

Theological Reflection: Purpose and Overview

The Praxis Spiral Model

"It is up to Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel's unalterable words, and to draw principles of reflections, norms of judgment, and directives of action from the social teaching of the Church. It is up to these Christian communities...to discern the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political, and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed."

-Octogesima Adveniens, No. 4

Reflection is just as important as action or experience. It is the counterpart or the complement to service. In reflection, we find the reasons and basis for our service. Reflection enables us to discover the complexities, root causes, and reasons for injustices. At its most basic level, reflection means the words, the stories, the experiences of others that speak to our experience and give us new insight for further action. It is more than discussing or debating an issue; reflection is personally coming to grips with it, realizing our limitations and then finding the nourishment and support we need to act for change.

Reflection is one of the most important parts of the ABI experience. By helping people dig deeper into the ABI and themselves, reflection turns a good immersion into a life experience that profoundly affects people. The goal of reflection on an ABI is to link faith, experience and justice: to ask structural questions based on experience and in the context of faith traditions. Your role as facilitator is to create a setting of sharing and trust, an atmosphere that will allow the group as a whole and the individuals within the group to reflect on their experiences.

There are many different forms of reflection and many different ways to facilitate it. These vary depending upon the facilitator's style and the group's personality. Some forms of reflection include: group discussions, group/individual prayer, quiet time, listening to music, reading a poem, quote, scripture passage, drawing, creating art, and many others. Use what will be helpful for you and your group.

Many models for doing theological reflection include discussions of the praxis circle or spiral as the process for doing reflection. This is the outline for one model which includes 6 stages that the group moves through during their experience. People may enter this spiral at any point; but each step is important for reflection to be meaningful. Each turn of the spiral process can move reflection deeper and deeper. The suggestions for helping to facilitate each stage are flexible and are useful for multiple stages.

- **Bonding the Group:** This stage is key to the success of the rest of the process. In order for the group to dig deeper and ask questions, they must feel comfortable with those they are sharing; there must be **trust**. The dynamics of the community also provide a place to ask the questions, to seek the answers, and to feel supported in the process. While the group will continue to bond throughout the ABI, it is important that your pre-immersion meetings focus on bonding the group.
Suggestions to help group bonding:
 - Shared experiences, sharing thoughts and prayer;
 - Ice-breakers;
 - Group check-in (how is everyone doing)
- **Experience:** This is the beginning of reflection. In order to ask further questions, the group must first be aware of what they have experienced; they must **re-present** their experiences to themselves. It is important for you to help the group to stay with their experience and not jump ahead too quickly into analysis or abstraction; help them notice details, actions, feelings and thoughts.
Suggestions to help re-present experience:
 - Having the group journal about the day's events, nonjudgmental narration of events,
 - Having quiet time with a lit candle and then sharing experiences and what they have meant to people;

- Asking who, what, when, where, and how about what the group has seen and done.
- **Social Analysis:** Here the reflection begins to go past the surface and examine the larger picture: the structure, systems, statistics, and facts surrounding what the group is experiencing. This is asking WHY. For example, asking why a problem exists in Appalachia or Guatemala, what systems contribute to this problem, and who holds the power to change it. The work you do in your pre-immersion meetings to educate yourselves on the history, structure, systems, etc. of the places you will visit will begin to set up this stage.
Suggestions to help in social analysis:
 - Help the group to articulate the questions that their experience points to. What does not fit with their previous ideas or observations? What reinforces their previous ideas about the situation? What challenges those ideas and pre-suppositions?
 - Talk with and ask questions of people who live within these structures. Some questions to ask are: Who is affected? What resources are involved? Who controls the resources? Who makes decisions? Whose voice is heard? Whose voice is silent? Who gains and who loses?
- **Heart of the Matter:** The group begins to sort the insights from social analysis into a larger picture. By going beyond structures and facts into an overall feeling about or picture of the problem, we begin to turn towards change. Stepping back and summarizing the social analysis leads to the heart of the matter.
Suggestions to help articulate the heart of the matter:
 - Try to find the "**A-ha!**" experiences, when something clicks in their heads or hearts;
 - Try to summarize the issues into a feeling-image or statement of the tension or problem;
 - Try to find the energy in the situation;
 - Take time to reflect on feelings as well as ideas. Feelings indicate where our values and energy are. They are the source of our power.
- **Theological Reflection** - Now that the group has begun to analyze and feel the problem, theological reflection can help guide them to action. This stage offers a larger context in which to put our experience. Here we can dialogue our questions with our various traditions. This dialogue can offer a sense of hope and direction for action. It offers a context for our experiences, questions, energies, etc., pointing us toward action.
Suggestions to help theological reflection:
 - link the experiences and feelings of group with Bible passages, prayers and readings from many traditions, Catholic Social teaching, folklore, etc. through discussion, reading, prayer, listening to music, etc.
- **Action / Vision** - This stage draws on all the other stages and leads the group towards action, towards a transformative vision of what *could* be. After all they have experienced and learned, the group tries to find the "so what now?" of the experience. The group is generally ready for this at the end of the immersion, the post-immersion meeting, and beyond. It is important to have the group commit to some form of action at the conclusion of the ABI, no matter how small the commitment may be – even if the commitment is simply to further reflection and openness to change. It may be helpful to commission the group to tell the story when they return home.
Suggestions to help move towards action / vision:
 - Ask concrete questions that lead towards action (What now? What will we take with us? What will we do concretely? How have our views changed or been confirmed by what we experienced?)
 - Visualize going back to a regular life: what sort of changes will you make based on your immersion experience?
 - Try to connect the immersion with the lives to which the group will return.

The Praxis Spiral – A Synopsis

Bonding the Group

(build trust, then focus topic and share first impressions)

Experience

(journaling, non-judgmental narration; who, what, where, when, how; inner and outer)

Social Analysis

(structures, systems, statistics, who has power, WHY?, lessons from Catholic Social Teaching, etc.)

Heart of the Matter

(Where is the energy? What is one feeling-image, statement of the tension or problem?)

Theological Reflection

(Dialogue the "Heart of the Matter" with the Tradition – Scripture, saints, Catholic Social Teaching, folklore, etc.)

Action/Vision

(So what? What will I/we take with me/us? What will I/we do concretely? Has this praxis changed or confirmed what I/we believe or think?)