

# **Cockpit or Conductor? - embedding theological reflection in a Church agency**

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## **Introduction**

Working for the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) for fourteen years, I am interested in how staff of diverse faith backgrounds might be encouraged to live out, in their work, the espoused values of this organisation, rooted as they are in the principles of Catholic Social Teaching.

From 2009-2015 I undertook a professional doctorate and my research question focused on how best to enable CAFOD staff to interpret, embed and embody CAFOD's values in their work. The research process identified practices that enhanced the confidence and competence of staff in ecclesiology, in religious and faith language, and in theological reflection. The findings affirmed the importance of allowing space for theological reflection within CAFOD, and that the practice of theological reflection is an essential dimension of living out its Catholic identity. I conclude that the model of embedding theological reflection in a faith organization needs to be more than of 'conductor' than pilot in a cockpit.

## **Background and context: CAFOD**

CAFOD was set up in 1962 by the Bishops of England and Wales, on behalf of the Catholic community. It was created to respond to the poverty and hunger experienced by people in 'developing countries'. Today, it employs more than 450 staff with a diversity of faiths and none, who seek to end poverty and injustice by working with communities and partners in 40 countries across the world.

Structurally, CAFOD is an ecclesial organisation in that it comes under the auspices of the Catholic Bishops' Conference and is part of an international network of 165 organisations known as Caritas Internationalis. Throughout its history, its main interlocutor has been the Catholic Church in all its forms: the Catholic community, the Church hierarchy and Catholic teaching. Although it is primarily a development and humanitarian agency, it is also involved in campaigning and education work, mostly with the Catholic community in England and Wales. CAFOD's ecclesial identity is also manifested in its ethos.

As a Catholic organisation, CAFOD espouses seven values which are rooted in the key principles of Catholic Social Teaching: dignity, solidarity, compassion, hope, stewardship, sustainability and partnership.

### **Background and context: Catholic Social Teaching**

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) has its roots in the Bible. It is expressed in the Old Testament by God's abiding love for the *anawim* (the poor and outcasts). In the New Testament, it is summed up in the advocacy to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbour as yourself" (Luke 10:27). Since the time of Jesus, men and women, individuals and communities, have striven to live out the Gospel imperative to "bring glad tidings to the poor... liberty to captives... and recovery of sight to the blind" (Luke 4:18-19). Since the Evangelists, the Church has shared its reflections on social, political and economic matters and in so doing has provided "principles for reflection", "criteria for judgement" and "guidelines for action" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1993, #2423).

Though there have been many reflections on social justice by Catholics from the early Church onwards - for example by St John Chrysostom, Ambrose of Milan, Bartolomé de Las Casas - only since the end of the 19th century has the Church's teaching in this area become more systematic. Starting with Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891), popes have written social encyclicals at regular intervals in the light of both the Christian tradition and their own context. There are conflicting reconstructions of CST's main principles, but salient themes are: the dignity of the human person; rights and responsibilities; the priority of labour over capital; solidarity and subsidiarity; the common good; and, more recently, environmental justice.

### **The need for theological reflection?**

CAFOD states on its website that its work is "inspired by Scripture, Catholic Social Teaching and by the experiences and hopes of people who are disadvantaged and living in poverty". But can this claim be true if many staff are only superficially familiar with Scripture and CST? As Cooper (2007) has questioned regarding faith-based non-governmental organisations: "If faith is the basis of their work, which they argue it is, it should not be left to the margins itself. How can agencies link reflection and action without a process in place" (p.173)?

Thus, some theological reflection is necessary if CAFOD wants to claim that its work is inspired and renewed by CST - staff need to be given opportunities to engage with this body of teaching at a deeper, more reflective level, and to be encouraged to bring their own hermeneutic to the task. This would give staff greater ownership and avoid the tendency simply to add a 'Pope quote' at the end of a seemingly secular campaign or policy.

Winkett (2010) draws an analogy between reading the Bible and reading written music: She says:

We can imagine that the written words in the Bible have the function of notes in a musical score. The notes are written down on paper; there is an accepted language of symbols, time signatures and markings, translating the tunes that the composer has heard in his or her head so as to be understood and played by others. But sitting and reading the score of Bach's B minor Mass is an entirely different experience from singing it. The score only becomes music when the players or singers take it up and give it life by playing it. So it is with Scripture (p.18).

And so it is with CST. It only comes alive by being metaphorically sung or played. Its melody then has the potential to inspire both the performers and those listening.

### **My role in the organisation:**

Regarding my own role in CAFOD, I - along with several of my colleagues - focus on helping staff develop their understanding of CST and how best to work with the Catholic Church, largely through training workshops and mentoring. I combine theological and ecclesial knowledge with pedagogical practice.

For a number of years, I looked for a way to bring the CST 'melody' alive through staff taking ownership of CAFOD's values. Between 2009 and 2015 I undertook a research project for a professional doctorate, rooted in my practice at CAFOD. Part of my motivation in undertaking the research project was to potentially close the space between the values CAFOD claimed it wanted to live out, and what happened in the day-to-day running of the organisation. My involvement in two cycles of an emerging method of theological reflection known as Theological Action Research (TAR) made me think I had found a way to embed CST in a manner consistent with my pedagogical practice. My research question was:

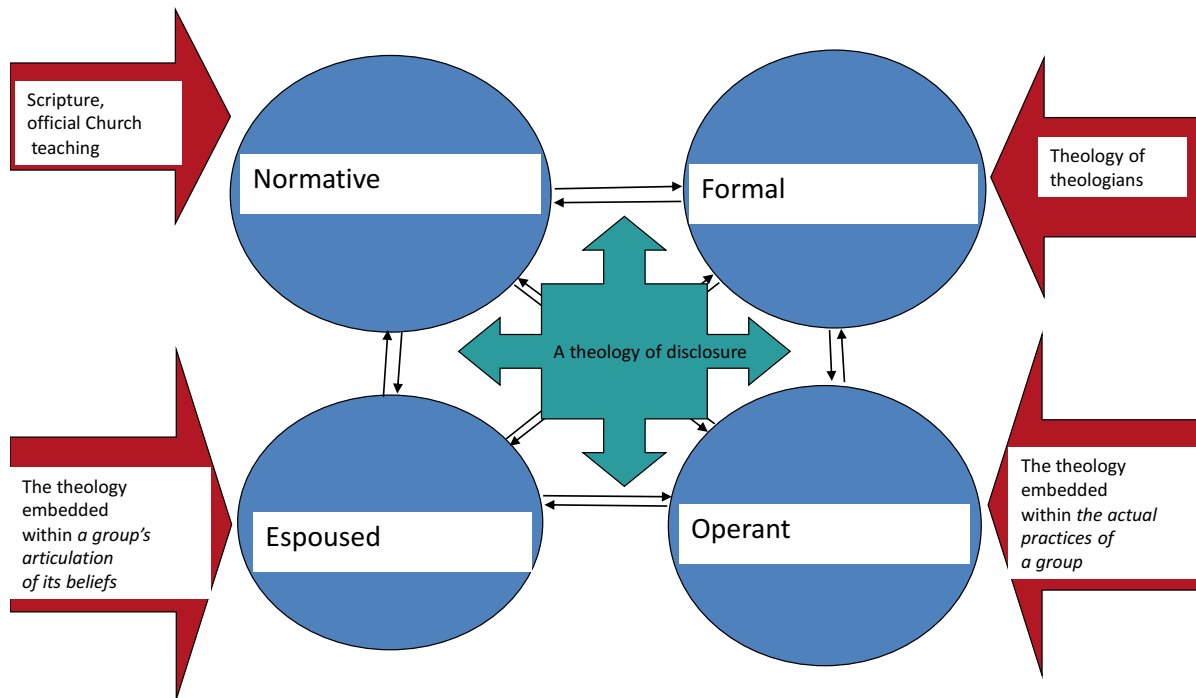
*How far is Theological Action Research an effective method to enable CAFOD staff to interpret, embed and embody the values of Catholic Social Teaching in their work?*

### **Theological Action Research**

In their book on Theological Action Research (TAR), *Talking about God in Practice: Theological action research and practical theology* (2010), the authors describe one of TAR's aims as being "enhancing the faith community's theological capacity", both in terms of words and action (p.14). The authors provide a one-sentence definition of TAR, which serves as a helpful summary: "Theological Action Research is a partnership between an insider and an outsider team to undertake research and conversations answering theological questions about faithful practice in order to renew both theology and practice in the service of God's mission" (2010, p.63). TAR has five distinct characteristics. These are:

1. It is theological all the way through
2. It involves an understanding of 'theology in four voices'
3. Theology is disclosed through conversational method
4. It offers a formative transformation of practice
5. It allows practice to contribute to the transformation of theology

Building on the conviction that Christian communities' lived practices are "bearers of theology", the ARCS team devised what they term "a heuristic and hermeneutic framework" (2010, p.53) that does not set one theological voice over the other, but instead brings them into conversation. Below is a diagram showing the conceptual framework of the 'theology in four voices'.



As well as the theology embedded in the practice of the community (operant) and the voice of tradition (normative), two other voices are brought into the conversation: the theology arising from theologians (formal) and the theology the community/group espouses, which is often rooted in normative and formal theology. It is clear that these four voices are not hermetically sealed entities, but that there is always a conscious and unconscious ‘flow’ between them. TAR insists that all four voices need to contribute to a theological conversation, and that theology is disclosed precisely in the dynamic between the four voices. For it is “only in the conversation between voices, carefully attended to, that an authentic practical-theological insight can be disclosed” (2010, p.56).

The TAR process offers an organisation or church the chance to take a snapshot of itself as it is in that moment. The snapshot is necessarily partial and incomplete. It nevertheless gives the organisation the opportunity to step back and gaze on its reflection.

## **The research findings**

So, what did the TAR process reflect back to CAFOD as an organisation? As well as answering the research question, the data also reflected back to CAFOD questions around identity, both organisational identity and Catholic identity. In particular, four recommendations came back to CAFOD in terms of how it might best live out its Catholic identity. These were to:

- Give staff time to engage in focussed theological reflection on CAFOD's values, rooted as they are in CST.
- Give staff the opportunity to 'practise' faith language - to talk about God in practice.
- Give staff the opportunity to explore the tensions which arise from being a Church agency.
- Encourage non-Catholic staff to contribute to CAFOD's theological narrative, not just its mission.

Reading the data, both the participants (the Insider team) and the Outsider team observed a lack of confidence and/or willingness to "talk about God in practice". Yet as Ranson (2008) suggests, Catholic agencies need to become "bi-lingual", that is, both theologically (literate) and professionally literate" (p.91). CAFOD needs to give its staff opportunities to practice "God-talk". This is for two main reasons. Firstly, CAFOD's main audience to which it is talking and seeking to act with is the Catholic community of England and Wales. The staff, particularly those whose job it is to regularly communicate with this community, must be given tools to 'inhabit' their (the Catholic community's) language.

The second reason why it is important to give staff space to talk about God in practice is in terms of integrity in respect to CAFOD being a faith-based agency. In an organisation such as CAFOD who works closely with Catholic partners overseas and in England and Wales, the language of faith offers a rich vehicle of communication which Catholics can hear easily and be inspired by. A greater theological fluency on behalf of CAFOD staff will only deepen its organisational identity and integrity and foster strong partnerships with Catholics worldwide. Quinlan (2008) asserts that Catholic identity "is not maintained merely through the affirmation of particular social or religious symbols or practices" (p.84). He makes a plea that Catholic identity does not

become something which is 'frozen' (p.84) or 'packaged' or 'possessed' (p.85), but rather something which unfolds as it lives and gives expression. As a lay ecclesial organisation, CAFOD must put effort into integrating and owning its Catholic identity and ask all staff in participating what that might mean and look like. This very endeavour would deepen and enrich its Catholic ethos.

By inviting its staff to engage in ongoing theological reflection, CAFOD can be confident that its Catholic identity is made manifest not so much in external trappings but rather in the way it embodies the Church's mission of being a dialogical and evangelising community, whose work bears both the seeds and the fruit of the kingdom of God. In employing people of all faiths and none CAFOD allows itself to be challenged and it expects the voice of the other to proclaim the good news alongside it. As Quinlan asserts "interpreting the application of gospel values, and the reapplication and reinterpretation of gospel values in an ever-changing context must be part of the life of our agencies too" (2008, p.46).

Another major finding from the research was that CAFOD's espoused theology - a theology which claims that the organisation's work is rooted in Scripture and CST - is both affirmed and developed by discovering in the data a Eucharistic narrative. This narrative reveals CAFOD to be an agency which responds to God's invitation to "love your neighbour as yourself" in three ways: pastorally, politically and in partnership. CAFOD responds pastorally by seeking to accompany those who are on the margins. It responds politically by envisioning a time when rich and poor will sit down together at the same table and the values of the Kingdom will have more power than consumption and violence. It responds in partnership through the mutuality of its relationships, by being open to being changed and through the quality of its relationships which go beyond the *telos* of justice-making.

TAR has enabled staff at CAFOD to learn about the principles of CST, and to interpret, embed and embody CAFOD's espoused values. Moreover, participants in the project were legitimately able to contribute to "a pragmatic framework of the elaboration of Catholic social thought" (McLoughlin and Simmonds, 2010, p.32). The research project demonstrated how CST (normative theology) can be taught in an inductive, creative and heuristic way which promotes individual and communal learning, within a setting which is neither a place of higher education nor exclusively Christian. Given the

absence of “hospitable spaces for theological conversations” (Hogan, 2012, p.283), TAR potentially provides an inclusive space for individuals to appropriate the principles of CST in their lives.

TAR provided for CAFOD a reading of its operant theology, thereby making a significant contribution to the ‘fullness’ of both CST and sacramental theology. By providing space for an authentic conversation between the four voices of theology, and the voice of practice, TAR has drawn the often-marginalised voices of operant and espoused theologies into conversation with the formal and normative in a way which is “mutually informative and shaping” (Watkins and Cameron, 2012, p.74).

Within the TAR process at CAFOD, participants were metaphorically given the opportunity to try playing the ‘score’ of CST while continuing to play the score of their own practice. The result was sometimes harmonious, sometimes discordant, but it was music which had not been heard before. The bringing together of the scores of operant, espoused, formal and normative theology with the score of practice made for a rich symphony, which engaged and energised the performers.

After completing my research, I was asked by Caritas Europa to head up a CST ‘learning path’ for staff from some of the 49 countries Caritas Europa serves - participants from Georgia, Latvia, Italy, Greece, Slovenia, Portugal and other countries came together for three, three-day workshops over an eighteen-month period. The process I used was based on TAR - asking participants to interrogate an aspect of CST in conversation with their practice. Working with different Catholic organisations made me realise how fortunate we are at CAFOD to have four staff members in the Theology Team, and one staff member (me) whose role it is to work exclusively with staff embedding CST. Many other Caritas organisations do not have such a luxury.

### **Laudato Si’ - a process not a document**

Fortuitously, following on from the findings of my research project and the affirmation that theological reflection needs to be a core part of CAFOD’s practice, in June 2015, Pope Francis published an encyclical - *Laudato Si’* (Praised be) - on care for our common home. In this circular letter, which he addresses to every person living on the planet, the Pope asks for a global dialogue on what constitutes true development and progress. As a Catholic



development agency, we felt we had something of value to contribute to this conversation. We therefore started a two-year process within CAFOD, beginning with workshops with CAFOD partners in Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Kenya, Columbia and Bangladesh.<sup>1</sup>

Only after listening to our partners and reflecting on what they had shared, did we undertake workshops with all CAFOD staff. This process included staff reflecting on the main themes which had arisen from our partners' 'conversations' with the encyclical, namely technology, politics, urbanization, economics, and culture and nature. The staff workshops included also some reflection on a Biblical text. A final report is in the process of being written up and it is envisaged that recommendations will be made to the senior management team based on an analysis of both the partner and staff workshops. It is likely to include a proposal to embed an integral approach to development, to ecology and to spirituality. This may mean not just tweaking the way CAFOD works at the edges, but more a radical change which will transform the way we work.

CAFOD is of course not the only Catholic agency to recognize that CST needs to be embedded in their practice at all levels. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in the United States saw that it was losing its Catholic identity during the 1990s, when there was talk of taking the word 'Catholic' out of the name of the organisation.<sup>2</sup> Funds and staff morale were low. In 1993, the new Executive Director Ken Hackett "felt that they needed to do something fundamentally different in order to survive". CST ceased to be just theory and began to come alive again. In the words of Christine Tucker:

It became a practical framework for the beliefs we espoused. Catholic social teaching helped us to rethink who we are and what we do...Justice was not simply another programming option but became the foundational value that was to permeate and be incorporated into all CRS strategies and activities.

All four thousand of CRS's staff worldwide undertook a day of reflection on the principle of justice and its practical implications, and they sought to embed this principle into their management as well as their operational work.

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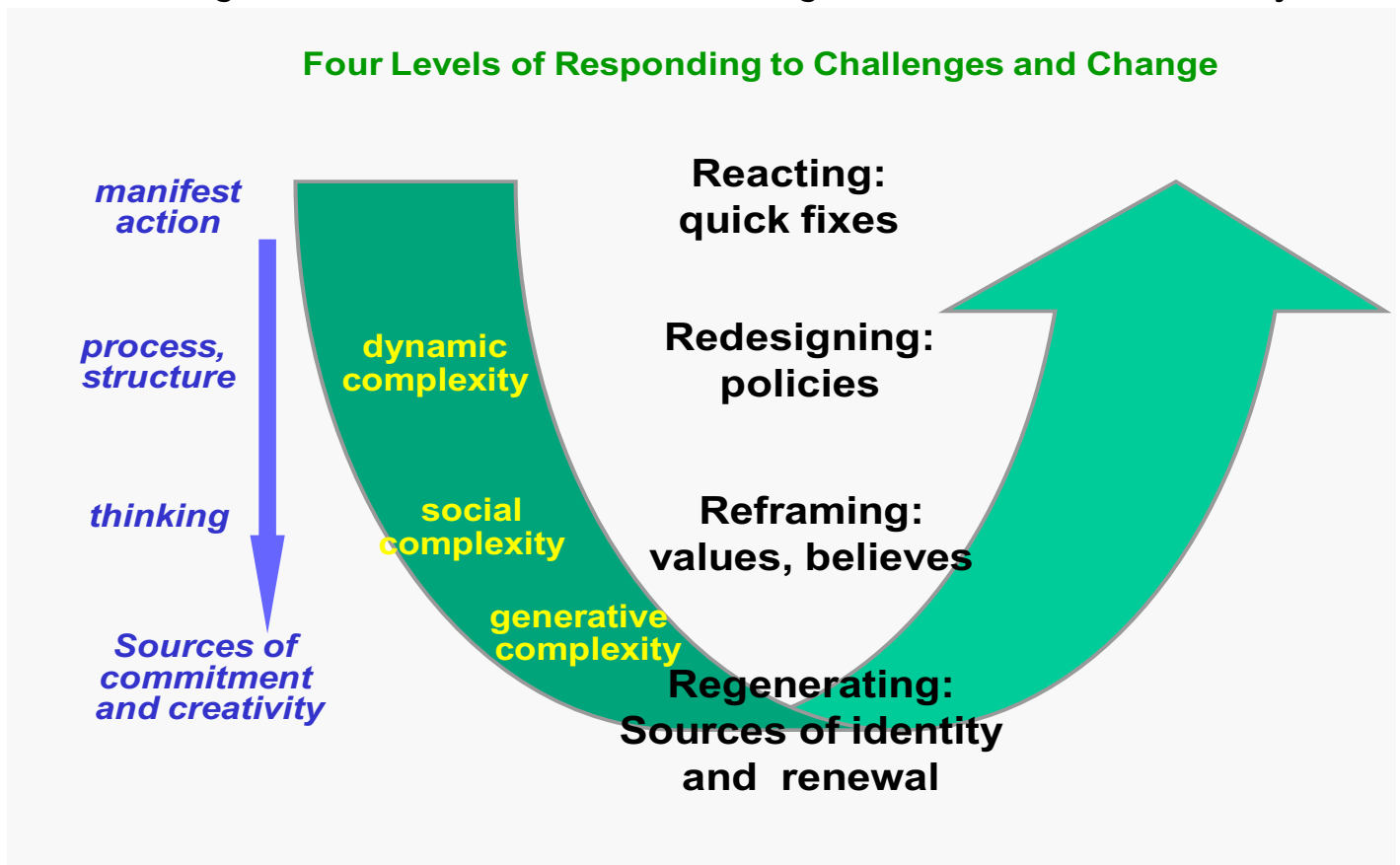
<sup>1</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the process see Deneulin, S and Zampini-Davies, A, Engaging Development and Religion: Methodological Groundings in *World Development*, Vol 99. Pp 110-121, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Tucker, C in *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 9:2, 2012, 315-324

## Models of embedding

In terms of embedding theological reflection into an organisation, one model might be an enforced embedding from the top down - like a pilot in the cockpit. The pilot is very much in control - s/he can choose the exact direction of travel, the destination, when to take off and when to land. Others are literally 'on board' but are they on board in any other way? It is very difficult in a top-down process to promote collaboration or co-ownership, and so any 'embedding' may well not last beyond the flight.

In organisational theory, Scharmer (2009) argues that in larger companies those at the top (ie: to continue my image, the pilots) are usually interested in maintaining the status quo, and therefore if an organisation is looking for innovation and change, it is more likely to come from other parts of the organisation (p.84). Leadership in organisations must be about facilitating and enhancing people's ability to 'see together', "to deeply attend to the reality that people face and enact" (p.136). Scharmer maintains that in order for change to happen, shifts need to occur at the bottom of the 'U' (see below), reframing values and beliefs and re-connecting with the fundamental identity



of the organisation. This shift in terms of the inner space from which a system operates “can be done only collaboratively” (p.377).

The model of embedding that I would advocate is that of leader (who does not have to be near the top of an organisation) as conductor – a conductor leads through accompaniment and draws out from people the best that they can give. The musicians have not written the score (in CAFOD’s case, the score is CST), but they bring their own interpretation of how the score can or should be played. It is worth remembering that the conductor is nothing without the musicians – s/he relies on their skills, experience and expertise. The score cannot be played well without ownership on the musicians’ part and in their desire to make the score come alive. And in their playing together, even if it is not always completely harmonious, collective knowledge and wisdom is maximized.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has sought to explain why theological reflection on the part of staff working for a Catholic Christian agency is essential to that organisation’s identity. Following a research project using an emerging methodology (Theological Action Research), four practices were suggested that would help staff to become more confident and competent in their ability to live out CAFOD’s values and its Catholic identity. Among these, it was proposed that CAFOD should invest in ongoing processes of theological reflection so that its values are continually broken open and owned by all members of staff, whatever their faith background. This will ensure that the gap between what is espoused by the organisation and what is operant is narrowed. A ‘conductor’ model of embedding theological reflection is strongly advised so that a space is created within the organisation “which can give a Christian meaning to commitment and activity” (Francis, 2013, #262).

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