

Wednesday, March 18, 2009

What purpose is theological reflection supposed to fulfill within pastoral care?

The answer to this question lies in the dual nature of Christian faith itself. Faith asks not just for assent to the Creedal truths, it asks that Christians also live their lives as a manifestation of what they believe and try to shape the culture in which they live to reflect the moral and ethical norms of the Kingdom of God.¹ The colloquial way of saying this is: “Walk the Talk”. The requirement that faith be *practiced* arises from God’s call to every human being to serve Him every day and all day in every fibre of their being (body, mind, and spirit) and to love their neighbors as they love themselves.² In order to be faithful to this calling (vocation), Christians therefore need to see the particularities of their normal everyday activities and the particularities of all their relationships not as problems to be dealt with but as opportunities to serve God. They therefore need to develop a supernatural outlook³ or mentality⁴ towards these quotidian particularities because, with the right intention, they can become sacred offerings to God. It is these normal daily activities that provide them with the opportunity to become fruitful branches grafted into Christ (the vine⁵), if they proceed virtuously⁶ in accordance with their

¹ This formulation is an attempt to synthesise all three of George Lindbeck’s (1984) typologies for doing theology: *propositionalist* (theology seeks to articulate truth claims for assent); *experimental-expressivist* (theology like art or poetry seeks to express what human beings universally experience); and *cultural-linguistic* (theology attempts to objectify a particular religious culture and its embodiment in narrative and ritual because religions are comprehensive interpretative schemes, embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualized, which structure human experience and understanding of self and world).

² Dt 6:5; Mt 22:37-40; John 15:12-17

³ Fernandez (1988, Vol. 1 p. 133)

⁴ McGhee (2007, p. 73)

⁵ John 15:4-7

⁶ Pembroke (2007, Ch. 10) employs the virtue ethics paradigm to do three things: to explain that virtues are moral habits, to outline the relationship between the human and theological virtues, and to promote the importance of the virtues of integrity, courage, and compassion for addressing the moral challenges that arise in living as a Christian.

Wednesday, March 18, 2009

beliefs and if they respond selflessly to what they understand to be God's will for them individually and communally.⁷ Grasping this idea, making this connection, developing this supernatural outlook, and acting upon it, has been described as "making faith-sense".⁸

The actual process of "making faith-sense" is a type of thinking called "theological reflection" in order to distinguish it from other critically reflective human thought processes. This manner of thinking is discussed in detail in the next question.

Lay spiritual / pastoral carers engage in theological reflection for two main reasons⁹: first, because, as Christians they need to "make faith-sense" for themselves; but, second, they are also in the business of

⁷ In this formulation I am trying to include the four sources of morality: virtue (Aristotle); will (Duns Scotus); duty (Kant); and consequences (Torah)

⁸ This term was coined by Kinast (1999, p. ix) to refer to the interpretative guidance practice of the early Church called mystical or wisdom theology. "Making faith-sense" is very useful terminology because it allows one to subsume the "functionalism" proposed by Clebsch & Jaekle (1964) and the "perspectivalism" proposed by Hiltner (1958) which are seen to be in conflict. It also allows one to subsume another conflict, viz., whether pastoral care necessarily entails the explicit proclamation of the Christian gospel [as advocated by Thurneysen (1962)] versus communication of Christian meanings through accepting, caring relationships [Carl Rogers uses the phrase "unconditional positive regard" to describe the required stance of the pastoral carer in such relationships] that seek to embody those meanings (Wise 1966, p. 8). This terminology is flexible enough to embrace the views of Oates (1962) who saw the defining marks of pastoral care as theological and Oden (1966), who, in attempting to correlate Barth theology and Carl Roger's therapeutic approach, concluded that the Christian *kerygma* can only be made explicit and thus clearly known through revelation as understood by Barth.

⁹ Other secondary reasons include: to assist others to resolve ethical issues, especially in health care; to transform the institution in which they offer pastoral care to make it more Christian, especially in schools, prisons, and hospitals; to convey to the wider Church what being Church in the world means in particular types of institutional setting; and to enhance their own professional development as pastoral care practitioners.

Wednesday, March 18, 2009

supporting others in their efforts at “making faith-sense”¹⁰. For lay spiritual / pastoral carers, theological reflection is an aid for discovering the signs of God’s presence¹¹ in (or the potential for God to be present in) the everyday realities of their own lives, in the dynamics of their pastoral encounters with others, and in the lives of those they meet in these pastoral encounters. But, in the process of making such discoveries, lay spiritual / pastoral carers come to realise that these signs of God’s presence are, in reality, human responses to God’s invitation to mankind to live out a personal and communal relationship of divine filiation¹² (or sonship or daughtership) with Him as Trinity¹³. For all Christians, the essence of their divine filiation with God is to live out their earthly existence giving the will of God absolute priority in everything they do and to love their fellow men and women as they love themselves. Discerning the significance of their divine filiation and comprehending what love of neighbor means in practice, is mediated to Christians through receiving the Sacraments, through liturgy, through Scripture

¹⁰ Gerkin (1997, p. 116) describes this function as “interpretative leadership” and promotes it as the “master function that informs all the various sub-functions of pastoral ministry in the life of the Christian community. It becomes the perspective from which all the functions of ministry – preaching, teaching, pastoral care, organizing and administering, and so on – are given coherence and unity of purpose”. I think that the descriptor “supporting others in their efforts at ‘making faith-sense’” can embrace the interpersonal model of pastoral care grounded in personalist theology, dynamic interpersonal psychology, and the “I – Thou” thought of Martin Buber [Johnson (1967); Pembroke (2002 & 2006)]

¹¹ Scripture is replete with language about God’s special action in the world or mankind seeking signs of God’s presence in the world or God pressing mankind to search for or request such signs. The most extended example is the Book of Job. However, use of “sign” language can cause theological difficulties. Pailin (1989) in his critical analyses of theism, canvasses the argument that human beings cannot, logically, have autonomy unless our concept of God’s relationship with humanity allows it. The only concept of God that can logically allow human autonomy and human flourishing is one where God’s presence in the world is not predeterminist, protectionist and interventionist, but silently loving, suffering and inviting. The line from T.S. Eliot’s Preludes comes to my mind: “The notion of some infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing.”

¹² John 1:12-13; Eph 1:5, 10; 1 John 3:1-2; Rom 8:17. See also Second Vatican Council document *Lumen Gentium* 3.

¹³ Pembroke (2006) proposes the Trinity as the central doctrine of Christian faith for guidance in shaping pastoral theory and practice because of this doctrine’s concern with relationality. God’s love for and reaching out to human kind, and the call to human kind to share in the Trinity’s loving communion, offer particularly apt insights into the purpose and nature of pastoral care.

Wednesday, March 18, 2009

and its exegesis, through Church doctrine, and through personal spiritual formation and spiritual direction or spiritual companionship.

To offer pastoral care to others (irrespective of whether these recipients are practicing Christians or not) is one practical way to live out the relationship of divine filiation with God as Trinity. When the lay spiritual / pastoral carer makes an offer to form a pastoral relationship with another, the Holy Spirit, working through them, can make God as Trinity more fruitfully present for the recipient¹⁴ and God can be “made-sense” of by the recipient. In this respect, pastoral care is apostolic.¹⁵ Lay spiritual / pastoral carers also have an obligation to use their pastoral encounters to attend to issues of morality and ethics and not set them aside in order to communicate acceptance and forgiveness.¹⁶ So, when supporting others in their efforts at “making faith sense”, the vocation of pastoral care has both moral and apostolic dimensions which need to be explicit within the pastoral functions of healing, sustaining, guiding, reconciling, and nurturing spiritual growth.¹⁷ It is not sufficient for a lay chaplain to be a well-intentioned, empathic, virtuous person competent at using non-directive techniques because each one these pastoral functions can really only be explained in theological terms.

¹⁴ John 15:4-7

¹⁵ There is a fine but important line between apostolate of this nature and proselytizing simply for Church membership. Proselytizing is unethical when targeted at vulnerable people in the stressful situations of hospitalization, residential care, rehabilitation, and incarceration.

¹⁶ Browning (1976) calls this the “moral” dimension or vision of pastoral care

¹⁷ Clebsch & Jaekle (1964) identified the first four function from an analysis of the history of the practice of pastoral care within the Church since its inception. The fifth function “nurturing spiritual growth” is normally added to the list at the suggestion of Clinebell (1984).

Wednesday, March 18, 2009

In summary, the main purpose of theological reflection within pastoral care is to provide the means for lay spiritual ' pastoral carers to "make faith-sense" of their own Christian vocation but also to support others in their efforts at "making faith-sense" via the pastoral functions of healing, sustaining, guiding, reconciling, and nurturing spiritual growth.

Note: This particular conceptualization of the purpose of theological reflection is but one of three broad trajectories that are discernible within the field of Pastoral/Practical Theology. Pattison & Lynch¹⁸ would categorise the above conceptualisation as one of the "Neo-traditional confessional approaches" for several reasons: the focus on the work and experiences of those who practice some form of pastoral ministry, the emphasis on personal spirituality, and the primacy given to the concept of revealed truth within the Christian tradition as the basis for guiding theology and practice. The other trajectories are: "Liberal-rational approaches" (which sees theological reflection as doing publicly defensible theology by "normative analysis and critique of the action-guiding worldviews, assumptions, and behaviours prevalent in contemporary culture and experience that does not draw simply on the concepts, values, and beliefs of the Christian church".¹⁹) and "Radical-liberationist approaches" (which emphasizes the structures and dynamics of power in particular contexts).

How is theological reflection supposed to operate within pastoral care?

Within the scholarly literature on theological reflection one can discern a line of logic comprising at least five foundational propositions, which, when read as a whole, go towards answering this question. I have cast them in a form that has specific reference to the pastoral care provided by lay spiritual; / pastoral carers. The first proposition is that theological reflection focuses on the here and now particularities of the pastoral encounter.²⁰ The second proposition is that human reflection, using the paradigms of the

¹⁸ Pattison and Lynch (2005, pp. 414-421)

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 410

²⁰ "Pastoral Theology is reflection on the pastoral situation. The pastoral situation is by definition particular in time and space." Ballard (1988, p. 375) cited by Thiselton (1992, p.556) who notes that Groome (1980), Farley (1983,

Wednesday, March 18, 2009

human sciences (e.g., needs, developmental stages, adjustment to losses and grief etc) is the normal and natural means by which lay spiritual / pastoral carers understand the dynamics of their pastoral encounters with others and by which they interpret what has been happening to the other person and what issues are confronting them. The third proposition is that such human reflection calls upon a range of resources (viz., the accumulated knowledge they have acquired as part of their on-going formation as a person in their immediate family and in their broader social networks) and methods [viz., both logic (inductive and deductive thinking) and intuition (trusting their emotions)]. The fourth proposition is that lay spiritual / pastoral carers cannot live their Christian faith/commitment without engaging in such human reflection because, notwithstanding the predilections that arise from nature and nurture, they still retain substantial freedom (autonomy) to choose how they live our lives and relate to others. The fifth proposition is that the lay spiritual / pastoral carer's own spiritual/religious tradition is a useful resource at their disposal when trying to make faith-sense of what has been happening to others and what spiritual and moral/ethical issues are confronting them²¹. The sixth proposition is that when they call upon the resource of their own spiritual/religious tradition in their pastoral encounters (and when later mulling over these pastoral encounters) they are doing something that makes this aspect of human reflection so generically different from other modes of human reflection as to warrant labeling it "theological". The difference can be attributed to several factors: the hermeneutical understanding they employ, the subject matter they focus on, the priority they give to their spiritual/religious tradition as a

pp.21-41) and Tracy (1983, pp.61-82) use similar language and that Browning (1983a, p.187; and 1983b, p.17) proposes a similar idea but emphasizes the diversity of the pastoral situations that arise both inside and outside the Church as a consequence of today's pluralism.

²¹ Browning goes much further than seeing the spiritual/religious tradition as simply a resource to be called upon as an input. He sees Pastoral Theology as informed by an ethical vision that is "*mediated* to individuals and groups in all their situational, existential, and developmental particularity." (emphasis mine) (1983, p. 187)

Wednesday, March 18, 2009

resource relative to the other resources at their disposal, and the intention with which they do the reflecting.

Theological reflection is critical reflection “for” a purpose and not just critical reflection “about” the nature of something. It is thus action-oriented. Within pastoral care, theological reflection operates by *correlating* experience²² with the spiritual/religious tradition *for the sake of praxis*.²³ When lay spiritual / pastoral carers attempt to *correlate* their own experience (or that of another) with their spiritual/religious tradition²⁴ they employ the same hermeneutical process that normally attends thoughts and desires that move humans emotionally and that prompt them to wonder whether these are responses to some reality that bestows meaning on life. They move through several cognitive stages: first, registering things as unaligned and unregulated; second, seeing them as connected, though not yet intelligibly so; and then, discerning the connection consciously.²⁵

²² Note the priority given to experience in this formulation. “The reality of theology, which theological reflection seeks to disclose, is the presence of God in people’s experience, a presence that invites them to encounter God where they are and to participate in the divine life which is offered to them there. For this reason the form that theological reflection takes is coextensive with people’s experience. It does not treat their experience as theological or spiritual void nor does it use their experience merely to illustrate and apply theological principles. With theological reflection, the theology is in the service to experience, not the other way around.” Kinast (2000, p. 3)

²³ Praxis is reflective practice undertaken within a theoretical framework.

²⁴ Habermas has criticized Gadamer for focusing on tradition because it seems to undermine the possibilities for social criticism and transformation.

²⁵ This explanation is drawn from Haldane (2007, pp. 41-45) who uses ideas from Augustine, Aquinas, C.S. Peirce, and C.S. Lewis to describe the thought processes that underpin the natural human inclination to believe in God,

Wednesday, March 18, 2009

What all the methods²⁶ or styles of theological reflection have in common is a threefold movement²⁷ that proceeds, first, by articulating the lived experience of the lay spiritual / pastoral carer or of the other person(s) in the pastoral encounter; second, by correlating this experience with the sources of the Christian spiritual/religious tradition; and third, by drawing out the practical implications for Christian living.

²⁶ However, Kinast (2000, p. 2) is at pains to point out that theological reflection is “neither a method (in the sense that apologetic, scholastic, transcendental, historical-critical forms of doing theology are methods), nor is it a separate theological discipline (in the sense that biblical, historical, systematic, moral and pastoral theology are distinct disciplines).”

²⁷ Within the literature these three movements may be further broken down into as many as fourteen steps depending upon how specific the author feels the process needs to be specified.