

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Topic: Catholic Practical Theology: Locating the Emerging Field
Convener: Tom Beaudoin, Santa Clara University
Moderator: Tom Beaudoin, Santa Clara University
Presenter: Kathleen Cahalan, St. John's University, Collegeville
Raymond Webb, University of Saint Mary of the Lake
Nancy Pineda-Madrid, Boston College
Terry Velting, Australian Catholic University, Brisbane

Practical theology presently occupies a dynamic and growing space within Catholic theology. A potentially critical mass of Catholic theologians now explicitly define themselves as practical theologians, and a significant number of Catholic practical theologians of a younger generation are being trained today in Protestant theological schools, suggesting the timeliness of intentional work to explore the unity and diversity of approaches to practical theology, and the distinctiveness of this emerging theological field, within Catholic thought. Thus, this session explored the question: What is the status of practical theology within Catholic life and thought?

In her paper, "Why Catholic Theological Education Should Embrace Practical Theology and Forget Pastoral Theology," Kathleen A. Cahalan argued that pastoral theology did not develop as an academic discipline after Vatican II with serious consequences. It exists as a "discourse" about the church's relationship to the modern world, and as a "field" that involves the teaching and formation of pastoral ministers. But it lacked development as a discipline, failing to ground the practices of ministry in theological and practical sources. She advocated an understanding of practical theology that begins in the life of lived faith, but retains its traditional emphasis on teaching and research about ministry. Practical theology is a theological discipline focused on the particular, local, contextual, existential, actual and specific dimension of lived faith. Study, research and teaching about ministry should have the lived life of discipleship as its primary frame of reference.

In his paper, "Catholic Concerns in Practical Theology," Ray Webb contended that there is a need for work in specifically Catholic practical theology, consistent with a Catholic ecclesiology and exhibiting a sacramental sensibility. To complement the largely "Word" and "rationality" focused work of Protestant practical theology scholars over the past forty years, what is needed is more than "accents" on the general field in order to make a significant Catholic contribution. Webb also suggested that the broader theoretical concerns of connecting the tradition and situational data in dialogue can be consistent with needs of traditional pastoral sub-disciplines in developing a unified discipline. He praised the value of the continual collection of and attention to accurate data. The academic discussion also must remain in contact with the lived realities of Catholic practice and practices. He noted the importance of the discipline for keeping a theological focus on decision-making and expressed concern about the need for more academic programs to form Catholic practical theologians and specialists in the sub-disciplines.

In her paper, "Social Suffering—A Vital Point of Departure for Practical Theology," Nancy Pineda-Madrid put forward the following thesis: "While Christian

theology since its inception has recognized the experience of suffering as a vital point of departure for theological reflection, a consideration of the more circumscribed phenomena of social suffering challenges us to re-imagine Christianity's redemptive promise." To develop this claim, she explored "social suffering" as a hermeneutic, distinguishing it from other ways of understanding suffering and identifying the advantage of framing suffering in this way. She used the March 2007 New Bedford, Massachusetts immigration raid to illustrate the value of this approach. This allowed her to recast questions in theological anthropology and redemption. She concluded by identifying the ways in which a hermeneutic of social suffering, and the concerns of practical theology not only overlap but contribute constructively to each other.

In his paper, "Theological Method: A Way of Life," Terry Veling observed that there are many misconceptions of practical theology: for example, that theology needs to be made practical, or that it must be made useful. Many scholars are interested in the method of practical theology, as though it offered a secret recipe that could produce successful outcomes. The word *method*, however, comes from the Greek word, *methodos*, which means a *path* or a *way*. This paper argued that practical theology is a choice to practice a theological way of life—a choice or decision that does not come at the end of a process like an outcome, but rather stands at the beginning, like a true test of faith: "Can I practice *this* way of life?"

The ensuing discussion took up questions of the possibility and shape of a distinctively Catholic practical theology, and the breadth and limits of methods for a Catholic approach. There seemed to be consensus that attention to the continued vitalization of practical theology in Catholic thought will be of critical importance in both academic and ecclesial life.

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