

SEMINAR ON PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

The Seminar on Practical Theology held two sessions, each convened by Mary Ellen Sheehan of St. Michael's College of the Toronto School of Theology. In the first session, Robert Kinast of the Center for Theological Reflection in Madeira Beach, Florida, presented a paper entitled "Experiential Theology or Theology of Experience?" in which he summarized the results of his research on the use of the term *experience* in recent theological reflection. Kinast has worked with the U.S. bishops in their recent national church consultation on the laity prior to the 1987 Episcopal Synod. His reports concerning the consultation on the laity were published in 1987 in *Origins*. He has also studied and synthesized input on two other episcopal consultations, the one on priesthood prior to the 1990 Episcopal Synod and the one on women prior to the current third draft of the bishops' response to women's concerns. This work led him to observe the participants expressing the religious/theological meaning of their own lives in their own words with an integrity and authenticity that almost defied a further more technical statement in theological categorical language.

At the same time he was aware of the increasing attention given by prominent systematic theologians, such as Tracy, Schillebeeckx, Ogden, Küng, Moltmann, and Lamb, to the role of experience in the method and content of theology. Kinast's study of such authors led him to observe that they seem to be searching for a theological perspective on experience itself, a framework that would take experience as a *source* of theology to justify and guide the current tasks of theological reflection as a critical dialogue between the classic articulations of the Christian tradition with the common experience of contemporary people.

At this stage of his research, Kinast explained his use of a working distinction between what he calls *experiential theology* and *theology of experience*, the first term corresponding to the direct, but already interpreted, description of the participants in the consultations and the second term corresponding to the theologians engaged in reflection on experience in the contemporary context in order to determine its importance for theological method and content. From reflection on his practice with the consultations and his study of current theory, Kinast has posed his research question as: are these two approaches two different perspectives on the same tasks sharing a common basic consensus? Or are they different kinds of theology, more dialectical than complementary? By comparing and contrasting *experiential theology* and *theology of experience*, Kinast summarized the results of his findings on experience as categorical or anecdotal, on the understanding and use of interpretation by each approach, and on the function and use of oppression as a basic category for paradigm change in theology.

Beginning with a response by Thomas Groome of Boston College, a lively discussion ensued among the twenty-one seminar participants whose specializa-

tions included bible, systematic theology, ethics, Christian education, health care, and field education. With the participants sharing their own practice and theory, the discussion focused on experience and interpretation, noting especially how interest and purpose influences the interpretation of experience. The session concluded with the convener providing time for the participants to evaluate the session. There was general agreement that the session was of great value, both with respect to the topic and the process used for reflection.

The second session, led by Robert McKeon, a Ph.D. candidate at St. Michael's College, Toronto, focused on his practice as an educator in the Ministry Formation Program (MFP) at Newman Theological College in Edmonton, Alberta. In his paper entitled "A Practitioner's Experiential Theology in the Teaching-Learning Situation," McKeon described briefly the origins, purposes, and characteristics of the MFP and then identified the explicit and implicit theology operative in the program during its nine year existence as an exercise in contextual theological analysis.

The MFP started on the invitation of bishops in Western Canada responding to the situation of many Roman Catholics who were presenting themselves for ministry, who were in need of theological education, and for whom the existing theological education programs were seen as inadequate in meeting their needs. The one year program for laity and members of religious communities emerged at Newman Theological College where previously the student body had been seminarians exclusively. The MFP participants, ranging in age from late teens to late sixties, came to the ten-month program with life experiences of Christian faith, ministry, and personal giftedness, although not necessarily named in these terms. They also came with experiences of doubt, injustice, and personal woundedness. Arrival at MFP was not a starting point on a faith journey, but rather a midpoint with the participants seeking a more intentional life of Christian discipleship and service. Some were seeking to move toward a full-time paid church ministry position.

McKeon's practice as an educator in the MFP led him to identify the ambiguities operative presently in the church concerning the theology of the laity, the meaning of the word *ministry*, the various contexts both available and sought after for the practice of ministry in the institutional church, the meaning of *personal formation for ministry*, adult educational methodology and evaluation for the practice of ministry, empowerment of the laity, and the understanding and practice of ecclesiology. For each of these issues, McKeon reviewed some of the current literature dealing with ambiguities existing at both the theoretical and practical levels.

Respondent Gaile Pohlhaus of Villanova University situated the question of laity and the practice of committed discipleship in a larger historical context. Then a lively discussion followed among the eighteen theological educator participants from both English and French-speaking Canada, Jamaica, Ireland, and the United States who represented parish, diocesan, base community, seminary, college, and university contexts. All recognized the ambiguities identified by McKeon to be operative in their contexts and discussants shared how they are engaged in meeting the challenges. Not surprisingly, the theological discussion focused on the theory and practice of the theology of the church.

Again in this second session, evaluation confirmed the value of this seminar within the CTSA offerings. Practice and theory were engaged in the conversation, with both new horizons and limitations opened up among the participants. The participants are committed to continuing the seminar and particularly its process. Robert Kinast and Thomas Groome will be the conveners for next year's seminar and the usual consultative process will be employed in the fall to determine the presenters, respondents, and topics.

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