

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Catholic Contributions in Practical Theology
Convener: Colleen M. Griffith, Boston College
Moderator: Ted Whapham, University of Dallas
Presenters: Claire E. Wolfeich, Boston University
M. Shawn Copeland, Boston College
Terrence W. Tilley, Fordham University

In her presentation, “Catholic Presentations in Practical Theology: Enlarging the Conversation,” Claire Wolfeich celebrates the development of Practical Theology as a robust academic discipline with international scope. Drawing from her edited anthology *Invitation to Practical Theology: Catholic Visions and Voices* (Paulist, 2014), Wolfeich highlights specific contributions to Practical Theology by contemporary Catholic theologians. She urges further Catholic scholarship in the field, noting that Catholic tradition and imagination are well suited to the creative and prophetic work of Practical Theology, and that Catholic understandings of revelation, tradition, sacramentality, grace, and the *sensus fidelium* provide strong basis for the study of the practice.

Wolfeich draws attention to Karl Rahner’s embrace of “practical theology” as a discipline concerned with the Church’s self-actualization in the world here and now. For Rahner, “practical theology” is not the application of doctrine, but rather an independent discipline that stands in reciprocal relationship with other theological disciplines. Like Rahner, Wolfeich views Practical Theology as its own science, not something derivative of dogmatics, social science, or pastoral ministry. Wolfeich views Catholic contributions to Practical Theology as serving to underscore its ecclesial and spiritual dimensions. She considers the mystical-prophetic-aesthetic trajectories in Catholic Practical Theology to be especially rich, as these are underdeveloped in the wider discourse of the field.

M. Shawn Copeland focuses on practical theological agency in her paper “Formation of Practical Theological Agency: The Institute for Black Catholic Studies.” Copeland looks at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University of Louisiana as an example of how to form practical theological agents. The Institute, founded in 1980, is the first and most primary place for practical theological research, analysis, and reflection on the African American Catholic experience. It has committed itself to fostering and supporting black Catholic religious *praxis*. Steeped in Catholic theological traditions, the Institute aims for practical theological engagement with the black lifeworld through *critical cultural interventions* in local parishes. In keeping with its praxial orientation, it concentrates on the pastoral formation of African American Catholic laity and those who minister in predominantly African American Catholic parishes. The Institute carries out an exemplary comprehensive pedagogical and practical pastoral program of study through which black Catholic cultural theorists, historians, ministerial leaders, and theologians collaborate to hand on the faith and discern and promote gifts of African American culture within the Roman Catholic Church.

Copeland regards the Institute as a strong example of what the formation of practical theological agents entails. Major components of this formation noted by her include 1) instruction in theological, historical, and cultural studies necessary for

ministerial leadership; 2) thoroughgoing training in doctrine; 3) competence in theological reflection; and 4) development of a practicum project that is a critical and *cultural intervention* demonstrating the integration of interdisciplinary study and theology. Copeland sees the goal of the formation process of the Institute to be a practical theological agency that serves to develop authentic black Catholic subjects and contributes to the traditioning process of African American Catholicism.

In his paper “Practicing the Faith: Tradition in Practical Theology,” Terrence Tilley underscores the lived practice of faith as the beginning point of Practical Theology. He describes practice as “a pattern of activity that employs specific *means* to reach an *end* or *goal* and requires participants’ intentional participation following the *rules* of the practice.” For Tilley, a faith *tradition* is a lasting set of connected communal practices that constitute “practicing the faith.” The *sensus fidelium* then gets found in persons who practice their faith. The *sensus fidelium* cannot be abridged to propositions alone, as propositions assume their meaning from how believers make sense of beliefs through their practice of faith. Urging a more practical understanding of the *sensus fidelium*, Tilley states that the meaning of an expressed belief requires understanding of how it is used in practice.

Tilley notes that practices of faith have *rules*, though practices cannot be reduced to rules alone. For him, rules function as “the grammar of a practice.” They are not absolutes, as they remain influenced by the shape of practice. Rules modify over time, as practices evolve. Tilley comments that the best practioners are, in fact, people who grasp how and when to apply the rules of practice. They are persons of faith who develop good judgment in the art of practice. This ability, this “practical wisdom,” is a hallmark of exemplary practitioners.

Lively conversation followed involving session participants. Questions arose concerning operative norms in the doing of Practical Theology. Of particular interest to participants was the matter of hermeneutical guidelines in the study of practice. Observations were noted regarding the direction of Practical Theology as a discipline in Europe versus the Americas, and the dominant methodologies rising from these diverse contexts. In addition, there was strong support voiced for the intentional formation of practical theological agents as a strategy for developing exemplary practitioners, persons who could lead with practical wisdom on behalf of communities of faith.

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