From a religious perspective, everything has a theological dimension. Theological reflection is the discipline of mindfulness of the meaning of every situation. Theology can be the hardest thing for ministers to talk about, yet reflecting theologically is an extremely important component of the supervisory sessions in an internship.

Ministerial students by necessity have been quite focused on themselves during their formation thus far. The theological reflection helps to get them out of their self-absorption. Not only is it essential for the student’s continuing ministerial formation, [for those seeking ordination] it’s a matter of being accountable to our religious tradition. [It is also a critical opportunity for them to become aware of their biases and predispositions.]

There are many different styles of “doing” theological reflection. Essentially, it consists of three parts: experience, reflection and action. To bridge the gap from experience to reflection, it’s useful to have a device or method to help the intern detach from his or her singular perception of the incident and to enter into a reflective mode. In the reflective mode, there is a greater openness to new insights and religious understandings, as well as new ways of understanding each person’s role in the situation (including the intern’s).

Some supervisors will have the intern come to the supervisory session with a written description of the situation that will be a part of their reflection. They may give the student something in writing, something from one of the sources of our religious tradition, to offer the intern a counterpoint from which to begin the reflection. [other examples: using a case study, sharing from a journal, submitting a weekly report/reflection, discussing a book or article]

Using a question as a lens through which to view the experience is another way to engage in the reflective process. “Where is the sacred?” “Where do you find God in this situation?” “What do you believe? Does this reflection confirm or challenge your beliefs?”

After contemplating the situation through theological reflection, the supervisor helps the intern discover what he/she may have missed. (And, of course, the reality is that it’s impossible to ever completely plumb the depths of a given situation, no matter how much reflection we do!)

Finally, the supervisor and intern move into an exploration of actions that might be taken as a result of the reflection. Some useful questions are: “What am I called to do in this context?” “What implications do these insights and understandings have on my future actions?” And, moving beyond the personal and the immediate, “Where am I called to be in the larger world?”

In the process of theological reflection, supervisors learn more about who they are as relational people. At its best, theological reflection is profound spiritual work for both intern and supervisor.