

COMMON LESSON TWO

"Letting the Sources Flow"

Introduction to Reflection

About a month ago I overheard a friend tell her husband that she wondered what I was going to do with my life. The three of us were guests at a crowded, noisy party, and she did not know that I was in the walk-in pantry next to the kitchen where she and her husband were getting ice. I said nothing and waited for them to leave the kitchen before I came out of the pantry. I felt angry at her implied statement that I was not presently "doing" anything with my life, guilty to be eavesdropping, and scared that her concern was valid.

The next evening I decided to write about that experience before going to bed. As I considered my long-standing relationship with my friend and the differences between our current lifestyles, it occurred to me that she did not know what I think about my life and what I am "doing" with it. I had been avoiding just that conversation because I presumed that she would not understand, or approve of, my existence. As a result, our interchanges had become increasingly trivial and strained. It was for that reason that I continued to hide in the pantry that evening rather than come out and address her concern in a loving and honest way. Deciding to do just these things, I called her right then, and we agreed to get together the following Friday for a long talk.

The above story is an example of the process of reflection. The movements went from EXPERIENCING something (the overheard conversation), to IDENTIFYING that experience (writing about it), to ANALYZING the experience (realizing that I was not being honest with my friend), and finally to GENERALIZING from that experience for future action (calling my friend to set up a time for a long conversation).

Reflection is a human activity. It is a process

in which we engage all the time, including when we dream. Reflection is looking back at what has happened so that we might make some sense of our experience. Without the function of reflection, human life would be a simple matter of stimuli and responses, and our existence would be determined by the frequency of positive or negative reinforcement.

Reflection may be spontaneous, or it may be intentional. In this program, reflection is designed to be both intentional and theological. The purpose of intentionally engaging in theological reflection is to discover a direction for living as one of God's ministers in this world.

Serious reflection is hard work involving cognition, emotion, and telling the truth. In theological reflection we also involve our faith because we open our hearts and minds to the possibilities of God's call to us. The fruits of theological reflection, however, will be well worth the hard work. Through this process faithful men and women come to find a way to live amidst the ambiguity and the brokenness of our world.

A Four-Source Theory For Theological Reflection

From the inception of this program, the ambition has been for students to strengthen their understanding of the Christian faith as they discover what God is calling them to do and to be. Seminar groups in the first years had little guidance from the program as to exactly how to go about this. As the program evolved, some wisdom developed about the process of theological reflection. Four sources were named as the categories of human knowledge engaged during a theological reflection. Around this four-source theory there are several different methods of theological reflection, one of which is described in this Common Lesson. Below is an explanation of the four different sources.

Action

The **Action** source includes all that we experience in life. It is the seemingly infinite collection of what we have experienced and what we have done. Past events and present feelings are located in this source. When we make statements such as, "I feel . . .," "I remember . . .," "I lived there for nine years . . .," we speak from the **Action** source.

Position

Located in this source are our opinions, convictions, beliefs, and attitudes. Idle chatter as well as non-negotiable confrontation come from the **Position** source. Phrases such as, "I believe . . .," "In my opinion . . .," "All women are . . ." suggest that the person speaks from the **Position** source.

Culture

The **Culture** source encompasses the content of our family traditions, our political context, our libraries, museums, movies, literature, and popular trends in our society. It includes national symbols, mores, academic disciplines, professional ethics, sexual roles, common sense, expected behavior, and systems of government. Phrases such as, "My father taught me . . .," "According to Carl Jung . . .," "The fashion for next fall . . ." suggest the **Culture** source.

Tradition

The **Tradition** source is the public content of the Christian faith. It is the corporate memory of the Christian community including the scriptures, creeds, doctrines, church history, lives of saints, liturgy, architecture, and contemporary theology. The readings for this program come from the **Tradition** source. We speak from this source when we say things like, "Jesus said . . .," "According to St. Paul . . .," "The rubrics of the prayer book forbid . . ."

The contexts, or sources, from which we learn to live our lives are either personal or communal. The **Action** and **Position** sources are the realms

of our personal, individual experience in the world. No two people share exactly the same position, as no two people can experience something in exactly the same way. The **Culture** and **Tradition** sources are by definition communal. It is within our culture that our experiences occur and our beliefs are expressed. The **Tradition** source is the story of the people of God and the basis for forming our Christian ministry. This source, as the **Culture** source, precedes our individual existence and will continue after us. Each of us in a small way contributes to the story, as well as inherits it.

Theological reflection, therefore, is conversation among these four sources. While they do overlap extensively, by categorizing what we know, believe, experience, and inherit into these sources, we can better see how we come to make the decisions that we do. Most importantly, through reflection that is theological, we learn that the inconsistencies between our beliefs and our behavior can be reconciled by discovering the reality of God in each human situation. This is not an easy discovery, nor quickly achieved, as in some situations God seems very removed from our experience. Theological reflection is one way to renew our faith in God's presence in our lives.

A Method of Theological Reflection

There are many ways to reflect theologically — anytime the **Tradition** source comes into conversation with another source theological reflection is taking place. One method that we have tried and tested for some time in this program is the "microscope" method of reflection. It can be described in ten steps and is a good way for groups to begin reflecting together.

The microscope method is so called because the reflection begins with a microscopic piece of an individual's experience which is examined closely to discover how we are being addressed by God. The intention is not to solve a problem, but to learn about ourselves, our relationship with one another, and our relationship with God.

There are several advantages to beginning

with a microscopic section of experience. For example, it is much more difficult to explain the relationship I have with my sister than it is to tell you about a specific conversation we had in which I was hurt and confused by her words. Likewise, I would have to spend a long time telling you about my understanding of sin (about which I am still undecided), but I can tell you about a time when I felt alienated from God. By grounding our reflections in specific experiences which generated emotion and uncertainty, we are on our way to genuine learning.

Another advantage of beginning with a microscopic slice of one person's life is that our personal standpoints become much clearer to us. We cannot avoid our own experience nor our own limitations to knowing the perfect truth. The microscope method prevents the reflection from being abstracted from our own lives. It is a way of examining not only the slice under the microscope, but also the very lens through which each of us sees the world.

Components of the Microscope Method of Theological Reflection

Before listing the ten steps of the microscope method of reflection, it helps to understand the purpose of some of the key components of the process. If something is unclear to you, write it down in your Log Book, and bring it before your seminar group at the next meeting.

Metaphor

This program makes no distinction between metaphor, simile, or image. In theological reflection, the metaphor is the topic of conversation among the four sources. The metaphor is generated by the group as an encapsulated description of the thoughts and feelings surrounding a given moment in experience. The movement from personal experience to a common image, by way of the metaphor, creates a universal language for the upcoming conversation among the sources.

The notion of metaphor is extraneous to some people. Students and mentors of this program

have commented that to "generate" an image during a theological reflection is difficult or even artificial. In truth, we human beings depend very much on our ability to communicate metaphorically. Jesus, a master of metaphorical language, frequently used images to teach about the coming of the kingdom and our relationship to God. Consider this step in theological reflection not as a task, but rather a change of language. Like a picture worth a thousand words, an image can name a common reality for many different people.

Perspective Questions

The conversation among the four sources during a theological reflection is expected to be both spontaneous and focused. The perspective questions, directed at the sources, help to give the reflection a focus. These questions allow participants to enter a world — be it the world of the metaphor, the world of our tradition, or the world of our culture — and explore it from the inside. The perspective questions illuminate the central, ongoing themes of life. By asking a similar question of the different sources, the group can make comparisons, notice patterns, and come to greater understandings.

Insights and Implications for Action

Stated several times in these first two Common Lessons is the basic purpose of the program: to prepare students for the ministry to which they are called. Theological reflection is one of the exercises throughout the life of the seminar group which contributes to that preparation. Being God's minister implies being and doing. We reflect theologically so that we may enter again into the world more faithful and confident that God is with us. The last two steps of the reflection process are designed to articulate insights and to make decisions for future living. Without these last steps, a reflection is stagnant.

THE TEN STEPS

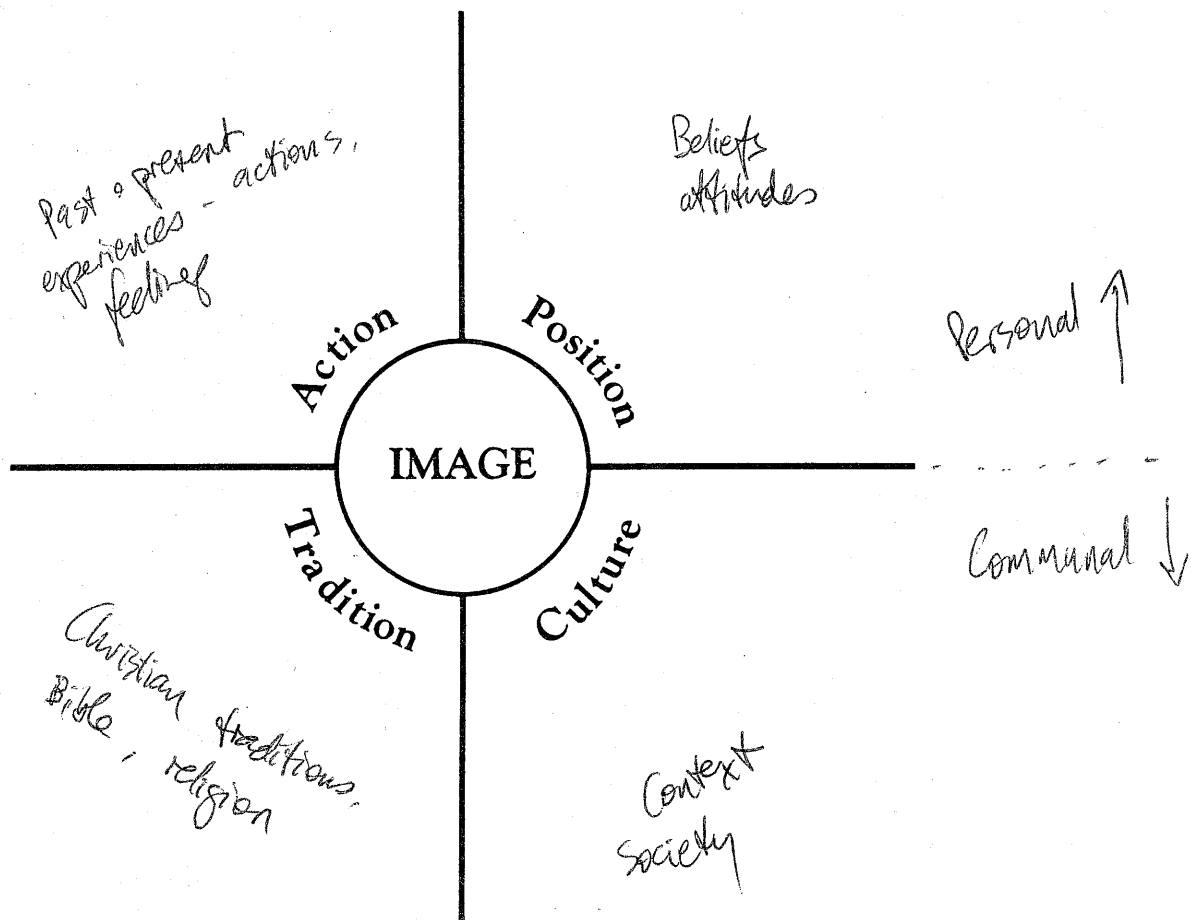
Please note that these steps give an outline for the microscope method of reflection. Each reflection will be different and should be allowed

to develop its own rhythm and energy. Your mentor is familiar with the mechanics of reflection and can guide the seminar group when things get off course.

RECALLS THE THOUGHTS AND CORRESPONDING FEELINGS DURING THAT MOMENT.

- 1). A GROUP MEMBER TELLS ABOUT A MOMENT WHICH CHALLENGED HIS OR HER FEELINGS, ASSUMPTIONS, OR VALUES.
- 2). THE MENTOR AND THE GROUP HELP THE PRESENTER LIST THE SHIFTS OF ACTION IN THE STORY AND CHOOSE ONE OF THEM AS THE FOCUS.
- 3). THE PRESENTER RETURNS TO THE CHOSEN MOMENT OF FOCUS AND
- 4). THE MEMBERS OF THE GROUP RECALL A TIME IN THEIR OWN LIVES WHEN SOME OF THE SAME THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS WERE EVOKED. EACH PERSON BRIEFLY SHARES WHAT HE OR SHE HAS RECALLED.
- 5). TOGETHER THE GROUP ENGENDERS AN IMAGE WHICH EXPRESSES THE RECALLED THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS.

The next five steps are circular in form, as the conversation among the sources unfolds. The recording of the reflection will move to a format somewhat like the diagram below:



- 6). BEGINNING IN THE ACTION SOURCE, THE GROUP POSES CERTAIN PERSPECTIVE QUESTIONS TO THE WORLD OF THE METAPHOR SUCH AS:
WHAT IS THE WORLD LIKE?
WHAT IS NEGATIVE IN THIS WORLD?
WHERE IS THE JUDGMENT IN THIS WORLD?
WHERE IS GOD IN THIS WORLD?
WHAT WOULD BE AN OCCASION FOR CELEBRATION IN THIS WORLD?
- 7). THE GROUP CHOOSES A PIECE OF THE TRADITION WHICH IS CALLED TO MIND FROM THE WORLD OF THE METAPHOR AND ASKS THE SAME PERSPECTIVE QUESTIONS OF THE PIECE OF TRADITION.
- 8). THE GROUP COMPARES AND CONTRASTS THE PERSPECTIVES FROM THE WORLD OF THE METAPHOR AND THE WORLD OF THE TRADITION, ALSO NOTING THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE CULTURE SOURCE AND THEIR OWN POSITIONS.
- 9). INDIVIDUALLY THE MEMBERS IDENTIFY INSIGHTS AND REMAINING QUESTIONS. WHAT SEEMS APPROPRIATE IS SHARED WITH THE OTHER MEMBERS.

- 10). INDIVIDUALLY THE MEMBERS DECIDE ON THE IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION, SHARE WITH THE GROUP WHAT IS APPROPRIATE, AND ASK FOR WHATEVER SUPPORT IS NEEDED.

Preparing for the seminar

Choose a recent event in your life which stirred up some emotion and perhaps uncertainty. Put yourself back in the moment of that event. Remember where you were, who was with you, what you could see, smell, and hear. Recall the actual words of the conversation, if there was one, and allow yourself to relive that moment. When you have recalled as much of the experience as you can, write it down in the "Reflections" section of your Log Book.

Now move through the ten steps of the microscope reflection method using your experience. You will not be doing this with a group, of course, but this method of reflection can easily be done solo.

After you have finished, record in your Log Book "Reflections" section any insights and implications for action that came to you through this reflection. Decide what you would like to tell your seminar group about this experience for your next meeting.

