

CATHOLIC PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Reflections on an Emerging Field

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Abstract: This essay is a reflection on the place of Catholic practical theology within the field of theological disciplines. It suggests that practical theology is a discipline in the sense that it is a *practice* or a way of life—a discipleship. To venture a theological life is to live *theologically*. It is not so much to ask about the ways that theology can be made practical; rather, it is to ask how the practices of my life can be made *theological*.

FOR SOME YEARS now, I've never quite known where to place myself as a theologian. When I am asked (at conferences or conventions, for example), 'What is your area?' or 'What do you teach?', I always feel a little lost for words. None of the designated areas of theology offer me a ready place to hang my hat.

When I look at the books on my shelves, there seem so few that qualify as 'theology books' – unless one considers that books on philosophy, culture, poetry, education, etc, have something to do with theology. I've always had an instinct that theology isn't meant to operate as a discipline unto its own or with a haughtiness that separates it from other human disciplines. If it is a 'divine discourse' or a 'sacred discipline,' then it seems to me that the Christian tradition has always urged the intimate bond between the divine and the human. As the Second Vatican Council so eloquently says, nothing authentically human is alien to the Gospel.¹

I was initially attracted to practical theology because of its interests in connecting theories/ideas/texts with practice/life/reality. It seemed to understand the link between theology and life, heaven and earth, question and answer, call and response. I also liked its lack

of self-regard—it didn't seem too pre-occupied with itself and it didn't feel 'boxed-in' or 'pinned-down.' I liked its beautiful ambiguity, its unabashed complexity, its passion, its life, its energy. As Karl Rahner suggests, '*everything* is its subject-matter.'² Moreover, it seemed to give me a place to hang my hat, so that when someone asked about what I do or what I teach or what my area was, I could reply: 'practical theology.' Of course, the next question would be, 'what's that?'—but at least a conversation could ensue. Or, people would simply be satisfied, 'Oh, so you make theology practical and concrete in people's real lives' (the typical stock-standard response).

I have a love-hate relationship with the phrase 'practical theology.' It's a cold, hard term. It also carries connotations of making theology practical lest it be of little or no use. I like the Catholic instincts behind the phrase 'pastoral theology'—to shepherd each other's lives, to be pastoral people through and through, filled with God's love and mercy. That's much more poetic than being 'practical.' But of course 'pastoral' also has its own connotations of limiting itself to such areas as pastoral care, ministry, counseling, *etc* (none of which I am specifically trained in).

In my recent book, *Practical Theology: On*

Earth as It Is in Heaven, I was surprised to find myself arguing against practical theology as much as I argued for it.³ There are conceptions of practical theology that are misconceptions. For example, that theology needs to be made practical. Or that theology isn't of much use, unless it can be made useful. Or that we need to take theology—which sits in a rarefied and abstract realm—and turn it into something relevant and applicable. Generally speaking, Western society doesn't like to suffer useless things (or useless people). It likes progress and achievement. It likes concrete facts and ideas that are tested. It likes things that are workable and effective—even though, any trip to the shopping mall will quickly reveal the plethora of useless things we produce and consume.

Many people are interested in the method of practical theology, as though it offered a secret recipe that could produce successful outcomes. The word *method*, however, comes from the Greek word, *methodos*, which means a *path* or a *way*. Practical theology is a choice to practice a theological way of life—a choice or a decision that doesn't come at the end of a process like an outcome, but rather stands at the beginning, like a true test of faith: 'Can I practice *this way of life*?'

In his study of ancient philosophy, Pierre Hadot notes that philosophy was never conceived by the ancients as a *mastery of life*—borne of speculative theorizing—but always as a *practice*, a *discipline*, a *way to follow*, a *questioning* and a *searching*. While the ancient philosophical schools were guided by ideals and *forms of life*—the true, the good, and the beautiful, for example—these were never considered as remote ideals or detached theories; rather, they were tasks to be enacted in our world. The ancients knew that the great universals such as 'the true, the good, and the beautiful' would remain great abstractions unless they were invested with a real weight or 'heaviness' that anchors them in actual existence. They considered that humans were the 'bearers' of these virtues in such ways that



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unless we learnt to *practice* them, we would remain mired in falsity and illusion—in lies, in hatred, and in ugliness. Rather than offer abstract principles, philosophical discourse 'always intended to produce an effect, to create a *habitus* within the soul, or to provoke a transformation of the self.' It sought to 'render active, efficacious, alive—to inspire judgments which generate useful acts, and choices in favour of the good.'⁴ The philosophical way was always in search of the best way to live. The goal was never simply knowledge, but the practice of a way of life. 'From this perspective,' Hadot says, 'we can define philosophical discourse as a spiritual exercise—in other words, as a practice intended to carry out a radical change in our being.'⁵ Unlike the many 'how to' books that fill the shelves of our bookstores today, knowledge was not an 'ensemble of propositions or formulas which could be written, communicated or sold ready-made.' Rather:

We must discern the philosopher's underlying intention, which was not to develop a discourse which had its end in itself but to act upon souls... Whether the goal was to convert, to console, to cure or to exhort the audience, the point was always and above all not to communicate to them some ready-made knowledge but to *form* them. The goal was to change people's way of living and of seeing the world.⁶

Hadot notes that Christianity, especially in the monastic movements, was also considered as a *philosophia*, as a way of life that sought to live according to the paths of divine Wisdom.⁷ Indeed, Ellen Charry has recently shown

that early Christian doctrines and teachings were less concerned with developing conceptual theories and more concerned with the promotion of virtue and a life of ‘Christian excellence.’ Knowing the truth implied ‘loving it, wanting it, and being transformed by it.’ Theory was not opposed to practice. Rather, theology was an exercise of life ‘nurtured through prayer, reflection, and the study of God’s word.’⁸

In modern thought, practice is often contrasted with theory. Practical theology is an attempt to heal this dichotomy, so that thought and deed can *work together* rather than against each other. David Tracy refers to the dichotomy between theory and practice as a ‘fatal split.’⁹ When we divide theory and practice, we injure life, and it is the task of practical theology to heal this fatal wound.

Often, we are impatient with ‘theories.’ We can easily dismiss them as heady speculations. We want to get on with life. Unlike theory, or in contrast to theory, we typically associate the word ‘practical’ with things that are *useful, workable, feasible, doable, realistic, sensible, functional, pragmatic, applied, hands-on, effective, relevant*. These ‘practical’ words carry a positive content for our modern ears. We like to feel useful and productive. We like things that are relevant and applicable. Theology would lose its very soul if it were reduced to this understanding of the word ‘practical.’

In a strange twist, however, there is also a sense in which we privilege theory over practice. Theory is the bright light that illumines all we do. Theory represents our ‘thinking selves,’ so highly prized in Western philosophy. It comes first and foremost. Practice plays second-fiddle to theory because practice typically comes *after* theory, in second-place. Practice is what remains after theory has accomplished all its winning work—all that now needs to be done is for practice to demonstrate or test how well the theory works. Too often practice functions as the hand-maiden of theory. In terms of theology, we have often considered ‘systematic’ theology as the queen bee,

and ‘pastoral’ theology as the worker bee.

Practical theology sees theory and practice as partners that belong together. They are made for each other. They require each other. Action requires reflection. Reflection requires action. They are not one or the other; they go hand-in-hand.

At one point in my book, I likened practical theology to a ‘rolling stone,’ and wrote:

Practical theology—always moving and restless—cannot stop to gather and formalize itself into a neat and tidy system or specialization of theology. ‘Once upon a time you dressed so fine,’ Dylan says. Yet while it is tempting to debate the formalities and proprieties of practical theology in academic journals and convention halls, practical theology nevertheless finds itself continually underdressed for the occasion, like an unruly itinerant, always on the move, on the way, *viatores*, as Aquinas said, ‘people on the road.’ There is a very real sense in which practical theology is ‘without a home/like a complete unknown/like a rolling stone’ (Dylan). It resembles its teacher who had ‘nowhere to lay his head’ (Matt 8:20), and who sent his disciples out into the world to move from town to town, ‘with no bag for your journey, or sandals, or a staff,’ proclaiming that the ‘kingdom of heaven has come near’ (Matt 10:10,7). So what does it mean to do practical theology? How does it feel? It feels like being-on-the-road, being-underway, even being homeless, in brief: discipleship.¹⁰

Practical theology is a discipline in the sense that it is a ‘practice’ or a way of life—a ‘discipleship.’ What I learnt from writing a book on practical theology is that to venture a theological life is *to live theologically*. It is not so much to ask about the ways that theology can be made practical; rather, it is to ask how the practices of my life can be made *theological*.

It would be a mistake to assume that practical theology is simply arguing for a ‘practical method’—something that will turn our systematic workings into practical workings. Rather, it is arguing for the somewhat maddening idea that we actually have to live the Gospel message much more than we think. J.B.

Metz says: ‘In itself, the Christian idea of God is a practical idea. God cannot be thought of at all unless this idea irritates and encroaches on the immediate interests of the person who is trying to think it.’ He then offers this rather maddening statement about the ‘folly’ of Christ: ‘Christ has always to be thought of in such a way that he is not simply thought of.’ Rather, ‘All Christology is nourished, for the sake of its own truth, by praxis and particularly the praxis of the imitation of Christ. It is, in other words, expressed in practical knowledge.’¹¹ Two simple verses from Luke’s gospel are enough to exemplify Metz’ point: ‘Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you’ (6:36-38).

‘If God were a theory,’ writes Abraham Heschel, ‘the study of theology would be a way to understand him.’¹² What if God were not a theory, but a method? What if we were meant to be studying, not the ‘theory’ of God, but rather the ‘way’ of God—God’s method, God’s ways, God’s thoughts, God’s hopes, God’s desires, God’s concerns—or, in traditional theological language—God’s will? At its simplest—and yet most difficult—practical theology is a way of life that needs to be practiced.

Will Catholic practical theology eventually find a home within the field of theological disciplines? My own sense is that practical theology readily lends itself to a deep reception within Catholic theological circles. I am thinking, for example, of the following highlights of the Catholic theological tradition, all of which draw us into the living practices of our faith:

- (i) A deep appreciation and respect for human cultures, with the ever-constant need for dialogue among us, evidenced in the documents of Vatican II and advanced by many contemporary Catholic theologians.
- (ii) A reflective body of Catholic social teachings, stressing the dignity of the human person and the inseparability be-

tween the love of God and the love of neighbour. *Divinitas* can never be separated from *humanitas*. We cannot love God unless we love our brother and sister.

- (iii) A rich sacramental tradition that recognizes God’s presence in the ordinary and the ‘down-to-earth.’ An ‘analogical imagination’ that finds divine correspondences ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’
- (iv) A prophetic imagination, especially as this has been advanced and developed by Catholic liberation and political theologians.
- (v) A profound respect for faith working together with reason, and for faith working together with good works. To love God ‘with all your heart and mind and soul and hands.’
- (vi) A deep and sustained awareness that the Scriptures have been read and received by fellow travelers over many centuries, and that we stand in this long line of descendents—called, like them, to activate the meaning of the Scriptures for our own times and in response to our own searching questions.
- (vii) A spirituality that recognizes life’s joyous, sorrowful and glorious mysteries.
- (viii) A commitment to finding and promoting the ‘Good’ in all things. A confidence in God’s love for the world, especially as that love inclines toward the least and the last.¹³

Exemplary truths are often considered as high ideals, yet that does not mean they are therefore impractical. Rather, it means that they continually put us to the test. ‘Examine yourselves to see if you are living in the faith. Test yourselves’ (2 Cor 13:5). As Emmanuel Levinas suggests, there is a very real sense in which ‘every truth must be attested,’ such that truth is always tied to ‘the veracity of the people who testify to it.’¹⁴ The gospel saying, ‘You will know them by their fruits’ (Matt 7:16), suggests that truth is intimately linked with those who *testify* or *bear witness* to the truth they are liv-

ing. The *practice* of truth is not something ‘added’ to truth; rather, the practice of truth *inheres* in truth, such that without a living testimony or witness, truth would ring hollow or, as St. Paul says, it would simply be a ‘noisy gong or a clanging cymbal’ (1 Cor 13:1).

Catholic practical theology requires a ‘whole way of life’—an *exemplum vitae*, as Tom Ryan reminds us, citing Aquinas.¹⁵ It is not a part of something, a segment, a piece, a specialized area or a set-aside realm. ‘This is what I understand by a theology that is practical,’ I wrote in my book. ‘It requires a way of life—living it, testing it, seeking it, treasuring it, daring it.’¹⁶

I would like to conclude with a poem from

Rainer Maria Rilke:

Only in our doing can we grasp you.
Only in our hands can we illumine you.
The mind is but a visitor:
it thinks us out of the world.

Each mind fabricates itself.
We sense its limits, for we have made them.
And just when we would flee them, you come
and make of yourself an offering.

I don’t want to think a place for you.
Speak to me from everywhere.
Your Gospel can be comprehended
without looking for its source.

When I go toward you
it is with my whole life.¹⁷

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