

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

METHODS IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGY: SUFFERING AND HOPE IN THREE CASE STUDIES

Presenters: Allan F. Deck, Loyola Marymount University
Mark L. Poorman and Regina Coll, University of Notre Dame
Patricia Smith and Patricia Reilly, Mercy Medical Center, Baltimore

For the past several years, the Practical Theology group has concentrated its efforts on methodology for practical theology. Specifically, we have examined the theological methods of Don Browning and Thomas Groome, with an eye toward particular contemporary issues of theological interest such as health care reform. At the 1994 convention in Baltimore, it was decided that at the 1995 convention the group would study other methodologies by taking up cases authored by various presenters on different topics, all related to the overall theme of the gathering, "Evil and Hope." Prior to the convention, the presenters submitted three case studies for distribution among the regular participants of the group with the understanding that all should come prepared to discuss the cases. Additional copies of the cases were provided to other participants at the time of the session. The presentations were abridged versions of the written cases. Very spirited discussions followed each.

Allan Deck outlined his efforts in the past two years to plan and design a leadership development program for Church-based Hispanics. Deck noted that Browning's practical theological category of "crisis" applies to the impending major shift in demographics of the American Church in which more than half of all U.S. Catholics by the year 2010 will be persons of Hispanic origin. Ecclesial leadership development among Latinos entails a number of interesting theological questions, including cross-cultural understandings of Church leadership and ministry, and contrasting pastoral strategies of evangelization, exemplified by the homogeneous approach of the Pentecostals and the more multicultural emphasis of Catholicism.

Regina Coll and I spoke about our experience directing the M.Div. program at Notre Dame, focusing our attention on the particular challenges and rewards of women in preparation for ministry at this time. Coll noted that compared with women students of an earlier time, women now express less open anger and

more personal hurt as the dominant response to strictures imposed by the institutional Church. On the side of "pain," the women are often discouraged by the lack of future opportunities for positions of authority in ministry; on the side of "promise," the women are encouraged by affirmation from their seminarian peers, as well as the generous financial support afforded them at Notre Dame as a sign of welcome for their contributions. I presented the case of "Anne," an M.Div. student who faces the personal and theological challenge of a clash between institutional and local ecclesiologies. She experiences the former as less affirming of her prospective ministry than the latter. The case also provided an illustration of the general observation that women are now often less inclined toward directly expressed anger and more inclined toward personal pain and the healing offered by the "inner work" of therapy, writing in a journal and spiritual direction.

Patricia Smith and Patricia Reilly presented summary remarks of a case which they constructed based upon a bereavement group of eleven men and women facilitated by Reilly and attended by Smith. Reilly's role as pastoral counselor was to assist group members in coming to terms with their own grief over the loss of a loved one; Smith's theological training helped the two to articulate the theological realities expressed in the group. Smith highlighted several categories for practical theological consideration, including the Church as a "community of pain," the pastoral translation of death and resurrection in the lives of the participants, and the ongoing "real presence" of the loved ones in the lives of the survivors.

Based upon the reception of the presentations and discussions, planners for the group agreed that we will continue to consider cases and methods for practical theology next year, grounding the topics once again in the overall theme of the convention.

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