



Immersion question:

What is happening here?

Analysis question:

Why is it happening?

Reflection question:

What does it mean (through a lens of faith)?

Response question:

How should we respond?

## THE PASTORAL CIRCLE

The concept of the "pastoral circle" or the "circle of praxis" was introduced in the book, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*, by Joe Holland and Peter Henriot (Orbis, 1980). This book is passionately concerned about the impoverishment of people\*, development, and social transformation. The pastoral circle is a critical, systematic and systemic approach to the reflecting on our human predicament.

The four moments or dimensions of the pastoral circle as: insertion, social analysis, theological reflection, and pastoral planning. All four of these circulate around experience and are concerned for justice. Peter Henriot presents the pastoral circle as follows:

1. *Contact or Immersion: WHAT IS HAPPENING HERE?*

"When contact is made, a privileged question to be asked is: What is happening to the poor in this situation?" This *option for the poor* "places a priority on the experiences, views, needs, feelings, and stance of the poor and most vulnerable in a community."

2. *Analysis or Social Analysis: WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?*

"The question of why such conditions exist will be guided by those whose *rights* are being violated and whose *responsibilities* are called upon to change the situation. The language of rights and responsibilities--rooted in the human dignity of each person in community--pushes analytical approaches beyond economic and political causes to social and cultural causes." (23)

3. *Reflection or Theological Reflection: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?*

"When we come to ask what it means to our faith to evaluate this situation and what is really most at stake in this situation, we can be guided by the church's social teaching about human dignity and solidarity. Every person is made in the image of God. Dignity is not earned; it is a gift. Key to this dimension of the pastoral circle is the influence of Scripture and theological thought.

4. *Response or Pastoral Planning: HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?*

"What to do is an inevitable question in the movement around the pastoral circle. Two principles of the church's social teaching orient the threefold response of planning, action, and evaluation. The first is the principle that places action at the lowest level possible--*subsidiarity*. The second is the principle that reckons the most efficient, equitable, and sustainable use of resources, *stewardship*."

Each of these four moments or dimensions is fundamental for real discernment among pastoral teams, social activists, development workers, instructors, and especially those working directly with the poor. Effective movement around the pastoral circle must be grounded in one's own experience, rather than books or the experience of others. Analysis must "pay attention to the many structures of reality." Theological reflection must be "cognitive (beliefs), affective (trusts), and effective (deeds)." "Response should always be the aim of going around the pastoral circle."

*\*Peter Henriot prefers using "impoverishment of people" over "poverty" because it illustrates that the poor persons are a result of structures rather than a status.*