Theological Reflection Day Guidelines

“Supervision, theological reflection, and evaluation are necessary components of an effective pastoral program. Although theological reflection can help the development of pastoral skills, its primary purpose is to interpret pastoral experience or activity in light of Scripture, church teaching, personal faith, and pastoral practices. Reflection of this kind should become a lifelong habit in priestly ministry.”
- Program for Priestly Formation # 248

I. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION: PURPOSE AND GOALS

1) What is Theological Reflection?
Descriptive definitions:
□ Theological Reflection is a conscious reflection on life experience in ministry, accomplished in the light of one’s faith and theological tradition, and respectful of the thoughts and emotions evoked by the event both in the minister and in those to whom he ministers. The purpose of the reflection is to assist the Seminarian in integrating and interiorizing these elements of the experience of ministry.

□ Theological Reflection is the ability to bring the Christian tradition into fruitful dialogue with contemporary experience; the goal being to interpret the experience so as to understand God’s will and action in the world, and to formulate an appropriate pastoral response to a situation. In this context then, Theological Reflection is the critical and constant foundation at the heart of a parish priest’s ministry and prayer.

2) Why do Theological Reflection?
It is imperative that a candidate for the priesthood learn to look at human experience through the prism of faith and theology.

It is a written task because the discipline involved requires sustained reflection and because the reflection then can be shared with those guiding the candidate’s formation process.

3) Why a three-fold process?
Each part of the Theological Reflection Paper strengthens a particular skill.

Part I invites the Seminarian to be a keen observer of the events that are going on around him.

Part II requires that we acknowledge the impact that our thoughts and emotions have on a pastoral situation, both in the minister and in the one who is served.

Part III invites the Seminarian to connect his theological training to his experience of ministry, so as to enhance his effectiveness in ministry and to fuel his desire for further theological study.
II. Theological Reflection Paper

n.b., The Theological Reflection Paper is due each semester on the date listed in the Orientation Booklet that was given at the Field Education Orientation Workshop at the start of the Fall Semester. This due date is also posted in the Field Education Calendar on the Seminary website.

On the due date, the paper should be dropped off at the Office of Pastoral and Apostolic Formation by 9 am. This due date is to be observed to allow Eileen Gardner enough time to make copies of the papers for all of the priest moderators and members of each group.

Please organize and execute the paper as follows:

- The Theological Reflection paper is a minimum of four (4) pages, 12 point, New York Times font, typed, double-spaced.
- Describe a pastoral incident drawn from your Field Education experience that you have discussed with your Field Education Supervisor. An incident is noteworthy in that it gave you reason for further reflection on the Faith; it was a graced moment in that it was experienced by you as a movement of God, or it awakened in you confusion or anxiety.

Parts I and II combined should be no more than two (2) pages.

- Part III should be at least two (2) pages.
- Do not use real names.
- Avoid specific details that might compromise confidentiality.
- Be prepared to summarize and discuss your paper in further detail with your classmates and a professor from the faculty who will lead the Theological Reflection Session.

PART I: THE EXPERIENCE
This is a brief narration of the event, i.e., “what happened,” described to the best of your ability:

- Detail the experience without interpretation or conclusion.
- Include the background or setting insofar as it helps one understand the event.

PART II: THE ANALYSIS
Here, begin your interpretation of the event:

- Note the initial thoughts and feelings that you had as the event unfolded, and relate them to your understanding of your own development in pastoral formation.
- Note the thoughts and feelings of the other people involved in the experience with you.
- Judge the meaning of these thoughts and feelings and the importance that should be attached to them.

PART III: THE THEOLOGICAL INSIGHT
Briefly relate the situation to the Catholic theological tradition. Making “faith connections” is the heart of theological reflection, assisting the faithful in understanding their experience in light of what God is revealing to them:

- Note the theological content inherent in the pastoral event, drawing from understanding of Scripture and Tradition to shed light on the event.
- Note the manner in which the Lord may be revealing Himself in this situation.
THEOLOGICAL MEANING: WHAT RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE DOES IT HAVE?
Synthesize the experience and situate it in theological conceptualization. Its meaning should flow out of your analysis. Questions to be asked of the experience include the following:

- What is its meaning theologically?
- What theological questions does it raise?
- How does the experience tell us something about how God relates with us?
- What does it say about who we are in relation to God?
- How has God revealed Himself in this experience?
- What images of God are implied?
- How does the experience relate to the Gospel?

RESOLUTIONS / FOLLOW-UP: WHAT DO YOU DO NEXT? HOW WILL YOU MINISTER / SERVE IN THE FUTURE?

- Discuss implications of analysis and synthesis for pastoral concern and responsible action.
- What does this experience contribute to your understanding of yourself as a minister?
- How might you minister more effectively in the future?
- What are the goals and limits you have for continuing ministry with this person/situation?
- What resources would you like to see utilized in the care of this person/situation?
- Which are realistic and appropriate?
- Is this pastoral strategy congruent with the theological / pastoral questions raised above?

SOME GUIDELINES FOR EVALUATION:

- A firm basis in Scripture
- Compatibility with Christian tradition
- A capacity to help Christians in their efforts to believe in Jesus
- A capacity to direct believers to fulfill their mission as members of the Church
- Correspondence with the Christian religious experience today (Christian piety)
- Theological fruitfulness (further theological elaboration / integrating theological synthesis)
- Ability to foster a healthy sense of Christian anthropology

III. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION DAY: THE GROUP DISCUSSION

GROUP PROCESS FOR THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

- The students are divided into small groups. These groups are facilitated by a priest moderator.
- Each faculty member may vary the group process as deemed appropriate.
- Each student presents his paper

After each student has presented his theological reflection paper, the following takes place:
- **Clarification of information** - The group members may ask the presenter for additional information and clarification.

- **Agenda setting** - The priest moderator helps to elicit from the group members points of interest and themes that emerged, and then facilitates the discussion.