

## Essence Seeing in Reflective Practice Bonnie Lemelle Abadie<sup>1</sup>

Trying to keep our equilibrium during the extraordinary time of the COVID-19 pandemic was difficult if not impossible for all of us in theological field education and reflective practice. This article attempts to articulate the reality as experienced by one director of theological field education during this time. “Essence seeing” is a term I coined to express the importance of looking for what is *truly important* in the operation of the program of theological field education in times of uncertainty and ministerial chaos. Shifting priorities in the awareness of the real possibility of severe illness and even death revealed the fragility of this existence. By focusing on what was at the heart, or the essence, of the program, it became possible to re-focus and work toward these goals.

### THE PASTORAL CONTEXT

The pastoral setting is the Oblate School of Theology (OST) in San Antonio, Texas. OST is a free-standing Roman Catholic institution of higher learning that offers master’s- and doctoral-level studies in theology, pastoral ministry, spirituality, sacred Scripture, and divinity. OST also offers certificate program studies in lay ministry and spiritual direction/companionship. The school was established in 1927 as a scholasticate or major seminary for the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI). Its original purpose was the formation and education of this religious order of priests and brothers. Over the years, its ability to adapt to changing circumstances has given witness to its past and current vibrancy.

The students with whom I work in supervised ministry or theological field education (TFE) are in the Master of Divinity (MDiv) program. The majority of students in the MDiv program are male. They are diverse in language, nationality, race, ecclesial realities, cultural sensitivities, and images of the ministerial priesthood. The MDiv population includes a small number of female students, most of whom are ordained ministers within their respective Christian denominations. The program of supervised ministry or theological field education (TFE) is a series of courses within the pastoral studies curriculum for the MDiv (I use the terms supervised ministry and TFE interchangeably here). The goal of TFE is to provide ongoing formation and integration of theological studies within the ministry setting. As outlined in the OST catalogue:

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Field education provides for the ongoing relationship between theory and practice. It is an experience of learning in which the student gains ministerial self-understanding and confidence as a pastoral theologian. The student is enabled to experience a variety of human needs in a way that combines active ministry with a reflective theological perspective.<sup>2</sup>

Students participate in either two or three years of field education depending upon their MDiv degree plan. The first-year course, orientation to supervised ministry (OSM), combines classroom and field education experiences. Theological field education year two (TFE II) and year three (TFE III) provide yearlong ministry opportunities. Year two correlates with the OST curriculum studies in evangelization, faith formation, and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). Year III students are given ministry opportunities that are outside their comfort zones. Through their practice of theological reflection, students are expected to emerge from these experiences with a reflective practice in ministry. A reflective practice is one's ability to look back, think theologically about what was occurring in ministry, and reflect upon it prayerfully, opening oneself to the Holy Spirit.

Greater enrichment comes through peer group engagement. Students are assigned to small groups of no more than four members so that an atmosphere of trust is built and cultivated. Meaningful prayer opportunities at the beginning of each session remind the students about the real reasons behind such gatherings. Ground rules that are clear about respect and confidentiality are presented at the beginning of each session. Students are willing to be vulnerable for the sake of personal and ministerial growth. Mature students often set a good example by their willingness to share their experiences with the group's younger members. The mixing together of religious, diocesan, and, where possible, laypersons enriches the conversations. Students can gently challenge each other in their perceptions and reactions. Typically, these conversations happen face to face in a prayerful classroom environment. Sitting at a round table gives a sign of welcome, shares power, and demonstrates inclusion.

## CHALLENGES TO MINISTRY IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

When the COVID-19 shutdown first occurred in mid-March 2020, everything was confusing and disorienting for all involved in ministry. Liturgical and ministerial sensibilities were uprooted and overturned, leaving populations to struggle with the new norms for ministry. The restrictions on physical proximity, numbers of people who could gather in public settings, including churches, and risk of infection to vulnerable

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populations affected everything. Having to wear personal protective equipment (PPE) negatively impacted the natural tendencies of humans to engage in physical touch as part of the healing process.

All persons involved in theological field education were uniquely challenged to reimagine ministry during this time of pandemic. Directors were challenged to find “safe” placements. The fear of exposing students to the virus and the potential for its spread throughout their seminaries and houses of formation was very real. In addition to finding safe placements, directors were challenged to find supervisors who were willing and able to engage students. Supervisors were challenged to find meaningful ministry assignments for students. Many struggled with technology as they tried to convert in-person programs and ministries to online platforms. Students were challenged to find their patience and understanding while learning to envision ministry in new ways.

It became necessary to read the signs of the times in order to respond in appropriate ways. Reading the signs of the times entails heightening one’s awareness of significant world events, prayerfully reflecting upon those events, and giving an adequate response. My personal response to the situation was prayerful reflection using the questions of Richard Osmer’s method: What was happening? Why was it happening? What ought to be happening? How might we respond?

Based on his own early experiences, Osmer developed this method to teach others how to approach ministry situations with both knowledge and skill. He learned that good ministry is not a matter of solving problems but rather a mystery to be explored. Osmer’s method combines a systematic approach using demographics with a reflective practice that calls the person to examine the situation in the light of faith. This reflective practice is what TFE aims to cultivate in the lives of students, so it should also apply to the director of the program. COVID-19 was certainly a mystery to be explored. Knowledge and skills could help us find our way.<sup>3</sup>

*What was happening?* A global pandemic occurred. The pandemic provided a critical lens through which the question “What is essential in the program of supervised ministry to help students develop as reflective ministers?” could be examined. The pandemic forced familiar placements to deny access to the MDiv students for the health and safety of all. Elderly folk were considered to be at high risk. Ministry in nursing homes, skilled care facilities, hospitals, and hospice entities withdrew immediately from the program of supervised ministry. When parishes and Catholic schools shut down, this marked a nearly complete discontinuation of supervised ministry. The entire school made the switch to online learning in a matter of days. During this time, peer group meetings took place on a virtual platform. Students encountered difficulties with technology. Everyone involved observed and experienced “Zoom fatigue.” Gathering on a virtual platform negatively affected the students’ ability to connect emotionally

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2008), 3.

and spiritually. Throughout the academic year, students noted how difficult this platform was for authentic sharing. Still, the students gathered together and gave feedback to the best of their abilities.

*Why was it happening?* Little was known at the beginning of the outbreak. The virus was much more deadly than the flu and much more contagious. Lack of information caused fear and panic. I and my co-director met to strategize ways to translate the intimate setting of the classroom in the peer group sessions to the online format. Presentations would continue as scheduled. We decided that we would both meet with students for a general “check-in” prior to breaking into small groups. These check-in sessions were to promote community connections, foster student well-being, and assure the persons in charge of the program that everyone was making the best of a less-than-ideal-situation. The instrument we used for peer group sessions, the process note, continued to serve as the focal point of the meetings. For the remainder of the semester, these process notes focused upon ministry experiences the students had had before the shutdown occurred (see appendix A for the guidelines given to students for preparing their process note and the addendum after each peer group session). The peer group meetings also allowed everyone the time and the space to process what was happening. It became clear that just as our sessions had to transition into the virtual world, so would ministry. By taking things one day at a time, the Spring semester came to its conclusion. Flexibility and adaptability were vital elements.

*What ought to be happening?* Ministry must continue! But how? The students, supervisors, facilitators, and co-directors wondered what ministry formation could look like in the uncertainty of the present moment and the unknown future. This uncertainty led to feelings of fear and anxiety. Before the 2020 Fall semester began, it became clear that ministry was still not going to happen in the more familiar and comfortable in-person ways. Ought the program shut down? I began to seriously consider the possibility that my job might be in jeopardy. However, there were good reasons that this position would not be eliminated. Supervised ministry is an essential part of the MDiv program. The program’s history affirmed its necessity. Students actually look forward to ministry experiences. Thus, discontinuance of the program was not a viable option. Consultation with others, including my co-director, faculty, formators, administration, peers in TFE, and supervised ministry sites, provided a nurturing environment for dialogue and for the emergence of different, sometimes creative ideas. Through such consultations with others, my fears and anxiety started to give way to faith and trust in a provident God. Matthew 14: 22–33 emerged as a meaningful Scripture passage for personal reflection, particularly 14:31b: “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?.” This Scripture passage became the keynote for the ministry year. This led me to create a painting and a poem for the practice of *visio divina* (sacred seeing) and prayerful reflection (see appendix B).

*How might we respond?* What does ministry look like now? Surprisingly, supervisors were willing and able to take MDiv students. Although they could not accept the full complement for obvious reasons, most parish religious education and RCIA programs had developed online teaching strategies. Others were working on enacting Centers for Disease Control protocols where online ministries were not possible. Typically, the students have the opportunity to choose a ministry that fits either the curriculum demands of OST or represents a growing edge for them. In the Fall semester of 2020, I made the assignments based upon placement availability. I knew that removing that element of freedom would not be easy for the students to accept. There was a bit of discomfort in some placements, but “excessive grumbling” did not occur. The students seemed to accept their assignments in the same way they would welcome an exercise in obedience. Perhaps this came about because of their ability to do the reflective practice. Perhaps the pandemic had called forth greater maturity from within each student. The members of the faculty were willing and able to serve as theological consultants. Unfortunately, the students did not take full advantage of their services.

The overarching theme of the process notes for the year 2020–2021 dealt with ministry challenges related to use of the virtual platform.<sup>4</sup> Peer group discussions gravitated toward developing “best practices” for making the most of a less-than-ideal situation. Emphasis on spiritual growth and human development were emerging themes. Students exhibited an increased understanding of obedience through being faithful to God’s call to become more while doing less (“human beings” vs. “human doings”). Discussions of the virtues of patience, understanding, and perseverance were prevalent.

Supervised ministry occurring on virtual platforms was the new norm. Peer discussion groups were now happening in the “Zoom room.” Consultations and supervision sessions were held both online and in person. We will re-examine how supervised ministry should continue in the emerging future. Students in supervised ministry are being formed to further the mission of Jesus Christ. Their formation is for service to the church in a new era—a post-pandemic world. Essential to the whole process is trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Responding to the signs of the time during this global pandemic correlates with Osmer’s concept of “transformative leadership.” This type of leadership requires vision and imagination about how things might be different if leaders commit themselves toward future, unknown possibilities.

What did we learn through the process of noticing and reflecting upon theological field education during this time of pre-vaccine COVID? While the world was thrown into crisis, I found it necessary to negotiate two simultaneous levels of awareness, reflection, and response. These two levels were my personal and professional responses. One was for my personal well-being as the director of the

program, and the other was for the good of the students and supervisors. The immediacy of a pivoting response became an opportunity to model for the students what was being asked of them. Closing doors required the search for open windows. There was a need for a spiritual leader to step forward with the words of assurance that God was with us in chaos as well as in order. People needed to hear that even though things were disorienting and confusing at this time, all was held in God's loving embrace. As the director, I provided that assurance to the students and supervisors. Theological reflection is the convergence point of ministry experiences, knowledge of the faith tradition, and personal gifts for ministry. Directing a supervised ministry or theological field education program in a time of pandemic required the use of essential skills: people skills, analytical skills, and research skills. The ability to respond to the crisis in real time required flexibility, imagination, determination, perseverance, curiosity, and a spirit of adventure. Spiritual resources included private and communal prayer, quiet reflection, Scripture, music, art, and other sources of spiritual renewal such as walking in nature and sitting still.

#### THE FUTURE OF MINISTRY IN A POST-PANDEMIC SOCIETY

Before the pandemic, I had been considering expanding the ministry placements to be reflective of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. These plans were delayed. The future of supervised ministry in the post-pandemic world reveals questions that remain unanswered. Little is known of the COVID-19 virus's adaptability and mutation. Vaccines currently proving effective against presently known strains are being monitored for future effectiveness.

Ministry placements in the former locations of nursing homes, hospitals, jails, hospices, and rehabilitation centers remain uncertain. Ministries that feed the hungry will continue to request the most assistance. Religious education in parishes and Catholic schools is in varying degrees of fullness. Several Catholic schools are in jeopardy of closing due to a lack of funding from tuition and archdiocesan resources. The uncertainty of the future of Catholic schools affects future placements in these settings. Liturgical ministries once again are becoming more available as parishes are becoming more vibrant again. Catholic campus ministry and the work of Catholic Charities USA will continue to provide in-person ministry opportunities.

Ministry in the virtual world may also continue. Perhaps the future of ministry looks like a hybrid of in-person and online options to serve. The path forward is not completely clear. What *is* clear is that supervised ministry will continue collaborative efforts to provide the accompaniment necessary for ministry formation. Future ministry opportunities will continue to stretch students. All are invited to embrace joy, discomfort, satisfaction, and frustration. Future ministry experiences will continue to serve as the catalyst for theological reflection and cultivating a reflective spiritual practice.

In essence, the lessons we gleaned from the pandemic are as follows:

Constantly read the signs of the time by being aware of global, national, and local events.

Daily monitor the social, political, ecclesial, cultural, theological, and spiritual dimensions that are unfolding.

Engage personally in regular theological reflection. Ask the questions posed by Osmer: What is happening? Why is it happening? What ought to be happening? How might we respond?

Engage creativity, imagination, and critical thinking skills.

Embrace a spirit of adventure and experience new things. Be courageous in trying something new or unfamiliar. If it fails, then try something else.

Prayerfully and carefully move forward in faith, repeating the process often.

Attempting to answer the question “What is essential in the program of supervised ministry to help students develop as reflective ministers?” revealed that having a ministry site and supervisor is primary. The students’ experiences in ministry—the practice of noticing, naming, describing, reflecting, and integrating—all combine to help the students and everyone involved in this endeavor to continually develop as reflective ministers. It is the regular practice of reflection itself that helps students, supervisors, facilitators, and theological consultants develop the skills of reflection. Just as basketball players become better at their craft by playing basketball and musicians become better performers by playing music, we become reflective ministers by practicing reflection.

As to discovering what is essential in the program itself, we gained insight from within the eye of the storm. Being challenged to let go of our expectations based on how the program ran in the past brought about the discovery of the heart of what matters today in supervised ministry. Careful attention to details such as deadlines for the completion and submission of forms gave way to a panoramic understanding of the overall purpose and mission of supervised ministry. That big picture reveals that the core of the program is helping students develop a reflective practice in ministry. Through engaging in “essence seeing” during the pandemic, record keeping emerged as essential (for example, certificates of attendance at required workshops for ministry in the archdiocese). The completed learning covenant between the student and the supervisor remains an essential document. Evaluations at mid-year and the end of the year remain important as they provide a roadmap for the student’s developing ministerial skills while providing helpful information to the formators. Less importance is given to the forms which track previous ministry experiences and to the ministry log for each student each week. What emerged as essential about meetings included the need to continue periodic meetings with supervisors and theological consultants for the purpose of providing clarity of purpose (primarily) and personal enrichment (secondarily). Peer group meetings are essential for the process of doing theological

reflection. Each group continues to meet four times a semester. The forum is more flexible now. When COVID-19 or other disasters dictates that people not gather, these meetings will continue to take place online.

Essence seeing allowed us to observe ways in which transformation occurred. First, there was transformation in the students' attitude toward TFE. Even with the difficulties of peer meetings online, the students were as fully present to each other as possible. The quality of most students' written work noticeably improved. They were more attentive to honoring important deadlines than in the previous years. Second, there was transformation in the openness of the supervisors. Despite having to reimagine ministry in the pandemic, they were creative, enthusiastic, dedicated, and hospitable. Third, there was transformation in the receptivity of theological consultants. Willing to embrace their role, several expressed their disappointment at not being contacted by the students assigned to them. And last of all, transformation occurred in myself as the director. I gained greater knowledge of the program. My appreciation of how the students and graduates experienced theological field education allowed me to see the bigger picture. I experienced greater freedom through trying new methods in all aspects of running the program. Instead of being fearful of destroying the system, I embraced new ways of teaching, assigning students to ministries, and convening meetings. My confidence in my ability to read situations and to respond in the present moment grew. Improvements to the program will continue in response to the unfolding realities.

In the end, the true essence of ministry is love. Recalling Pope Francis's vision of love being at the heart of the church's mission, authentic ministry is about connectivity with God and each other through the bonds of love. The grace of God empowers us to become Christ's ambassadors in ministry settings. The Holy Spirit inspires and guides the church, especially through times of uncertainty. I conclude with an original poem/reflection as a blessing to all involved in the TFE process.

The Blessing of Love  
by Bonnie Abadie

Origin and destiny, the heart of God.  
May your life continue to be rooted and harvested in the blessing of Love!  
Unconditional, unlimited, unbounded  
The grace to be self-emptying AND completely receptive  
Know in your bones that your life matters  
And is held in the embrace of the Source of it all.  
May you receive and share  
The blessing of Love.



Process Note Guidelines  
Oblate School of Theology

(Use this format for your paper. The paper is to be single-spaced and does not require line numbering in the left margin.)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Group \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Ministerial Experience:

Today's date: (the day you are writing the paper)

Pastoral issue:

Identify the issue in the pastoral experience that is calling for deeper reflection.

Framing this in the form of a question may be helpful: e.g., How do I deal with/respond to . . . ?

Learning goal for this session:

What are you hoping to learn from this experience in this particular reflection session?

What do you want your supervisor/peer group and facilitator to do for you in the course of this meeting?

Background: State the pertinent details leading up to the situation you are describing.

This is the backdrop that helps put the experience in context. What is the ministry setting where the event took place? Describe any feelings or expectations you had before the pastoral experience took place. What should your audience know that will be helpful to their understanding of the scenario you are about to describe?

Description: This is a narrative or story of what happened. This is to be written as objectively as possible, as though you were a bystander watching the event unfold.

Paint a clear picture for the reader to understand the entire scenario. Include all important details. Report the facts: who, what, when, where, how, and why. There is no reflection in this section, only statements of facts.

Reflection:

Personal: What did the experience evoke within you at a personal/human level? What physical bodily sensations did you experience? What personal feelings did you notice? What interior struggles were you experiencing? What conflicting thoughts and feelings were you having? Has something like this happened before? What life experiences from the past connect with this experience? What did you learn from that previous experience that may shed light on this present experience? *Or*, is this a new experience?

Did it catch you by surprise? What did this experience reveal to you about yourself as a person?

Professional/Pastoral: What was your pastoral response to the situation? What was your demeanor as you responded? How adequate or inadequate was your response? How could you tell if your response was adequate or inadequate? What skills were needed? What skills did you use? What knowledge was needed? What knowledge did you use? How does this experience help form or develop your pastoral identity? Which courses have you taken or what previous pastoral experiences help inform this experience? How specifically do they help? What courses do you need to take in order to be better prepared for ministry?

Cultural Context: Considering your own social location and the ministry's social context, what cultural issues are raised here? How do you describe the cultural milieu in which you are ministering? How does your own background help you to understand the cultural realities of the ministry setting? How does your culture hinder your understanding? How do questions of social structure, race, ethnicity, class, age, or gender help shed light on this experience? How is (or is not) this a universal experience? How did you pastorally express cultural awareness and sensitivity? How do the courses which address culture inform this experience?

Theological: What theological issues or themes emerge from this incident? Is there a Scripture passage that comes to mind as you reflect upon this experience? In what ways are your story and God's story connected? (Use and list Scripture resources with contemporary exegesis in the development of this section. Be attentive to the Rubric to Inform the Use of Scripture in Study and Ministry.) What theological sources inform this experience? Which three (3) church documents, religious constitutions, theological works, articles, art expressions, etc., best contribute to your understanding of this pastoral experience? (Footnotes are required here.) How does this experience inform theology?

Spiritual: How does this experience help support your spiritual development? How do you bring this experience to prayer? In what ways does this event heighten and deepen your reliance upon God? In what ways are you being challenged to grow spiritually? Does this event reveal something to you that can be further explored in spiritual direction?

How does this help you to grow in your relationship with God?

Integration

What did I learn from this pastoral experience and reflection? Is there anything that I would do differently as a result of what I have now learned? Will there be a follow-up to this experience? Please describe what actions may follow. How has this experience changed me?

Works Consulted

List a minimum of three theological resources used to inform this pastoral experience and which have been integrated in this reflection. (Bibliography format required. NB: These shall be advanced theological resources that go beyond the summary statements found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC).)

(rev. 4/20)

Outline for Addendum to Process Note  
Oblate School of Theology

This paper will be submitted by the **MONDAY** after the Peer Reflection Session.  
Please follow the outline provided. Use headings that are in bold print.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ TFE Group: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of presentation: \_\_\_\_\_

Date submitted: \_\_\_\_\_

Was the pastoral issue clarified and addressed?

Was the goal for the session revised? If so, state the revised goal.

What suggestions or feedback did the group offer under each section of the process note that you found helpful or challenging in responding to the pastoral issue?

Were there additional theological sources offered that you had not considered and found helpful?

How did the reflection process help you grow in your pastoral formation?

How do you anticipate integrating what you learned in this process of reflection?

APPENDIX B

This artwork for visio divina and the poem that follows it were created by Bonnie Abadie for prayerful reflection by students and supervisors in field education at Oblate School of Theology during the 2020–2021 school year.



Step Out of the Boat  
by Bonnie Abadie, August 2020

How can you say you have Faith  
When you are sitting comfortably in the boat?  
Can you be like Peter?  
Daring while afloat  
Questions the essence of the Master  
Yet upon invitation steps out in Faith  
Taking his eyes off Christ for only a moment  
    He beholds the impossible  
And in this weakness, he sinks  
    But even then he cries for help  
And the Lord is there  
    To bring him fully into his grasp  
There is no need to panic  
    Christ gives the faithful glance  
Life is an angry sea right now  
    Can you step out of the boat?