

Reflections on Theological Reflection

By Ron Kienzle

September 2007

The art of theological reflection is explored well in the book *Theological Reflection: Connecting Faith and Life* by Joye Gros, O.P., D.Min (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002). This little book (68 pages) has six parts or elements:

- The definition and need for theological reflection
 - “Theological reflection is a tool or means that helps us reflect in ways that allow faith to touch our lives and our lives to touch our faith”^{*}
 - “Theological reflection allows us to recall and savor the fleeting glimpses of God at work in our world and our lives”
- The form and substance of the process of theological reflection
 - The three poles or sources of religiously significant information
 - Experience – our life as we see it through the filters of our feelings, biases, and our past
 - Culture – that part of us that shapes our attitudes because of our environment and “its symbols, values, mores, and philosophies”
 - Tradition – the wisdom that our faith and its tenets explains or “shed[s] light” upon any experience we have
- The tools required for a deep Christian experience
 - The “three-step method” for integrating the poles
 - Attending – “the skill of listening, giving ear to the wisdom and insights that each ‘pole’ provides”
 - Assertion – the process of analyzing and, thus, applying the truths of our tradition to our understanding of our experiences
 - Decision – finally challenging pre-conceived ideas, or reinforcing them, in the light of theological reflection
- Practice exercises and questions
- Some audiences and circumstances of Christian sharing
 - RCIA group members and their stories
 - Faith-sharing groups and their questions
 - Religious education classes and the need for examples
- Tools for facilitating theological reflection in groups
 - Gaining clarity about feelings
 - Interactive listening
 - Guidelines for faith sharing
 - Dialogue not debate
 - Crafting meaningful and significant questions

* All material in quotes is directly from the book here cited

Sr. Gros, in her book, a part of the Pastoral Ministry Series of the Loyola Press, has given us a concise guide to a richer, more spirit-filled life by giving us the basics of integrating our faith with our experience. She tells us that, by continually and habitually practicing the art of theological reflection, we will be able to see the truth and beauty of our everyday existence because we will learn to recognize God's presence and His influence in everything. Furthermore, she has given us explicit and easy-to-follow steps to achieving a nearly instinctive, automatic habit of finding the rewards of our faith and the truths of our beliefs. Happiness is most often felt when our lives seem to bear out those principles we hold dearest. Through constant theological reflection we can find the contentment of God's love by seeing his plan in everything around us.

Would it not be exceedingly grand to see the world as Jesus saw it? To understand humans and nature as he understood them? As people called by God to serve Him in a special way, it seems that we would be far better servants if, by emulating the Lord, we could see His hand in all creation and appreciate His providence every moment of every day just as Jesus did. Would we not love our neighbors and the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters if we saw the face of God in everyone?

For me personally, I found the tools presented by Sr. Gros to be of great help in leading me to that habitual "dialog" of theological reflection. Although I have been trying for many years to see the world through the glasses of my faith, it has always been a conscious, often difficult, exercise of will to see God in the experiences I have. By breaking the process down into the poles, or sources, of information (experience, culture, and tradition) and giving me a methodology (attending, asserting, decision-making), I believe this book will furnish great progress in my attempts to be a better, more spirit-filled, spirit-directed, person.

The greatest difficulty I think I will find in the exercise of the art of theological reflection is that of asserting the truths of my tradition into my understanding of the world. Anyone who knows me well, or has seen the results of my Myers-Briggs analysis, will realize that my ego is strong and that the convictions of my opinions border on arrogance. I tend to believe, immediately, my first opinions about my experiences – those impressions I receive through my ingrained filters often without objectivity and usually

without regard to the traditions of my faith. The questions and exercises Sr. Gros has included at the end of each chapter have provided a means of practicing the connection of life to faith and, with enough quality practice, I should finally get to that stage where my life is permanently and perpetually integrated with my religious beliefs. I hope to attain a level of that “dialog” she speaks of that will result in a never-ending, ceaseless communication among all three poles of voice.

In the end, it is important that I not keep what I have learned to myself. If I truly lock down theological reflection, I should – I must – find ways to share the art and help others learn to gain the same gift. Sr. Gros gives me the tools to do exactly that. Despite her cutesy snorkeling metaphor, the thought of launching into group facilitation of theological reflection is, indeed, a little intimidating. The guidelines given are much the same as those for any group sharing exercise and are probably not foreign concepts to most of us and, therefore, should, with patience and practice, become second nature to me. *Theological Reflection* presents an excellent review of the concepts of group sharing facilitation and I would be smart to memorize them and rehearse. As the book points out, ministerial concern and love for God’s people will be my best guide for my own development as well as my assisting others in seeing Him in the world.