O’Brien Micro-Lecture 2

In the reading this week, I offer a Gospel narrative—Jesus’ appearance at the Sea of Tiberias in John 21—as a metaphor for the process of theological reflection. In the first unit, I had proposed some reasons for engaging in such processes: the assumption of God’s presence and activity in the world, our desire to cooperate with God’s will in serving the Kingdom of God, and the importance of our practices in cooperating faithfully and effectively. I think that John 21 provides an evocative narrative that can help us become more comfortable with theological reflection.

As you read, write in your Learning Journal, and discuss the assigned questions, I’d like to emphasize two important qualities for you to cultivate:

1. First, openness to God’s sometimes-surprising presence and activity. The Holy Spirit moves where it will! John 21 is a story of unexpected events for the followers of Jesus. As we enter into our reflection on it, we may be surprised at our new thoughts, feelings and questions.

2. Second, imagination in our response to the narrative and to our own ministry.

Theologian John R. Sachs comments:

It seems to me that the Scriptures are not meant merely to teach us certain facts about God, the world and Christian life. They are meant, rather, to inspire our imaginations, enabling us to recognize the inner heart and outer contours of the Kingdom….The stories about Jesus, his words and deeds permit the believer to develop a sensibility for the Kingdom. This can enable us to imagine our lives in a much different way and help us to develop an ability to discern the presence of the Lord’s Spirit in the ever-changing circumstances of our present lives.

O’Brien Micro-Lecture 3

I’m very inspired by the account from Fr. Benedicto. It reveals a man who is able to enter frightening and uncertain situations to bring a message of hope and reconciliation. I’m convinced that he must have experienced sound “formation” and profound “transformation” in his spiritual journey in order to take on such a mission. And, as he notes, the mission itself was transformative for him.

This interaction between experiences of formation and transformation can happen in more ordinary situations, too. When I was in college, for example, I was part of a student group that “formed” me and pointed me toward “transformation” in important ways. The members participated in many service and outreach activities to elderly, disabled and poor people. We also celebrated liturgy together regularly, studied the economic and social conditions affecting those we served, went on retreats, and made time for parties, too. I realize now that this group offered me a program of holistic “formation” for Christian mission in community—and in being formed, I was “transformed” into someone with lasting commitments to justice, peace and the integrity of creation.
This unit, then, is intended to help you to understand the vital importance of “formation” for “transformation” in your spirituality as ministers—whatever your circumstances—and to note the role of theological reflection in making this possible. As you read my notes and the Krisak article for this unit, please keep in mind:

1. First, spirituality is more than prayer—and it’s even more than our relationship with God. Spirituality encompasses every dimension of our lives and how we are in touch with the mystery of divine presence throughout.
2. Second, Christian spirituality has a long and rich history. As with Christian theology as a whole, spirituality develops in dialogue with the contexts and situations in which the followers of Jesus find themselves.
3. Third, because of this contextual grounding, Christian spirituality will have various emphases at various times in history and in different parts of the world. Fr. Paul Bernier, in a book called *Ministry in the Church*, proposes four characteristics for the spirituality of priests (and all Christians) today. He calls it a servant spirituality, and says it should be:
   - *ecclesial*, that is, community-centered and nurtured;
   - *incarnational*, having appreciation for and centeredness in creation and sensitive to cultural diversity/
   - calling all the baptized to be in service to the world; and
   - *committed to liberation and justice*

**O’Brien Micro-Lecture 4**
In this second part of the course, we’ll look more closely at some key components of theological reflection. In the current unit, we’re focusing on how the two closely related factors, *culture* and *context*, influence our experiences and how we interpret those experiences.

Here’s a simple example: eating. Every human eats, and must do so to stay alive. Thus each of us experiences eating throughout our life. However, context and culture greatly affect both our experiences and the way we make meaning of them.

Think of your most recent meal. Where and when did it take place? What food was served, and how was it prepared? Who did the preparing and serving? Who ate together, and how long did the meal take? What customs and rituals were part of the meal?

Contrast this with the meal of a child house laborer in Haiti, a country of desperate poverty even before the recent earthquake. Such children sometimes hover at the edges of food distribution centers. Once the adults standing in line there have received their rations, the children swoop in and grab whatever leftovers the adults have dropped on the ground. Their eating experience is profoundly shaped by their context and culture, just as yours is. It can be assumed for these children, tragically, that eating is simply for survival, with no opportunity for sharing food with others at table, for enjoying its preparation or consumption—indeed, for any positive “cultural” meaning at all.
We could draw many other comparisons of eating by groups and individuals, rich and poor, throughout the world. For now, let these examples help to remind us to bring an awareness of cultural context to theological reflection on our experiences and situations.