

## SEMINAR ON PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

The Seminar on Practical Theology discussed two papers which illustrated similar, though not identical, realizations of practical theology understood as the mutually critical correlation of meanings in human experience and those in the Christian tradition. At its first session, the seminar considered Gaile Pohlhaus's "Spirituality and Sexuality: A Test Case for Practical Theology"; at its second session, Mary Ellen Sheehan's "The Interaction of Experience and Theological Reflection in the U.S. Bishops' Proposed Pastoral Letter on Women's Concerns for Church and Society." The group's reaction to each paper was initiated by a designated respondent: Jean Guy Nadeau for the Pohlhaus paper; Michael McGinniss for the Sheehan paper.

Within the definition of practical theology stated above, Pohlhaus's paper can be appreciated as focusing more upon the step of critically reappropriating elements of the Christian tradition. Sheehan's paper, on the other hand, focused more upon the step of critically exploring an aspect of present experience—namely, the U.S. bishops' use of the concept of experience in their draft pastoral on women's concerns. Both Pohlhaus and Sheehan indicated that the papers were part of a larger ongoing research project and thus could not encompass the entirety of their methods of practical theological reflection.

### FIRST SESSION

Pohlhaus's paper, which was based explicitly on David Tracy's concept of practical theology as the mutually critical correlation of meanings in human experience and those in the Christian tradition, included: (1) a reexamination of tradition, especially focused on the influence of Augustine, on the relationship between sexuality and spirituality; (2) a brief review of selected alternative approaches to relating sexuality and spirituality; (3) discussion of sexual intercourse as a symbol for the self-disclosure of marriage partners; (4) review of some Christian theological understandings of marriage and celibacy; (5) a discussion of similar structural dynamics in both sexuality and spirituality (namely, in being other-centered activities, with appropriate balances of giving to and receiving from the other).

Nadeau's response developed: (1) elements of Christian tradition other than those included in the paper, notably the presence and influences of the courtly love tradition; (2) reflections on the appropriateness of the use of sexual intercourse as symbolic; (3) methodological comments on the need to propose or develop a practical theological discourse that encompasses "common human experience."

A lively general discussion picked up on the second and third points in Nadeau's summary and pursued the narrowed understandings that could result from

too exclusive a focus on sexual intercourse and the possibility of developing an inclusive vocabulary for the human experience of sexuality. The focus on sexual intercourse, even though taken as symbolic of the total interpersonal exchange, was seen as possibly obscuring other very important understandings of sexuality as a constitutive part of all human interactions, whether expressed genitally or not. Further, such a symbolic usage could lead to ignoring the meanings of sexual expression when that occurs outside the marriage between man and woman. Awareness of the variety of nonmarital sexual expressions underscored Nadeau's identification of the difficulty of achieving an adequate and inclusive vocabulary for common human sexual experience. That difficulty became evident concretely as seminar members identified the variety of components which structured their own personal experience, for example, gender, marriage, single life, celibacy, ethnic identity, and sexual preference.

## SECOND SESSION

Sheehan's paper illustrated a concept of practical theology as the correlation of practice and theory for the reconstruction of theology and praxis. The focus in this demonstration of practical theology was on the transformational possibilities of practical theology for the present-day life and praxis of the church. Sheehan's method was to look critically at the bishops' use of the category of experience and at the utilization and interpretation of that category in the draft version of *Partners in the Mystery of Redemption*. In executing her method, Sheehan focused critical attention on three aspects of the bishops' use of "experience": (1) sources of their access to women's experience and interpretations thereof (that is, the choice of voices of affirmation and alienation as key categories); (2) selectivity of their use of the Christian heritage as a critical tool in reflecting on women's experiences and concerns today; (3) relative inadequacy of the practical responses to the experiences of women as heard and interpreted.

McGinniss's response focused on Sheehan's mention of indications that the bishops would be developing this draft pastoral under a different title, with perhaps the more inclusive metaphor of friendship replacing that of partnership. McGinniss assumed that those indications would prove true and sketched a range of interpretations of that development and implications attending each interpretation for the credibility of the bishops's exercise of pastoral leadership. Those interpretations included abandoning entirely the writing of a pastoral on women's concerns; revising the existing draft in light of the many critiques available to the conference; refocusing the existing draft in light of a new metaphor such as friendship; modeling in a pastoral and in practice the kind of institutional self-criticism called for, even if weakly, in the present draft.

General discussion began by considering and comparing personal experiences of the interpretive categories (that is, affirmation and alienation). Participants agreed with Sheehan's analysis of those categories as not well grounded theologically and as especially negligent of the prophetic dimensions of protests against oppression. Consideration was also given to the relative strengths and weaknesses of partnership and friendship as metaphors for the relationships between women and men in society and church. The consensus of the seminar members, after lively

discussion, was that whatever approach to developing this draft pastoral is adopted that that approach must be subjected to careful analysis similar to that given to this draft by Sheehan's paper.

A steering group for 1990 was formed, including Orlando Espin, Jean-Guy Nadeau, Eugene King, Gaile Pohlhaus, and Mary Ellen Sheehan (as convener). Tentative plans include a paper (by Michael McGinniss) on the nature and methods of practical theology as an example of an inculturated theology and a panel of theologians reflecting on their experience of doing feminist theology as a form of practical theology.

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