

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

- Topic: Roman Catholic Approaches to Practical Theology
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Robert Schreiter proposed four areas of Catholic theology and practice that are essential to a Catholic approach to practical theology: (1) the interaction with culture; (2) the place of the Church in practical theology; (3) theological presuppositions behind the doing of practical theology; and (4) concepts of universality. According to Schreiter all practical theology is contextual. Regarding the context of culture, Schreiter mentioned four dimensions to a Catholic understanding of culture. Culture can, first of all, be understood as a system of signs, which corresponds with Catholic notions of sacramentality. Culture can also be understood through narrativity, and through popular religiosity. Finally, culture has an aesthetic dimension. The semiotic, narrative, popular, and aesthetic aspects of Catholic theology and practice bring particular dimensions of culture to a Catholic approach to practical theology.

A Catholic approach to practical theology has a well-developed and defined ecclesiology. Schreiter focused on two aspects of the Church essential to practical theology: sacramentality and tradition. Catholic approaches to practical theology, in contrast to some Protestant practical theologies, would highlight the communal dimension of theology—both the Church as the *sacramentum mundi* and the Tradition.

Schreiter discussed three theological presuppositions for a Catholic approach to practical theology. First, Catholic theologians emphasize the Incarnation and take issues of contextuality and inculturation from that starting point. Secondly, Catholics would emphasize the relationship between nature and grace, rather than sin and grace. Finally, Catholics would emphasize the Catholic, or analogical, imagination rather than the dialectical approach of many Protestants.

The final characteristic of a Catholic approach to practical theology is universality. Schreiter noted three concepts that point beyond relative or reductionistic approaches to theology: global theological flows, communicative theologies, and catholicity. Each of these concepts points to ways in which local and contextual theologies find points of comparison and similarity with other theological ideas in other places.

Raymond Webb's paper, "Catholic Practical Theology: Challenge and Opportunity," presented an understanding of Catholic practical theology as the theological discipline distinctive for its dialogical engagement of specific life situations with the Tradition. It includes general metatheoretical concerns as well as the various specializations (pastoral care and counseling, church leadership, religious education, and so forth). Examples of metatheoretical concerns are the nature of the relationship between situations and the tradition and between theological considerations and social scientific perspectives. Webb proposed a framework for an understanding of Catholic practical theology that is (1) immersed in Catholic theology, (2) theoretical and scientific, and (3) practical.

One of the dialogue partners is the Catholic tradition, characterized in the paper as intellectual, ecclesial, spiritual, sacramental, and ecumenical-interreligious. As a theological discipline, practical theology must be theoretical, scientific, critical, scholarly, intellectual, and methodologically disciplined. Simple problem solving, however valid and useful, is not the scientific work which is adequate to the discipline. Like other areas of theology, practical theology will draw on the social and human sciences and attend to relevant philosophical issues, including truth claims, foundationalism, and postmodern concerns. The nonrational, in particular the aesthetic dimension of practical theology, warrants intensified attention and development.

Of course, practical theology will be practical, meaning that it will relate to church practice or societal situations, be concerned about the specific, and have a bias toward action. Theoretical concerns in understanding the particular situation are important, including issues such as description and measurement, observer participation and potential bias, and fallacies in reasoning about data. Metatheory must have a relationship to practice and practical disciplines. Though not focusing exclusively on the ordained pastor, practical theology must include and fund pastors, other ministers and ministries. "Theological reflection" needs increased nuance and interpretation.

Webb noted timely areas for attention by practical theologians, including the relationship between metatheory and the specializations, protecting persons on the margins and children, interreligious dialogue, Catholic congregational studies, Catholic identity, the current "high spirituality/low church attendance" phenomenon, ethnic expressions of religion and their interrelationship within church communities, aesthetics, war-peace-security, conflict, and the use of church resources. He presented an example of the contribution practical theologians could make toward understanding and addressing the clergy sexual abuse of minors scandal.

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