

The Pastoral Circle

By John Gonzalez

It is up to Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel's unalterable words, and to draw principles or reflections, norms of judgement, and directives of action from the social teaching of the Church

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Back in 1980 the Center of Concern, A Catholic social justice thinktank, devised a methodological tool for promoting social analysis on critical social issues. The Center of Concerns call this tool the “pastoral circle” and they have disseminated this to the faith based communities throughout the world. Their famous book, “Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice,” remains the authority on this subject and currently they have 21 editions of what is considered an essential reference for JPIC ministries.

The pastoral circle is a tool that aides us in making good social judgments on issues that impact a community. In living the moral life we are required to make sound judgments in order to discern between good and evil acts. The Church teaches us that the judgments of our conscience involve a process for discerning every action we take. This process can be long and painstaking pending on the complexities of the decision we need to make.

Conscience includes the perception of the principles of morality; their application in the given circumstances by practical discernment of reasons and goods; and finally judgments about concrete act.¹

The Church advises us in that same paragraph that only through a “prudent judgment of conscience” can we come to act on the moral good.

While some of our own personal moral decisions can be difficult to discern at the very least we tend to know the details of our own moral dilemmas and usually we have a pretty good sense of what the outcomes will be. Social moral decisions are usually far more complicated because we often do not know that details of the issue and we have no idea how and who these decisions will affect. To make a prudent judgment on social issues is a complicated task but it is a task we chose to accept as participating members of local and national democratic forms of governments.

And so it is that the pastoral circle was devised. This tool offers the individual or the community a framework from which we can explore all the details of both the social issue and the applicable moral principles from which we can make our “prudent judgment.” The pastoral circle is shown as a circular process with four moments incorporated into it (diagram 1).² These moments are:

- Insertion Experience – where one has an experience of the social issue.

¹ Article 1780, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, United States Catholic Conferences, 1994

² Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, S.J. *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*, Orbis Books, 2006, pg. 7

- Social Analysis – where one uncovers the root causes and values of the social issue.
- Theological Reflection – where one judges on the issue and the causes based on their own moral value system.
- Pastoral Action – where one acts on the judgments in a manner consistent one’s own moral values.

Before we get the particular moments it is helpful to understand two aspects of the process itself. First, the reader will notice that at the center of the diagram below we have incorporated a Passionist symbol. This identifies the lived experience of who we are. The ideal is that justice is blind, we strive to promote justice in the most objective way possible. The pastoral circle itself is an attempt to promote a more objective perspective on the social issue we face. And yet the reality is that we as individuals or as a group are neither objective nor blind. Perhaps it is better understood to say that we are not value free. We come at our own social dilemmas from a particular perspective which we should honor. We should however also honor the other perspectives that confront the same social dilemma. In a corporate decision, for example, the values of the CEO will be different then the values of the laborer. It is good for us to lay open and affirm who we are and from which perspective are we approaching the social issue. Since this is being written for a religious community it is appropriate that we use the symbol of our faith to identify the value we affirm in promoting the pastoral circle.

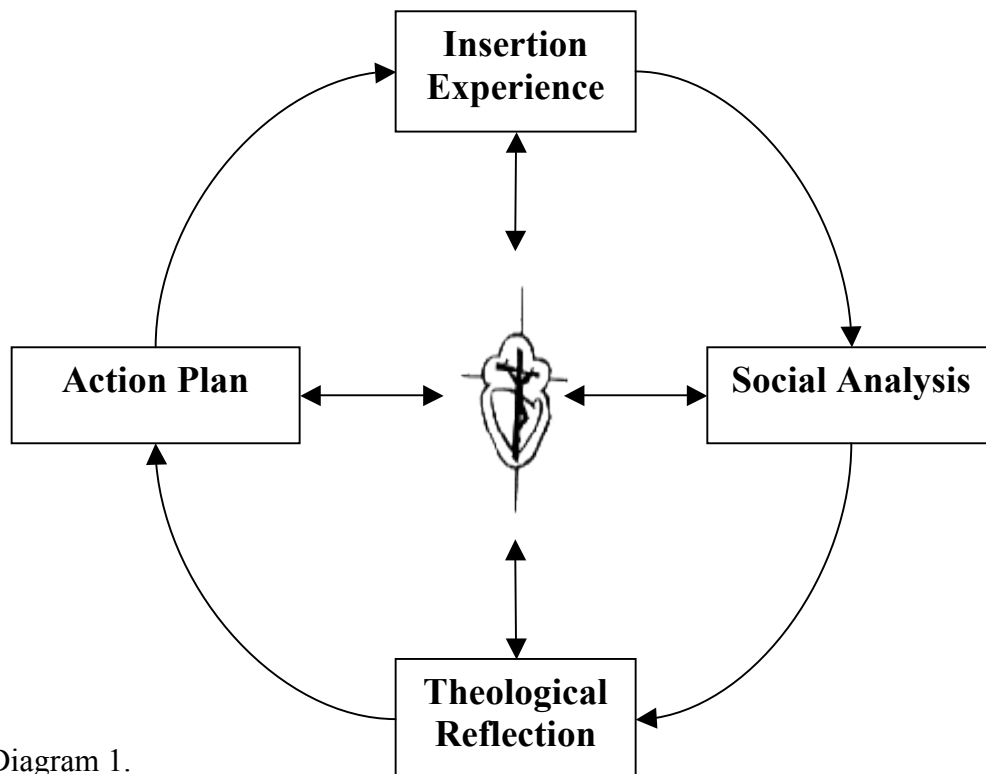


Diagram 1.

The reader will also notice the double arrows that connect the subjective identity in the middle with each moment of the process. That is because on the one hand our values will prejudice each analysis, reflection, and decision we make. Because we are a community of faith, our values will find greater expression during the moment of theological reflection. Other aspects of our values however will also reflect throughout the process. This is perfectly natural and there is nothing wrong with this. But it is good to own up to our own values and be open to the fact that other values are also being expressed. The reason that these arrows are double is because we also hope to be open to the process. As we are informed by experience, analysis, and reflection as well as the other values and perspectives that we encounter, we need to be able to integrate these so that we can make a “prudent judgment.”

The second aspect is with the use of the circular image for the pastoral circle. The image of the circle denotes an ongoing process. While this is true the image also handicaps the process from showing growth. In other words as one engages a social issue with a pastoral action then the social experience has changed. Once you have addressed a social issue then you will face a new social reality with its own issues which you may also want to address. Because of this many have suggested that the pastoral circle functions more appropriately as an ongoing spiral.

Now let us look at the four moments of the process itself.³

Insertion Experience:

The point of origin for any moral deliberation is the experience in question. This holds true for our social as well as personal deliberations. The community chooses to address a social issue because we each have an experience of it. Perhaps we are not personally affected by the issue but we may have feelings about it. The first moment in the cycle is for the community to express their experience of the issue. What are they feeling? What are they undergoing? How are they responding? This sharing will be the primary data for the community's insertion into the experience.

Passionist spirituality has us oriented to the needs of those “crucified as they are by injustice.” For us that means that we should express a sensitivity to those who are suffering from the social issue at hand. It does not exclude anyone to the process but rather it includes individuals whose experience is vital for the immersion of the group. It means that if we are addressing the issue of housing or health care we may all have our own feelings but we are encouraged to have the presence of one who is deeply affected by the issue. It means that if we are addressing the war in Iraq we may all have feelings and opinions but we should be attentive to the experience of those who are more deeply affected.

³ *Ibid.*, pg. 8-10

Social Analysis:

Imagine that the social issue in question can be represented as an onion. What social analysis hopes to accomplish is to peel away the various layers of the onion in order to find the root of it. The community hopes to find the root cause of the issue at hand in order to lay bare the cause that we will be reflecting on from our own faith tradition during the next moment of the process. In order to do this our analysis will examine the intricate social interrelationships that contribute to the social issue. Here are six layers the community may want to analyze:⁴

1. What is the history of the situation?
 - a. What do we know about the historical development of the issue?
 - b. What have been the recent events with regard to the issue and what are people's experiences of these events?
2. What are the major structures (institutions, policies and processes) that affect the issue?
 - a. Economic Structures (production, labor, access to capital, marketing, technology, corporations, tax structures, interest rates, consumption, distribution, Environmental and economic policies etc.)
 - b. Political Structures (Decision makers and their processes, public transparency and accountability, Constitutional laws, courts, political parties, lobbying and finance, etc.)
 - c. Cultural Structures (Religion and religious institutions, family, neighborhood, education, symbols, media, communications, music, lifestyle, art, local traditions and values, etc.)
3. What are the connections (explicit and implicit linkages) between these structures?
4. What are the major values operative in these structures?
5. What is the future direction of this situation?
 - a. What are the most significant trends to the present situation?
 - b. If things stay as they are what can we expect in 10 years?
 - c. What are the emerging sources of hope and creativity?
6. Drawing Conclusions
 - a. Prioritize the root causes within each structure
 - b. What are the two or three root elements of these causes that are most responsible for the current situation?

Theological Reflection:

At this moment the community strives to understand more deeply the social issue that was just analyzed by seeing the root causes of the issue from the perspective of faith. We especially want to assess the root values of the issue based on the values and principles of our Scripture, Catholic social teachings, and Passionist spirituality. As we reflect deeply

⁴ Catholic Campaign for Human Development, *Journey to Justice Retreat*, Session 6: Social Analysis

we look to our faith to give us new insights and offer us new responses towards addressing the social issue. It is at this point that we are judging the situation.

As we undergo this reflection we will want to examine aspects of our tradition that are most informative to us with regards to the social issue. From this we may want to ask some of the following questions:

1. What aspect of the social issue reinforces our Christian values? Where do we see social grace?
2. What aspect of the issue undercuts our Christian values? Where do we see social sin?
3. How realistic is Christian teaching here?
4. What is the Christian approach to this issue? Is it the best approach?
5. What is the role of the Church community?
6. What is the challenge to our community and our ministry?

Throughout this process we should stay in prayer asking for the power of the Holy Spirit and the courage of Christ Crucified to be with us. However at this time we should also pray to our God to give us the wisdom and courage to move on as a community in addressing the challenges that are emerging here.

Pastoral Planning:

Finally we come to the culmination of this phase of the process. Based on our analysis and reflections we now move towards the appropriate response. A plan should be developed that articulates this response.

A plan includes:

1. Vision – What we hope to accomplish
2. Goals – steps needed to accomplish the vision
3. Objectives – ways of measuring our goals
4. Resources – objects we need to move forward
5. Strategies – the means to achieving our end
6. Calendar – when we will get things done
7. Responsibilities – who will get what done
8. Evaluation – How will we assess our progress.

The following article will identify some forms of social action that can address the immediate social injustices or the root causes of these injustices.