

SEMINAR ON PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

That the seminar on Practical Theology met for the first time at the San Francisco convention is particularly fitting given the convention theme, "Theology: Academic and Ecclesial" and the fact that practical theology has often been caught in the dichotomy between theory and praxis or between the academy and the Church. The very name of the seminar raised questions for some of the participants and led to their proposing alternatives such as pastoral theology, ministerial theology, or contextual theology. The name practical theology had been selected originally in an effort to find a kind of field-encompassing name for a variety of theological approaches and processes employed in reflection on praxis. The complexity of practical theology was reflected in the diverse backgrounds of the seminar participants: pastoral theology, moral theology, liturgy, spirituality, spiritual direction, systematic theology—all were represented. In addition the participants represented a variety of educational contexts: seminaries, universities and colleges sponsoring programs in ministry training, graduate schools of theology, and campus ministry programs in Roman Catholic colleges. While the diversity within the group at times led to some diffuse conversation, the overall effect enriched the seminar by revealing the centrality of praxis-reflection in theology generally and in that broad area of theology designated as practical theology.

The first session of the seminar was devoted to a panel discussion entitled "Perspectives on Practical Theology." Each of the three panelists gave a fifteen-minute presentation on the nature of practical theology as seen from the particular perspective of the educational context in which he or she taught. The second session consisted in a general discussion of a previously circulated paper by David Killen and Patricia O'Connell Killen entitled "Theology in its Natural Environment: Issues, Implications and Directions." The following summary is the work of the moderator of the seminar.

First Session, Thursday. The panelists for this session were: Edward Sellner of the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Timothy O'Connell of the Institute of Pastoral Studies of Loyola University in Chicago and Rosann Catalano of St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore. Edward Sellner highlighted the way that his own experiences had shaped his development as a theologian and also the ways in which students' experiences shape their development as theologians and ministers. He briefly narrated his own career in theology and paid particular attention to periods or moments in which an experience held for him some powerfully transforming or converting impact. Next, Sellner described how the experiences of students in a lay ministry empowerment program serve in an equally transforming or converting way for them when those experiences are reflected upon critically. Thus Sellner's remarks highlighted the integrating and transforming effect of conversion in the theological process.

Timothy O'Connell broadened the topic to speak to the fundamental question of how indeed all theology is effectively pastoral. He spoke primarily from the perspective of a moral theologian rather than from his position as administrator of a program of pastoral studies. He indicated that for him the goal of theology is meaning and thus truth grasped in a historical, personal and social context. The sources of theological reflection are in fact varied, though all are experiential. Finally, the task of theology in its search for meaning is to mine the revelational quality of experience. O'Connell also developed the theme of how experiences shape the agent who actually does theology and in some sense qualify or condition what he or she can honestly say to others about the revelational quality of experience.

Rosann Catalano developed her remarks in the context of her work teaching the foundational theological courses in an extension doctor of ministry program. She took exception to the title of the seminar and explored the ways in which so-called scientific theology has been related to practical theology in the past and how it might be so related in the future. In Catalano's view the dichotomy usually set up between scientific or academic theology and practical theology worked to the detriment of practical theology by making it appear to be impractical, easier, or less critical than its academic counterpart. She proposed that the dichotomy be overcome by linking practical theology as much as possible to the liberating aspects of all education.

Second Session, Friday. The second session was devoted to a discussion of the paper presented by David P. Killen and Patricia O'Connell Killen. Their paper grew out of their involvement at the University of the South in The Bairnwick Center's Education for Ministry Program—David Killen as Director of The Bairnwick Center and Patricia Killen as a professor in the University's Department of Theology. (All quoted material is from the text of the Killens' paper.)

The Education for Ministry Program currently enrolls some 6,000 students in six countries and is the English-speaking world's largest extension program of theological education. The heart of the program "is a model of and methods for theological reflection that enable people to do theology in their daily lives with the ongoing critical support of a small group (six to ten)." For the Killens' the term "natural environment" denotes the environment in which people live and work and the religious community in which people gather to express their faith and to reach out in mission and ministry. The experiential base for their paper and presentation on theology in such a natural environment derives from the Education for Ministry Program.

The seminar's discussion explored four of the major claims in the Killens' paper. First, theology in its natural environment is in continuity with a theological process of critical reflection on praxis that is often given other names—for example, contextual theology, theological reflection, indigenous theology, theology from the base communities. Under whatever name, this process of praxis-reflection focuses directly upon a crucial problem for academic and magisterial theology: "its 'fit' with the faith praxis of local Christian communities." Theology in its natural environment, like other similar processes, must develop criteria for adequacy and coherence, as well as a method for helping reflecting groups gain

the appropriate critical access to the sources of Christian tradition. The ultimate norm for theology in its natural environment is its ability to "enliven and foster faith in a manner which maintains the integrity of gospel and mission."

Second, the elements of the process of theology in its natural environment are fourfold: "a clear focus on some aspect of experience; some conversation or correlation between that experience and scripture or church teaching; and, some judgments about truth yielding new actions" as well as a focus upon group processes in both the development and the sustaining of the reflection in the natural environment.

The third key theme in the Killens' paper is that there is an intimate link between theology in its natural environment and the emergence of a literate and mission-oriented laity within the local congregation. In fact the process of theology in its natural environment can contribute to sharing of power and authority in local congregations as surely as would changes in structures of authority and ministry.

Fourth, the process of theology in its natural environment has implications for the exercise of professional theology by making clearer the processes of contextualization within local congregations and by revealing a part of the process of forming the *sensus fidelium*. In the immediate future these implications may heighten the already existing tension between academic and practical theologians, but continued dialogue among practitioners of both academic and practical approaches promises a more collaborative, praxis-oriented theological method for the future.

The seminar concluded with a brief discussion of the process and content of the two sessions and a consideration of a possible format and principal participants for the seminar meeting at the 1986 convention.

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