

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Practical Theology as Grace at Work
Convener: Thomas Groome, Boston College
Moderator: Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Fordham University
Presenters: Brent Little, Sacred Heart University
Cynthia Cameron, Rivier University

The overall theme of the 2018 CTSA convention, “Grace at Work in the World” was most congenial to the work of Practical Theology and its focused concern for the praxis of Christian faith in varied historical contexts.

Prof. Little situated his paper, “A Dialogue with L’Arche: Grace, Hospitality, and Church,” within the context of developmental disabilities. He critiqued the frequent “charity” model of Catholic praxis toward people with disabilities—a model demonstrated both in official Church documents as well as common practices of American parishes. The charity model’s underlying theology is built on a problematic concept of hospitality that emphasizes the agency of the giver, who is the person seemingly without disabilities, over the receiver, who is the person with disabilities. In other words, the full agency of the person with developmental disabilities is not recognized. At the level of parish life, a practical consequence of the charity model can be seen when people with developmental disabilities are not given opportunities to become active participants in parish life, because it is assumed that they can only receive hospitality and not contribute to it. Instead, a more just form of hospitality is defined by a mutuality that affirms each person’s agency to be both a giver and a receiver.

The foundation of Prof. Little’s paper was theological reflection upon his own experience of L’Arche communities. L’Arche demonstrates a hospitality that recognizes and nurtures the agency of those with developmental disabilities, specifically their agency to extend hospitality, and perhaps even friendship, to non-disabled people, a reversal of the one-directional hospitality of the conventional charity model. In addition, L’Arche challenges and deepens theological reflection on grace’s activity in the world. As an example, the paper engaged with Karl Rahner’s argument on the indissoluble unity between love of God and neighbor in the light of the experiences of L’Arche. Specifically, the guiding question is to what degree Rahner’s rhetoric aligns with the conventional charity model’s emphasis on the neighbor as the receiver of the giving person’s charity.

In her paper, “Adolescent Girls and Experiences of Grace: Considering Cognitive Development and the Experience of Transcendence,” Prof. Cynthia Cameron took up the theological commitment that grace is God’s love for humanity, experienced in our historicity and in experiences of transcendence. She noted that experiences of transcendence and, therefore, experiences of grace tend to be defined from the perspective of theologians writing from an adult cognitive developmental stage. This raises the question of how those who are not at an adult stage of cognitive development—such as children, adolescents, those with developmental disabilities or dementia—experience transcendence and grace.

Prof. Cameron situated this question in the context of adolescent girls who are both developmentally not yet adult and socialized to be oriented towards relationships. Drawing on the work of psychologists Robert Kegan and James Fowler, she suggested

Topic Session: Practical Theology

that the ability to reflect on one's relationship with God and on grace as a "corner of the eye" glimpse of transcendence is determined by one's cognitive development. Adolescent girls, for example, have not yet developed the ability to stand sufficiently outside of a relationship with God and the experience of grace in order to reflect on these. Nevertheless, since grace is universally available and humans are oriented towards transcendence, adolescent girls already experience grace. Theologians can provide more capacious understandings of grace by attending to the experiences of adolescent girls and others who do not have the developmental capabilities of typical adults. Prof. Cameron suggested that, because they are adolescents, girls need adults—particularly ministers and religious educators—in their lives who are attentive to the developmental task of learning to reflect on a relationship with God and on God's grace, providing support for their current developmental stage and challenging them to think about their relationship with God in new, more complex ways.

The lively conversation that ensued, between the two presenters and then with all participants, focused on imagining ways for parishes to include people with developmental disabilities as agents (rather than simply recipients) in community hospitality, and likewise how to mentor adolescent girls to deepen their abilities to reflect on experiences of grace in their lives.

*Thomas Groome
Boston College
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts*