



# MOUNT ST. MARY'S SEMINARY & SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

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*Lay Ecclesial Formation  
Theological Reflection Handbook*

2022-2023

This handbook is designed for the students, faculty, and administrators of the Master of Arts in Pastoral Ministry (MAPM) degree program, the Graduate Certificate in Pastoral Ministry (GCPM) program, and the Certificate in Pastoral Ministry (CPM) program at Mount St. Mary's School of Theology. It is a supplement to the text book on theological reflection and the small group sessions offered by the Coordinator of Lay Ecclesial Formation. It outlines the role of theological reflection in ministerial formation and offers approaches, methodologies, terms, resources, and worksheets.

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## Theological Reflection: Definition and Overview

St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) wrote what is considered one of the classical definitions of theology in his work *Proslogion* calling it, “*fides quaerens intellectum*” (“faith seeking understanding”). This means that faith in God, as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, prompts us to search for deeper understanding.

One way lay ecclesial ministers grow in that understanding is through theological reflection. Theological reflection uses an incarnational approach to help pastoral ministers integrate theology with praxis. This process involves intentional reflection, undertaken singly or with a small group, with the goal of placing experience into an intentional dialogue with the wisdom and tradition of Catholic Christian heritage. This exploration is not a scientific analysis or problem solving, but rather a conversation that leads to greater insight. It is a process that helps make connections between what happens on the surface of experience and what happens at a deeper level. It asks questions such as, “*Where and how was the Holy Spirit moving in this situation? How does/should faith shape my actions? How does theological studies, experience of ministry and the wisdom of the Christian tradition impact family, personal, and work relationships? How does my worldview and socio/economic background affect the way I engage in ministry?*” In an era and culture in which work, faith, family, spirituality, and leisure often feel fragmented, theological reflection is a process that offers integration.

## Theological Reflection in Ministry and Formation

God calls. We respond. If that call includes formal ministry in the Church, our response engages us in theological and ministerial formation. Theological reflection occurs in the rich and fruitful space between call and response; between the study of theology and the practice of ministry. For lay ecclesial ministers, ongoing reflection on our experience is not optional. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ document that guides lay formation programs, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, points to the importance of systematic theological reflection both during formation (p. 42) and as an ongoing practice after degree and certificate programs are completed (p. 51).

We live life moving forward, but only understand and learn from our experience by stopping periodically to look back to examine and reflect. We naturally engage in this work whenever we search for deeper meaning, look for connections, and explore questions such as, “*What was happening in this encounter? Where can I see the movement of God in this experience? What do I/should I learn from this moment? How can this experience shape future encounters?*” It is part of our human nature to ponder meanings, discuss situations with friends and family, and connect the stories and lessons of scripture to our daily lives. These moments of spontaneous reflection are healthy and helpful, but seldom go deep enough to affect ministerial approaches. The connection between experience and Catholic Christian heritage are seldom obvious or gleaned without a substantial investment of time and space. We often miss many of the more significant meanings of each encounter or experience.

When we undertake this reflection intentionally and deliberately, particularly in peer ministry settings, theological reflection can help us become more skilled, more disciplined, more observant and more articulate. This engagement helps the participant(s) identify and reflect on the movement

of God, expand awareness of God's presence in the midst of concrete experiences, challenge preconceived ideas, bias, and prejudices, explore the call of justice and mercy, and grow in wisdom and insight. Over time, it can foster conversion of heart and mind, leading to more effective ministry. It challenges us to practice and acquire the skills necessary to foster theological reflection among colleagues and in ministry settings.

The attitudes and stances we bring to theological reflection have a direct impact on the depth, quality, and trustworthiness of the insights gained by the experience.

All of us, to some degree and under some circumstances, exhibit stances of fear, defensiveness, avoidance, and over- or under-functioning. It is part of our human nature. Awareness of these tendencies and their damaging effect on the ability to reflect on our experience will help us recognize and address them as they arise. Theological reflection takes place in the landscape of dialogue, exploration, mutuality, openness, and assurance in the reality of God's revelation and the Church's rich theological tradition.

MAPM, GCPM, and CPM students are asked to obtain *Theological Reflection: Connecting Faith and Life* by Joye Gros, O.P., DMin, Loyola Press, 2002. This text includes chapters on "The What and the Why," "The Model," "The Method," "How to Begin," "The Facilitator," "The Discipline of Authenticity," and "What's it to Me?" This text, along with this *Theological Reflection Handbook*, provides the foundation for theological reflection for students in the School of Theology.

## Approaches and Methodologies

Theological reflection sessions in ministry formation settings may employ journaling or trigger questions, *Lectio Divina* or other reflections on scripture, case studies, even art and images, to generate an engagement with experience, Church teachings, tradition, scripture, spirituality, culture, and the minister's own worldview and background. The following are some you may encounter during formation.

### *Lectio Divina*

#### Historical Background

*Lectio Divina* ("divine or holy reading") is an ancient way to pray and reflect with scripture. The roots of *Lectio* reach back to Origen, a third century scholar and theologian who taught that scripture was a place for reflection, prayer, and growth in faith. Origen said, "What good does it do me if Christ was born in Bethlehem once, if he is not born again in my heart through faith?"<sup>1</sup>

In the sixth century, St. Benedict fostered the practice of reading and reflection on scripture in monasteries. In the twelfth century, a Carthusian monk named Guigo II, had a dream or vision of Jacob's ladder from Genesis chapter 12, and inspired by that dream, wrote a book about meditative prayer called *The Ladder of Monks*, the first description of meditative prayer in the western tradition. He outlined four steps of this prayer ladder:

- *Lectio* (Read)

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<sup>1</sup> *Homilies on Luke. Fragments on Luke*, trans. Joseph T. Lienhard (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

- *Meditatio* (Meditate)
- *Oratio* (Pray)
- *Contemplatio* (Contemplate)

He wrote, “One day I was engaged in physical work with my hands and I began to think about the spiritual tasks we humans have. While I was thinking, four spiritual steps came to mind: reading (*lectio*), meditation (*meditatio*), prayer (*oratio*), and contemplation (*contemplatio*). This is the ladder of monastics by which they are lifted up from the earth into heaven. There are only a few distinct steps, but the distance covered is beyond measure and belief since the lower part is fixed on the earth and its top passes through the clouds to lay bare the secrets of heaven.”<sup>2</sup>

After the Protestant Reformation, when many of the reformers eliminated sacraments and tradition and priesthood from their approach to Christian faith, some of them retained *Lectio Divina*, incorporating this process into a life of prayer.

In the modern era, *Dei Verbum*, the Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Word of God, encouraged Catholic laity to engage in *Lectio*, which fostered a renewed interest in the practice of *Lectio*. The practice is noted positively in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and recently, has been strongly re-affirmed and recommended by Pope Benedict in *Verbum Domini*, and Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*.

### **Aim**

*Lectio* offers us an encounter with Sacred Scripture, not as a problem to be solved or a text to be dissected and studied, but as a world unfolding and a mystery to be explored. *Lectio* is not a Bible study or an academic analysis. Rather, it invites us to attend to the text. Attending to the Bible is different from reading it, skimming it, or studying it. Attending involves physical sensations such as seeing, listening, touching, tasting. It engages our emotions and visceral reactions.

*Lectio* is deceptively simple. It is so simple that it may feel as if nothing can come from a process so quiet and unassuming. But simplicity often leads to something profound, and in the case of *Lectio*, it can help us surrender to God, which in turn, holds out the offer of metanoia—a word that means *to be turned around*; to experience a radical turn or conversion from one way of life to another. Over time, praying with scripture can form us into living icons of the Word of God because it fosters an encounter with Christ.

### **Approaches**

There are several ways to approach *Lectio*, but all follow a similar structure that typically includes the following: read; meditate; pray; contemplate.

- Reading, sometimes multiple readings
- Meditating, *does not necessarily mean the popular definition*
- Praying
- Contemplating

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<sup>2</sup> *The Ladder of Monks: A Letter on the Contemplative Life and Twelve Meditations*, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981).

We hold these stages loosely, and in modern usage, there are a variety of approaches.

St. John of the Cross said about *Lectio*:

Seek in READING,  
And you will find in MEDITATION;  
Knock in PRAYER,  
And it will be opened to you in CONTEMPLATION

In the early and medieval eras, the process ended with contemplation, but modern *Lectio* often adds the final stage: *Actio* or acting on the reflection. For ministry formation, the final step is essential. As we reflect, what are we invited or challenged to do, be, feel, think, believe? What is the action we will take as the fruit of the reflection?

**Pope Benedict** summarizes *Lectio* in this way:

... It opens with the reading (*lectio*) of a text, which leads to a desire to understand its true content: *what does the biblical text say in itself?* Without this, there is always a risk that the text will become a pretext for never moving beyond our own ideas. Next comes meditation (*meditatio*), which asks: *what does the biblical text say to us?* Here, each person, individually but also as a member of the community, must let himself or herself be moved and challenged. Following this comes prayer (*oratio*), which asks the question: *what do we say to the Lord in response to his word?* Prayer, as petition, intercession, thanksgiving and praise, is the primary way by which the word transforms us. Finally, *lectio divina* continues with contemplation (*contemplatio*), during which we take up, as a gift from God, his own way of seeing and judging reality... We do well also to remember that the process of *lectio divina* is not concluded until it arrives at action (*actio*), which moves the believer to make his or her life a gift for others in charity. We find the supreme synthesis and fulfilment of this process in the Mother of God. For every member of the faithful Mary is the model of docile acceptance of God's word, for she "kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (*Lk* 2:19; cf. 2:51)... [*Verbum Domini*, 87]

*If it [Lectio] is effectively promoted, this practice will bring to the Church – I am convinced of it – a new spiritual springtime.* (Pope Benedict XVI, Address, September 16, 2005)

## **Process of *Lectio***

### **Preparation**

What is the best time for *Lectio*? The best place? This will differ for each of us. The best time is the one that works for you. Wherever and whenever you engage in *Lectio*, preparation should include the intentional and deliberate setting aside of agendas, phones, and distractions. It may be helpful to say the Prayer to the Holy Spirit:

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Thy faithful and enkindle in them the fire of Thy love.  
V. Send forth Thy Spirit and they shall be created.  
R. And Thou shalt renew the face of the earth.  
Let us pray. O God, Who didst instruct the hearts of the faithful by the light of the Holy Spirit, grant us in the same Spirit to be truly wise, and ever to rejoice in His consolation.  
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sit in silence for a moment. Still your breathing. Sit comfortably. If you are distracted, gently return your attention to the present moment.

### ***Lectio***

Read the scripture aloud, even when alone. Scripture was created in the oral world, when one person told another person the stories of faith. Even Paul's letters were dictated. *Lectio* often includes multiple readings from different voices, which give different emphasis. In the traditional Benedictine approach, the passage is slowly read four times, each time with a slightly different focus. As you listen, allow the text to speak. Take note of observations. What captures your attention? What is the action? Who are the people? What do you see, smell, hear? What is happening here?

### ***Meditatio***

In our culture, meditation and contemplation have come to mean the same thing. However, we mean two distinct actions here. In meditation, the "mind seeks to understand the why and how of the Christian life, in order to adhere and respond to what the Lord is asking."<sup>3</sup>

In this phase of *Lectio*, the intellect is actively engaged. Consider, think, unpack, ponder. The English word ponder comes from the Latin *pondus* which relates to the mental activity of weighing or considering. To ponder on the passage that has been read is to consider it from various angles. Meditation is an active and prayerful quest that engages thought, imagination, and emotion.

What questions do you have? What piqued your curiosity most? What tugged at your heart? What bothers you? Confuses you? What is the good news? Is there any challenging news? What is promised? What questions arise? You might find your attention caught by a single word or phrase and you simply linger in that spot. Perhaps you converse with a character or stare at a mental image.

### ***Oratio***

In this phase, we approach God in light of what we have read and meditated upon and pray based on what we have questioned and felt. We offer a response to God in the form of praise, thanksgiving, petition, or adoration. We pray for the courage and grace to respond to God's invitation, challenge, or insight. We speak to God about what we have explored.

### ***Contemplatio***

In contemplation, we dwell in God and allow our gaze to be drawn into the mystery. Having read the Word, explored it, and prayed over it, contemplation is the act of sitting in the presence of God, resting in God. Contemplation invites us to "Take off your sandals, you are standing on Holy Ground." This takes place in silence and attentiveness and might be summarized by the phrase, "I look at God and God looks at me."

### ***Actio***

What is God asking of me concretely? What is God inviting or challenging me to do or become? Is there a concrete action I can take this day? This week? How will I hold myself accountable for this action?

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<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2011), sec. 2705.

## **Visio Divina**

*Visio Divina* is translated as “divine seeing.” It is related to the prayer form *Lectio Divina* described above. *Visio Divina* invites you to encounter the divine through the contemplation of art and image. This prayerful engagement with a photograph, icon, statue, painting, or other visual representation allows you to experience the divine and invites God to speak to you in a unique and powerful way.

This form of prayer has been used throughout the centuries and is popular in Catholic and Eastern Orthodox communities where icons are often used in prayer. The Byzantine icon engages an elaborate system of symbols and images that speaks to faith, and the artists of icons are in deep prayer when they create an icon. The act of creating an icon is even called “writing an icon.” There are many online resources to explore this form of prayer and devotion.

*Visio Divina* usually follows these simple steps:

- Select an image, piece of art, or a place in nature
- Prepare and clear your mind
- Allow the image to speak
  - First impression
  - Entire image
  - Emotions/challenges/invitation
- Pray
- Contemplate/rest in God

Before you begin, choose your image and have it visible—either be near it in person or have the image available on your phone or computer. Begin with a prayer to the Holy Spirit or by reading a scripture passage related to the image. Close your eyes, breathe, clear your mind, and ask God to enter into this time of prayer with you and speak to you through this process.

### **Process of *Visio Divina***

#### **Allow the Image to Speak**

Look at the image. Let your eyes focus and remain on the part of the image they are first drawn to. Gaze upon that part for a minute or two allowing your eyes to remain focused on the first aspect of the image or sculpture you see. Close your eyes and reflect on that part of the art that first captured your attention.

#### **Reflect on the Entire Image**

Open your eyes and look at the whole image. Reflect and consider the following:

- What emotions or feelings does the image bring forth in you?
- Do you sense a challenge or invitation?
- What thoughts or questions do you have?
- What do you want to say to God about this experience or image?
- Is there something God is saying to you? Continue to gaze and reflect as long as you need to and then briefly close your eyes.

#### **Pray through the Image**

Open your eyes, look at the image, and respond to God in prayer about the image, emotions, questions, insights, and thoughts that emerged.

## Contemplation and Resting in God

As you close out your time in prayer, open your eyes and gaze again upon the image. Rest in God's presence as you reflect upon this prayer experience.

## Reflecting on Personal Experience

Reflecting on personal experience involves these stages.

1. Retrieve a significant experience.  
This experience can be selected from ministry, family life, or engagement with the community. It should be something that still resonates with you. Perhaps it was a turning point, a time of discernment, anxiety, or affirmation. It could be a time when you tried a new skill, discovered new insights, or took a different path. Perhaps it is an experience that feels unfinished, or one in which you wonder if you made the right choice or question where God was in the moment.
2. Retell the experience as if you are sharing a story.  
What are the highlights? Why is it important? In the retelling, what remains clear and what has fallen away or no longer seems critical? How did it feel to share this experience with others? Is it a story you tell often, or is this the first time you have shared it?
3. Reframe the experience in today's context or via a different lens.  
When you share the experience with others, their reactions, questions, and insights may invite you to see it through a different lens, allowing for new insights and questions. You are recalling the experience in light of today's context. What changes with this perspective?
4. What emotions arise?  
As we enter into experience and listen to the experience afresh, emotions may arise. Are those the same emotions that surfaced in the original experience, or have they changed in some way?
5. Are there any images or sensory impressions that surface?
6. Reconnect the experience with scripture, tradition, and culture.  
What scripture passages come to mind? Does this experience connect you with a particular character in the Bible? How does it connect with Catholic tradition and doctrine? What theological concepts lie at the heart of this experience? What does culture or society have to say about this experience?
7. Re-vision the experience in light of the conversation and reflection.  
What difference does this make? What has changed in light of the conversation? Do you see yourself and your experience differently? Are there new insights? Is there anything you would do differently in the future as a result of this reflection? Is there any action to take today as a result of this reflection?

## Ministerial Case Study

In the Lay Ecclesial Formation program, students will participate in facilitated Case Studies led by the formation director. These groups are offered once or twice a year in the winter or spring. Students who have completed at least 50 percent of Field Education are eligible to register. The case study methodology for lay ecclesial ministers emerged from the experience of *verbatim*s in chaplaincy training. A verbatim documents and evaluates a specific pastoral visit by describing the nature of the encounter and the chaplain's assessment of the issues, problems, and interactions. It offers an opportunity to evaluate and reflect on the pastoral care relationship in that moment and allows for feedback and perspective from the supervisor and peers. This process is an adaptation of that experience, incorporating insights from "reflecting on personal experience" above.

### Select an Event

The event should be a concrete and specific experience emerging from Field Education. It does not need to be dramatic or life changing, but it should be something that still engages your attention. Some suggestions:

- A situation that feels ambiguous or unfinished in some way.
- A situation in which you felt unsure of your response or conflicted about the outcome.
- A situation in which you wonder how the experience connects with the life of faith and discipleship.
- A situation in which you wonder what happened in the moment or how it unfolded later.
- A situation that engendered strong emotion in you or others.

### Writing the Case

The case is to have five parts, which do not need to be equal in length.

BE CONCISE. BE SUCCINCT. BE CLEAR.

The written case should be no more than two pages. Edit for clarity and focus.

**Part I Background:** Set the event in context.

- What was the setting?
- Why were you there?
- Who were the key characters?
- How did you happen to become involved in the event?

**Part II Description:** Tell what happened. Report the event, including as much detail as necessary to be clear, but without bogging the listener down in unnecessary detail. What does the listener need to know in order to reflect on the situation?

**Part III Analysis:** What is going on here?

- Identify issues, relationships, critical moments, changes.
- What are the key transitions?
- Is there a climax or crisis?
- Is there a situation that is unfinished, ambiguous, challenging?
- What incident lies at the heart of the matter?

**Part IV Evaluation:** How did you function in this event?

- Did you do what you set out to do?
- Did you function effectively?
- What factors, forces, or situations emerged that you did not anticipate?
- What questions do you still have?

**Part V Theological Reflection**

- What theological concepts seem to lie at the heart of this matter?
- What scripture passages come to mind? Be specific in where you see evidence of them.
- Where do you see the movement of God in this situation?
- Has your impression of this incident changed or grown after reflecting upon it?

## Sample Ministerial Case Study

### Background

Last summer, I completed Field Education at Old St. Mary's Pregnancy Center in the Over the Rhine neighborhood of downtown Cincinnati. In this experience, I counselled women after they had taken a pregnancy test on issues such as abortion alternatives and chastity. I also facilitated Bible study from time to time.

### Description

One hot day in August, I facilitated a Bible study with two African-American women. One woman was holding her son, approximately two years old, who appeared to be ill or handicapped in some way. He looked very sad, as did she.

The Bible study focused on a reading from Matthew 17:14-20. It was a reading about faith, in which Jesus says to his disciples, "...Amen, I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

After the reading, I asked the two women what they thought the reading meant. One woman began with a literal interpretation suggesting that no one has the faith even of a mustard seed. Before I could respond, the woman with the little boy asked, "Is it a sin to hate God?" This threw me for a loop. "What do you mean?" I asked. She then told us her story. She was a young girl who unexpectedly found out she was pregnant. She was not seeing the father regularly and he was not in her life or the life of her son currently. She wanted to do the right thing and have the baby because she felt that was what God wanted. But the baby was born with spinal meningitis and other conditions, and has suffered pain every day of his life. The mother is depressed and often in despair. She said there are days she feels she cannot go on, and wishes they were both dead. She is frequently angry. On bad days she hates God, and then suffers feelings of guilt.

My first thought was that I was in over my head. I didn't feel prepared to respond to this situation or to be of any help to her. I said a quick prayer, "Help me God." I didn't know what to say. I asked, "Do you think that Jesus was speaking of literally moving mountains? There would not be much point to that. Perhaps he was speaking of moving spiritual mountains." I said to the mother,

“you are confronted with a spiritual mountain every day that you take care of your little boy. Every day you are asked to move that spiritual mountain and you think that you cannot do it, it is too hard, too much of a struggle, but then you go ahead and do it, and you do it every day. It is your faith that allows you to care for him every day.” At this point, I ran out of things to say, and the woman burst into tears. I didn’t know what to say next. The older woman turned to me and said, “Can you leave us alone?” I didn’t want to leave at first, but she motioned to the door, and I knew my part in this situation was finished. I got up and left without saying anything. I never saw either of them again during my Field Education experience.

### **Analysis**

I often felt out of place in this FE experience. I was a white middle class male in a world of poor black females, and I frequently felt out of touch and insecure about my effectiveness or even the appropriateness of my presence. I didn’t know if I helped or hurt in this situation, and didn’t know if the woman’s tears were tears of sorrow, anger, hurt, or some type of breakthrough or spiritual insight. I didn’t know if the two women had a prior relationship or were strangers, and couldn’t “read” the other woman’s emotions or feelings. Did she think I made the situation worse?

### **Evaluation**

I did not necessarily feel that I was effective, but did feel that God was present in this situation, helping us. I have a lot of unresolved questions about this situation, but have come to believe that ministry is not about the minister or our needs, but rather it is how God can work through us, even in our inadequacy, in order to help others. Perhaps we never know if we are effective or not, and maybe that is not even necessary. Maybe we don’t achieve what we initially intend, but God uses us in another way. We are called to journey with people along the way, and we seldom travel the whole path with them, so we rarely know what impact, if any, we have on their lives. This is difficult to accept, but it is part of ministry.

### **Theological Reflection**

I thought of the scripture passage, “Can you not stay awake with me one hour?” I also considered how this incident brought to mind the suffering of the cross and the road to Calvary. I also found myself reflecting on the Emmaus Journey, and how the disciples did not recognize the presence of Christ among them at first. It was only in sharing the communal experience that their eyes were opened.

Theological concepts that seemed to be at the heart of this experience for me are the idea of *imago Dei*, how all of humanity is created in the image of God, and that image is not only whole and perfect but broken and suffering. Also present here is the idea of the Body of Christ and the community of faith or the communion of saints. We are all connected in our humanity, even if that connection is brief and tenuous.

## Assignments

### Assignment for TR I Theological Reflection I

Read *Theological Reflection: Connecting Faith and Life*, by Joye Gros, O.P., DMin, published by Loyola Press.

Write a three page reflection incorporating the following questions:

- What is theological reflection?
- Why is it important for ministry formation?
- What is one important insight, challenge, or invitation you take from this introduction to theological reflection?

Email assignment in a Word document to Aimee May ([amay@athenaeum.edu](mailto:amay@athenaeum.edu)).

### Assignments for TR II Theological Reflection II

*(Do not complete until directed by Formation Advisor)*

#### #1

Review the Gros Theological Reflection book and consider the various ways in which you reflect theologically on your life, experiences, studies, and service.

With that review in mind, please answer the following two-part question in a typed document, using 12 point, Times New Roman or Garamond font, standard margins, and double spaced. Your answer should be no less than a half page and not more than one page (i.e., two to four paragraphs). Be succinct.

- Consider your personality type, personal situation, biases, gifts, weaknesses, and worldview. In your opinion, what is the greatest barrier or challenge you will need to address in order to reflect authentically and openly on your ministerial experience?
- What step(s) will you take to address this?

#### #2

Using the ministerial case writing process outlined above, prepare a case study from your Field Education experience. Remember that each case is to have five parts. Do not turn in your first draft, but edit your work for clarity and focus. No more than two pages, single spaced may be turned in.

In the Theological Reflection section, please identify at least two theological concepts that lie at the heart and at least two scripture passages.

Email assignments to Aimee May ([amay@athenaeum.edu](mailto:amay@athenaeum.edu)).