O’Brien Micro-Lecture 6

In the previous unit we discussed the major elements of the process of TR being used in this course: Experiences and Situations, Social Analysis, Christian Tradition, and New Actions. In this unit we’re putting these together and getting a sense of the overall method and flow of TR, in preparation for practicing it over the next few units.

An image for the relationship between method and flow might be that of a skilled craftsperson making a piece of furniture. He has been taught, and has practiced for years, a step-by-step process for assembling the piece. This is akin to “method”—knowing the materials and tools that are needed, he brings them together in ways that will predictably result in a good product. Yet for each piece, this expert will have a distinctive way of combining the materials and using the tools that makes each new product unique. His own creativity, appreciation for materials he has and the conditions under which he’s working, and perhaps a sense of who will purchase and use the piece—all of these add a kind of artistic style or flow to the approach that he takes.

Theologian Robert Kinast affirms that TR seeks

…to allow the reality of theology to come through its distinct form, namely, experience correlated with tradition for the sake of praxis [that is, reflective action]. 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.

Doing this effectively requires attention to both “method” and “flow” in TR. While it can be helpful to have clearly defined concepts and rules to guide us, we also need the artistic element that emerges from practice and from imagination—and which seeks to be open to the working of God’s creative Spirit. Our Scriptural metaphors can help to evoke this. Recall how we used the metaphor of fishing, then cooking and sharing the fish, from John 21 in Unit 2 as an imaginative and artful entry into the flow of TR. Drawing on your own cultures, I hope that new metaphors will emerge as you practice TR.
O’Brien Micro-Lecture 7
Now we will begin to practice TR according to the method outlined in Unit 6. As you’ll see, I’ve constructed an example for you to use in your group or on your own. It concerns a parish in western Africa run by the Congregation of the Holy Ghost—the Spiritans—and that parish’s ministry with migrants.

As you work on this example together, I hope that you’ll remember the following tips for success in beginning TR:
• Always study and discuss in an atmosphere of prayerful discernment, attentive to how God is working in the experiences and situations and in you.
• Be patient with this new process; like any other skill, it takes practice to become comfortable in it.
• Along with the facilitator, help others in your group to work through each phase of the method in a disciplined way, resisting the temptation to lapse into unstructured debate.
• Honor the diversity of insights that may emerge among you.
• Respect not only one another’s viewpoint but also the perspectives of those who present TR examples. In this instance, since the participants in the example are far away, imagine that they can listen to you as you speak about their situation.
• Recognize that all our insights are partial and limited, and give thanks for those that emerge through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

• Best wishes as you launch into theological reflection together!

O’Brien Micro-Lecture 8
In this unit we’ll practice TR with a second example, also drawn from the missionary work of the Spiritans. This example uses quotations from an essay written by a Spiritan as he reflected on his two years in ministry to the poor in Mexico. Thus, his reflection is not aimed at planning new actions within that context, since he has already departed from it. Rather, in such a case, “action” for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation must be imagined for his future ministry.

Many of you may be in similar situations, either “between” active ministries due to your studies, or preparing to engage in ministry for the first time. Thus you are challenged to do TR now in a way that develops this skill for what may be an uncertain future. Try to use the practice in these units, then, to build the habitus for TR in ways that will make it “portable”—something that you can carry with you into new contexts.
As you work on this example together, use the same procedure as in Unit 6. And you may want to review the tips for success included in my micro-lecture for Unit 7, summarized here:

- Atmosphere of prayerful discernment
- Patience with yourself and others
- Staying disciplined in your use of the TR method
- Honoring diverse insights
- Respecting the perspective of the author of each example
- Recognizing the limitations of our insights, and being thankful for those that emerge through the Spirit’s guidance.

O’Brien Micro-Lecture 9
Now the time has come to generate your own examples of TR for use in your groups. As you worked through the examples in Units 7 and 8, I hope that your own memories, analytical skills and imagination have been sparked. And I hope that this has helped you to begin to understand yourself as a practical/pastoral theologian. Ministry is about “being” as much as it is about “doing”—so in doing TR, you are opening yourself to being more fully attuned to God’s presence and activity and thus serving as a channel or window for divine grace. This is your role—and as a pastoral leader, it is also your role to invite others into such service.

O’Brien Micro-Lecture 10
In their book on theological reflection, James and Evelyn Whitehead liken its various elements to the blades on a helicopter propeller. When stopped, it is easy to see each blade, but when the engine is turned on, the propeller rotates so quickly that the blades seem to blur together!

Remember the group of women that I mentioned in Unit 5, with whom I did TR for over a decade? A few years after we had disbanded and I had moved away, I was able to visit with them again. When we gathered, the helicopter propeller started turning so fast that it fell off! That is, we “lost” our process and thus the fruits of good TR. Eventually we had to stop and consciously remind ourselves to use our method step by step in order to reclaim the rich insights that we had always gained through our TR habitus.

The blurring of the TR “blades” can often happen in groups as they enthusiastically engage with an example. You may have already noticed this tendency as you discussed
the earlier examples in Units 7 and 8. Now, as you prepare to work with your own examples, try to follow the four-part method, step by step, as outlined throughout the course and in the Instructor’s Notes for this unit. While the facilitator is primarily responsible to guide this, everyone should help in keeping the group “on track.”

After doing it a few times, you may want to stop and consider whether some small revisions will improve your work together. Again, the facilitator can take note of this and incorporate the revisions, but everyone should be co-responsible.

Good luck!

O’Brien Micro-Lecture 11

I hope that your extensive work with TR in the last several units has been fruitful. By now you should have a good familiarity with its method and have developed, as a group, some sense of a “flow” for engaging in it.

In these final units, we will take a step back from practicing TR and consider its relationship to other aspects of you as minister and your own ministry, as well as looking toward the next course in this series. In the present unit we’ll consider the minister and how she or he is gifted and seeks to develop those gifts.

The notion of “gifts” for ministry is, of course, rooted in the New Testament, especially the writings of Paul. Early Christian communities were experiencing the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the realization that they were called to live differently in their new identity as baptized believers in Christ. They were to respond to the unearned charis—the superabundant gift of God’s gracious, merciful love for them—through the exercise of their charismata—the particular and varied gifts bestowed by the Spirit on each, for the greater good of all. In Paul’s memorable presentation in 1 Cor 12:

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit (vv. 4-7).

As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all give to drink of one Spirit (v. 12).
When I interview a prospective student for our program in Pastoral Ministry at Duquesne University, I always ask her to name her gifts—both as discovered within herself and acknowledged by others. Discernment of gifts is a vital and ongoing spiritual exercise for Christian ministers for the sake of faithful and effective service, and for growth in this service.

O’Brien Micro-Lecture 12

I usually incorporate TR in my teaching and in outside presentations to groups in my church and community. While I’ve developed a confidence in the method and a sense of flow over the years, TR will “look” different as I use it with different audiences and in different settings. It is also more readily embraced by certain groups. For example, when I teach theology to undergraduates at my university, most of whom are eighteen to twenty-two years of age, they may have little interest in learning themes from Christian tradition. Thus they, and I, are hampered in the use of TR. On the other hand, Christian adults are typically excited by the TR method and use it enthusiastically, even if they lack formal background in theology. They draw insightfully on their own experiences and situations, and their maturity in faith allows them to make the most of their theological knowledge in connecting Christian tradition with new actions in their lives.

Although I’ve stressed the conversational dimension of TR, and you have practiced it in groups in largely verbal ways—oral and written—part of effective adaptation also involves exercising non-verbal capacities. The use of art, dance, play, movement and other dimensions of human expression are very important. For example, I led a workshop with lay ministers in which they drew colorful representations of the four phases of TR on large pieces of paper. I also once taught a class with adults from many cultural contexts, and one of the students—a trained dancer—created and led a dance in which all of us expressed with our bodies the movements of TR.

In this unit I want to encourage you to exercise flexibility and imagination in adapting TR for your ministry. The reading and Instructor’s Notes will offer some further examples. If you are currently involved in full-time study, your opportunities to do this now may be limited. However, keeping aware of the TR habitus in your everyday round of activities may well yield unexpected opportunities. One of my students, after learning to use it, remarked that TR became part of her thinking in almost every situation! At the least, I believe that it will increase your consciousness of God’s presence and activity in your life, and cause you to be more attentive to the rhythm of moving, in Thomas Groome’s words, from “life to faith, and faith to life.”
O’Brien Micro-Lecture 13

As we come to the end of this course, I want to reiterate some points about theological reflection and also begin to highlight the role of social analysis, which will be the focus of the next course.

This course and all courses in the Duquesne University JPIC program are built on the values of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation, especially as grounded in Christian faith and the charisms of missionary congregations. Many such congregations have publications and websites dedicated to the promotion of JPIC, and I hope that you are becoming familiar with those most relevant to you.

Theological reflection within a JPIC commitment will, as with all TR, take seriously God’s presence and activity in our midst. It will be catalyzed by real-life experiences and situations, especially those of the poor and oppressed. It will seek to cooperate in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, oriented toward the full realization of God’s Kingdom. To do this effectively, social analysis of the political, economic, social, and cultural factors revealed in experiences and situations will be vital.

As with the TR method as a whole, social analysis can be seen as happening in informal ways every day. When we have an experience or situation that is especially notable—whether positive, negative or aspects of both—we naturally tend to ask “Why?” We seek to interpret the experience according to our habitual assumptions, values and ways of making meaning. However, the need for more formal and deliberate social analysis emerges especially when we are confronted with experiences and situations of suffering due to injustice, where there is a strong sense of a “disconnect” between how things are and how they ought to be. Perhaps our habitual assumptions no longer make sense. Perhaps our suffering and frustration at injustice have become so intense that we are no longer willing simply to bear this. In community, then, fortified by Christian tradition and what it reveals of God’s values, we gather to answer the “Why?” question through social analysis.

I hope to continue this exploration with you in the next course in this series. Until then, I wish you blessings in your ministry and in your practice of theological reflection!