

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

- Topic: Practical Theology and the Languages
for Communal and Public Discourse
- Convener: Michael P. Horan, Loyola Marymount University
- Presenter: Maureen R. O'Brien, Duquesne University
- Respondent: Stephen Pope, Boston College

Practical theology seeks to foster critical reflection on the activity of sharing faith, not only within the community of faith, but in society. Accordingly, practical theology can illumine some of the concerns of a church committed to a public presence and identity, especially in a consideration of the use of religious language and ritual in public conversation and public ceremony.

In her presentation, Maureen O'Brien of Duquesne University led the continuing group participants in a process of theological reflection upon two contemporary events in United States society. In both events, religious language and ritual were used in public contexts. The recent events that O'Brien chose included one civic event in which religious language was evoked (the debate among Republican presidential candidates) and the televised funeral Mass of a church leader (John Cardinal O'Connor, archbishop of New York). Drawing upon the writings of both Don Browning and Thomas Groome, O'Brien proposed a series of steps that she deems essential for theological reflection. The steps include *encountering* and *interpreting* the events, naming the key *aspects of Christian tradition* that can illumine the events, consideration of the use of Christian *classics* as they influence public discourse and behavior, and *imagining new responses* by practical theologians. The participants engaged in discussion using these steps prior to the formal response to O'Brien's presentation.

The response by Stephen Pope of Boston College focused on the need to distinguish among four items in further considering the role of practical theology in elucidating discourse about religion. These items are *civic religion*, *public philosophy* (articulation and intraecclesial reflection), *public theology* (use of the symbols of faith in influencing or narrating public policy), and *Christian witness* of the kind that is synonymous with Christian figures such as Dorothy Day and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

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