

The Pastoral Cycle¹ – or ‘See, Judge, Act’

Also known as the ‘Doing Theology Spiral’, this is a useful way of working to ensure a balance between reflection and action. It is a way of working that is also a process, and important for the results it produces. It is a way of engaging ourselves in a programme of commitment, action and transformation as followers of Christ in the world. It is a way of helping us to link faith, action and politics within our daily lives. The process helps people to develop critical judgement about situations, events and structures. Often the stages (below) overlap and intermingle²:

Experience:

What do I know of this issue? What have I experienced of this?

Who are affected most by this and how? How has the issue arisen?

We start from our own experience in order to be able to move on from there, sharing our own understanding and knowledge of a particular issue. This gives the group a foundation on which to build and plenty of opportunities to discuss their concerns and learn from other people’s experience.

Analysis:

Why is this happening? Who gains from this situation? Who loses out?

Why does this situation continue?

Human beings are not creatures who live independently of other members of the human community and the natural world. We need to understand the role we play in the structures which order human society, the links between our lives and the lives of the poor with whom we wish to be in solidarity. Thorough analysis needs to form the basis of our work, so that we will be able to identify instances where we may be participating in the oppression unconsciously facing marginalized peoples and the ways in which we can most effectively challenge that oppression.

Theological (Faith) Reflection:

What particular insight/view does our faith, church teaching, scriptures etc give us on this issue?

This is a very grand title for trying to discern what our faith has to say about the realities we face. Our work is concerned with putting faith into action, in participating in building God’s Kingdom. We need to listen to the word of God, reflect on scripture, particularly through the eyes of the poor and marginalized. It is wise to remember that God’s place is in everything we are trying to achieve and not just in a particular place on the agenda.

Action:

What needs to be done to resolve this situation? What can I/we/my parish do?

How will your action change those involved? How can you tell if it is successful?

¹ Taken from the Shrewsbury Diocesan J & P Commission Resources Pack with thanks

² Living the Gospel 3 – Doing Justice, a handbook for groups, (CAFOD, Pax Christi, SCIAF & CIIR, 1994) p 29

The group now has to decide on what it wants to do – or is able to do. Often, the problem is not in deciding what to do, but in not taking on too much! The objectives the group or individuals set should be realistic and take into account the resources, talents and time available. It is important to have effective action so people don't get frustrated. Starting small and developing activities is much better than constantly feeling that nothing is happening.

Celebration:

Whatever a group decides to do, celebrating achievements is vital and could be an opportunity to recruit new people to join a campaign or concern. They also strengthen the group's sense of unity and community. Not all celebrations have to be of successes, they could be linked with the need to grieve, or as a feeling of powerlessness (as after Sept 11th 2001). It doesn't have to always be 'holy' though it's good to spend some time together in prayer. It's also useful to record your activities in a scrapbook with any newspaper cuttings and photographs so that you can look back on them in the leaner moments.

Evaluate:

What went well? What didn't? What lessons have you learned for the next time?

Have you made anyone else aware of the issue? What do you hope to achieve in the

future? What might you do differently next time/

Often the biggest learning is to start with something small! Did you manage to get the rest of the parish involved? Were the same people struggling to do everything – perhaps you need to get more people involved, often a personal invitation will encourage people to do something on a 'one-off' basis, and they might enjoy it so much they want to become more involved? Evaluation is not something we do automatically in many cases and yet it is often the most valuable part of the exercise to begin with, enabling people to get to know each other and how they can work together. It takes a bit of effort but is well worth it in the long term.

New experience:

What do I know of this issue? What have I experienced of this?

Who are affected most by this and how?

Following on from the evaluation, the group now has an enormous amount of experience on which to build. Does it want to continue on the same issue or move to something else? Perhaps it feels brave enough to tackle two issues! How does the group feel about the way it is working? What is the next step?

Example of using the pastoral cycle: Asylum Seekers and Refugees in our area

1. Experience: The issue of Asylum – what do I already know of the way people are treated, of their rights, of the situation in my neighbourhood? Do I know any refugees?
2. Analysis: Why is this happening? Why are people coming from abroad? What happens to them? Is there a reception centre near to me – or a detention centre? How are they treated? Do we need to ask someone from an agency to come and

talk to us about the issue to understand it? Where can we get the information to help us support a local need?

3. Faith Reflection: Jesus spoke of “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Mt 25: 35) What insight do we get from this? What are we called to by Jesus? What about the parish?

4. Action: What can we as a group do? Are we being called to concrete action or campaigning, to letter writing or volunteering? Could we collect items for a nearby Refugee Support centre? Could we offer emergency accommodation to an asylum seeker? Could we hold a multi-cultural celebration during Refugee Week to help the parish understand how we are all part of the same family? Could we holding an open meeting with speakers from the refugee community? How can we choose just one (or two) actions?

5. Celebration: perhaps a multi-cultural event, or prayers during Refugee Week, or visiting a support centre and sharing with the people we meet.

6. Evaluate/New experience: what have we learned about Asylum here in the UK and the system that people have to cope with? Through our action what change have we made – to ourselves, to the parish, to the asylum seekers and refugees? What would we do differently next time? Perhaps we need to do some more campaigning as well as direct action of collecting clothes etc? *Where do we go from here?*