

Reflection/Action Process

The social message of the Gospel must not be considered a theory, but above all else a basis and a motivation for action.... Today more than ever, the Church is aware that her social message will gain credibility more immediately from the witness of actions than as a result of its internal logic and consistency.

Pope John Paul II, The Hundredth Year, 1991

Introduction

Moving from beliefs and values to action is a fundamental requirement of our faith. But how do we accomplish this move? What steps are required?

This brief workbook is a tool to answer these questions. More specifically, it is intended as a guide for decision making about current social issues or for reflecting on the experiences that Catholics have in everyday life or through working with social ministry projects or volunteer opportunities in their parishes. Use this workbook as a tool to deepen your understanding of these experiences and to help identify available opportunities to act on behalf of justice.

Background

The material in this booklet describes a reflection-action process. It is based on a very traditional Catholic methodology that is often described as the "observe-judge-act" process. This process was initially promoted by a Belgian priest named Fr. Cardijn. Prior to World War II he inspired many Catholic social action groups such as the Young Christian Workers, Young Christian Students, and the Christian Family Movement.

This observe-judge-act method was also recommended in the 1961 encyclical letter entitled *Mother and Teacher*:

There are three stages which should normally be followed in the reduction of social principles into practice. First, one reviews the concrete situation; secondly, one forms a judgment on it in the light of these same principles; thirdly, one decides what in the circumstances can and should be done to implement these principles. These are the three stages that are usually expressed in the three terms: observe, judge, act.

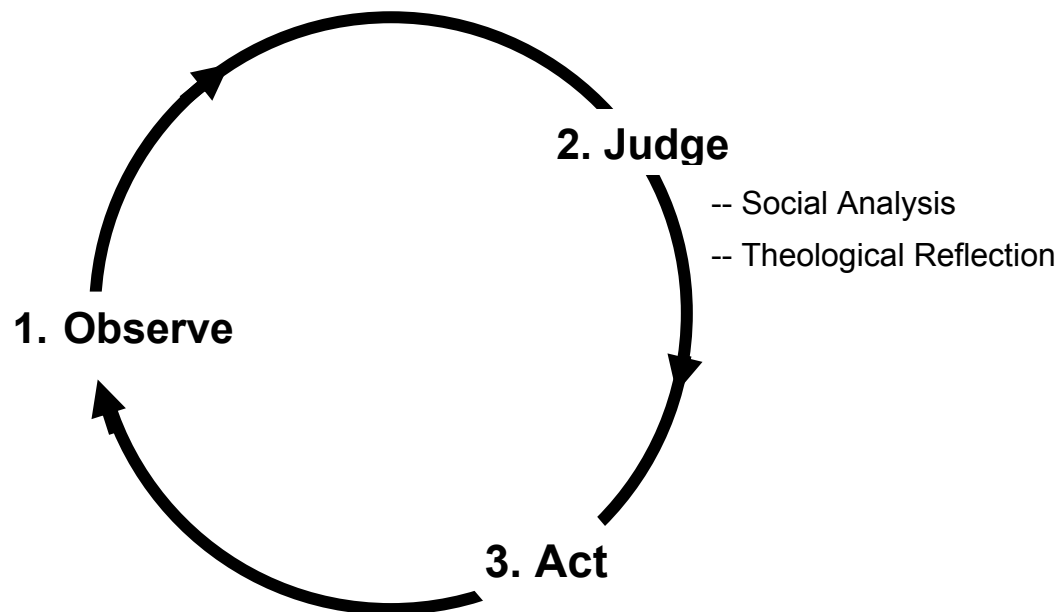
Pope John XXIII, 1961, *Mother and Teacher*, #263

Reflection /Action Process

Here is a brief sketch of the key elements of the reflection-action process:

1. **Observe** – Seeing, hearing, and experiencing the lived reality of individuals and communities. Carefully and intentionally examining the primary data of the situation. What are the people in this situation doing, feeling, and saying? What is happening to them and how do they respond?
2. **Judge** – This is the heart of the process and it involves two key parts:
 - a. **Social Analysis** -- Obtaining a more complete picture of the social situation by exploring its historical and structural relationships. In this step, we attempt to make sense of the reality that was observed in Step 1. Why are things this way? What are the root causes?
 - b. **Theological Reflection** – Analyzing the experience in the light of scripture and the Catholic social tradition? How do biblical values and the principles of Catholic social teaching help us to see this reality in a different way? How do they serve as a measuring stick for this experience?

(Obviously, the word "judge" is used here in a positive sense, meaning to analyze the situation. It does not imply that we judge other people or that we are judgmental in the pejorative sense.)
3. **Act** – Planning and carrying out actions aimed at transforming the social structures that contribute to suffering and injustice.



It is important to remember that this is a process. It is a cycle that is continually repeated. That is, after completing Step Three, the participants return to Step One – observing new realities, making new judgments, and finding new ways to act. This process is intended for groups working collectively, rather than for single individuals. The group process allows for a richer reflection, a deeper analysis, and a more creative search for effective action.

Importance of Social Analysis

Social analysis is a key element of this reflection-action process. Since the concept may be new to some of us, it is worth exploring a bit further.

First, note that social analysis is an essential part of our mission as believers and disciples. Our faith compels us to work for a more just world, and social analysis is a necessary element of carrying out that mission. In the words of Pope Paul VI,

It is up to the 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 of reflection, norms of judgment and directives for action from the social teaching of the Church.

Pope Paul VI, 1971, *A Call to Action*, #4

Similarly, Pope John Paul II has urged us to go beyond the symptoms and effects of injustice and seek out the root causes:

We should not limit ourselves to deploring the negative effects of the present situation of crisis and injustice. What we are really required to do is destroy the roots that cause these effects.

Pope John Paul II, World Day of Peace Message, 1985

Benefits of Social Analysis

- It forces us to go beyond the interpersonal level and to think systemically. Systems are interrelated parts that form a whole, and social and economic systems act and react with other systems to produce the social conditions in which we live. By using social analysis, we begin to see the connections between social institutions and we begin to get a fuller picture of the social, economic, and political forces at work in our world.
- It enables us to make a proper diagnosis of the social problem. In doing so we avoid spending time and energy on activities that will not really change the situation. In this way, social analysis is a tool that leads to effective action.
- It helps us identify potential allies and opponents in the search for a just resolution of the situation.

The pages that follow are worksheets to guide you through the observe-judge-act process.

Reflection/Action Worksheet

1. Observe:

What do you know about this issue or what did you observe?

What specific facts can you cite about this issue or experience?
What did you learn or observe?

How do you feel in the face of this issue or experience?
How does it touch you personally?

2. Judge:

a. Social Analysis

From your experience, what is your understanding of the following:

Why does this situation exist? What are the root causes?

Economic factors -- Who owns? Who controls? Who pays? Who gets? Why?

Political factors – Who decides? For whom do they decide?
How do decisions get made? Who is left out of the process? Why?

Social Factors – Who is left out? Who is included? Why?

Historic Factors – What past events influence the situation today?

Cultural Factors – What values are evident? What do people believe in?
Who influences what people believe?

b. Theological Reflection

What lessons or values from scripture can help us to interpret this experience?
E.g. the prophets, the Beatitudes, the example of Jesus himself, and the parables he told.

What key principles from Catholic Social Teaching apply to this situation.
E.g. human dignity, the common good, human rights, the option for the poor.

3. Act

Do you have enough information and analysis to act?
If not, what additional research is needed?

If you were to act to change this situation, what root causes would you attack?
How would you transform the structures and relationships that produce this situation?

How can you act to support the empowerment of those who are poor or disadvantaged?