

## PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

- Topic: Practical Theology: An Introduction by Richard Osmer  
 Convener: Kathleen A. Cahalan, Saint John's University  
 Presenters: Bryan Froehle, University of St. Thomas, Miami  
 Maureen O'Brien, Duquesne University  
 Respondents: Richard Osmer, Princeton University

Richard Osmer, Thomas W. Synnott Professor of Christian Education at Princeton Theological Seminary, recently published *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Eerdmans, 2008). For practical theologians as well as those who teach in the subdisciplines of the field, this book is a major contribution to the hermeneutical approach to practical theology. This approach, pioneered in 1980s by the work of Don Browning and Thomas Groome, has been a major influence in ministry education in both Protestant and Catholic settings. Osmer's book takes this work a step further, incorporating recent scholarship in contextual theology, congregational studies, and spirituality. From a Reformed theological perspective, Osmer's approach to practical theology includes four tasks: the descriptive-empirical, the interpretative, the normative, and the pragmatic, each of which corresponds to his interpretation of Christ as priest, prophet, and king. The session included responses by two Catholic practical theologians with a response from Osmer, who was invited as our guest.

Maureen O'Brien summarized the four tasks of practical theology and offered three comments. Osmer emphasizes Jesus the Suffering Servant and a kenotic spirituality for the pragmatic task of the minister, which may be a difficult image for lay ecclesial ministers in Catholic settings to embrace, especially because their own identity and recognition as leaders is at times suspect and vulnerable. The Catholic bishops' terminology of "collaboration" and "Trinitarian communion" would need to couple with Osmer's emphasis on servanthood.

A second issue for Catholic ministers has to do with the Osmer's description of the third normative task of practical theology as anchored primarily in priestly and lawgiving functions rather than the prophetic task. This could potentially be an area of ministry where the priestly-prophetic task is necessary in Catholic ministry for a certain "talking back" to the tradition, insofar as the lay ecclesial minister draws upon the *sensus fidelium* in critical mediation. O'Brien's third critique focused on the "communicative model of rationality" promoted in the book. She advocated for a Catholic spirituality that lends itself to a more holistic sense of the self-engaged in practical theological reflection.

Bryan Froehle has taught the book to doctoral students and recognized Osmer as a "master teacher." In addition to his commitment to teach ministry students how to think practically and theologically, Osmer is also teaching teachers how to think about teaching in a practical theological way. Froehle recognizes the inherent ecumenical task of practical theology going back to the 1960s in the Catholic community and now being extended by Osmer's work in a new and exciting way. For example, he retrieves the concept of spirituality from the larger tradition and

incorporates it into each of the four parts of practical theology. What is exciting for practical theology is precisely its “catholicity” (small “c” of course), so that a scholar like Osmer can reach across traditions for theological insight while bringing to his readers insights from the Reformed tradition. He does this primarily through a robust Christology, though he could also work this out through a more explicit pneumatology, especially since he incorporates the wisdom tradition into the book. Osmer challenges Catholic practical theologians to see ways in which our claims about *sensus fidelium*, the communion of saints, or mediation can be worked out in these four steps. Froehle challenged Osmer to be more explicit about power relations at work in church ministry. He also pointed out implications for Osmer’s work in doctoral education: doctoral students need to be pointed toward their passions, and they need to relate their spirituality to practical theological method.

The practical theology group is extremely grateful to Dr. Richard Osmer for traveling to Halifax and discussing his book with us.

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