

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY—TOPIC SESSION

Topic:	Practices and Catholic Identity
Convener:	Brett C. Hoover, Loyola Marymount University
Moderator:	Theodore J. Whapham, St. Thomas University
Presenters:	Angela Senander, University of St. Thomas Elsie M. Miranda, Barry University
Respondent:	James L. Heft, S.M., University of Southern California

Practical theology explores theological questions driven by contextual issues and concerns, both in its interrogation of theological methodology and in its attention to everyday practice. This session examined recent papal and episcopal leadership practices and their impact on our construction of Catholic authority and identity. The two papers, the response, and subsequent conversation raised questions about the relationship between scandal and the credibility of authority, between decentralization and a healthy polyvocality, and, of course, between orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

In the first paper, “Leadership Practices of Francis, Bishop of Rome,” Dr. Angela Senander explored the leadership practices of Pope Francis as embodied in a number of gestures and speech acts made early on in his papacy, most especially his favoring of the title “Bishop of Rome.” Dr. Senander contrasted this and other practices with those of the pope emeritus, Benedict XVI. The leadership practices of Francis—some simple and quotidian, others public and dramatic—emphasize not only solidarity with the poor and a witness to the evangelical life as frequently reported, they also suggest a preference for collegiality in leadership and a desire for reform in the Church. Dr. Senander drew attention to Francis’ frequent quoting of the teaching of episcopal conferences (in marked contrast to John Paul II’s explicit denial that Episcopal conferences had any teaching authority) and on the bypassing of the Roman Curia by his predecessor as Archbishop of Buenos Aires in securing his appointment as archbishop. These and other practices point to the promise of a return to various structural forms of collegiality in the Church.

The second paper, by Elsie Miranda, “Orthopraxis and the Restoration of Catholic Identity: A Covenanted Journey,” similarly looked at the leadership practices of the U.S. Catholic bishops, the pope, and the Vatican Curia but from the appalling context of the 2002 sex abuse crisis. Dr. Miranda used startling visual images like Kerald’s vivid 10th-century Dutch mural of the Massacre of the Innocents to symbolize and summarize the victimization of children. She drew our attention to the papal monarchy paradigm implicit in the quiet transferring of offender priests by bishops like Bernard Law of Boston and the defensive silence of the Vatican. She saw practices like the appointment of doctrinally “correct” bishops and the silencing of theologians and pastoral initiatives as similarly upholding a monarchical paradigm of the papacy. Also damaging was the way in which such practices separate out *orthopraxis* from the strict *orthodoxy* observed and promoted by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. One wonders if greater attention to the connection between orthopraxis and orthodoxy might have generated critical self-reflection on the abusive leadership practices at the heart of the sex abuse scandal. Miranda argued for a restoration of sound Catholic identity through orthopraxis

rooted in the biblical new covenant embraced first by the Hebrew prophets and then by Jesus himself. This orthopraxis should allow for a “pluriversality” within Catholic tradition as the Church encounters, comes to know, and accompanies those seen as “other.” She saw the leadership practices of Pope Francis—such as washing a Muslim woman’s feet on Holy Thursday—as demonstrating such a theology of Catholic identity.

James Heft responded primarily to the contrast in the two talks between Popes Francis and Benedict XVI, and his response framed some of the conversation that followed. Dr. Heft cautioned against too strong a distinction being made between the two papacies. Francis appears to depart from Benedict in his desire for a more decentralized church and the multiple voices that emerge from decentralization. Yet he remains silent as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith continues its investigations of U.S. women religious and (Jesuit) theologian Fr. Michael Amaladoss of India. Several of those present commented on the seeming contradiction, particularly concerned about the trials of U.S. women religious. Heft also wondered whether or not Francis is sufficiently attentive to still-developing aspects of the sex abuse crisis. Elsie Miranda noted that the crisis emerged because of the abuse of power, and Heft theorized that it might have continued but for cultural changes permitting the public discussion of sexuality and the assertive leadership of lay women and men. Finally, Heft warned of “papolatry,” putting too much focus on the Bishop of Rome. Some of the conversation that followed mused on the intentions and importance of Pope Francis. Questions were also asked about the methodological relationship between practices like those discussed and understandings of authority in Catholic tradition.

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