

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON SOCIAL ISSUES: Some Simple Techniques

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION IS FOR EVERYONE!

We do not need to be professional theologians in order to reflect on our world in a theological manner. 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.

In the same way we can test the 'fit' between what is happening in our society and the sources of Christian tradition, such as the Scriptures and Church teaching. This is an important part of planning a Christian response to social justice issues and to situations of injustice.

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.

SOME SIMPLE TECHNIQUES

These simple techniques could 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 matter 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 by asking that suitable prayers be included in the General Intercessions at Mass or during group prayer times.

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.)

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:

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?

A NOTE ON LIBERATION & SALVATION

The Reign of God involves working for justice in our world here and now but it cannot be reduced to this. As well as this horizontal dimension – our relationships with one another – there is a vertical dimension – our relationship with God.

The liberation and salvation proclaimed by Jesus include a transcendent dimension:

“The Kingdom aims at transforming human relationships; it grows gradually as people slowly learn to love, forgive and serve one another...”

The Kingdom is the concern of everyone: individuals, society, and the world. Working for the Kingdom means acknowledging and promoting God's activity, which is present in human history and transforms it. Building the Kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms. In a word, the Kingdom of God is the manifestation and the realization of God's plan of salvation in all its fullness.”

John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n 14

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.

A brief explanation of four of the key principles that are considered to hold true always and everywhere is available at www.faithdoingjustice.com.au 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 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 a guide to finding church statements on issues is available at www.faithdoingjustice.com.au) 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?