

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

- Topic: The Saints and Tradition: A Distinctively Catholic Conversation in Practical Theology?
- Convener: Lynn Bridgers, St. Norbert College
- Moderator: Bryan Thomas Froehle, St. Thomas University
- Presenters: Theodore James Whapham, St. Thomas University
Ondina Cortes, St. Thomas University

Bridgers convened the 2011 Practical Theology topic session under the title “A Distinctively Catholic Conversation in Practical Theology?” The goal was to explore ways in which contemporary practical theology might be resourced by Catholic theological sources, including ancient sources less frequently accessed in practical theological work.

Whapham’s paper, “The Saints and Tradition: Theses for a Distinctively Catholic Practical Theology,” sought to develop a theology of tradition as a grounding for a Catholic practical theological conversation. Whapham developed this material collaboratively with his doctoral students in practical theology in a course on a practical theological approach to sources in the theology of grace. He argued that tradition grounded the experience of the Triune God in the lives of “all the saints,” thus drawing upon a praxis-oriented yet normative understanding of “the tradition.” Such an understanding reflects continuity and constancy but also flexibility and development through history. This may involve struggles, even violent conflicts, as the historical record shows, and requires taking marginalized voices seriously. In this, it beckons us to the “dangerous memory” of the passion and death of Jesus. Whapham argued for practical theologians to engage with tradition as praxis, both inherited practices and written expressions of religious experience. Offering a hermeneutically grounded approach to praxis rooted in the work of Ricoeur, Whapham suggested that a robust practical theological approach to praxis engages a critical understanding of the interplay of theory and action, practice and articulation. In this, he emphasized an eschatological perspective that related the consummation of God’s reign to the active communion of the saints. Whapham concluded by observing that such a Catholic practical theological approach offers a powerful means of identifying connections between tradition, revelation, and truth claims in a way that advances the entire theological enterprise. All good theology is in this sense practical, attentive fundamentally to the experience of God self-revelation through history.

Cortes continued the conversation in “Thomas Aquinas as a Source for Practical Theology: The Human and Divine Aspects of Reconciliation Informed by Aquinas’ Understanding of Nature and Grace.” The paper extended the engagement with a theology of grace for practical theology within the context of a reconciliation process for Cuban exiles. Cortes spoke of the various generations of exile and the lack of a common exile ideology. Working with the concepts of nature and grace in Aquinas, the paper explored the work of Robert Schreiter, particularly his understanding of reconciliation as both spiritual and social. In the case of Cuban

exiles as well as more generally, Cortes argued, reconciliation requires spiritual practice as much as effective procedural strategies. Following Aquinas, Cortes then explored how grace operates in and with a community, moving people in the direction of goodness. Thus, social practices of reconciliation need to be intertwined with spirituality to bring about truly transformational reconciliation. Aquinas's understanding of grace and nature suggest a means of uniting strategy and spirituality in a unified model of reconciliation. Cortes concluded by exploring how two contemporary practical theologians have used Aquinas. In this way, practical theology can lay claim to classical sources such that theology recovers its original vocation as *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. In this regard, Cortes cited David Tracy's proposal of a Christian analogical imagination grounded in Aquinas's "analogical envisionment of all reality" as well as Clodovis Boff's application of Aquinas's epistemological principles to ground an epistemology of praxis in liberation theology.

Froehle moderated the conversation and business session that followed. All attending the session together explored the insights of the papers and named possible new directions for future sessions. Carrying the theme of a practical theology of grace forward, there was some discussion of experiences of theologizing public issues as well as the link between the arts and tradition. Other comments explored possible approaches adapted from liturgical and sacramental theology, such as Kevin Irwin's work on models of the Eucharist, or the sacramental imagination in the work of Andrew Greeley. The conversation also considered how a distinctively Catholic-accented conversation in practical theology might examine the dynamics of the theological understanding of reception, as in Ormond Rush's work, or broader questions of how Catholics individually and collectively, as communities of faith, work through personally appropriating and extending the tradition in their experience. Others observed that the challenges of appropriating a sacramental tradition may be greater than ever in an historical moment marked by speed far more than leisurely contemplation.

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