

THE PASTORAL SPIRAL: a Framework for Action

WHAT IS THE PASTORAL SPIRAL?

While working at the Center of Concern in the USA, Joe Holland and Peter Henriot SJ developed this method of pastoral theology as a framework for responding to issues and situations of social injustice. It was initially called the pastoral circle, but it has also come to be known as the pastoral cycle or pastoral spiral.

This method invites us to attend to four 'moments': experience; analysis; theological reflection; and response. Each moment is important and should be addressed, but this need not be done in strict sequence.

The four moments provide spaces in which to draw on each of the sources of Catholic social ethics: Scripture; tradition; reason; and experience. They engage our feelings and imagination, our capacity for dialogue and contemplation, as well as our intellect.

This methodology reflects the way in which the Second Vatican Council described the methodology of Catholic Social Teaching itself. It provides a tool for drawing on Catholic Social Teaching, and it prevents us from rushing into action without paying sufficient attention to the experience of those most affected, and giving adequate time and attention to analysis of and reflection on the issue or situation.

Adopting the name 'pastoral spiral' emphasizes that the circle is not closed. Our response leads to a new reality, even if only we are changed by our action. We do not return to the same experience, and the process of analysis, reflection and action continues.

This method has been used by social justice groups, pastoral planners, academics and grassroots educators for more than twenty five years. It is a flexible framework that can be adapted and developed in response to different experiences, contexts and needs.

EXPERIENCE

This method takes an inductive rather than deductive approach. It starts with the data of human experience rather than deducing conclusions about reality from theory.

By paying close attention to our concrete social reality, we take seriously the incarnation, following Jesus' path through human experience. Like Jesus, we will pay particular attention to those who are economically poor or socially excluded.

This moment is sometimes called insertion or contact. Here we seek and find God in our world.

We try to describe what is happening through observation, being attentive to feelings, gathering stories, information and descriptions of what is going on.

Some of the questions we may ask include:

- What is the lived experience?
- What is happening to people? What stories are they telling?
- How do they feel? How are they responding?

We will ask ourselves:

- Are we listening to the people most directly affected?
- Can we / do we share their experience? Do we need to undertake some kind of exposure or immersion to get in touch with their experience?

ANALYSIS

The moment of analysis takes us beyond the anecdotal to investigate the reality in a systematic and analytical way.

We examine the causes and consequences of what is happening and identify the interconnections between factors. The fundamental question is, why is this happening?

This moment is sometimes called social analysis

because it involves examining the structures and processes of our society. The broader term analysis is used to emphasize that analysis from historical, cultural, economic, political, religious and gender perspectives may be needed as well as analysis of social structures strictly speaking.

Some of the questions we will ask include:

- What are the causes of the issue / situation?
- Are they historical, political, economic, social, cultural or gendered?
- What are the consequences?
- How are these elements linked?
- Who are the key actors? Are they subjects of rights, duty bearers, agents of influence or decision makers?

While the first moment provides a privileged space for experience, this second moment focuses more on the use of reason. It prevents us from rushing into action in an emotional way without sufficient thought or information.

A danger of this moment is ‘analysis paralysis’. We can become overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of the data and feel unable to respond.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Theological reflection helps us to discern the meaning of what is happening. An authentically Catholic response to social issues will draw on Scripture and tradition as part of this process.

As we reflect on the situation or issue in the light of the Gospel and Church teaching, we ask ourselves:

- Are Gospel values being upheld or denied?
- How do the Scriptures speak to this issue or situation?
- How do the principles of Catholic Social Teaching speak to this issue or situation?
- What does Church teaching have to say about it?
- Can the experience of the Christian community through time help us to discern this situation or issue?

Theological reflection helps us to name our concerns in terms of our core values and beliefs. It also helps us to set priorities, and it guides our approach to action in response the issue or situation.

RESPONSE

Finally, the point of all our research and reflection is to make an effective response. This is the moment in which we, as individuals and in groups of different kinds, take action.

We draw on reason, human knowledge and tradition to plan our action, setting goals, determining strategies, and allocating tasks.

Complex issues and situations with many interrelated causes call for sophisticated, multi faceted responses.

We ask ourselves if our action includes:

- Service of the poor or marginalized;
- Education or awareness raising;
- Advocacy & transformation of causes;
- and, faith formation.

Evaluating the effectiveness of our response becomes part of our examination of experience, and the spiral continues.

FOR REFLECTION

- How do you currently go about your work for social justice? Does your way of working touch on the main elements of the Pastoral Spiral?
- At their 34th General Congregation, the Society of Jesus decided that
“...every Jesuit ministry can and should promote justice in one or more of the following ways: (a) direct service and accompaniment of the poor; (b) developing awareness of the demands of justice joined to the responsibility to achieve it; (c) participating in social mobilization for the creation of a more just social order”. (Decree 3, n 19)

Does your action correspond to one or more of these categories?

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