

## SEMINAR ON PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Following last year's seminar members expressed a desire to do practical theology together rather than just talk about it and to use a common approach rather than one particular model (e.g., Don Browning's). Since seminar members had never formulated a common approach for doing practical theology, this became the goal of the 1993 seminar. To identify a common approach, each member was asked to describe the elements which would be used to formulate a practical theology of national health care. The intention was to pool the individual responses and see if a consensus emerged.

The discussion understandably shifted between the issues involved in national health care and the method for doing practical theology. The main points raised concerning method were these:

1. The four moments described by Don Browning are helpful as general categories. These moments are descriptive theology (naming the theological dimension of the facts), historical theology (tracing the factors contributing to the present state of affairs), systematic theology (critically correlating sources of the faith with the situation), and practical-strategic theology (formulating proposals for action based on the preceding theological moments).

2. Practical theology is local theology. A practical theology of national health care begins at the micro level of a community or hospital. As these local theologies are articulated, they can coalesce into a practical theology adequate for the scope of a national policy. For this to happen, mediating structures are needed. These too begin at the local level and within the theological arena. For example, there is need for channels to enable parishes, health care organizations, and professional theologians to dialogue. At present they are too isolated from one another, not only on health care issues but on many other issues.

3. Practical theology is inclusive theology. It works best with a team or group rather than an individual and it should include those who are affected by the situation, who are usually overlooked or disregarded (e.g., the uninsured, single parents, hospital maintenance workers). The recipients of typical theology should be the subjects of practical theology. At the same time professional theologians must be self-critical about their perception of these partners. Is practical theology being done *to* them, *for* them, or *with* them? (This sequence reflects the shift in ecclesiology brought about by Vatican II.)

4. Practical theology is pluralistic theology. It must reckon with the real diversity of situations people face and therefore the real diversity of theological perspectives, principles, insights, and actions they represent. Practical theology

should not try to disguise this pluralism or impose an artificial unity on it. On the other hand, practical theology must be able to ask the right questions and search for appropriate answers (e.g., regarding abortion, life support systems, futile care).

5. Practical theology is not practical in the sense of producing programs and ready-made solutions. It is practical in the sense of realistically facing situations and providing a process by which theologically-grounded solutions can emerge (e.g., clarification of the value of human life so hospital ethics committees can make decisions regarding PVS patients or prioritize limited resources). To do this, practical theology must trust the wisdom of the people in the situation and the validity of the process, even when it embraces conflicting theologies.

6. Practical theology is not primarily or directly an advocate for public policy but a catalyst for theological reflection on public issues. The practical-strategic moment of practical theology determines who is best qualified to bring the theological perspective to bear on public issues and how best that might be done. At the same time shaping a theological response to public issues keeps the theological agenda open and can lead to insights which would not have been contemplated otherwise.

7. The task of practical theology is both to do something and to understand something. Its doing flows from its understanding. Practical theology tries to understand specific situations and how they affect the people in them. A major part of this understanding is to discern how theology is a factor in the situation and how it might contribute to its improvement. Practical theology is therefore a self-critical understanding of theology drawn from the actual conditions of people's lives. This understanding is incomplete until it helps to determine a course of action which will benefit the people in the situation. Such a course of action cannot be determined by theology alone. It is worked out with others in the public forum. Here powerful influences such as the electronic media and financial interests challenge practical theology to translate its proposals into workable strategies.

The consensus which the seminar produced is that practical theology must include those affected by the situations reflected upon, must be open to theological revision in light of the situation, must trust the process of conversation and the diversity it may generate, and must propose courses of action rather than impose pragmatic solutions.

In light of this discussion the plan for next year's seminar is as follows:

- A suitable case description will be formulated and circulated to members of the seminar.
- Each member will construct a local, practical theology of the case in dialogue with their own constituents, including those often overlooked in theological reflection.
- Progress reports from each member will be circulated to the others prior to the seminar.

- At the seminar there will be a full discussion of the case, based on the individual reports. This discussion will attend to both the substance of the local theologies and the methodological considerations used in producing them.
- The results of the seminar discussion may be developed into an article for publication, may be made available to interested members of the CTSA, or may be used as the basis for continuing reflection among seminar members.

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