

I BELIEVE... IN THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

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In the Clinical Pastoral Education, one of the skills we teach is theological reflection. The method I use is based on Robert Kinast's 1996 book *Let Ministry Teach: A Guide to Theological Reflection* and his subsequent book *Making Faith Sense: Theological Reflection in Everyday Life*. Theological reflection is not reserved for clergy or professional spiritual care practitioners. It is about connecting faith with activity and learning from our experiences. Its purpose is to heighten our sense of where and how God is present in our experiences and to encounter the living God in these experiences. It is a practical activity; it asks us to consider what difference God's presence makes, and what God expects of us as a result. Anyone can do it.

There are several "ingredients" in theological reflection: a meaningful experience, a faith perspective, the willingness to enter the experience and explore it as fully as possible, a reflection group, and the willingness to enact the changes that God seems to be asking of us. Theological reflection is best done in a group, which can see more than an individual. It keeps us honest and can

prevent us from distorting or misreading an experience.

Here are Kinast's five steps for theological reflection:

1. Choose an experience that makes you ask questions or surprises you.
2. Describe the experience in detail.
3. Enter the experience. Who is involved? What issues or values are at stake? What themes emerge?
4. Learn from the experience. What insights do you discover? What is God asking of you?
5. Enact your learning. Plan concrete steps to put it into practice.

This brief summary does not do justice to Kinast's work, but I want to use it to share some thoughts about my recent trip to New Zealand. I'm breaking one of the rules of theological reflection by writing this alone.

I have wanted to visit New Zealand since I was a child. Part of my "mission" was to find the burial place of my great-great-great uncle, Thomas Whytehead, who went from England as a missionary in the 19th century. He has been part of my family's story ever since I can remember. Through



△ *Thomas Whytehead's grave.*

the Diocese of Auckland, I contacted the archivist at St. John's College, the theological college for the Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand, and Polynesia. I spent several hours in the archives reading copies of his correspondence, as well as what others wrote about him.

Thomas Whytehead received his BA and MA from St. John's College, Cambridge. He wrote poetry from a young age, some of which was published. He was ordained and served a curacy on the Isle of Wight, eventually becoming the chaplain to George Selwyn, the newly appointed Bishop of New Zealand, and the intended head of the new theological college. Thomas sailed from England in late 1841 on a six-month voyage, during which he contracted tuberculosis. When

they reached Australia, he was so weak he had to stay behind while the rest of the party carried on.

He eventually reached New Zealand in October 1842, settled into the mission house, and began tutoring candidates for ordination, but it became clear he was dying. His final letters home contain messages for his family and arrange for the disposition of those possessions he had not already designated. One of his last works was a translation of the evening hymn "Glory to thee, my God, this night," into Maori, which he called "my legacy." He died on March 19, 1843, at the age of 27 and was buried in the churchyard at St. John the Baptist, Waimate North, in the Bay of Islands region. The Maori inscription on his grave reads "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

Making what amounted to a personal pilgrimage was a highlight of my trip. Reading Thomas's letters and the words of others gave me a sense of him as a person and of his faith. At the Mission House, now a museum, I saw the study he used and the bedroom where he died. The fact that I was there two days before the 205th anniversary of his death and on the third anniversary of my husband's death added a layer of poignancy to my visit.

In the weeks since my return home, I've reflected on why this experience made such an impact on me. At this point, I find myself being led toward a greater appreciation of the communion of saints. We affirm our belief in this holy community each time we say the Apostles' Creed, but I wonder how much thought we give to our words. Do we, and I include myself, regard statements about God the creator and Jesus as the "important" parts of the Creed? Do we hurry through the rest as though it were just a conclusion? If we do, we miss something crucial. The Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting flow from the creating, redeeming, and sanctifying love of God in Christ and through the Holy Spirit. This love unites the whole people of God, past, present, and future, in one body, with Christ as the head.

Writing about resurrection, Paul asserts, "If Christ has not been raised, those who have died in Christ have perished," and goes on to ask, "If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?" (1 Corinthians 15: 18, 29). While baptism on behalf of those who die unbaptized is not part of our practice today, I understand why someone would want to perform this loving action.

Paul's point is that resurrection and new life are God's gift for both the living and the dead. When we gather for worship, our prayers include both intercessions for the needs of the living and thanksgivings for those who have died. Through our statements of faith and our liturgies, we express our confidence that God's goodness and faithfulness extend beyond the bounds of this life. The communion of saints is real, and through this experience I feel bound more tightly to all the saints across space and through time. I invite you to reflect on the saints who are part of your faith story. What better time than in this season of resurrection? 



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