Ethical Reflection Guide: Peace in our Hearts, Ministries, Communities and the World

From time to time all organizations and groups are called upon to spend time in collective discernment. Whether confronted by an internal crisis or in response to concerns of the larger community, ethical reflection provides a tool to guide our communal conversation. It is especially important tool for leaders at all levels of the organization who bear the responsibility of making clear, values-driven decisions. A good ethical reflection process is a reliable instrument for making critically informed and morally sound decisions in policy, direction and/or advocacy.

All ethical reflection takes place by investigating and reflecting upon several dimensions or facets of the situation or issue at hand. These include:
1. Identifying where one stands personally with honestly and with humility;
2. Naming and exploring key values at stake in the situation;
3. Analyzing the structural dimensions and power dynamics within the situation or issue;
4. Recognizing the need for mutuality, interdependence in the service of community and society;
5. Naming actions to take us into the future.

Key Dimensions and Themes

1. **Repentance for complicity in violence and apathy in resistance**

   Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:9, 10)

   Issues for exploration:
   - Where in my own history and upbringing have I been taught to be insensitive to the needs and rights of others?
   - How and when do I place my needs, hopes and desires before those of others?
   - Do I retreat out of fear, laziness or selfishness from adopting an empathetic stance toward others and their experiences?

2. **Affirming human dignity, rights of peoples and the integrity of creation**

   So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them…. God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food. And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. (Gen. 1: 27, 29-31)

   Issues for exploration:
   - What are the basic, universal rights of all people?
   - What ideals are at stake in the situation at hand? How are they compromised?
• How am I, as a member of a particular community, both blessed and blinded by how these rights and ideals are left yet unrealized?

3. Interrogating and redefining power

*Those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. (Mark 10:42-44)*

Questions for exploration:
• What structures of power are at work in the current situation?
• Who are holders and keepers of power? Are there imbalances that need to be acknowledged?
• What resources are available to those in control? What are withheld to those not in control?
• In what ways is the uneven distribution of power the source and seed of violence?

4. Realizing mutuality and interdependence in a world of diverse identities

*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. (John 15:12, 13). Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. (Isaiah 32:16-17)*

Questions for exploration:
• Is vulnerability a sign of weakness? Is it possible to view vulnerability as a redeeming factor, an opportunity to be and to become more human?
• Is it possible to ensure safety and security with relationships based on mutuality and interdependence?
• What are the biggest obstacles of achieving mutuality and interdependence?
• How can tolerance be promoted amidst diversity marked by intense struggles for power, identity, resources, opportunities, and justice?

5. Walking in the way of peace, justice and reconciliation

*But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you…. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? …And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? (Matt 5: 44, 46 & 47)*

Questions for exploration:
• What does it mean to follow Christ in a violent world?
• What kind of language is required to talk about Christ as a path of peace, justice and reconciliation in a pluralistic world?
• How can we walk within the *logos* of peace rather than the *logic* of violence?
The role of a facilitator is to guide a group through a structured reflection process with gentle but firm support. Her or his aim is to enable the group to reflect carefully and systematically on matters of importance with the hope of bringing the group to new insights and a potential course(s) of action. Careful and attentive listening followed open, gentle dialogue is the greatest tool for success.

A few tips:

- Encourage the use of “I” language, asking everyone not to presume to know or speak for another’s experience.
- Let silence in and allow for it, without it become a source of anxiety. Use a period of personal reflection (if time allows) to give people a chance to gather their thoughts and feelings before they speak.
- Keep the group focused on the appropriate “stage” within the process. Try to draw people out without making them feel put on the spot. Try using questions such as, “Can you say a bit more about ….? Or, “Can you recall a time when . . .?” Ask participants what statements mean to them. Try not to rush to next steps. The process is not a race. Encourage others to do the same if they need more clarity or a deeper understanding of one another.
- Remind the group not to “rush to judgement” and to suspend certitude.
- Periodically, summarize what you have heard and ask others to do the same.
- Allow people to express worries, concerns or fears. Ask the group to be respectful of them.
- Before moving on to a next step or phase of the overall process, ask if there is anything left unspoken, at least for the moment.

A few cautions:

- Avoid jargon -- religious, professional or political. Try to keep buzz words and clichés to a minimum. Try not to make the “theological” leap too soon.
- Seek common ground, avoiding, if possible, polarizing extremes.
- Do not ask for “extraordinary” experiences. Most of us don’t have many, if any. Ask for the “ordinary” experience that none-the-less meant something.
- The questions provided for each section above are only suggestions. If you have others that you believe will work better for the group, then create them.
- Don’t let talky people monopolize. Kindly ask talkative people to allow others to speak.
- So, too, with manipulators, who influence the group by sarcasm, defensive language or body posture, etc.
- Beware scripture quoters. They often assume a certain moral superiority.
- Trust the Spirit. Come with a firm sense or your role, but do not push or impose an outcome.