

*Kathleen T. Talvacchia*

## **Finding God Experientially in the Tradition: Theological Reflection as Spiritual Formation**

One of the most important tasks in my job at a theological seminary training students for ministry is to help them find the connections between their experiences in the practice of ministry and the intellectual content of their courses in Bible, theology, ethics, history, and pastoral studies. The goal of this endeavor often eludes them. I have observed that many students can do one or the other easily—they can talk about the theological tradition or they can talk about their ministerial practice. It is far more difficult for them to integrate both areas into a clear and coherent insight about their work as an integral expression of Christian vocation and commitment.

That future ministers learn to make this transition into more unified thinking is, I believe, essential. Ministerial students share with many other contemporary Christians the tendency to find God either abstractly in theology or concretely in practical action. Yet without the tradition our reflection is flat, lacking any theological depth, complexity or richness; without concrete experience it is abstract and disconnected from the reality of communities and events. How, then, can we learn to find the *living* God of the Christian tradition that is infused throughout Christian ministry? How can we find God experientially in the tradition?

### **THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION AND THE BUSY MINISTER**

These questions are just as essential for those of us already active in pastoral work as they are for students in training for professional ministry. And yet, the daily pulls and pushes of ministry make it difficult to carve out the time to meet all the immediate demands on us, let alone find the time for sustained prayer or reflection. How can we find the living God of the Christian tradition when we cannot find the topic for next week's sermon? How can we find the living God of Christian ministry when we cannot find the time to pray?

Becoming adept in the process of theological reflection is a way to ground ourselves in the unitive task of seeing how the theological tradition is integral to the practice of ministry and vice versa. It is a process that helps us find God experientially in our religious heritage. Theological reflection focuses attention on the *praxis* (action/reflection)

necessary to form ministerial character rooted in a deep awareness of the source of our being and action. Seeing the living God in the depth of the theological tradition synthesized with the messiness of ministerial action grounds an ongoing spiritual formation for ministry. Through the process of theological reflection we can become more spiritually centered and focused so as to better discern the presence of God in our ministry.

There are many ways to engage in theological reflection. The various methods, however, have some common elements. Each counsels engaging in-depth in an experience, understanding it in conversation with the theological tradition of a community, moving towards a new insight into the richness and relevance of God in one's awareness and in the world, and ultimately letting all of this feed our pastoral action. Theological reflection seeks a rigor that encompasses both an intellectual heritage and a personal and communal consciousness. It is "theological" insofar as it is concerned about God, but its concern is not abstract or academic. Rather, this approach seeks a concrete awareness of God's presence that has ultimate significance for one's faith and action. Thus, theological reflection is a profoundly formative process. As Robert Kinast states:

It tries to help a person (or group) discover God's presence in that person's (or group's) experience. In this respect theological reflection is akin to prayer or spiritual direction (guidance, counseling). It is not satisfied with learning more about God but with leading a person more directly to encounter God. As this happens, theological reflection asks the person to consider what difference God's presence makes (the reflection stage) and what God expects as a result (the action stage). This integration of reflection and action is what ultimately makes theological reflection theological (Kinast, 1996: x).

What does theological reflection look like? Given the various ways of engaging in pastoral reflection it will be useful to highlight two methods of theological reflection. Both methods have a similar process, yet each approaches the task from a different perspective. The first method proceeds from the understanding of theological reflection as a movement of insight and correlation, while the second method proceeds from an understanding of theological reflection as conversation.

#### A METHOD OF INSIGHT AND CORRELATION

Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer articulate a theological reflection process that focuses on the movement toward insight and correlation. They provide a useful definition that clearly articulates the dialogic nature of the experience:

Theological reflection is the discipline of exploring individual and corporate experience in conversation with the wisdom of a religious heritage. The conversation is a genuine dialogue that seeks to hear from our own beliefs, actions, and perspectives, as well as those from the tradition. It respects the integrity of both. Theological reflection therefore may confirm, challenge, clarify, and expand how we understand our own experience and how we understand the religious tradition. The outcome is new truth and meaning for living (O'Connell Killen and de Beer, 1994: viii).

In theological reflection both personal experience and the Christian story are mutually respected. It is not automatic, rather it is a discipline undertaken in openness and faith. It has the potential to both confirm and challenge our accepted understandings. The anticipated result is insight and transformative action.

O'Connell Killen and de Beer believe that there is a structure to the process of meaning-making. They refer to this as the "movement toward insight." First one enters experience, encounters feelings, and apprehends the images that arise from those feelings. Considering and questioning those feelings may spark an insight, which potentially leads to action. Theological reflection, then, is the intentional attempt to incorporate the wisdom of the Christian tradition into the process of meaning-making.

The authors note that one's ideological standpoint influences the quality and trustworthiness of the theological reflection. A standpoint of dogmatic certitude, for example, does not allow personal experience to challenge the religious tradition; rather, one is controlled by a pre-established religious interpretive framework. At the opposite extreme, a standpoint of absolute self-assurance does not allow the religious tradition to challenge one's understanding of personal experience; one is controlled by self-interpretation. Genuine theological reflection takes place with a standpoint of exploration, which allows one to be open to the wisdom of both experience and the religious tradition. Here one is open to the possibility that one's interpretive framework is in need of revision and will be changed by reflection and experience.

O'Connell Killen and de Beer's method of theological reflection develops an understanding of the "movement toward insight" in three major ways: expanding the concept of experience, determining what to reflect on, and deliberately incorporating religious heritage into the reflection.

The category of experience is vast. In order to make it manageable for reflection, the authors distinguish among several sources that categorize experience. One source is action, that is, the lived narrative or life story of a person. Another source is tradition, that is, the authoritative scriptures, doctrinal teachings, church history and stories of the

community's inspirational persons. Culture is a third source of experience. This includes the ideas, social structures and ecological environment of a people. A fourth source of experience is the category of positions, that is, the attitudes, opinions, beliefs and convictions that one holds and is willing to defend.

To determine what to reflect on, one must pay attention to feelings so that images arise. The combination of feeling with image directs reflection to the central issue in an event. The authors refer to this significant issue as "the heart of the matter," i.e., the central question, tension, issue, theme, problematic or wonderment involved. This involves a careful spiritual listening and discernment of the movement of God's Spirit in the event.

Next, the minister puts what he or she understands to be the heart of the matter in conversation with the wisdom of the Christian heritage in the intentional activity of correlation. This movement deliberately incorporates the religious heritage into the reflection process. It creates a correlation between experience and the wisdom of the religious heritage. The correlation has two parts. In the first the conversation explores the religious or theological meaning of the experience. In a second part, the specific materials of the religious tradition (scriptures, doctrines, history, etc.) are brought to bear in consideration on the heart of the matter.

Thus, the framework of theological reflection for O'Connell Killen and de Beer consists of four basic steps (O'Connell Killen and de Beer 68–69): (1) Focus on some aspect of experience; (2) Describe that experience to identify the heart of the matter; (3) Explore the heart of the matter in conversation with the wisdom of the Christian heritage; (4) Identify from this conversation new truths and meanings for living. The framework provides a structured process for theological reflection. Many specific designs for the process can be developed by using such elements as prayer, meditation, contemplation, worship, art and movement. Each design, however, will share these fundamental elements of the framework for theological reflection.

#### THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION AS CONVERSATION

In *Method in Ministry* James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead provide another approach to pastoral reflection. They present a method for theological reflection rooted in the model of "conversation." They understand this lively exchange between Christian faith and contemporary life to be a conversation that is by turn debate, dialogue, reconciliation and accusation. As a communal process rather than a monologue, it is a process of communication that should be at the core of our life together.

The model they present engages three conversation partners. One partner is the Christian tradition—the religious heritage of both the sacred texts of holy Scripture and the wisdom of the Christian Church in its history. A second partner is experience—both the experience of individual Christians and the collective experience of faith communities. A third conversation partner is culture, that is, “the convictions, values and biases that form the social setting in which the reflection takes place” (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995: 5). The method of theological reflection describes how the conversation among the Christian tradition, experience and culture proceeds in a movement from listening, to assertion, to pastoral response.

Listening or attending is a fundamental attribute of spiritual discernment. In attending one seeks to know the movement of God wherever God may be found. The Whiteheads see many interpersonal skills as necessary for attending in theological reflection. These include patience, active listening, and the ability to respond with accurate understanding. Such skillful listening begins the spiritual discernment process in which one “tests the spirits” by attending to the information available in the Christian tradition, experience and culture. They view “attending” as a “ministerial asceticism,” an emptying of self that allows space for God’s revelation to emerge (Ibid., 73).

When a community has engaged in skillful listening, participants realize the diversity of experiences and interpretations that are part of their life. At times God’s revelation challenges accepted doctrines and understandings. It is at this point that assertion is necessary as an aspect of theological reflection. In this step the community engages in the honest and respectful sharing of their plurality of opinions and convictions. Assertion demands a willingness to engage in the constructive conflict that is part of engagement with people of diverse perspectives. Such constructive dissent and disagreement has the potential to be a positive dynamic, and draws upon interpersonal skills of mature interaction and assertiveness. The Whiteheads especially note that the success of assertion in theological reflection depends upon the mutual partnership of the sources in conversation. Religious tradition, experience and the surrounding culture must be given equal right to assert their claims in the conversation. Otherwise, the danger can be stated as follows:

A reflection in which tradition simply interprets experience, without consideration of cultural information . . . leads us towards fundamentalism. A reflection that limits the dialogue to cultural information and individual experience is not explicitly Christian. Finally, a reflection which is essentially a dialogue between the Christian tradition and cultural information (whether philosophy,

philology, or science), to the neglect of personal experience, tends to yield conclusions of a more theoretical nature. Since the experience of participants is overlooked, the pastoral conclusions arising from such a reflection are often abstract or simply irrelevant (*Ibid.*, 82).

In the final stage of theological reflection according to the Whiteheads' method, the insight of the reflection process is turned into pastoral action. The goal of theological reflection is tested not just in the quality of the discernment, but in the effectiveness of the pastoral action. This means that there are many ways that important insights can be brought to fruition in a common response.

#### A CASE STUDY: WHAT IS "PRIESTLINESS"?

A case study of a theological reflection process will help to concretize and exemplify the frameworks reviewed. The case is taken, with permission, from a ministerial colleague at a large, interdenominational Protestant church in a major urban center. This colleague is a Roman Catholic woman, Mary (name changed), with twenty years of ministerial experience in the areas of community organizing, liturgy, and worship. Her professional position at this church is Coordinator of Worship.

While setting up for a Lenten program, she was approached by her student intern who asked for help in dealing with a man who was in distress and "looking for a clergy person." Since none of the ordained clergy were there at that moment, Mary invited him to speak with her. She recognized him as a member of the church who suffered from mental illness. He had the reputation of not being dangerous, and she observed that, although he was agitated, he did not seem in crisis or a threat to himself or others. After this assessment, she invited him to join her in a routine task that she was doing to prepare for the service, folding programs. As they talked and folded he began to calm down and told Mary about himself. He said that he was on medication to prevent delusion, but that this medication had a side-effect of memory loss and loss of concentration. He was worried that he would lose his part-time job because of this problem. During the course of their conversation he asked, "If God is perfect, why did God create me with such an awful problem?"

In response, Mary initiated reflection on the Psalms and how these Scriptures articulate the struggles of persons confronting God in the midst of their pain and suffering. They prayed together with Psalm 23—"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul." Eventually the man was calmer and said that he was tired and

needed to go home. When he left, Mary made a mental note to report this event to the clergy staff person who dealt with pastoral care concerns in the congregation. She then continued her preparation for the Lenten service.

The event seemed ordinary at the time for Mary, but it stayed with her enough that she asked me to engage in a theological reflection process with her about it. As she told me the details and we reflected on them together, she discovered that a key feeling for her was that she felt “priestly” in the encounter. In fact, the heart of the matter for her was that, even though ordination is denied to her in the Catholic tradition, in this incident as a lay minister she was able to function in a priestly way with someone in need. It became clear as we spoke that an aspect of the spiritual discernment she brought to the reflection was her awareness of her own struggles with depression and medication. Attending to the event in this way gave her a compassionate entry to the struggles of this man.

I asked her what the feeling experience of being priestly was like. She said that it felt as if she was a vehicle or channel for God’s love and care to this man. Specifically, she felt like a companion to him; she felt that she was able to engage him both from her own woundedness and from her desire to help him feel God’s presence to soothe his mental and spiritual agitation.

We began to probe these ideas further to understand how they might correlate with Christian religious heritage. Since I knew she was currently engaged in the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, one connection I proposed was with St. Ignatius Loyola’s depiction of the Jesuits as “companions to Jesus.” This helped her reflect more deeply on her understanding of priesthood.

Also, she made connection to two biblical resources. Wisdom 7:27 speaks of Wisdom entering persons who are holy, making them friends of God and prophets: “Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God and prophets.” Mary understood the holiness of this tormented man and the wisdom of his simplicity and honesty. He was stable enough to realize his disability, and he struggled to find God’s love and acceptance of him. His unblinking openness to see himself and the world spoke of an inner integrity of self that was holy. Mary recognized that this man was deeply connected to God in his suffering and struggle, and that he was prophetic to her in her own struggle to deal with depression and medication.

Another biblical resource for her was from John 15:15: “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made

known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.” In his discussion of servant leadership, Jesus offers insight into what constitutes a priestly role. In the gospel story Jesus tells the apostles that he does not call them servants, he calls them friends, ones who know what is on the mind of God, and who offer their lives generously for one another. Mary saw in this biblical passage the notion of equality; that is, since all are made in God’s image, priests incarnate God in humanity through generous service given friend to friend, and not in hierarchical relationship.

These correlations with the Christian tradition helped Mary to gain insight into the spiritual reality of priesthood. In serving this man she was being a friend to him, as well as a professional person in a service role. It was the ministerial model of the pastor as friend. The emphasis was on the character of their relationship, rather than on a separation of role. He was a friend of God, as was she, and together they were befriending each other for the purpose of healing and wholeness.

Out of this theological reflection Mary understands that what was a seemingly ordinary event was, in fact, a graced moment in which many strands of her vocational journey came together. First, these insights are now part of her work with her spiritual director as she moves through the Ignatian Exercises. This reflection has fueled her attempts to learn to be more intentionally a “contemplative in action.” Secondly, she feels more accepting of her own struggles with depression and medication, and how these struggles play a role in her professional life. She has a greater understanding of herself as both wounded and healer, as one who is served and one who serves. Finally, she feels more empowered to take seriously her vocational call to priestly work, understanding the need to see the priestly character of her ministerial action more carefully and intentionally. In this way she can spiritually and emotionally support herself through the pain associated with the denial of ordination, and find a way of being able to more or less thrive in the life of ministry to which she feels called. Mary also sees this as a constructive way to resist the gender discrimination that she experiences in both Protestant and Catholic traditions. While her future as an ordained minister is not assured, she has a better sense of herself as priestly in her present ministry. While she waits for the Church to recognize her as a priest, she takes great spiritual sustenance in knowing that this man in need recognized her as one.

#### SUSTAINING A LIFE OF MINISTRY

As the case study indicates, theological reflection has the potential to produce deep spiritual insights that can then become sources for our ongoing spiritual formation as ministers. It can focus our discernment so that we understand more profoundly God’s presence in our work

and the implications of this presence for our pastoral action. It can connect us to the richness of the religious heritage that is the wisdom of our community life. And it can sustain a dialogue between that tradition and our ministry experiences that will empower our vocation over the course of our life. Thus, regular engagement in theological reflection can sustain our vocation and prevent ministerial burnout.

Theological reflection processes can also be used for communal discernment of ministerial experiences. The weekly seminar classes that I run for ministry students are examples of this. Each week we gather to discern the presence of God in the events of each student's field site, and we seek to correlate our insights with the Christian religious heritage in order to discover ways of acting that are more faithful to the gospel. But use of communal theological reflection should not be limited to the seminary classroom. A parish social justice committee could use theological reflection to probe more deeply into a communal experience of service work that all shared. A group of hospital chaplains might engage in the process to discover ways to maintain their pastoral integrity amid the escalating changes in health care systems. Whether used individually or communally, theological reflection has the potential to help people engage more deeply in the life of the Spirit as revealed experientially in the tradition.

What are some concrete ways that we who are overly busy in the work of our ministries can ensure that theological reflection is a consistent part of our vocational life? O'Connell Killen and de Beer have very useful exercises in their book for individual and communal theological reflection. Another suggestion is to schedule monthly or twice monthly meals with a colleague in which the agenda for the meal is to engage in theological reflection. A staff team could use a part of regularly scheduled staff meeting time for theological reflection; or, a group from a church or agency can be recruited specifically to engage in communal theological reflection.

It is important for all of us to bring theological reflection to ministry as a habit and an intuitive sense. Through theological reflection we are seeking to form the discipline, instincts, and skills that will serve us in the course of our ministry and sustain us in our faithfulness to the sacred trust to which we have been called.

## REFERENCES

- Kinast, Robert L. *Let Ministry Teach: A Guide to Theological Reflection*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996.

O'Connell Killen, Patricia, and John de Beer. *The Art of Theological Reflection*. New York: Crossroad, 1994.

James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead. *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*, rev. edition. Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed and Ward, 1995.

---

*Kathleen T. Talvacchia is assistant professor of ministry and theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. She teaches in the areas of field education, religious education, and urban ministry.*

Christianity is so human and so historical that it is too human for many people, who think that true religion must be inhuman, that is, not of the senses, nonhistorical. But the word was made flesh. The word of the Lord went forth to John in the fifteenth year of the emperor Tiberius. And so it has remained. Christianity is an historical and a very concrete and sturdy religion, a stumbling block to the proud who really—at least in religious matters—do not wish to be human beings, but it is grace and truth for those who with humble hearts are willing to be human beings in space and time even when they are adoring the God of eternity and infinity.

*Karl Rahner*