

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

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All of us are aware of the kind of practical and anxious theological reflection that is stirred up by disastrous events like the earthquake in Haiti. Where was God in such an event? A more common type of theological reflection may occur when a family survives an automobile crash or a house fire, and the mother says, "The Lord must have been taking care of us." And a later reflection may conclude, "Because we survived we must have a special calling." That kind of theological reflection can take place any time the circumstances of life call it forth.

Required or intentional theological reflection is more likely to take place in a group that is part of an academic program or a part of a church's Christian education. Its subject matter can be an event in life and ministry or a text from scripture or faith tradition that calls for something other than routine, everyday thought. I like to describe that kind of event or text as one that feels "meaningful." Its meaning is seldom immediately clear, and it needs to be thought about further, shared, and discussed in search of some understanding of its present meaning. The reflection is theological when the person or reflecting group's view of life involves assumptions about and some sense of relationship to God.

What I want to suggest in this paper is that there is not one type of theological formulation that facilitators of the theological reflection process should be looking for. Rather, it is the involvement in a process that contributes to the wisdom of the participants. Theological reflection should contribute to a wisdom that gains insight into situations of ministry, that creatively interprets the texts and traditions of faith, and that further develops the person and practice of the minister.

I begin with definitions of reflection and of wisdom and then move to some historical discussion of how the process of theological reflection has developed in recent years. Most of the literature about this development has come from practical theologians, but that more recently biblical and doctrinal theologians have made significant contributions. I move then to a discussion of what I believe is the greatest inhibitor of theological reflection among those are asked or required to do it. This is followed by the description of a method for facilitating reflection. Finally, I describe some of the things that may emerge from the reflection process that may contribute to the development of the kind of wisdom I have described.

The dictionary definition of the verb “reflect” states that *reflect*, is a combination of *flex*, meaning to bend, and *re*, meaning to do it again. Literally to reflect is “to bend again.” Meanings of reflect include: (1) bending-back light, heat or sound; (2) showing skills or other characteristics that reflect years of training; and (3) to *re*-collect or pull together after remembering.

All three of these meanings suggest something important about reflection that is also theological. (1) That which is being reflected upon – whether acts of ministry, theological or biblical material is bent or moved from its usual place. The bending involves action or at least words written or spoken. (2) The reflection should demonstrate the knowledge of the reflecting person. Reflection also involves the use of one's memory and dealing with things with which the reflector is already somewhat familiar. Thus it can be part of the process of developing wisdom and maturity in dealing with the theoretical and practical issues at hand. (3) It is not an immediate reaction, but is something that involves a thoughtful consideration of the matter at hand whether it is a biblical text, theological doctrine or an event in ministry.

This definition of reflection also suggests that it involves not only what is being reflected upon, but also the person of the reflector. The reflecting mirror focuses not only upon the event or the text, but also upon the character of the reflector and the reflecting community as well. Reflection that is theological is concerned with events of life and ministry, the faith that invokes the ministry, and the person of the minister herself. I turn now to some of the meanings of wisdom.

Wisdom most often refers to a deep or insightful understanding of life achieved through experience. It includes knowledge about how to do things or how to proceed in certain situations. It seems to be primarily existential, a quality of understanding and experience won through struggle and effort over time. It is

largely tacit--only partly reducible to speech and writing – and is marked by qualities of self-knowledge, maturity, perspective, judgment, a sense of the whole, and a capacity to deal with the contradictory aspects of human experience.

Wisdom involves the ability to make sound choices and good decisions. It is not something a person is born with. It comes from living, from making mistakes and learning from them. It's often thought of as a state of mind characterized by profound understanding and deep insight. Although it involves intelligence, that is not always the case. In fact, wisdom can be found among relatively uneducated persons who have developed it through persistent learning from their experience, and it is sometime characterized as maturity not primarily related to the age of the person.

A person who has wisdom is one who maintains a larger view of the situation to be addressed without losing sight of particularity and the intricacies of interrelationships within it. Thus wisdom involves the acceptance of complexity in a situation as matter of fact and just something to be dealt with. This is demonstrated in the recognition that the relationships between persons and things are not always the same – that there is a messiness and disorder in life that must be acknowledged and dealt with. I believe that theological reflection is intended to contribute to the development of wisdom about life and ministry.

Edward Farley, a philosophical theologian, has described theological wisdom as *theologia*, something that is not a body of information and theory

about God. It is rooted in and develops in situations of where faith describes the way in which the human being lives in and toward God and the world. It is a kind of personal wisdom or way of being human.¹

In commenting about the essence of pastoral work, Herbert Anderson seems to me to have captured some we are trying to say about theological reflection. It is, he says,

to live fully in the joys and struggles and sometimes harsh realities of the people with whom we minister, discern the presence of God in the midst of daily living, help people find themselves in the biblical stories, and then find authentic ways for linking faith's wisdom to the human story.²

The quotation resonates with Job's questions "where shall wisdom be found, and where is the place of understanding?" reflects the answer to those questions is in Psalm 111:10: "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." The New Testament answer to Job's question lies somewhere in that wonderful, yet paradoxical presentation of wisdom in First Corinthians where human wisdom is first negated and then returns as the wisdom of love revealed in Christ.

These definitions and descriptions of reflection and of wisdom suggest something of what the process of theological reflection is intended to do, but it is also useful to consider how theological reflection has developed. I believe that

¹ Edward Farley, *theologia: The fragmentation and unity of theological education*: Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983, see particularly chapter 7.

² This comment comes from conversations with Anderson. The same view is expressed in pp. 3-54 of *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals* by Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998.

there are four factors that have most influenced its development in roughly the last forty years. I discuss them not in the order of their importance but in the order of my familiarity with them.

The first of these is the pastoral care and counseling movement and its serious examination of acts of ministry through the supervisory or consultative process. The second is the development of supervised ministry programs in the theological degree change from B.D. to M.Div. in the early 70's and in the early developments of the Doctor of Ministry degree. The third is the broadening of the understanding of ministry to include laity as well as clergy. The fourth is the Second Vatican Council that concluded in the mid-sixties. Vatican II significantly influenced the theology and practice of the Roman Catholic Church, and, more than we usually realize, it has influenced the Protestant church as well.

What is evident in all four of these factors or events is the change in locus of authority. (1) The pastoral care movement argued that there is authority for life and ministry not only in written text, but also in human text or event. (2) The development of the D.Min. was, in fact, a statement that there can be doctoral wisdom and authority not only in the doctor of philosophy or theology but also in the doctor of the practice of ministry. (3) The importance of the laity in ministry emerged when it was recognized that authority for ministry rested not only in the church hierarchy or the charismatic preacher but also in members of the communities of faith. (4) Vatican II and what emerged after it was the most clear-cut example of that expanded view of authority. Although a greater

authority on matters of faith still rested in the clergy, the community of faith became recognized as having a significant voice.

An illustration of this may be seen in an article by Roman Catholic pastoral theologian Robert L. Kinast. Informed by the work of John Henry Newman and David Tracy, Kinast noted that the Second Vatican Council “set in motion changes that have affected every aspect of church life.” The one that is particularly relevant for our concerns here is “a shift in focus from the clergy to the church as a whole.” This has, in fact, made theological reflection broadly relevant for the church’s life. Kinast defines theological reflection as “a group process that begins with an actual, pastoral situation; correlates theological resources with this situation; and aims at an informed course of action.” And what he sees as most important is that it begins with a specific situation rather than with generic formulations or hypothetical cases. It ordinarily occurs in a group in order to utilize the different vantage points and experiences of the reflectors.³

A great deal of the theological reflection literature has been concerned with the theological education of the laity. An important example of this is the work of Killen and de Beer that grew out of the lay training Education for Ministry program developed at the School of Theology of the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. Killen and de Beer describe theological reflection as “the discipline of exploring our individual and corporate experience in

³ Robert L. Kinast, “Pastoral Theology, Roman Catholic,” *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Expanded Edition, Nashville Abingdon Press, 2005 p 873

conversation with the wisdom of a religious heritage.” That conversation, they say, is a genuine dialogue that listens to our own beliefs as well as those of the tradition, respecting the integrity of both. It nurtures growth in mature faith.⁴

Edward O. de Bary, also associated with the Episcopalian Education for Ministry program, has written a book describing the historical, philosophical and theological context for theological reflection and the various theories and means of practicing it. He describes theological reflection as “looking at the richness of the human experience to discover its meaning by recognizing the transcendent factors that connect us to one another and to the divine milieu.” I particularly like de Barry’s use of some words from Catholic author Schillebeeckx, who described the theologian as a “shepherd of transcendence.” That to me is a practical theological description of what we are about. I like to think of myself as one who guides persons in discovering evidences of transcendence in their life experiences.⁵

Of all the literature I have surveyed I believe that the most useful recent book on theological reflection is the *SCM Study Guide to Theological Reflection* by Judith Thompson with Stephen Pattison and Ross Thompson.⁶ What is particularly interesting about these authors is that they are trying to say what

⁴ Patricia O’Connell Killen and John de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1994, Chapter 1

⁵ Edward O. de Bary *Theological Reflection: The Creation of Spiritual Power in the Information Age*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003

⁶ *SCM Study Guide to Theological Reflection* by Judith Thompson with Stephen Pattison and Ross Thompson (London: SCM Press, 2008.

differentiates *theological reflection* from reflection in other fields and contexts. For them the mark of theological reflection is “that whatever the issue under scrutiny, and however unrelated it may seem at first sight to themes in sacred text and tradition, a rigorous exploration is undertaken to discover how a theological perspective may illuminate, interrogate and suggest alternative ways of acting, in a process that also sheds new light on that theological perspective.”⁷ It is a process “that also sheds new light on that theological perspective.” They’re saying, I think, that theological reflection often works with surprising material and that it can cut both ways, affecting both how the event and also the theological concept is understood.

Although most of the literature on theological reflection has been written by practical theologians, more recently biblical and doctrinal theologians have made significant contributions. For some of them, authority is seen to lie not only in the Bible and doctrine as it has been traditionally interpreted by either ecclesial or academic authorities, but in the contemporary community of faith seeking relevant meanings for life in scripture and tradition. The clear implication of this is that these scholars believe that the final word of faith cannot be found in only a historical critical or literal method of interpreting a text. It also lies in a community of faithful persons seeking God’s will and meaning for their lives.

⁷ Ibid, p.27.

A good example of this point of view may be seen in the work of Luke Timothy Johnson, a New Testament professor at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University. Johnson has been a major critic of the historical-critical quest for the Jesus of history apart from the community that has told his story and interpreted it. He remains convinced of the positive value of exegesis carried out within the scientific paradigm because it helps us avoid reading contemporary perspectives anachronistically into a very different ancient world. Nevertheless, he argues that the “historical-critical approach to the Bible drives a decisive wedge between the world imaged by Scripture and the world inhabited by its examiners.”⁸ This has led, he says, to a distancing of the world of the Bible from the contemporary world, something to be looked at with detached scholarly study rather than being a source of personal and community transformation within the church.

Johnson sees the task of the community of believers as learning to imagine the world that the scripture imagines and use its images to live Christianly in the contemporary world. It is important to say here that as he uses the word and as I will use it in this paper, imagination is not a substitute for fact or truth as it is when a mother says to a child, “That’s just your imagination.” Rather it is similar in meaning to what psychiatrists Jerome and Julia Frank have called the “assumptive world.” “Each person,” they say, “evaluates internal and

⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson, “Imagining the World Scripture Imagines,” *Theology and Scriptural Imagination*, edited by L. Gregory Jones and James J. Buckley, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., p. 7.

external stimuli in the light of what is dangerous, safe, important, unimportant, good, bad, and so on.”⁹ As Johnson uses it, and as I use it here, imagination simply refers to our way of picturing the world we live in or another that we read about. “People act on the basis of the imagined world in which they dwell. By acting on what they image, they help establish their worlds as real.”

Luke Johnson believes that if scripture is to “be a living source for theology, those who practice theology must become less preoccupied “with the world that produced Scripture and learn again how to live a relationship in the world Scripture produces.” Scriptural imagination, he believes, must come from a faith community whose practices are ordered to the transformation of humans according to the world imagined by Scripture. Theologians with scriptural imagination must come from within the church.¹⁰

Luke Johnson’s words come from a professor in a university setting. James Cochrane’s words come from a radically different context, but they seem to exemplify some of the same things that Johnson has described. Cochrane, a South African, listens to the interpretive voices of members of base ecclesial communities. He works with recorded transcriptions of Bible studies from an oppressed and marginalized black Christian community and challenges “the dominant discourses in global theology from this specific location.” The original experiences of faith of ordinary believers’ and their practical reflection on daily

⁹ Jerome and Julia Frank, *Persuasion and Healing*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, Paperback Edition, 1993, Chapter Two

¹⁰ Johnson, p. 9-12.

life, however unsophisticated or flawed their theology, confront us with issues and challenges too seldom incorporated into the formal theological work of the Christian community.

Similar to Johnson, Cochrane comments that while “the text reflects its own world. . . and constrains the range of possible meanings through its semantic structure. . . , it also opens up worlds to the reader. It offers indeterminate ways of interpreting the present.” Using a term of Paul Ricoeur, Cochrane describes the biblical text as polysemic. It has multiply meanings, and he argues that “commitment to perspectives on the margins of society, away from centers of power and wealth, becomes fundamental to the theological enterprise.”¹¹

This commitment is expressed in what he calls “incipient theology.” “Incipient” is a fascinating term. In my computer dictionary “incipient” means, “beginning to exist or appear.” Any good pastor, priest, or lay worker who takes the time to listen with care to her or his local community, Cochrane says, already deals with incipient theologies – those just beginning to appear. Interpretive activity is part of a creative process that reduces the text from multiple meanings to one meaning for that time and place and then incorporates that interpretation into the range of possible meanings for that text that may come from different

¹¹ James R. Cochrane, *Circles of Dignity: Community Wisdom and Theological Reflection*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999, p. 16

contexts.¹² Those whom we guide in theological reflection, whatever their level of sophistication, also have incipient theologies that theological reflection can encourage them to develop.

The doctrinal theologian who has been most helpful to me in thinking about theological wisdom for ministry is British theologian David Ford. Theology at its best, he says, "is an attempt to discern and draw on the wisdom of scripture and of tradition in ways that contribute to wise understanding and living before God today."¹³ That statement seems to me to capture the purpose of theological reflection.

Ford further argues that conceptual thought is important, but it "inevitably abstracts from scripture, tradition and life in order to make its general statements. More important is "a community actively seeking wisdom through ever fresh engagement with scripture, tradition and contemporary understanding of life."

Wisdom, according to Ford:

grows through habits of attentiveness, listening and respect that allow for otherness to the point of mystery. It is expressed in many genres, perhaps most typically in the epigrammatic wisdom sayings. Yet it is more appropriately associated with people than with texts, and with their engagement in the complexities of living. Its presence is most urgent and

¹² Cochrane, p. 151-152.

¹³ David Ford, *Shaping Theology: Engagements in a Religious and Secular World*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, p. 152.)

apparent at the raw edge of life, responding to the new in ways that are impossible to catch adequately in sayings, principles or theories.¹⁴

Again we are considering the meaning of theological wisdom because it is the goal of theological reflection. Such wisdom, according to Ford, seeks to do justice to many contexts, levels, voices, moods, genres, systems and responsibilities. It should be practiced collegially, in conversation and, best of all in friendship; and, through the theological image of the communion of saints. The best theological wisdom is a broker of the arts, humanities, sciences and common sense for the sake of a wisdom that affirms critiques and transforms each of them.

One of the interesting things that seems important in this brief survey of the theological reflection literature is that while practical theologians are pushing to demonstrate the importance of theological theory for what they do, at the same time a number of biblical and doctrinal theologians seem to be arguing that theological and biblical studies need to become more practical.

I move now to discuss what I believe most often inhibits the development of wisdom through theological reflection and to suggest a method for addressing that problem. My experience over the years has convinced me that the greatest inhibitor to theological reflection is the “disease” of “what am I supposed to think?” Disease may seem to be too strong a word, but if you consider the two

¹⁴ Ford, p. 40.

syllables that make up the word, what I am talking about is “dis-ease” or anxiety about doing or saying the right thing—“What should I think or say so that I don’t reveal what I don’t know?”

I first became aware of this type of anxiety in Clinical Pastoral Education, with students who may have gotten to feel pretty good about how they are doing pastoral care, but when asked to theologize about it they would freeze up. A rich pastoral experience often died of dullness when the student was asked to write about it theologically. What came out sounded like a biblical text or a part of a creed or confession that the student knew but had not related imaginatively to his or her own life experience. Or sometimes it was something that was all heart, a personal testimony that was apparently unrelated to the mainline Christian tradition and affirmations.

What do we do, then, about our students’ anxiety that appears as that “what should I say disease”? The most important element in encouraging good theological reflection is developing a community that is safe enough for the reflection to take place. It may first seem that this concern for safety in expression conflicts with the concern in doctoral programs to facilitate critical thinking. What I have experienced over and over, however, and had reported to me by my students and from laity involved in ministry, is how much easier it is to express oneself critically and constructively—about theology or about anything else for that matter—if a safe atmosphere for sharing can be established first. Even for persons who have become comfortable and familiar with using theological

language, applying that language to their own experience may appear on one hand to be presumptuous and on the other hand too personal to speak about comfortably.

There are certainly a number of methods for developing a safe community for reflection. The one I have used for a number of years has two essential elements. The first is having group members write stories about events in their lives prior to writing their theological reflections. In his discussion of theological reflection Luke Johnson spoke of the importance of giving attention to the human stories of today that lie outside of scripture. Similarly, my experience has convinced me of the value of beginning with some of the personal stories of members of the group before moving on to reflection upon the stories of faith. .

Many of us are accustomed using stories as a means of getting acquainted in a group setting. What I am suggesting here is simply taking the story-telling to a deeper level and having the stories written before they are presented. The use of written verbatims of pastoral events has demonstrated that the process of writing with group response is a more effective learning tool than is verbal sharing alone. The writing of stories about oneself puts some distance between the writer and the story and allows the group and the writer herself more freedom to respond to the product as well as the person. It is also a means for encouraging and taking seriously the use of ones imagination. In the personal story one can tell about an event imaginatively without too much pressure on

“getting it right.” Writing encourages imaginative sharing – whether writing creatively about events in ones life or, later, sharing more freely about ones theological thoughts.

In the appendix of my book *From Ministry to Theology*¹⁵ I have suggested the kind of stories I have used prior to the actual reflection on events or texts. Some of the them are: a simple description of an event that happened in the last week; an event when I was a youth; an event that characterizes my family of origin; an occurrence that pictures my faith family of origin; one of my sacred places or things. The move in this process is from personal story, to sacred story, and then to theological reflection on event or text. It’s possible that the stories that the personal stories can simply be told, but writing them is infinitely more valuable.

Perhaps the most important element in developing a “safe” group environment for reflection is the use of a group leadership technique I call “bracketing.” “One never will see the phenomena in question as it presents itself,” says phenomenological philosopher Paul Brockelman, “if one carries to it a priori views, assumptions and assertions about it.”¹⁶ Bracketing is valuable because it provides a structure for approaching the events of life or a religious text more directly, thus and enabling others to share in them before putting them

¹⁵ John Patton, *From Ministry to Theology*, Journal of Pastoral Care Publications, 1995, p. 121-122.

¹⁶ Paul T. Brockelman, *Existential Phenomenology and the World of Ordinary Experience*, Lanham MD: University Press of America, p. 61

in categories. Categorical and analytic knowledge are important, but the bracketing method is to prevent such knowledge from blinding us to things as they first appear. The most important thing about this method is that it is a valuable way of making the group safe for genuine reflection to take place.

In the early stages of the group's time together the group leader is very direct in instructing the group members on how to present their events and how to respond to the events of others. The presenter should simply read her written story and not say what the event means to her until the material has been responded to by others. The purpose of this group method is to let the personal event, and later the written text, speak to the imagination of the hearers before an interpretation by the writer inhibits that imagination.

Before any of the stories are presented the leader announces that critical responses, either positive or negative, will not be allowed. After the story or text is read, he will simply ask, "What did you notice?" "What did you feel? Either of those responses will be allowed. Others will not be. Although the method may at first be resisted, my experience with the method has convinced me that it can reduce the anxiety of the group's members and contribute to freeing them from most of their concern about what they should say. It contributes to their responding more imaginatively in their later interpretation of events and texts. The structure makes it clear that in its early stages theological reflection is not discussion. Rather it is listening, remembering, and personal response. There is

opportunity later for critical discussion and evaluation, but not until evaluation and criticism has at first been restricted.

Theodore Jennings speaks more theoretically about the importance of imagination. He gives a picture of what he calls the “three storied edifice of human experience. On the first floor is our existence and reality. On the second floor is the imagination and its product, the symbol. On the third floor is reflection. There is, he says,

no direct or unmediated intercourse between existence and reality. It is only by way of imagination that access is gained to existence. . . . reflection which is alienated from imagination has lost its ground in reality and human life, and thus becomes empty, sterile, lifeless.”¹⁷

It is imagination that can creatively stir elements of the faith tradition with our contemporary experiences of ministry. Rather than imaging a stirring bowl I have used a pyramid as a container for this mix. Imagination, which I affirm theologically to be a part of both human and divine creativity, fills the pyramid touching each of its base points. These points reach up toward and are, in fact, connected to the ultimate or, theologically stated, God. God touches the base points: the action, relationship, and meanings touched on through the imagination or through human creativity that has been empowered by divine creativity.¹⁸

¹⁷ Theodore Jennings, *Introduction to Theology*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976, p. 17

¹⁸ *From Ministry to Theology*, p. 19

Reflection and sharing in a community of faith can affirm members of the community as persons who can risk handling their faith and interpreting it in the light of their experience. These meanings shared in relationship with other members of that community of ministers contributes to the life of the community and, sometimes, to the larger community of faith to which the members are accountable. The new imaginatively informed interpretation and the experience of the community that helped create it can encourage and empower the members' continuing their interpretation of Christian meanings in the context of their place of ministry.

When the group moves on to reflection that is more specifically theological, there is an initial presentation of an event in ministry or a response to a biblical or theological text with the presenter's initial theological reflection about it. Members of the group respond to the presentation with some continuing awareness of their earlier bracketing experience and offer their associations to the material and their consultation about how to proceed toward further toward theological conceptualization..

The presenter takes the group's consultation and their encouraged to go "back to the books," seeking to find what the larger church, the scholars or his ecclesial tradition have to say about the issue that has been presented. As Luke Johnson has suggested, the imagination of the theologian should "roam freely through the Sacred Writ" or the literature of faith. This, he says, can literally be a way to new life, or I would add, at least to an interesting sermon, lesson, or

doctoral project. After the return to the books the presenter comes back to the group with a second edition of his work, this time more informed by his colleagues and by his religious tradition. He uses the group's consultation, now offered with more discussion and critique, and puts together a theological formulation of the issue to be used as needed in his ministry.

As I have suggested earlier, the purpose of theological reflection is to contribute to the kind of practical knowledge or wisdom that gains insight into situations of ministry, that creatively interprets the texts and traditions of faith, and that further develops the person and practice of the minister. Developing this kind of wisdom requires (1) the freedom to use one's imagination to bend, actively handle, or move from its usual place whatever is being reflected upon. (2) The reflection also involves prior knowledge and the use of the reflector's memory in dealing with things that are already somewhat familiar. (3) It is a process, not an immediate reaction, one that involves thoughtful consideration of the matter at hand whether it is a biblical text, theological doctrine or an event in ministry. (4) The process also involves not only what is being reflected upon, but also the person of the reflector. The reflecting mirror focuses not only upon the event or the text, but also upon the character of the reflector and the reflecting community as well.

James Woodward and Stephen Pattison in their edited volume *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*,¹⁹ have discussed the essential characteristics of practical theology. What they say about practical theology resonates so clearly with much of what I have tried to say about theological reflection that my final comments about theological reflection will be a paraphrase of some of the things they affirm about practical theology.

Theological reflection is a transformational activity concerned with helping people and situations change. It is about theology and ministry

It is not just concerned with the propositional and rational, but seeks to find a place for feelings, emotions, the symbolic, and the irrational in order to describe the human condition.

It operates from a committed faith perspective, attempting to bear witness to the truth and relevance of religious experience in dialogue with the contemporary world.

Theological reflection is necessarily *unsystematic*. The theology emerging from theological reflection is a “throwaway,” or temporary theology that must always be flexible and provisional.

It attempts to discern the reality of situations in all their complexity, resisting temptations to gloss over the awkward aspects of what has been discerned.

¹⁹ James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (eds) *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2000, p. 13-16.

Theological reflection's major concern is to explore and contribute to immediate contexts, situations, and practices rather than historical data and texts.

It is experiential in that it gives contemporary people's experiences high status alongside authoritative texts like the Bible that contain religious experiences from the past.

It is interdisciplinary in its use of the methods and insights of disciplines that are not explicitly theological as a part of its theological method.

It is more interrogative than didactic in that it is more interested in asking good questions about the nature of reality and the practice of ministry than in trying to fit within theological orthodoxy.

Theological reflection as I have described it here requires immersion in the rich material of human experience and inhibition of too quick interpretation and conceptualization of it. It involves seeking consultation about one's experience and one's faith with colleagues who are also involved in ministry. That is the major reason why it cannot be done quickly.

Some other words of Herbert Anderson capture the spirit of what I have been saying:

In order to engage fully in the process of theological reflection we need to be able to be surprised, be willing to respect the idea of others as valid, regard every conclusion as provisional, and set aside cherished conclusions for the sake of community. Courage, curiosity, and humility are hallmarks of the practical Christian thinker.²⁰

²⁰ Herbert Anderson, "Forming a Pastoral Habitus: A Rich Tapestry with Many Threads," *Journal of Supervision and Training in Ministry*, Vol.15, 1994, p. 238.