignity; the common good; subsidiarity; and solidarity suggest any directions or orientations for action?
6. Do they argue against any of the policy options being promoted in relation to the issue or situation?

DRAWING ON TEACHING & TRADITION

Catholic Social Teaching includes criteria for judgment and guidelines for action as well as principles for reflection.

These teachings are often presented in pastoral statements by Popes, Bishops and Church agencies. You can draw on these existing reflections to inform your own theological reflection.

This form of theological reflection requires a bit of preparatory research, gathering relevant information for your group to draw on.

1. What have the international teaching documents said about the issue or situation, or related issues or situations? (*The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church are good starting points; Church justice and peace agencies will also be able to help; and you can use the search engine on the Vatican website www.vatican.va*) Are these teachings directly applicable to your issue or situation?
2. Can you identify in these documents general principles or criteria that might be relevant for your own situation?
3. What have local Bishops and national conferences of Bishops said?
4. The closer in time and cultural context these statements or actions are to your own situation, the more likely they will be to provide you with concrete guidance. What can we learn from the witness of Church people and Church agencies on this issue or situation?



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