

SEMINAR ON PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

The Philadelphia convention of the CTSA marked the third meeting of the seminar in Practical Theology. The Seminar had developed a framework for its meetings: one day is devoted to a discussion of the theory of practical theology; the second day, to consideration of a case or body of empirical data relevant to the task of practical theology. The first day of this meeting was taken up with discussion of a previously circulated paper prepared by Professor Mary Ellen Sheahan of the University of St. Michael's College, Toronto. Professor Sheahan's paper, entitled "Assumptions About Experience and Knowledge: Naming Issues in Practical Theology," enabled the seminar to relate a portion of its work to the convention theme, "the linguistic turn in theology." The second day was devoted to a panel presentation and discussion of the implications for practical theology of the ongoing Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life. Panelists included Professors Bernard Prusak of Villanova University and Michael McGinniss of La Salle University. A third panelist, Dr. Lou McNeil, from the Glenmary Research Center in Atlanta, GA was unable to attend. The following summary is based upon notes taken by Dr. Eugene King of St. Paul's University and Seminary, Ottawa, who chaired the first session and by Michael McGinniss, who chaired the second session.

First Session. The purpose of Professor Sheahan's paper was to engage the seminar members in discussion of a set of questions, which included the following:

What language do you use to describe yourself as a theologian in the church, and why? . . . What are the determining factors of this usage? . . . What are the assets and liabilities of this language? Do you use the word *praxis* in your work and in what sense? . . . Do you use the word *experience* in your work and in what sense? . . . Does language make any difference: *should* or *can* the various notions of pastoral or practical theology . . . be co-related? What is the most critical question facing you as a pastoral or practical theologian in your ministry context? (p. 14).

Sheahan explored a variety of uses of the terms practical and pastoral theology in current programs of pastoral and ministerial education and in writings of North American theologians, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. Further, Sheahan situated these programs and literature against the theological and ecclesial split between academic and pastoral theology, especially as discussed by Edward Farley in his 1983 work *Theologia*. Along with Farley, Sheahan suggested that contemporary theology and practice might reflect the same dichotomy between academic and pastoral aspects of theology which had been festering since the decline of theology as *habitus* or wisdom.

Sheahan presented the understandings of pastoral and/or practical theology of James Lapsley (pastoral theology is identified with pastoral care), Don Browning (as a dimension of theological ethics), Thomas Oden (pastoral theology is defined

by the actions of the pastor), Karl Rahner and Robert Kinast (for both of whom the area is basically theological reflection on all actions which constitute the church in the concrete). In her analysis of these definitions, Sheahan identified and analyzed differences in usage of the terms pastoral and practical, whether the term practical or pastoral denotes an all-inclusive discipline or a very precise and specialized sub-discipline, the degree to which the definition requires the correlation of theory and praxis, and finally the methodologies by which such a critical correlation might be achieved.

The discussion which followed Sheahan's presentation revealed considerable variety of agenda and interests among the participants. What was common to all, however, was a concern for the living experience of the church as a distinctive component of practical/pastoral theology. In concluding the discussion, the chairperson suggested that it might be helpful to focus on the methods by which practical and pastoral theologians engage the church's living experience—as the seminar would be doing in the following session by its concentration on selected reports from the Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life.

Second Session. Bernard Prusak and Michael McGinniss initiated the discussion by giving brief reactions to the Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life (henceforth NDS). Prusak presented a set of seven observations of an ecclesiological and pastoral nature in the form of questions which the NDS had evoked in him. Those questions might be paraphrased as follows.

1. What is the purpose of any parish, its function?
2. What in the church, and particularly in the parish, exists to enable the community gathered to become a community of participatory dialogue?
3. What views of the lay person are revealed in the NDS?
4. What is being done in the concrete life of the church to develop bridges between historical-critical study and actual pastoral praxis?
5. What is being done to resolve and integrate the energy deriving from the tension of lay passivity and lay assertiveness?
6. What vision of holiness animates the NDS and parish life generally and specifically?
7. Finally, what of the need for an eschatological vision, an opening toward the future and toward an unfinished project, for the church?

Unifying Prusak's response to the NDS was a vision of church as participatory dialogue and functional community in which the experience of all members, especially of the so-called laity, was valued in the dialogue and contributed to the community's accomplishing its function or mission. Prusak's vision tends to relativize the church, especially any clerical or triumphalist elements. The model requires a democratic or collegial inclusion of all members' experience as manifested, for example, in developing models of holiness that are not limited to a few selected lifestyles. Finally, Prusak noted how the data from the survey tended to obscure or ignore the eschatological or future-oriented dimensions of the church's self-understanding.

McGinniss' comments were directed at the methodological implications of the NDS, specifically for the self-identified pastoral or practical theologian. Throughout his comments, McGinniss used the terms practical and pastoral theology interchangeably to denote a branch of theology responsible for the analysis and

critique of existing pastoral practice, as well as for envisioning future praxis. McGinniss contended that data—such as that gathered in the NDS or in the Call to Action, the recent Parish Project of the US Bishops, and so forth—is an essential element in practical theology and that all theologians need to be comfortable, at the least, in reading statistical reports and be disposed to take seriously the data contained therein. However, he noted, in agreement with Prusak, that sometimes the nature of empirical data makes it somewhat less accessible to theologians than data of a narrative type—e.g., case studies of parishes.

The NDS contributes several dimensions to the task of practical theology, which can be specified as follows.

1. The NDS contributes more data to our understanding of the impact of Vatican II. Consequently, this data can be used in comparison with other such data, for example that of the National Opinion Research Center, in continuing theological reflection on the effects of Vatican II.
2. The NDS dispels myths, prevalent but generally unquestioned assumptions, about parish life in the United States. For example, the NDS documents the U.S. church's growing dependence upon laity in its ministries, and the prevalence of women in those lay ministry positions.
3. The NDS reveals in concrete, non-theological terms some determinants of pluralism in the US church today, such as: age cohort, location (city, suburb, rural area), sex, and social location or class. Interestingly, the data suggests that these non-theological factors are more likely to lead to pluralism in parish life than are specifically theological or ecclesiological differences often so prominent in contemporary Catholic life.
4. The study also reveals the abstractness of some popular theological formulations—e.g., the community nature of the church; its commitment to a socio-political mission (which the study reveals as not integrated structurally into the life of parishes, even though it figures prominently in parish and parishioner self-understandings).
5. Finally, the study demonstrates the usefulness of statistical data and indicates the value of more systematic attention to existing sources of data, the coordination of those data bases, and the development and sharing of research and data nationally.

Reaction to the presentations centered around the notion of the so-called "core-Catholics," whose responses constituted a substantial part of the data base for the NDS. Questions were raised about the representativeness of the study since it is based on a rather narrow and highly committed sub-population within the parishes studied, and about the applicability of the data in its present form to the variety of parish experiences. The acknowledged exclusion of the experience of Hispanic Catholics from the NDS, for example, greatly limits the applicability of the data. In addition, one participant, a pastor from a suburban parish, questioned whether theologians and creators of the NDS are too involved in their own agendas to be able to interpret accurately the experience of ordinary church members. One conclusion shared by the participants is that the sheer volume of material in the study tended to overwhelm since none of the participants claimed to be expert in the analysis of statistical information. While it is possible to observe, as was done in

several instances, that other types of data might indeed be more useful, accessible and/or evocative, participants also confirmed the idea that generally theologians are untrained, thus often uncomfortable, with utilizing statistical information.

Topics for 1988. The seminar Steering Committee—Michael McGinniss, Robert Kinast, Eugene King, David Killen and Mary Ellen Sheahan—invites those interested in proposing a contribution to the seminar to send such a proposal to the chair of the Steering Committee (Michael McGinniss, FSC, c/o Department of Religion, La Salle University, Philadelphia, PA 19141). Proposals linking the seminar to the convention theme, "The Sources of Theology," are particularly welcome.

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