

SEMINAR ON PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

The Practical Theology Seminar convened for the fourth time during the Toronto convention and considered two papers: "When Relevance Is At Issue: Pastoral Praxiology—A Science of and A Science for Pastoral Action" by Jean-Guy Nadeau of the University of Montréal and "Preparing for Lay Ministry: Theological Analysis of the Experience of Ecclesial Lay Ministers" by Louise Bond, a D.Min. candidate at the Catholic University of America. In dealing with these papers, the seminar continued its custom of devoting one session to a theoretical discussion of practical theology and the other to a case or body of data representative of a praxis situation in the life of the churches in North America. The following summary report has been prepared from the papers of the presenters and notes taken by the seminar moderator.

FIRST SESSION: "PASTORAL PRAXIOLOGY"

Professor Nadeau's paper presented basic concerns and operations of a method of practical theological reflection that has been developed within the faculty of theology at the University of Montréal, but which has affinities to methods of theological reflection popular in the United States and Latin America, as well as to methods of social science research in which the researcher either participates in (participant observation) or intervenes in (action research) the context under study. Praxiology is further understood as potentially a conversion process in at least two senses: (1) the reflector's self-understanding and future praxis might be transformed; (2) praxis in the specific situation under study might be transformed. The evidence of conversion is verified only in continuing praxis, not in an intellectual understanding detached from action in particular situations.

The sources or foundations of praxiology are threefold. First, there is a concern for relevance, not in a faddish sense, but a care or concern for the real lives of women and men today—that such lives be more thoroughly Christian, more expressive of the Gospel, more liberating of women and men in their concrete situations. Secondly, praxiology is grounded in the conviction that practices are determinative of personal identity and are not simply exterior or superfluous to conceptual understandings. In a very real sense, without practice there is no real (i.e., concrete, historical, incarnated) understanding. Thirdly, the Christian character of pastoral praxis requires a mutually critical correlation of the praxis with the foundational narratives of Christian faith and the traditions of theological and ecclesial reflection. Throughout both paper and discussion, Nadeau focused on praxis that was expressly Christian, that is rooted in the Gospel story of Jesus Christ. He noted, however, that praxiological analysis is applicable to praxis which did not ground itself finally in faith in Jesus Christ but perhaps in Marxist theory, or Freudian theory.

The objectives of praxiology are: (1st) to achieve a thorough observation of the praxis situation with all of its actors, their social contexts and, and as far as possible, their self-understandings in the situation; (2nd) to elaborate a responsible interpretation of the praxis—in the dual sense of *emerging from and motivating* the reflector and *emerging for* the particular situation; (3rd) to indicate the concrete action plans suggested by the ongoing interpretation; (4th) to engender a habit of planning and evaluating one's practice. In these four objectives, praxiology clearly corresponds to other theological methodologies, such as those developed by James and Evelyn Whitehead or Robert Kinast, which are quite familiar to North American theologians, and to the methods and concerns of liberation theologians in Latin America and in Africa.

The above foundations and objectives are pursued first through a very specific schedule of questions, which open up the situation so that its multiple constituents (i.e., who, what, why, how, where, when) are made accessible to the reflector. While these questions appear at first glance simple, even self-evident, Nadeau reported that the disciplined application of such questions typically yields great insight for the reflector—into both her/his own motivations and understandings and into the motivations and understandings of other actors in the pastoral situation. Thus, while the analysis of praxiology is demanding and painstaking, it promises and provides understanding and insight, which in turn can lead to enhancing one's future praxis. Throughout his specific elaboration of these "W" questions, Nadeau referred to a variety of social scientific concepts and interpretive frameworks that the student would employ in analyzing the situation. When this social scientific moment in the process is complete, then the explicitly religious or theological moment is initiated—first, by a spontaneous correlation with the narratives and images of the Christian story and, second, by a reading of the situation through the lens of Andrew Greeley's elaboration of the five functions of religion (cf. *Unsecular Man*, Schocken Books, 1972). Those five functions expand the analysis to include: (1) the social structural context which sustains and conditions that practice, (2) the identities of the actors and social-structural impact upon those identities, (3) relationships with the Absolute, (4) linkages to community or church, (5) the ethical or moral implications for the continuing praxis.

The central concerns in discussion evoked by Nadeau's paper on praxiology can be summarized in three questions: (1) what is the relationship of praxiology to the classic theological disciplines (and their sources), especially as these are located in a department or faculty in the university or seminary? (2) what is the theological status, if any, of those social scientific frameworks from which praxiology has been derived in part and which it uses in analysis—are those frameworks merely explanatory or are they a constitutive theological source? (3) how, if at all, does one normative praxis appear within praxiology?

SECOND SESSION: "PREPARING FOR LAY MINISTRY"

Louise Bond's paper on the training of lay ecclesial ministers reported data from the first stage of a research project under the direction of Dr. Dean Hoge of Catholic University and funded by a grant from the Lilly Endowment. Bond asked the seminar participants not to publish this data until after the release date of the

research project itself, which is projected for November, 1988. Thus, this report respects that request by dealing only generally with the content of the paper and more specifically with the conversation which it sparked.

The sample for this study was drawn from among graduates of lay ministry training programs who received either certificates or degrees between 1981 and 1986. The 1986 end date assured that any subjects would have had at least two years of post-training experience. Names of potential subjects were invited from programs listed in the USCC Directory (cf. *Preparing Laity for Ministry: Directory of Programs from the Catholic Dioceses throughout the United States*, 1986) and identified as having a minimum of fifty graduates. From the names provided, a sample of 1000 lay ministers—divided equally between degree and non-degree programs—was chosen at random. Members of the sample were sent a pre-tested questionnaire “asking them to reflect on their experience and to evaluate program effectiveness in . . . theological content, spiritual formation, ministerial skills, teaching methods, and supervision” (quoting Bond’s paper). In a second, yet to be completed stage, 20 self-identified volunteers from the first stage will assess their training in the above-named areas in structured, individual interviews.

Bond observed that there was a happy correspondence between her paper and the plenary session in which Dr. Ellen Leonard had used the question “whose experience do we listen to . . . ?” as a hermeneutical tool for identifying and exploring experiences of previously “voiceless” communities within the larger community of the church. The survey being reported and analyzed probes the experience of a new group, lay ecclesial ministers, whose experience has not been subjected to sustained social scientific or theological study.

Discussion of Bond’s paper centered around a few key questions: (1) what experiences are common among these new ecclesial ministers, and why is anger so common an experience? (2) is this phenomenon really new or are there historical paradigms by which to interpret this aspect of contemporary church experience? (3) what kinds of renewal are needed among all groups in the church to facilitate the acceptance and integration of lay ecclesial ministers? (4) what are the proper responsibilities for training lay ministers of the various educational institutions within the church (i.e., colleges, universities, seminaries, schools for ministry education)? (5) what are the implications of the present study for projected studies—such as that planned by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States—and its relationship to studies and lay training programs in Canadian dioceses? (6) what are the implications in this study’s omission of data collection among Hispanic Catholics in the United States—and what paradigms might the Hispanic community provide for nurturing grass-roots leadership?

Discussion of both papers was lively, and in regard to Bond’s paper even occasionally contentious. The vigor of the discussions pointed, first, to the general relevance of both topics and, secondly, to the interests in and commitments to ministry and education for ministry of the several participants. At the end of the second session, Professor Nadeau observed that the presence of such strong interests and commitments demonstrates the value, indeed necessity, of a method like praxiology which first endeavors to describe the entire situation—as it exists

within and is constituted by many contexts and as it reflects many, even competing, interests and commitments.

PLANS FOR THE 1989 CONVENTION

Before concluding its business for the convention, participants evaluated the two sessions and the status of the seminar itself. Participants felt strongly that the seminar was indeed developing a stable core group who attended the CTSA regularly as well as yearly *ad hoc* members attracted either by specific topics and/or the location of the convention itself. The moderator pointed out that the mailing list for the seminar numbers over 40 persons. A clear consensus emerged that the seminar should be continued because it attracts participants who interact in true seminar style around a very central contemporary theological concern, reflection on concrete ecclesial praxis.

A steering group for 1989 was formed, including: Clarisse Croteau-Chonka (Chicago), Orlando Espin (Boynton Beach), Jean-Guy Nadeau (Montréal), Eugene King (Ottawa), and, as moderator, Michael McGinniss (Philadelphia). Proposals will be invited from all past seminar members, in the Fall of 1988, on either the convention theme of "God's Providence and Human Responsibility" or the nature/methods/research of practical theology. The steering group is especially interested in receiving proposals that will lend greater unity to its two sessions at the 1989 convention. Such proposals should be sent directly to Michael McGinniss at: La Salle University, Department of Religion, Philadelphia, PA 19141.

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