

*What Is Theological Reflection?  
A Guide from the Rev. Dr. Richard Dickey, 6/2006*

The term ‘**theological reflection**’ has come into prominence over the last thirty years in a variety of settings and serving a number of ends. It is used to denote a process in which an individual or small group reflects on their personal or collective experience(s) in light of their faith. The aim is not only to come to new understandings about the circumstances in which people live and the faith they profess, but to identify new ways of responding that validate their experience and give voice to their truth.

To reflect theologically is an essential element in **faith formation**. It is a principal means of integrating *faith* and *life*. To reflect on one’s circumstances in life is as natural as breathing. It is that innate capacity and necessity that characterizes our human condition. It is that same capacity which enables us to recognize a reality greater than ourselves. To reflect on our life experiences in light of this greater reality is to reflect ‘*theo*-logically.’ It is to open us to the possibility of ‘knowing’ and ‘being known’ by what some call the ‘Holy Other.’ Such reflection draws us into the realm of faith. It grounds us in an unseen reality, alters our way of ‘seeing’ and shapes our responses in all of life’s relationships.

Theological Reflection also is a primary tool in **ministry formation**. In the setting of Theological Field Education, the term has come to refer to a method to assist students in integrating their academic disciplines and their ministry experiences. Through a supervisory process that includes one-on-one supervision and a peer reflection group, students reflect theologically on their experiences in a Field Placement Site. Theological reflection facilitates the learning of ministry skills by deepening awareness of the external forces and interior dynamics that form perceptions and shape responses. Theological reflection also engages students, as well as those already in ministry, in dialogue with the faith tradition in which they stand. It brings to bear on their ministry experiences the wisdom, experience and faith of those who witness to the influence of the Holy in the call to ministry.

The practice of reflecting theologically, likewise, is an essential ingredient in the process of **spiritual discernment**. It holds the inherent possibility of discerning God’s presence and/or leading. When entered into from a ‘**contemplative stance**,’ theological reflection on one’s experience is to be receptive to being guided by the Holy. It is to stand before our experience ‘open’ to what may or may not be revealed. In the words of the late Gerald May, it is to stand “undefended and openeyed.” [Gerald May, *Addiction & Grace*, p. 107]. It is to stand as on tiptoe at a parade eagerly seeking to catch a glimpse of that which attracts but is fleeting. It is to notice what we may not have noticed before – about ourselves, about our experience, about the reality that gently beckons us.

## *The How of Reflecting Theologically*

There are different models for ‘doing’ theological reflection, each in keeping with the ends that it serves. All hold that the act of reflecting *theologically* is critical to an informed faith and instrumental in fashioning faith-filled action in the world. All share these three elements in common: **experience - reflection - response**.

### **Experience**

Current understandings of *theological reflection* are characterized by their focus on life experiences rather than on a doctrine, belief or practice. ‘Experience’ can include one’s own or another’s – present or past – individual or collective. It also can encompass an ‘event’ that one participates in or observes. One can even reflect theologically on a work of art such as a painting, a poem or a musical composition with great effect. Although any experience can be reflected on theologically, the most fruitful experiences are those which ‘grab’ or make a claim on us.

Often it is those experiences that we can’t get out of our mind, or that we keep going back to, that invite a more disciplined reflection on our part. They bother us or raise questions about how we responded or didn’t respond. We might wonder what the experience says about who we are or what we profess. Or, perhaps, we are curious as to where or how the Divine might have been present in the experience. Further, as those engaged in or preparing for ministry, we desire to bring our faith-stance to bear on ministry experiences – and let our experiences inform our faith-stance. Whatever the impetus, we seek to learn from our experiences.

### **Reflection**

The second major component that defines contemporary models of theological reflection centers on the sources or resources that are brought to bear in the reflection process. It is to choose the lenses by which to view our experiences. One lens may be that of our faith tradition with its history, sacred writings and collective beliefs and values. Another lens may be our culture with its diverse and changing (and often conflicting) voices, values and practices. Even more basic are the lenses forged by our own unique life-stories. For what we ‘see’ and ‘hear’ in any experience is colored (and at times clouded or distorted) by past encounters.

To learn from our experiences requires that we become skillful observers of our interior world. It is to ‘*listen*’ with an inner ear and to ‘*see*’ anew with the mind’s eye. In this context, reflection serves to bring to awareness what is already present but often deeply hidden. It is a way of getting in touch with feelings, attitudes and images; it is a way of making connections with prior learnings. It also is a means of opening ourselves to a Source deep within us. To reflect on our experience with an intentional openness to the Holy is to assume ‘**a contemplative stance**.’ It is to place ourselves in a receptive posture. It is to ponder *how* and *where* the Divine may be encountering us. It is *a way of perceiving* that not only invites self-revelation but the discerning of what Spirit *brings to mind* in our times of reflection.

### **Response**

Our experiences shape our perceptions, and our perceptions shape our experiences. Therefore, a third core element in theological reflection is the outcome or desired end of the reflection process. The intent goes beyond gaining clarity or new insights. It is more than just the product

of our best efforts at analyzing, and processing new information from whatever source or resource we bring to the task. The goal is response-oriented. It is to bring our faith to bear on life experiences in order to come to a new way of perceiving and a new way of responding.

Entered into with *integrity*, theological reflection challenges how we think and feel about ourselves, others, and our world. It opens us to *a new reality* - one stripped of our prejudices (i.e., pre-judgments) and our blindness in a given situation. To reflect theologically is to be vulnerable to change - change in our feelings, our attitudes, our perceptions, and our ways of responding. In a word, *Theological Reflection* is about *transformation* - in our thinking and in our perceiving - in our being and in our doing.

## Guidelines for Writing a Reflection

In choosing an experience to reflect on it is helpful to focus on one specific incident even though it may be part of an on-going situation.

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1. Become centered. Invite the Holy to be a part of the reflection process that it may be a learning experience for you.
  2. Select an experience that raises an issue or question or touches you deeply.
  3. Describe the situation in as much detail as can be recalled to enable you (and others) to imaginatively re-visit the experience.
  4. Re-enter the experience and notice what you were thinking and feeling in the moment. Identify the claim that the experience has on you and add it to your written reflection.
  5. Pause again and invite Spirit to **'bring to mind'** that which you didn't notice during the original experience. Ponder what comes to mind and **'make connections'** with your current experience.
  6. Finally, record any change in your perceptions and any new response(s) that the change may have elicited in you.
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The progression in the writing of a reflection would be something like this:

- center
    - select and recall
      - describe in writing
        - revisit and notice
          - ponder and make connections
            - record new perceptions, feelings and responses
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This progression utilizes the discipline of writing the Reflection as an integral part of the reflection process. Often there is more in an experience than we 'see' initially. This model helps to focus our attention and gently leads us through a process of uncovering or 'bringing to awareness' which enriches our understanding, challenges our perceptions and opens us to new ways of responding.