

The Nature and Process of Theological Reflection

By Mary Hunt

Broadly conceived, theological reflection involves the attempt to bring into dialogue our own experience which is seen as an important locus of revelation, and the experience of the Christian community. The code word used to describe that community experience both past and present is **Tradition**. So generally speaking, then, theological reflection involves a dialogue between our experience and the wider tradition of which we are a part.

Within this framework the current understanding of experience is one pole of the process. I would like to make a few clarifying remarks about the meaning of tradition, the other pole, as it is used in theological reflection. Tradition is sometimes misunderstood as a static kind of reality, a sort of enclosed box, a “deposit of faith” which has as its content certain timeless truths against which we can check all our later perceptions and experiences. Vatican II and much current theological thought, however adopt a much more dynamic view of tradition. It is this dynamic view that is presupposed in theological reflection. Following this view, and for our purposes, we might define tradition as including scripture, doctrine, church history, stories of heroines and heroes of faith – all the various ways faith has been handed on through the centuries as well as the various ways that faith has been interpreted. Perhaps the most important characteristics of the tradition, then, for the theological reflection process are its pluriformity and its dynamism. Tradition is an active, not a static words and Christian tradition has been pluriform from its very beginnings.

I think also that it is important to note that Christian tradition is pluriform on two levels:

1. It has been pluriform within particular historical periods, i.e. even within the New Testament period one can find different interpretations of the Christ event, of eschatology, of church order, etc. (so we shouldn't be surprised by pluriform theologies today.)
2. The tradition is also pluriform longitudinally, or across history. The tradition has developed in a dynamic way as the Christian Church interacted with different cultural contexts and historical challenges. So one finds different theological explanations and insights at different times in history, i.e. early church issues, medieval syntheses and present day concentrations necessarily differ because of the different concerns and questions of each age, inspired at least in part by the different cultural, social and philosophical contexts of our times. There has been, therefore, in our past as well as our present a variety of beliefs and expressions of faith.

I think that it is important to start a theological reflection process by recalling this dynamic pluriform view of tradition to avoid the danger of using the word unreflectively to mean "as we have always done it," or as we sometimes hear "as the Church has always taught." Our history and our tradition are far more interesting and complex than that.

There are two other important points about tradition that I think it is important to recall before starting a theological reflection process.

1. It is a presupposition of the process that the tradition is valuable and worth knowing and evaluating in the light of present experience. The theological

reflection process presupposes that we can receive guidance from the rich diversity of our communal past. One of the things that historical research prior to Vatican II showed us was that a knowledge of our history can free us from the tyranny of the recent past which should not be equated with “what the Church as always taught.”

2. On the other hand, one should not see the dialogue with tradition as a one-way street. Dialogue goes two ways. Not only do we allow our experience to be stretched and challenged by tradition, but also our experience can and should challenge and critique the tradition. And this is a particularly important dimension for us as women in the Church today. The distortion in our tradition which has been caused by the patriarchal traditioning process causes us to approach the tradition with a certain suspicion. Our tradition has been handed on to us largely through the experience and in the categories and interpretations of men. This can lead us often to experience the tradition as alienating and extrinsic to us as women. One of the functions of theological reflection is to underline the importance of bringing our own experience of God, human life, and Christian revelation **as women** to bear as a critique of the patriarchal distortion. In a more positive way, also, our own experience and questions lead us to look within the tradition for elements which are more liberating for women.

With this brief reflection on the meaning of tradition as one of the elements in theological reflection, then, I would like to move toward looking at the process itself. Within the general description of bringing experience and tradition into dialogue, many actual models or methods of theological reflection exist today. These methods do have

certain common elements although they may differ somewhat in procedure. Some common elements might be described as follows:

- They begin with reflecting on concrete experience and the feelings and thoughts that are generated by that experience.
- They employ a collaborative effort, one's experience is brought into dialogue with others.
- They help in organizing and refining the data of raw experience.
- They facilitate a dialogue between experience and tradition so that these can mutually illuminate and critique each other; they help one to identify and name the theological meanings inherent in one's experience.
- They lead to action - in the light of the reflection what action is one led to do?

Behind these common elements can be seen a few basic assumptions. There is an assumption that:

1. Experience and Christian tradition are open to mutual influence.
2. A collaborative effort is richer than a solitary pursuit.
3. Story telling is one effective way of sharing, ordering and refining one's experience.
4. Persons today are looking for ways or tools to reflect on and assess their experience.

The particular model or method of theological reflection that we will be using during this conference is one developed by Pat McDermott (who was an important resource in planning this meeting).

I will conclude by describing the six steps that will constitute the process we will be using. (I'm sure you will all become very familiar with these steps over the next few days).

1. **EXPERIENCE: ATTENTIVENESS TO EXPERIENCE: LISTENING**

This step will involve gathering in small groups, and sharing a personal statement or story about a particular experience. It is hoped that the small groups will provide an environment in which persons can share their stories in trust and honesty.

2. **CRITICAL REFLECTION - LOOKING AT THE VALUES/ASSUMPTIONS/BIASES OR MOTIVES BEHIND THE EXPERIENCE**

This is the clarifying stage. It involves trying to clarify why we do what we do, and analyzing critically our own experiences. Group interaction at this stage will be aimed at assisting one another in becoming more focused about the shared stories, particularly by helping to uncover the values, beliefs, assumptions, and themes that lie behind the stories.

3. **THE SYMBOLIZATION PROCESS - SYMBOLIZING THE EXPERIENCE**

At this stage you will be asked to identify a symbol or image that emerges from your story that will portray how you see yourself in the experience and/or how God is disclosed for you in the experience.

4. **CONTENT/PRESENTATION - STRETCHING THE MEANING OF THE EXPERIENCE THROUGH CONTENT OR INPUT**

This is the point at which you will have the opportunity to attend two workshops designed to present some aspect of the tradition. These can act as a

dialogue partner with the original experience and reflection and allow for the mutual critique and illumination we discussed earlier. The diversity of the workshops offered witnesses to the pluriform and diverse nature of Christian tradition.

5. **CORRELATION - INTEGRATING THE EXPERIENCE**

Step five is the opportunity for actual dialogue between your individual stories, and that aspect of the tradition which was presented in the workshop. You may see either connections or lack of connections in terms of values and themes, symbols and images.

6. **ENACTMENT - CHOOSING SOME ACTION I AM BEING LED TO OUT OF MY EXPERIENCE**

This is the goal of theological reflection. What concrete action grows out of this reflection process? In terms of the theme of this conference, how has your experience shaped your spirituality, what have you learned through this process and where does that lead you for the future?

This was a brief description of the process we will be entering into for the next few days. We hope it will be truly helpful in moving toward naming a spirituality that grows out of our own experience as women in this century of the world and church.

HUNT MODEL OF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

1. Attentiveness to the Experience
2. Interpreting the Experience
 Look at the values / assumptions / biases / motives behind the experience
3. Symbolizing the Experience
4. Stretching the meaning of the experience through content or input.
5. Integrating the Experience
6. Acting out the Experience
 Choosing some action I am being led to out of my experience.

Note: This document is from a lecture given by Mary Hunt in 1996 at the LWRC Convention. Mary Hunt gave permission to reprint these notes for STM use.

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