

## Invitation to Practical Theology: Catholic Voices and Visions

Claire E. Wolfteich, Ed.

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New York / Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2014, 386pp, ISBN 978-0-8091-4890-5. \$29.95pbk

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**A** *Catholic* practical theology? Clearly, the work of practical theology has been traditionally associated with Protestant theology. What the essays in this volume reveal is that practical theology—in essence if not in name—has deep roots in, and profound resonance with, the Catholic tradition. Equally, the discipline of practical theology has much to assist Catholic theologians in the development of scholarship and method in relation to multiple areas of Church life and ministry such as Catholic education, pastoral care, liturgy, community and ethics. More than this, the volume shows how a Catholic practical theological imagination is essential for the effectiveness of the Church’s mission. Although focused on the work of Catholic researchers, there is ample evidence of contribution to the broader, ecumenical academy with which it is in dialogue.

Entitled an *Invitation to Practical Theology*, the volume is not a theological treatise on practical theology. Rather, it invites readers to explore Christian practices from the perspective of Catholic theology. Dependant on Vatican II’s invitation to “read the signs of the times in light of the Gospel”, the essays bring us into critical dialogue with practices, cultures and contexts in light of Scripture, tradition, and Church teaching, the three hallmarks of all Catholic theology. The larger context of these reflections is the challenge “to speak about God and our human callings” (3) given current, critical issues—from polarisation, scandal, failure of leadership to complex problems of poverty, politics, economics and climate change—facing our faith communities. Indeed, it is claimed, the most compelling reason for developing a Catholic practical theology “is the need to address pressing practical questions of how we live our faith in the current ecclesial and cultural situation” (341). The work is divided into three parts.

Part One invites us to see how the Catholic voice in practical theology is expressed in relation to historical, ecclesial, and contextual realities. Cahalan/Froele’s chapter identifies an ever-changing Catholic voice in practical theology from medieval to contemporary times, noting how Vatican II represented something of a watershed—or “practical theological revolution”—evidenced in post-conciliar engagement with culture and context. From a different perspective, Colleen Griffith explores the notion of “spiritual practices” as “embodied knowing” thereby expanding our appreciation of the primacy of experience, practice, and embodiment for Christian faith. Applied to the Catholic tradition, she defines the *sensus fidei* as “the sense of the faith embodied in people’s participation in spiritual practices” (65). This emphasis on embodied spiritual practices at the heart of Christian faith is corroborated by David Tracy’s call for a “correlational practical theology” (71) in critical dialogue with both prophetic and mystical traditions. Tracy’s emphasis on

spirituality, poetics, aesthetics, and mysticism is revisited throughout the volume as a particular concern and contribution of Catholic practical theology.

The longest section (Part Two / nine chapters), focuses on more specific and concrete practices, contexts, and conversations that arise from expressions of faith in diverse situations. Authors from a range of disciplines and perspectives grapple with multiple issues including liturgy, spiritual direction, ministry formation, popular religion, ethnicity, gender, social ethics and justice, mission, and evangelisation. These are all vignettes illustrating multiple ways in which practical theology is actually practised in particular contexts. Equally, they demonstrate a distinctive, Catholic practical theological sensibility. Many chapters, such as Ed Foley's reflections on "Eucharistic Practice" and Shawn Copeland's "Commemoration of the Ancestors", deal explicitly with the transformative potential of symbol and ritual arising from a "Catholic sacramental imagination." Other authors more explicitly reveal the abiding Catholic concern for social justice, solidarity and dialogue as integral to the Church's mission. Stephen Bevans' "Missiology as Practical Theology" brings together the mystical-sacramental and prophetic-justice centred approaches of the Catholic theological tradition.

Part Three consists of three illuminating chapters on teaching and research. Thomas Groome provides a disciplined pedagogy for practical theology focused on "intended learning outcomes" and what he calls "some Catholic convictions." Dillen/Mager introduce us to a range of research methodologies and an outline of basic principles for a practical theological methodology. While situating Catholic practical theology within the wider discourse, Claire Wolfeich gives prominence to the manner in which "Catholic scholarship lends more weight to the significance of aesthetics and poetics in practical theology" (336). While recognising the importance of empirical methods, she demonstrates how Catholic practical theologians are at the forefront of articulating the "mystical dimension" of practical theology.

This multi-authored volume is ground-breaking in the manner it enlists a group of esteemed interdisciplinary scholars to explore practical theology from a distinctive Catholic perspective. One hopes it will be widely read, not least by those involved in theological education and ministry formation in the Catholic tradition. Moreover, it has a significant contribution to make to the discipline of practical theology in an ecumenical context.

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