

# Process Theology: A Pastor's Guide to Understanding God's Dynamic Nature

## Introduction

Process theology represents one of the most significant theological developments of the twentieth century, offering a radically different way of understanding God's relationship with the world. For pastors accustomed to classical theism's portrait of an unchanging, all-powerful deity, process theology presents both challenges and opportunities. At its core, process theology suggests that God is not a static being removed from the world's suffering and change, but rather a dynamic presence intimately involved in every moment of creation's unfolding story.

This theological movement emerged from the philosophical work of Alfred North Whitehead and was developed theologically by scholars like Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb, and David Ray Griffin. Rather than viewing reality as composed of static substances, process thought sees the universe as comprised of interconnected events and experiences. Everything that exists is in a constant state of becoming, including God. This perspective has profound implications for how we understand divine power, suffering, prayer, and pastoral care.

## The Philosophical Foundation: Reality as Process

To understand process theology, we must first grasp its fundamental claim about the nature of reality itself. Traditional Western thought, heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, tends to think of reality in terms of substances—things that exist independently and remain essentially unchanged despite surface modifications. A rock is a rock; a person is a person; God is God—each maintaining their essential nature through time.

Process philosophy challenges this view by proposing that reality consists not of substances but of events and experiences. Everything that exists is constantly becoming something new through its relationships and interactions with other entities. Consider how a human being is never quite the same from moment to moment. Our cells are constantly dying and being replaced, our thoughts and emotions are in flux, and our relationships continuously shape who we are becoming. Process thought suggests that this dynamic quality isn't limited to living beings but characterizes all of reality, from subatomic particles to galaxies to God.

This shift from substance to process thinking has immediate pastoral implications. When we encounter someone struggling with addiction, depression, or spiritual doubt, process theology reminds us that people are not trapped by fixed natures or predetermined destinies. Instead, each moment offers genuine possibilities for growth, healing, and transformation. The alcoholic is not condemned to remain an alcoholic; the doubter need not remain trapped in doubt. Each moment presents real alternatives, and God is actively involved in offering new possibilities for becoming.

## Process Theology's Understanding of God

Perhaps the most striking aspect of process theology is its reconceptualization of God's nature. Classical theism typically describes God as omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), omnipresent (everywhere), and impassible (unchanging and unaffected by the world). Process theology maintains God's omnipresence but significantly revises our understanding of divine power, knowledge, and emotional involvement with creation.

In process theology, God is dipolar—possessing both a primordial and a consequent nature. God's primordial nature contains all possibilities and remains constant, providing the eternal principles and potentials that guide the universe's development. This aspect of God ensures that there are always genuine alternatives available in every situation, preventing the universe from falling into complete chaos or meaninglessness.

God's consequent nature, however, is constantly changing as God experiences and is affected by everything that happens in the world. God feels every joy and suffers every pain that occurs in creation. When a child dies, God grieves. When lovers unite, God celebrates. When injustice occurs, God experiences genuine anger and sadness. This means that God is not emotionally distant from human suffering but intimately connected to it.

This understanding transforms how we think about divine power. Rather than coercive omnipotence—the ability to unilaterally control all events—God exercises persuasive power. God influences the world not by forcing outcomes but by offering possibilities and luring creation toward greater complexity, beauty, and value. Every moment, God presents each entity with options for its next becoming, always encouraging movement toward greater harmony and intensity of experience.

## Implications for Understanding Suffering and Evil

One of the most pastorally relevant aspects of process theology is its approach to the problem of evil and suffering. The traditional problem of evil poses a difficult question: If God is all-powerful and all-good, why does suffering exist? Classical answers often involve appeals to mysterious divine purposes, the greater good, or human free will, but these responses can feel inadequate to grieving families or those experiencing profound injustice.

Process theology offers a different perspective. Because God's power is persuasive rather than coercive, and because all entities possess some degree of self-determination, suffering and evil are genuine possibilities that God cannot unilaterally prevent. God doesn't cause or permit suffering in service of some greater plan; rather, suffering emerges from the intersection of creaturely freedom, natural processes, and the inherent risks involved in a world where genuine becoming is possible.

This doesn't mean God is powerless in the face of evil. Instead, God is constantly working to minimize suffering and maximize opportunities for healing and growth. When tragedy strikes, God doesn't stand apart as an unmoved observer but suffers alongside creation while simultaneously offering new possibilities for response and recovery. God weeps with those who weep and works tirelessly to bring good from evil situations, though not by overriding the genuine freedom that makes both love and suffering possible.

For pastoral care, this perspective can be deeply comforting. When someone asks, "Why did God let this happen?" the process pastor can honestly say that God didn't want it to happen and is working to

help heal the damage. God is not the cause of suffering but our most intimate companion in it, always offering resources for hope and transformation even in the darkest circumstances.

## Prayer and Divine Action

Process theology also transforms our understanding of prayer and how God acts in the world. If God cannot coercively control events, what does it mean to pray for healing, protection, or guidance? Process theology suggests that prayer is not about convincing God to intervene supernaturally but about opening ourselves to God's constant flow of possibilities and influence.

When we pray for someone's healing, we're not asking God to override natural laws or force a cure. Instead, we're participating in God's ongoing creative work by opening channels for divine influence to flow more freely. Our prayers may help create conditions where healing becomes more likely—perhaps by encouraging us to provide better care, by fostering hope that supports the body's natural healing processes, or by creating a community of support that facilitates recovery.

This understanding makes prayer both more realistic and more empowering. We don't need to worry about whether our prayers are selfish or whether we're asking for the right things. Instead, we can trust that God is always working for the best possible outcomes given the constraints of any situation. Our role is to align ourselves with God's purposes and to become channels through which divine love and creativity can more effectively work in the world.

## Pastoral Applications and Benefits

Process theology offers several practical benefits for pastoral ministry.

First, it provides a framework for honest engagement with doubt and questioning. Because God is seen as constantly learning and growing through relationship with creation, our own spiritual struggles and evolving understanding become part of God's own experience rather than evidence of spiritual failure.

Second, process theology strongly emphasizes human responsibility and agency. While we are not ultimately in control of our circumstances, we do have genuine choices about how to respond to the possibilities God offers us in each moment. This perspective can be especially helpful in counseling situations, where people often feel trapped by their past or overwhelmed by their circumstances.

Third, the process emphasis on interconnectedness provides theological grounding for situational concerns of social fairness and care for creation. Since everything is related to everything else, and since God experiences all suffering, working for the healing of specific situations and relationships becomes a direct participation in God's own mission of love and redemption.

## Challenges and Limitations

Process theology is not without its challenges for traditional Christian faith and practice. Some pastors worry that limiting God's power makes God less worthy of worship or less able to provide ultimate hope. Others question whether process theology adequately accounts for biblical teachings about God's sovereignty or the finality of salvation.

These concerns deserve serious consideration. Process theologians respond by arguing that a God who chooses to work through persuasion rather than coercion is more worthy of worship, not less,

because divine love is thereby shown to be genuine rather than manipulative. They also suggest that hope is better grounded in a God who is actively working for good outcomes than in one whose mysterious purposes might involve the perpetuation of suffering.

Regarding biblical authority, process theologians typically adopt a progressive understanding of revelation, seeing the Bible as recording humanity's evolving understanding of God rather than providing a final, unchangeable description of divine nature. This allows them to embrace biblical insights about God's love and fairness while reinterpreting passages that seem to portray God as arbitrarily powerful or emotionally distant.

## Conclusion

Process theology offers contemporary pastors a way of understanding God that takes seriously both the reality of suffering and the possibility of hope. By envisioning God as intimately involved in the world's becoming, constantly offering new possibilities while experiencing all of creation's joys and sorrows, process theology provides resources for authentic engagement with life's complexities.

This theological approach doesn't eliminate mystery or reduce faith to mere human projection. Instead, it invites us to see ourselves as partners with God in the ongoing creation of the world, called to participate in divine love by working for healing, fairness, and the flourishing of all life. For pastors seeking to speak meaningfully about God in a world marked by both beauty and tragedy, process theology provides valuable insights and practical wisdom.

Whether or not one fully embraces process theology's philosophical foundations, its emphasis on God's empathetic involvement with creation and its call to responsible participation in divine creativity offer important resources for contemporary ministry. In a world that often feels abandoned by transcendent power, process theology reminds us that God is not distant but intimately present, not unchanging but dynamically responsive, not controlling but lovingly persuasive—always calling us toward greater possibilities for healing and hope.