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Locating Practical Theology in Catholic Theological Discourse and Practice

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In a forthcoming book on Catholic pastoral and practical theology in Britain and Ireland, the Protestant theologian, Stephen Pattison, notes that Catholicism is “the sleeping giant of pastoral and practical theology in our midst.”¹ As one of the editors of *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* a decade ago, he could not identify British Catholic practical theologians to contribute to the volume. Pattison recognizes just ten years later that the scene has changed. In fact, there are Catholic theologians engaged in the practical theology enterprise, both in the U.S. and abroad, though a clearly Catholic approach to practical theology and Catholic theology’s embrace of practical theology has been slow to awaken. For Pattison, “Catholic practical theology in Britain in the new, overt form expounded and exemplified herein, is a somewhat tender plant. While there are shoots of real interest and methodological innovation, it would not take much for these to perish, as they have in the past, if a handful of institutions and people were to de-commit from the quest to make Catholic thinking and working part of mainstream practical theology.”² Pattison’s concern speaks frankly to the U.S. situation where Catholics are engaged in practical theology, but practical theology is not widely recognized or embraced by Catholic theology.

In 2008, a group of U.S. Catholic theologians began exploring how they teach, write, and think as practical theologians practicing practical theology.³ The group explored who in Catholic theology identifies with practical theology, how it is carried forth, and where practical theology appears in

1 Stephen Pattison, Foreword, in: *Keeping Faith in Practice: Aspects of Catholic Pastoral Theology*, ed. James Sweeney, Gemma Simmonds, and David Lonsdale, London (SCM Press) 2010, ix.

2 *Ibid.*, x.

3 The group included Susan Abraham, Thomas Beaudoin, Lynn Bridgers, Kathleen Cahalan, Edward Foley, Bryan Froehle, Ray Webb, and Terry Veling, who currently teaches in Australia but was trained and taught practical theology in the U.S.

the institutional and curricular landscape in the U.S. Catholic context. Interestingly, each of these theologians came to practical theology through a different route, identifying with practical theology in some way and yet finding themselves not always at home in either Catholic theology or Protestant practical theology.

Issues of identity and vocation emerged as important points of conversation. Claiming a vocation and disciplinary identity as a practical theologian is not without its problems in the Catholic context. It can come at a cost. It can be a highly contested category, one that causes confusion and often times rejection. Because there are very few jobs listed in “practical theology” in Catholic theology departments, many colleagues do not know how to react to candidates that present themselves as practical theologians. Perhaps there is a slight or lingering prejudice that practical theology is Protestant and does not fit in the Catholic context. Many experience practical theology as a hindrance for some academic careers in certain Catholic institutions.

In this essay I draw together some of the main issues about the location, practice, and identity of Catholics doing practical theology, drawing from the group’s conversation as well as other sources. Where do we locate practical theology in Catholic theology today? What needs to happen in order that the contributions of practical theology to the larger Catholic theological enterprise can be critically engaged? How might practical theology serve as a helpful vantage point to think about Catholic thought and practice? What can practical theology gain by the awakening Catholic presence and what can Catholic theology gain by awakening to practical theology?

Curricular and Disciplinary Location

According to Bonnie Miller-McLemore, practical theology can be understood in four ways, depending on where it is done and by whom: “Practical theology refers to an *activity* of believers seeking to sustain a life of reflective faith in the everyday, a *method* or way of doing theology used by religious leaders and by teachers and students across the curriculum, a *curricular area* in theological education focused on ministerial practice, and, finally, an *academic discipline* pursued by a smaller subset of scholars to support and sustain these first three enterprises.”⁴ I will begin my analysis at the end of Miller-McLemore’s list, for clearly if one looks for the fourth category of practical theology in the Catholic context, a well-defined academic discipline, they will be hard pressed to find it. The third feature—practical theology as a curricular area—is more possible to see, though

4 Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Practical Theology, in: The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology, eds. Dawn DeVries and Brian Gerrish, Louisville (Westminster John Knox) forthcoming 2011.

Catholics commonly have referred to it as pastoral theology. It is important to note that, unlike Protestants, Catholics have rarely referred to ministry education curricula as practical theology, though there is beginning to be some change. Pastoral theology exists primarily as a curricular heading but not as a fully-formed discipline of theology.⁵ Many people continue to use them interchangeably at the same time recognizing a real difference between them.⁶ There are several reasons for the seeming absence of practical and pastoral theology as well-defined and seriously-crafted disciplines among Catholic thinkers, and I want to first explore why this is the case. As James Sweeney and others demonstrate, however, this does not mean that practical and pastoral foci are missing. Instead, the way “practical dimensions of theology are conceptualized tends to be different in Catholicism.”⁷

First, there is a long-standing tradition about how theology has been organized as a body of knowledge in Catholicism, and issues of practice and pastoral ministry have been a significant part of that history. Prior to the 1960s, Catholic theology was produced primarily though not exclusively within and for seminary education, whose sole purpose was the education of priests. The seminary’s pedagogy was reflected in the *Ratio studiorum*, an order of studies developed by the Jesuits that has its origins in the post-Tridentine development of seminaries in the sixteenth century. The *Ratio studiorum* was organized into three parts: doctrine, moral, and spiritual theology. Moral theology covered aspects of pastoral practice, because it was that part of theology that defined “the minimum requirements necessary for salvation,” and these were largely determined through licit and valid administration and reception of the sacraments.⁸ Pastoral practice was learned through the art of casuistry: applying canon law to particular cases in order to assist the student in determining the acceptable decision, even in the most wild of cases (e. g., eating frogs’ legs on Lenten Fridays). As T. Howland Sanks notes, “Prior to Vatican II, less emphasis was given to the pastoral skills needed for ministry. Courses in homiletics, pastoral counseling, spiritual direction, and liturgical practice were almost completely absent from the curriculum of most seminaries. There was no such thing as clinical pastoral education or field education.”⁹ Nevertheless, the “pastoral” and the “practical” were embedded within a particular Catholic curricular and institutional structure for at least four hundred years.

5 Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Pastoral Theology or Practical Theology? Limits and Possibilities*, in: Sweeney, et al. (n.1), 99–116.

6 Sweeney, et al. (n.1), 2–3.

7 *Ibid.*, 3.

8 See Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Formed in the Image of Christ: The Sacramental-Moral Theology of Bernard Häring*, Collegeville, Minnesota (Liturgical Press) 2004, 33–60.

9 T. Howland Sanks, *Education for Ministry Since Vatican II*, *Theological Studies* 45 (1984), 489.

The duties of the priest were taught as an aspect of moral theology since the purpose of moral theology was to guide priests in their sacramental ministry, particularly as confessors in the sacrament of penance. After the Council, moral theology retained its pastoral focus in the seminary, though there was a decided shift away from the neo-Thomist manualists' approach. Outside the seminary, moral theology advanced quickly in the academy as it sought to address pressing social questions of bioethics, population, and sexual ethics, but by and large it left the practice of ministry behind.

However, a new meaning of "pastoral" was emerging, one much broader in scope than the sacramental acts of the ordained. The categories "pastoral" and "pastoral theology" shifted significantly at the Second Vatican Council, a council that Pope John XXIII called as a "pastoral council." The Council was pivotal in claiming "pastoral" as an ecclesial discourse pertaining to the church's relationship to the world, most notably in *Gaudium et spes*, the only constitution given the title "pastoral."¹⁰ As the document notes, "pastoral" means "resting on doctrinal principles" that "seeks to set forth the relation of the Church to the world and to the men of today"¹¹ in order to address social issues and "to enter into dialogue with it about all these different problems."¹² Certainly, *Gaudium et spes* meant to broaden the idea of "pastoral" beyond its traditional association with ordained ministers in order to embrace the way in which the entire people of God witnesses and transforms the world. All theology was charged with becoming more open and directed to social and cultural realities, more *pastoral*, rather than closed within traditional scholastic categories that are more essentialist and ahistorical. The shift of focus in moral theology, then, must be seen in this light. Theology's embrace of biblical and historical (especially patristic) studies, along with renewed liturgical theology and practice, and new dialogue-partners in philosophy, makes the mid-twentieth century one of the most fruitful and productive periods of Catholic thought. Everything seemed possible in the advent of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*, the embrace of the historical past, notably the patristic era, and an opening to new ideas and sources in modernity.

The broader understanding of "pastoral" also impacted ministry studies by the mid-1960s in the U.S. Many seminary educators viewed the semina-

10 The Second Vatican Council has two dogmatic constitutions (*Lumen gentium* and *Dei verbum*), one pastoral (*Gaudium et spes*), and one with no descriptor (*Sacrosanctum concilium*).

11 Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, New York (Costello) 1987, 903 n.a. As one commentator notes, "If there was one sentence repeated more often than any other at the Second Vatican Council it was: 'This council is pastoral in its scope, objectives, and aims.'" John M. Fearn, *Pastoral Formation and Seminary Training*, NCEA Bulletin (August 1968), 36.

12 *Gaudium et spes*, no. 3.

ry as isolated physically, socially, and intellectually from the university and the world, and were eager to embrace *aggiornamento*, the Council's call to bring the church up to date. Some seminaries operated by religious orders sought affiliations with universities to improve their academic quality and integrity. Catholic seminaries opened their curricula to new areas of study and began to seek membership in educational accrediting agencies such as the Association of Theological Schools, adopting the Masters of Divinity degree in place of the *Ratio studiorum*.

Attention to new subject matter also began to change curricula. The liturgical and religious education movements, both preceding the Second Vatican Council by several decades, were well on their way to being fully formed disciplines in the wake of the Council. Each area had an academic and pastoral dimension; scholars were concerned with identifying the biblical, historical, and theological grounds for renewed practice, and began to open up to the social sciences to explore effective methods. Liturgy and preaching slowly expanded in seminary education, and religious education was taking hold in colleges, universities, and summer programs geared toward women religious; diocesan programs in ministry training also expanded.¹³ Since the Council, an explosion of information in these areas of ministry has taken place, including the development of professional organizations, conferences, journals, and continuing education for ministers.¹⁴ Furthermore, "pastoral theology" is a field that includes pastoral

13 The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate studies Catholic ministry formation programs that prepare men and women for ministry as priests, deacons and lay ecclesial ministry. In 2009, CARA reported 46 theologates in the U.S. that have a combined enrollment of 3,357; 167 dioceses with formation programs for deacons, with a total enrollment of 2,319; 17,538 lay ecclesial ministry candidates were enrolled in 273 lay ecclesial ministry formation programs. Candidates for the priesthood generally receive the Masters of Divinity degree; deacons enrolled in diocesan formation programs receive a certificate; two-thirds (69 %) of lay ecclesial ministers are enrolled in certificate programs, about 30 % in degree programs. Mary L. Gautier, Catholic Ministry Formation Enrollments: Statistical Overview for 2008–2009, Washington D.C. (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate) April 2009, 1, 19–20, 25.

14 Among Catholics academic disciplines have risen in relation to catechesis and liturgy, but pastoral care and homiletics are not as developed disciplines as they are in Protestant theology. Along with disciplinary identity and expertise, ministry has witnessed the development of academic and professional organizations, each with their own national and regional conferences, academic and professional journals, as well as the offering of degrees at both the master and doctorate level, including doctor of ministry and philosophy degrees. Consider the "field" of catechesis: there exist journals for practitioners (Catechist, Liturgical Catechesis), professional organizations (National Conference for Catechetical Leadership, National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Association, National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry), as well as journals and organizations for scholars (Religious Education, and the Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education). Catechists and faith formation directors can be certified according to the national certification standards for lay ecclesial ministers, and may obtain advanced degrees at a number of Catholic universities. Specialization within religious education is

ministers as well as theologians, bishops' conferences, besides Vatican and papal statements, all writing and speaking about issues of faith and ecclesial life. All understood themselves to be engaged in pastoral theology as called for by the pastoral constitution. The expanding forms of ministry training, as well as the specialization and professionalization of particular areas of ministry, were certainly unforeseen in the wake of the Council, and yet these changes mark one of the most significant developments in post-conciliar theological education. "Pastoral" became the purpose and goal of all theology insofar as it claimed theology's role vis-à-vis the community's faith practice *within* modernity. Expansion in ministry education was deeply related to this worldview.

Despite the explosion of "pastoral" activity in the wake of the Council, however, pastoral theology never became a serious, well-developed academic discipline. As Peter Phan notes, "It is common knowledge that the nature and task of pastoral theology is highly controverted."¹⁵ Phan argues that pastoral theology has too many meanings or associations, which confuses its scope and purpose, including the shepherding role of the pastor, clinical pastoral education and pastoral care (the common way Protestants use the term), the practical disciplines of ascetical and spiritual theology, and the method termed "theological reflection."

A second factor related to the lack of disciplinary activity mentioned earlier was that Catholic theology began to move away from the seminary and closer to the university during the 1960s. Pastoral theology became a category in seminary education but did not develop as an area in university-based theology, which was growing and expanding in all other areas after the Council (e.g., Bible, history, systematic theology, and ethics). According to Earl C. Muller, the collapse of neo-Thomism

...left the seminaries somewhat adrift though their fundamental purpose, the training of priests and other pastoral ministers, precluded their ever moving in the direction of religious studies. This clear purpose combined with the tendency of seminary faculty to be overworked and under-published has led to a more recent stereotype of the seminaries as "pastoral shops" over and against the universities where "scientific" theology is done, a reversal from the pre-Vatican II situation.¹⁶

In many ways pastoral theology was left behind since it had no real place in Catholic university-based theology. It was emerging as curricular category

also a feature of the field. Boston College offers a masters degree in religious education with a concentration in "total community catechesis" or "high school religion teaching" or a masters of education in educational administration. The school also offers a doctorate in theology and education.

15 Peter Phan, Karl Rahner as Pastoral Theologian, *Living Light* 30 (Summer 1994), 5-6.

16 Earl C. Muller, Afterword, in: *Theological Education in the Catholic Tradition: Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Patrick W. Carey and Earl C. Muller, New York (Crossroad) 1997, 368.

in seminary education at the point when seminary education was no longer the determining factor of Catholic theology. Of course the great irony is that Catholic theology was stepping into the modern world precisely at the point that modernity was under threat and the postmodern was quickly gaining ground.

Pastoral theology has also suffered from a reputation problem, which seems to be a truly catholic (in the sense of “universal”) problem.¹⁷ As Katarina Schuth points out, pastoral theology is a relatively new discipline to theological education, and among seminary faculties it is the most controversial, the area about which there is strongest disagreement and greatest concern about what and how to teach.¹⁸ Overall, the number of pastoral ministry courses taught since the Council has increased steadily. On average, twenty-four credit hours are given to pastoral ministry courses, with an additional twelve hours of field education.¹⁹ Because of this dramatic change, pastoral theology is viewed as encroaching into the traditional curriculum, often reducing the number of courses taught in systematic or other areas of theology.²⁰ Schuth reports that 20% of the Catholic faculty referred to the regrettable “erosion of the academic” due to the increase in pastoral studies courses.²¹ The attitude that pastoral theology has weakened

17 Scholars from Europe note the fledging, underdeveloped nature of Catholic pastoral theology. Sweeney, et al. (n.1), 1–3.

18 Katarina Schuth, *Reason for the Hope: The Future of Roman Catholic Theologates*, Wilmington, Del. (Michael Glazier) 1989, 171–184. Schuth makes a similar observation about seminary faculty: “The question of precisely what should be taught is much debated.... How important and central a pastoral emphasis should be in the curriculum is an area of strong disagreement. A significant minority of faculty perceives that greater demands for spiritual and pastoral training since Vatican II have eroded the academic program. These faculty believe that the essential task of theological education is to prepare seminarians intellectually and not to train them in ministerial skills.” Katarina Schuth, *Theological Faculty and Programs in Seminaries*, in: *Theological Education in the Catholic Tradition: Contemporary Challenges* (n.16), 174.

19 Schuth notes that the increase in both moral and pastoral courses reflects “changes in what congregations are expecting of their priests and lay ministers.” Schuth, *Theological Faculty* (n.18), 171. For a summary of credit distribution in the Masters of Divinity program see Katarina Schuth, *Seminaries, Theologates, and the Future of Church Ministry*, Collegeville, Minn. (Liturgical Press) 1999, 156.

20 The Auburn Center reports that theological faculty teaching in Practical Studies constitutes about 27% of faculties. Religious Education faculty members are listed separately, accounting for about 4% of faculty. Taken together, faculty in practical studies and religious education account for the largest number of faculty, though Bible and history taken together would exceed these areas. Barbara G. Wheeler, Sharon L. Miller, and Katarina Schuth, *Signs of the Times: Present and Future Theological Faculty*, Auburn Studies No. 10 (February 2005), 5.

21 Schuth, *Reason for the Hope* (n.18), 171. Interestingly the same attitude is not attached to the growth of biblical studies in theological education, which has consumed considerable aspects of the curriculum as well as faculty teaching positions. Biblical studies are viewed as more objective and scientific due to the discipline’s historical critical commitments.

the academic integrity of theology arises from the sense that pastoral theology is not “academic.” It is viewed as process-oriented, in opposition to the rigorous, scientific, or theoretical forms of doctrinal theology. The perception is that pastoral theology contains little theological substance itself, but is instead an application of the ideas established in other areas. Robert Imbelli and Thomas Groome pointed out in 1992 that pastoral theology was deemed less demanding, rigorous, and serious, “relegated to part-time personnel teaching at odd hours, consisted of various courses that lacked clear cogent integrated vision. One consequence was that the substantive fields were let off the hook from pastoral questions and could maintain an objective stance in relation to contemporary concerns.” Pastoral theology has come to be an “administrative convenience” and a “delivery system for the more prestigious theology.”²²

Of course there may be some truth to why pastoral theology has not been considered rigorous and intellectually sophisticated. The emergence of a curricular area called pastoral theology did not commence in a discipline called pastoral theology. The discipline of pastoral theology can be located in its parts, in liturgy, religious education, pastoral care, or homiletics, but each operate independently from any common connection to a discipline called pastoral theology.²³ There is little evidence of pastoral theology as a theological discipline in Catholic discourse. There are no academic journals for pastoral theology, no professional organizations, and no graduate programs for a doctorate in pastoral theology, and few theologians would identify with pastoral theology. In terms of the practice of ministry, the pastoral as practice never became a respectable arena of scholarly inquiry.

22 Imbelli and Groome argue that pastoral theology is a “self-conscious perspective on the contemporary life of the Church and the living out of Christian faith in today’s world.” Robert P. Imbelli and Thomas H. Groome, *Signposts towards a Pastoral Theology*, *Theological Studies* 53 (1992), 133–134.

23 Edward Farley claims that specialization on theological faculties is the “most powerful structure at work in faculty life.” Specialization determines faculty identity and loyalty to such a strong degree that faculty can be suspicious of the academic content and rigor of other disciplines. Such suspicion leads to the feeling that other faculty members do not appreciate or understand one’s field. Edward Farley, *Why Seminaries Don’t Change: A Reflection on Faculty Specialization*, *Christian Century* 114 (February 5, 1995), 133–143. The Dutch practical theologian, Gerben Heitink, argues that a “moderate differentiation” among the subdisciplines is necessary in practical theology, but that they must function with a “theoretical unity that gives way to a degree of differentiation.” He advocates a theory of action as practical theology’s theoretical unity. Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains*, Grand Rapids, Mich. (Eerdmans) 1993, 244–248.

Institutional Location

A critical factor in practical or pastoral theology's recognition in Catholic theology since the Council, then, is its institutional location. There has been a significant shift from theology taught and produced primarily in seminaries to departments of theology in colleges and universities. In the post Second World War American context, the growth in the number and size of Catholic colleges and universities is one of the direct factors leading to theology becoming primarily a university discipline.

Some universities began graduate-level ministry education for religious and lay persons after the Second Vatican Council, but generally, a separate school or department with a separate mission was charged with ministry training.²⁴ Theology departments rarely took up the task, and in some places a dual department (or center or institute) persists today with two separate faculties, one in "theology" and the other in "pastoral studies." In this way, professional education for ministry, either in seminaries or pastoral institutes, was never the main force or center of Catholic theology. Systematic and moral theology in university theology departments in particular has been the driving force of Catholic theology during most of the twentieth century and into the new millennium. This is much different than the production and location of Protestant theology, which has flourished in seminaries and divinity schools. Colleges and universities, many of which lost their Protestant religious identity or missions in the twentieth century, have not been centers of theological thought.

For Protestants, pastoral and practical theology has largely been located in the seminary. But in the past twenty-five years, the identity and practice of practical theology has shifted dramatically, breaking out of the "clerical paradigm" that had sequestered practical theology to a set of functional concerns about the practice of ministry, to embrace a wider interest and research agenda related to the lived practice of religious people and communities in a pluralistic society (not unlike the vision of *Gaudium et spes*). Catholics who identify with practical theology today largely do so in relationship to the development of practical theology advanced since the 1980s.²⁵

If discipline and curricular categories are the sole focus for identifying practical or pastoral theology in Catholic contexts, we might too easily conclude that there is no practical theology among Catholics. The fact is, however, that Catholics practice practical theology in every setting where theology is taught. For example, some who teach in seminaries and schools of

24 Three examples include Loyola University of Chicago's Institute of Pastoral Studies, Boston College's Institute for Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry, and Fordham University's Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education.

25 Dana Wright, *The Contemporary Renaissance of Practical Theology in the United States: The Past, Present, and Future of a Discipline in Creative Ferment*, *International Journal of Practical Theology* 6/2 (2002), 288–319.

ministry, where the primary concern is the formation and education of priesthood, diaconate and/or lay ecclesial ministry candidates, teach and engage the practical theology literature. Practical issues and concerns are also taught in Catholic colleges and universities, in undergraduate departments of theology where the post-modern condition for practicing *Catholic* faith is explored, contested, and engaged with young adults.

In Catholic graduate theology departments, practical questions reside primarily in research on liturgy, spirituality, and ethics, where the work of practical theology often goes on without any explicit identification. While few places use practical theology as a discipline or curricular heading, there are increasing numbers of people who either identify as practical theologians or are engaging research in lived religious practice with attention to research on practice, embodied knowing, and performance. In addition, in Catholic Doctor of Ministry programs, practical theology is more likely to appear as a method or approach. One Catholic institution has a doctorate in practical theology.

In Protestant seminaries and non-denominational university-based divinity schools, Catholic theological perspectives inform questions of political agency, cultural and religious identity, spirituality, social ethics, post-modern constructs of self and world, and ministry training. The material and cultural artifacts of Catholic belief and practice are also examined and studied by sociologists, historians, and anthropologists in order to understand how believers construct religious meaning and identity, frequently in more popular forms. Clearly, the categories of practice and interest in the practical are moving across theological and social scientific disciplines, regardless of whether or not they intersect with the discipline or literature of practical theology.

Methodological Location

According to Miller-McLemore's categories, Catholics are more likely to associate practical theology with an activity or method. A significant aspect of practical theological thinking among Catholics has taken place at the local or "grassroots" level, stemming back at least a hundred years to the lay apostolic movements that focused on both spiritual piety and works of mercy and justice in society. The laity grew more actively involved in "pastoral" outreach to the poor and marginalized as well as in parish ministries related to education and devotions. The wave of theological reflection that developed during the 1970s, and is still prominent today in many places, is a direct descendant from lay apostolic movements and the theology of the laity emerging from the Council. The pastoral focus of *Gaudium et spes* on the church's mission in society, together with an em-

phasis on “full, active, and conscious” participation in the liturgy,²⁶ brought lay Catholics to a new involvement and responsibility with the church. This pastoral-social emphasis reached across numerous institutions including parishes, elementary and secondary schools, campus ministries, service programs, hospitals, and social service agencies—i. e., just about any institution owned and operated by religious communities or dioceses. Of course, the church’s approach to engaging society culminated in the U.S. Catholic Bishop’s *pastoral* letters on nuclear war and the economy.²⁷

Theological reflection, as a method for critically reflecting on faith-in-action, grew out of this ecclesial atmosphere, drenched in the promise of change and transformation. Three main methods emerged at this time: theological reflection, the pastoral circle, and praxis-based approaches. Theological reflection, first developed by Evelyn and James Whitehead in the late 1970s and further expanded by Patricia Killen and Robert Kinast, is a method with deep roots in mid-twentieth century Catholic thought.²⁸ Based largely on the turn to experience in the work of Karl Rahner and the correlation methods developed by Paul Tillich and David Tracy, the authors note that theological reflection is conversation and dialogue between experience and tradition. The pastoral circle, developed by Joseph Holland and Peter Henriot, refers to the method of “see, judge, act,” emphasizing observation, interpretation, and response. It developed largely out of the Latin American context in which Catholic social teachings on justice were being integrated into the practice of ministry and base Christian communities. Thomas Groome’s *Sharing Faith*, the most comprehensive method in Catholic religious education, employs five movements of thought: naming present experience, critically reflecting on experience, engaging scripture and tradition, appropriation of the faith through dialectical hermeneutics, and deciding how to live.

Each of these approaches relies heavily on hermeneutical theories, drawing the focus on interpretation of texts toward the interpretation of

26 *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, in Vatican Council II: Volume 1, The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents, no. 14.

27 National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response*, Washington, D.C. (USCC Office of Publishing and Promotion Services) 1983 and National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, Washington, D.C. (USCC Office of Publishing and Promotion Services) 1986.

28 James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*, New York (Seabury Press) 1980; Patricia O’Connell Killen, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, New York (Crossroad) 1994; Robert Kinast, *Let Ministry Teach: A Guide to Theological Reflection*, Collegeville, Minn. (Liturgical Press) 1996; Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*, Maryknoll, N.Y. (Orbis) 1980; Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry*, San Francisco (Harper San Francisco) 1991.

experience. The goal was largely the dialogue between text and experience toward the purpose of renewed faith in action. These methods followed theology's turn away from purely theoretical, universal, and often static categories in scholasticism, to embrace a more historical and practical focus to theology: the aim of good theological thinking is faithful action. These methods begin with observation and attention to faith practice, engage theological content, and draw this "new" meaning and insight into renewed action. These methods have made a significant contribution to the church's practice of theology as a "practical" endeavor in which all the baptized participate. In turn, these methods shifted the practice of ministry toward enabling and empowering the laity to claim the faith as their own and take it out into the world as a leaven for change. The turn to the modern subject became the central *locus theologicus*, and "theology's anthropological turn now caused it to rely heavily on the human and social sciences."²⁹

These methods suffer from a critique commonly leveled against *Gaudium et spes*. The pastoral constitution embraced an optimistic view of social transformation, colored largely by the modern belief in social development and progress by people of good will for people of good will. These methods likewise adopted what many view as a naïve and rose-colored view of human persons and their capacity for change, transformation, and conversion toward a faith that can "build up" the reign of God on earth. Like *Gaudium et spes*, methods of theological reflection often lack a rigorous view of sin and the tragic, and they certainly lack the postmodern critique and skepticism about the modern project, especially the capacity of persons to remake society as just and peaceable. Furthermore, these methods trust interpretation as a pure and open process leading to greater insight and purpose, rather than recognizing the systematic distortions built into identity, personal and communal, throughout the theological reflection process.³⁰

Models of theological reflection have made interpretation the central action and practice of theology and faith. What they lack is a robust theory of action or practice. This may largely be due to the fact that the "faith" being interpreted was largely intact at the time and that methods of theological reflection appealed primarily to the generations of Catholics that lived through the changes of the Second Vatican Council. They experienced theological reflection as liberation from the rote forms of memorization employed by teachers of the Catechism. In this sense, they were very much Roman Catholics, steeped deeply in the cultural faith practices of a community emerging from immigrant Catholicism. Clearly these faith practices were undergoing change, such as the liturgy or forms of social engagement, but they were not up for grabs. In that regard, theological reflec-

29 James Sweeney, CP, *Catholic Theology and Practice Today*, in: id., et al. (n.1), 18.

30 Tom Beaudion, *Witness to Dispossession: The Vocation of a Postmodern Theologian*, Maryknoll, N.Y. (Orbis) 2008.

tion served a rightful place in Catholic theology and ministry in a time of great promise and hope, giving people new insight and voice in relationship to faith practices.

Robert Schreiter identifies two approaches to “catholic,” both of which have deep roots in the tradition and today continue to shape approaches to theology and practice.³¹ The first approach defines catholic as “universal” and world-wide, drawing from Ignatius of Antioch and fully expressed in the call in *Gaudium et spes* for the church to embrace the world as the place of theological engagement. The second approach defines catholic as the “fullness of faith, the depository and guarantor” of the faith. As the defender of the true deposit of faith, the second approach is concerned with the inner life of the church as it is expressed fully in liturgy and moral teachings. Its neo-Augustinian view of world sees the culture in crisis and decline and the church as the answer to the world’s crisis.

The first approach is clearly aligned with theological reflection methods, as well as praxis approaches in liberation, feminist, and contextual theologies. Theologians working out of a “universal” approach to catholic thought view practices as social and cultural realities, embedded in a local context and culture. They embrace pluralism and difference as positive dimensions of modernity, view identity and culture in constructivist terms, and see the world in need of transformation away from oppressive forces that hinder human development. Practices, in this context, are tied to the narrative of being a “pilgrim people” taking Jesus’ mission to the people. Within this understanding of “catholic,” practical theology finds many conversation partners.

The Dis-location of the Practical

Given that Catholicism is a tradition filled with practice and practices, it is curious and a bit ironic that practical theology, with its primary focus on practice and action, has not found more of a home within Catholic theology. Attitudes toward practical theology among Catholic theologians can range from indifference (it is Protestant) to a deep bias and suspicion, to some form of recognition. I can point to at least two factors. The first, mentioned earlier, is the way in which theological knowledge is constructed and what counts as theology. The second is the current ecclesial cultural setting in which theology is produced, which is characterized much more by Schreiter’s second approach to “catholic.”

What counts as Catholic theology (which is not dissimilar from Protestant theology) is largely defined within the categories of systematic theol-

31 Robert Schreiter, CPPS, *Pastoral Theology as Contextual: Forms of Catholic Pastoral Theology Today*, in: Sweeney, et al. (n.1), 64–79.

ogy: the major doctrines of the faith have been articulated in creeds, summaries, and manuals organized around claims about God. In modern Catholic theology, this organization was not replaced or lost in the modern turn to the subject, but continued precisely because of the Enlightenment challenges regarding the existence and legitimacy of claims about God and Christ. In the twentieth century, systematic theology expanded to include ecclesiology, pneumatology, and the Trinity, keeping its primary focus on the doctrines of God. Examining the ways Catholic theology is organized today in textbooks, departments, and professional societies (such as the Catholic Theological Society of America today) demonstrates the accepted way in which theological questions are raised, framed, and pursued among Catholic theologians.³² Even among many liberation, feminist, and praxis theologians, all who have concerns arising from contemporary conditions such as poverty, sexism, immigration, and oppression, a primary task has been to raise this concern in relationship to a systematic category or doctrine, and then reframe the doctrine within that realm of experience.

One way in which practical theology makes for a hard fit in Catholic theology is not that it lacks interest in doctrine but that doctrine is not necessarily where practical theology begins, ends, or focuses. Clarifying doctrine for systematic coherence is not the question animating practical theology. Instead, it is the intelligibility of practice and the ways in which beliefs, sacred narratives, ritual enactments, canons and authorities all cohere (or not) into a religious self-in-community. It is the way in which doctrine and belief are embodied and enacted in a lived faith that most sparks the interest of the practical theologian, which is not always a neat and coherent fit with systematic categories.

As has often been assumed in practical theology, the place to begin is with experience or practice, but where one begins is not as essential today as the realization that the two are intrinsically connected in multiple and complex ways. Practical theologians strive to engage concrete lived realities and the theories embedded in them, as well as theories outside them, in an effort to help understand the life lived in and through practice. What Catholic theology has failed to grasp is that people's lived faith does not conform to precise systematic categories, nor does lived religious practice derive from a logically coherent set of ideas. Practice, whether it is what ministers or people engage in as they live out their faith in a postmodern pluralistic setting, is a quite varied, complex, fragmented, and incoherent set of constructions, and probably always has been. Catholic theology

32 The shifting ground of Catholic theology was obvious in the 2006 reorganization of category slots at the Catholic Theological Society of America. In recognition of the growing areas of Catholic thought beyond the traditional systematic categories, conference organizers first removed practical theology as a group and then returned it to the conference.

has largely been based on the assumption that getting the doctrines right will ensure right practice.

In order to understand, analyze, critique and form this level of practice, practical theology has turned to the social sciences as a dialogue partner.³³ The construction of practical theological insight takes place within an interdisciplinary conversation that seeks to illuminate practice in all its complexity. These resources are seen as friend not foe, and in this regard practical theology as it is practiced today finds a home within Schreiter's first approach to catholic, one that is open to the world of thought and action beyond religious thought. In turn, practical theology turns to multiple sources to critique practice, holding it up to critical scrutiny by a wide range of sources in philosophy and cultural studies.

Some Catholic pastoral theologians see practical theology as emerging in a particular historical context in relationship to changes in systematic theology and modern thought. The French pastoral theologian, Henri-Jérôme Gagey, points out that practical theology emerges from Catholic theology's embrace of history in place of scholasticism's metaphysics. Its focus on the practices of the church, analyzed by history and the social sciences and in conversation with philosophy, is "supported by the resources of, and responding to issues and questions in, systematic theology."³⁴ Practical theology emerges as a "project" in which "systematic theology had to discover its own fundamentally practical orientation." Protestant theologians have made a similar point about practical theology: it becomes a self-conscious approach to theology precisely in modernity when religious thought and practice are seriously threatened by the modern project and religious communities undergo radical change as Christendom fades into history. Communities under threat look more closely at what they are doing not just what they are thinking.

Catholic theology differs from Protestant theology in at least one important way: how ecclesial authority functions in the community of discourse and practice. The "Roman Catholic" tradition is defined, to a large extent, by claims to magisterial authority in the teaching offices of the papacy and episcopacy expressed through a wide range of papal and conciliar documents, the code of canon law, and a history of moral and sacramental doctrines defined largely in juridical terms. Catholic belief, of course, asserts that the Roman tradition is more than the magisterium, its pronouncements, and laws. Certainly the church is the whole people of God, the *Christifideles*, and the priesthood of all believers. Yet even shifts toward

33 Don S. Browning, Bonnie J. Miller-McLeMore, Pamela D. Couture, K. Brynolf Lyon, and Robert M. Franklin, Appendix: Hermeneutic Social Science and Practical Theology, in: *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate*, 2d. ed., Louisville, Ky. (Westminster John Knox Press) 2000, 335–383.

34 Henri-Jérôme Gagey, *Pastoral Theology as a Theological Project*, in: Sweeney, et al. (n.1), 87.

more expansive notions of the church have not changed the fundamental claims to authority and how it is exercised within the Catholic church. In fact, in the face of numerous problems facing the Catholic church today, most notably the decline in church attendance as well as belief in central teachings (most recently in the U.S.), the magisterial response has been to exercise a new wave of magisterial authority. As Catholic belief and practice has shifted away from "official" church teaching, church authorities have determined that it is necessary to enforce "correct" Catholic teaching and enforce faith as assent to belief.

Schreiter's second approach to "catholic" theology and practice has risen in critique of the more progressive movement of theology since the Second Vatican Council. Schreiter points out that the second approach seeks to diagnose culture and context, critiquing what is not of the gospel. It embraces a unifying view of Christian life over against modernity's naïve sense of progress and optimism. It seeks to form people by liturgical and spiritual practices into the form of Christ. It views practice as largely within Catholic resources for spiritual, liturgical, and prayer practices, and finds little need for the social sciences. In the past thirty years, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has exerted increasing pressure on theologians whose "critique" of the tradition is deemed false and dangerous. While they clearly believe that right thinking eventuates in right practice, church leaders are also aware that conformity to practice expresses right belief. Current debates in the U.S. over certain politicians receiving communion or the proposed changes in the English translation of the liturgy can be viewed against this backdrop: practices reflecting certain beliefs regarded as immoral, improper, and false, must be brought in line with the true deposit of the faith.

Locating Practical Theology Today

Thus far I have been describing and mapping where I see practical theology located on the landscape of Catholic theology, and I would like to conclude by offering several ways in which I think it can be located in order to serve Catholic theology in the U.S. in a more creative way.

First, I would like to see practical theology grow and mature as a *disciplined practice of intellectual and scholarly work* among some Catholic theologians.³⁵ I am not advocating that practical theology be recognized

35 Bonne Miller-McLemore notes that several contemporary theologians, both Catholic and Protestant, make no mention of practical theology in their analyses of contemporary theology. She notes that Robert Schreiter in his important book, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Maryknoll, N.Y. (Orbis) 1985 appears "...oblivious of practical theology. It appears nowhere in the index or text itself. When he lists and evaluates new kinds of local theologizing, such as indigenous and contextual theology, he does not mention it. As a

as a “discipline” alongside Bible, ethics or history, at least not at this point, but that it is recognized as a disciplined practice in theology that brings both rigorous methods and substantive content that can contribute to the larger theological enterprise.³⁶ In this way, practical theology is engaged as an exciting intellectual movement that can inform a wide range of intellectual work, regardless of the discipline one claims allegiance. Moreover, for those who do claim an allegiance to the discipline because of vocational commitment, doctoral training, and intellectual and personal friendships with other practical theologians, these commitments and identities should not and need not be penalized in Catholic settings. In other words, in the absence of disciplinary and curricular location in the many places, the first step is recognition that practical theologians exist within the Catholic community. This is, of course, an issue of power and legitimacy.³⁷

Catholic theology is characterized by many different approaches to theology that have emerged and developed over the last forty years. In fact, there is a remarkably “catholic” approach to theology currently in place. Certainly the rise and acceptance of liberation, feminist, contextual, Asian, African, and more recently communicative theologies, are kin and cousins to practical theology in important ways, especially their commitment to praxis and theology’s role in a revitalized faith for the mission of the church. Even though these approaches to theology do so largely within the categories of systematic theology, there is a greater capacity for them to embrace notions of practice and lived faith than before. It would be most helpful if practical theology were understood not as the opposite of systematic theology or as the meta or fundamental approach to all theology, but as an approach that brings interesting insights to other approaches and can glean important insights from them. What we need is greater cross-fertilization between approaches, rather than creating silos of intellectual groups identified by like-minded interests, favorite philosophers, or hermeneutical methods. What we need to embrace is a “catholic approach” to Catholic theology (or a cafeteria-style theology in which all approaches are offered at the table). Of course, it must be recognized that just as there is a plurality of approaches within Catholic theology today, there is also a plurality within practical theology, a feature that those within the discipline view as a necessary and creative tension.

Catholic theologian, practical theology likely has an unclear, perhaps even unwelcome connotation.” Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Introduction: The Politics of Practical Theological Knowledge, unpublished paper, July 2009. Likewise, Terrance Tilley in his book *Inventing Catholic Tradition*, Maryknoll, N.Y. (Orbis) 2001 argues that tradition is set of “enduring practices” but he makes little reference to the literature in practical theology.

36 Gagey makes a similar point, claiming practical theology as a “project” within theology. Gagey, *Pastoral Theology as a Theological Project*, in: Sweeney, et al. (n.1), 82.

37 Sweeney (n.29), 48.

Until Catholics become more serious about doctoral-level training in the discipline of practical theology it will not become a curricular category or discipline. This was certainly the case in “pastoral theology” as it related to ministry education. Even today, there is a surprising dearth of doctorates in pastoral theology (especially in homiletics and pastoral care), and one would think that Catholic theological educators would be more concerned about where they will find present and future faculty hires.³⁸ A 2001 Auburn Center study reported that the practical areas across ATS schools will experience the largest number of retirements in the next ten to fifteen years (60% of practical theology faculty members are over fifty-two years old).³⁹ In examining practical theology faculty hires from 1992 through 2000, the study revealed that Catholics are in an alarming situation:⁴⁰ Twenty-two Catholic schools hired new faculty in pastoral positions over the eight year period, whereas Protestant schools hire new practical theology faculty at a much higher rate; Catholics hire the largest number of part-time pastoral theologians (38%) as compared to Protestants (10%), and are less likely to hire pastoral theologians in tenure-track positions (85% were contract hires) or with doctorates (18% had doctorates).⁴¹ Within the top suppliers of doctoral degrees in practical areas, only two Catholic schools are listed, accounting for 3.8% of the hires.⁴² The numbers would suggest that Catholic theological education is in a crisis in regard to hiring in pastoral theology. In fact, though, the opposite is true: few schools experience the current situation as a crisis because this is the way pastoral theologians have always been hired in Catholic seminaries and theological

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- 38 Schuth reports that more than half of seminary rectors and presidents reported concern about the capacity of seminary graduates to respond to the needs of the church today. “More than half of them pointed to the difficulty posed by the immense scope of ministry required by the more than sixty million Catholics... ‘inadequate attention given to preparation for ministry in the Hispanic community,’ ‘an incapacity to train flexible, resilient spiritual leaders who call forth and empower the gifts of diverse leaders in a community,’ and ‘lack of attention to lay ministry and preaching.’” Schuth, *Seminaries* (n.19), 65.
- 39 A 1992 NCEA report states that during the two preceding years (1990–1992), about one-third of new positions in seminaries were in pastoral areas (12 out of 39); about one-third of replacements were also in the pastoral areas (36 out of 103). National Catholic Educational Association, *The Recruitment and Retention of Faculty in Roman Catholic Theological Seminaries*, Washington, D.C. 1992, 60.
- 40 Schuth notes that hiring in moral theology and pastoral theology, especially preaching, pastoral counseling, and Hispanic ministry are very difficult for seminaries. Schuth, *Theological Education* (n.18), 172. For a discussion of field educators’ qualifications, see Schuth, *Seminaries* (n.19), 197 ff.
- 41 In the NCEA study on theological faculty, seminary administrators had the most difficulty hiring in homiletics, either leaving the post open or using part-time faculty. In faculty searches homiletics had the most applicants apply who lacked sufficient qualifications. *The Recruitment and Retention* (n.39), 62–63.
- 42 *Hard to Find: Searching for Practical Faculty in the 1990’s*, Auburn Center Background Report 8 (January 2002), 3–7.

schools. Developing strong doctoral programs in practical theology or engaged with practical theology as it relates to the practices of ministry is obviously needed.

What has more chance of changing Catholic practical theology are the numbers of Catholics currently enrolled in Protestant practical theology doctoral programs.⁴³ Even so, Catholic candidates trained in Protestant practical theology programs will not necessarily be formed in the ecclesial culture and pastoral thinking that shape Catholic ministry and thus may find the adjustment to Catholic theological education or undergraduate teaching quite difficult. On the other hand, if it is correct that many Catholic practical theologians will be educated in Protestant practical theology programs, they will most likely identify as practical theologians and perhaps find ways of introducing a newly conceived practical theology into Catholic theological education.

The primary reason for Catholic theology to embrace those who work in the area of practical theology is to gain important insights into the nature of practice. Don Browning noted that practical theological thinking begins when practices break down, when people are forced to reconceive and remake faith practices.⁴⁴ In the U.S., Catholics are certainly facing a breakdown of practices, which is often mistaken as a rejection of doctrine and authority. There is a growing rift between highly idealized theological constructs and the actual lived reality of Catholics. The crisis in the U.S. Catholic church is clearly one of practice, and yet the great irony is that Catholics continue to report high levels of identity. How is this possible? Is this a new historical phenomenon or not? How long can people tolerate the dissonance between identity and practice?

Perhaps the problem is that the practices themselves have lost their reasonableness. Some things just do not practically make sense any more. It is not that people ever assented to all the beliefs, but that the reasonableness of the practices that constitute the moral and spiritual landscape of “everyday” Catholics is gone. Using Charles Taylor’s terms, the Catholic “social imaginary” has disappeared, thereby leaving the practices without a religious imaginary to support them.

The separation of identity and practice is also prominent in theologies of ordained and lay ministry. The church has long maintained a substance ontology to explain ordained ministry, forcing a separation between being (the essence of the person that is changed and is unchangeable) and doing (the functions that constitute the work). One obvious crisis in ministry is that of incompetence, which a substance or relational ontology can-

43 In the past few years, doctoral programs have been started at University of St. Thomas, Miami, Fla.; Candler School of Theology, Emory University; Vanderbilt Divinity School; Boston School of Theology, Boston University; and Duke Divinity School, Duke University.

44 Don S. Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*, Minneapolis (Augsburg) 1991, 6.

not address since incompetence is about inadequate practice. An obvious dissonance persists when men claim a vocation to the priesthood or episcopacy without the requisite gifts that correspond to the ministerial practice. In a highly educated and professional society, people have low tolerance for incompetence, regardless of the claims to authority. If ministerial vocation was viewed as the integration of identity and practice, not the separation of the two, we would call forth and ordain a much different set of leaders.

Catholic theology does not need to embrace the practical theology enterprise in order to understand the importance of studying and understanding practice and practices. Certainly a tradition rich in liturgical, moral, and spiritual practices could be leading the conversation about what is practice. One of the important identifying markers of practical theology is its interest and commitment to stand up-close and appreciate the faith as it is lived, the way in which people construct religious meaning and community regardless of the amount of dissonance in the environment.

Catholics engaged in practical theology bring to their work central theological commitments related to practice: a sense of the sacramental in relationship to creation, the incarnation, and the Christian community; a social and communal theological anthropology; liturgical and spiritual practice as formations of the self; the witness of practice in intentional communities; the mystical tradition; and the communion of saints. The force of these ideas can be found all through Catholic thought, both Schreiter's first and second approaches, and they are a particular vantage point that can be often missing in practical theology.

These suggestions only begin to identify what might happen if the "slumbering giant" that Stephen Pattison has noticed wakes up. In this regard, if Bonnie Miller-McLemore is right, practical theology is engaging people as a way of thinking about their faith in everyday life, a way for ministers to study and understand the practice of ministry in relationship to changing faith conditions, and a disciplined inquiry by researchers in seminaries and universities. The interplay of theology across multiple contexts, identities, and institutions is precisely what practical theology can attend to in a disciplined and creative way.

Abstract

Catholic pastoral theology has existed as a curricular heading in seminaries but not as a discipline in U.S. universities, at least not with the same meaning and intention as in Protestant schools. Catholic theology is largely produced by university theologians where the subject and teaching of ministry has not been a central feature. Scholarship pertaining to practice, sometimes linked with practical theology, is gaining attention among U.S. Catholics, though the way in which Catholics organize theology as a discipline, its ecclesial authority structure, and the numerous approaches to theology today, make practical theology one disciplined inquiry among many. Its appearance as a fully-formed discipline in Catholic thought is still not present.

Zusammenfassung

Katholische Pastoraltheologie existierte zwar als curriculares Thema an den Ausbildungsstätten der Vereinigten Staaten, aber nicht als Disziplin an den Universitäten, zumindest nicht mit derselben Bedeutung und Intention wie an Protestantischen Einrichtungen. Katholische Theologie wird überwiegend von universitären Theologen produziert, für die das Thema des geistlichen Amtes und seine Thematisierung in der Lehre von geringer Bedeutung ist. Die Verbindung von Wissenschaft und Praxis, manchmal im Zusammenhang der Praktischen Theologie, gewinnt aber an Aufmerksamkeit innerhalb der US-amerikanischen Katholiken, obwohl die Organisation der Theologie als Disziplin katholischerseits, insbesondere ihre ekklesiale Autoritätsstruktur, sowie die Vielzahl an gegenwärtigen Ansätzen in der Theologie die Praktische Theologie zu einem disziplinären Ansatz unter vielen machen. Gegenwärtig kann zumindest nicht vom Erreichen eines vollgültigen Disziplinstatus innerhalb der katholischen Theologie gesprochen werden.