

Invitation to Practical Theology: Catholic Voices and Visions

Edited by Claire E. Wolfteich

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In Catholic theology, practical theology occupies an ambiguous space. It sometimes stands alone as a discipline, while in other discussions it is combined with pastoral theology, systematic theology, or ethics. Compared to Protestant theology, Catholic circles have been slower to pay attention to and develop this field. Under Claire E. Wolfteich's guidance, eighteen of the top Catholic theologians collaborate in *Invitation to Practical Theology: Catholic Voices and Visions*. This volume seeks to "demonstrate that Catholic theology, tradition, and imagination are especially well suited to the creative work of practical theology" (11). In doing so, it brings many movements in practical theology into conversation with Catholic theological tradition. As a result, it is an excellent addition to the conversation in practical theology as well as broader theological discourse.

Wolfteich's introduction to this volume is a high point of the text. It provides a helpful overview of the work, while also appropriately serving as an invitation into this field. "Part I: Invitation to Practical Theology" provides a historical overview of the development of the field. Notably, in "A Developing Discipline: The Catholic Voice in Practical Theology," Kathleen A. Cahalan and Bryan Froehle trace the evolution of practice and tradition from the Middle Ages to the present age. They illuminate the "modest and expansive" Catholic voice in practical theology, grounding the volume in historical context (44).

The most robust engagement with practices comes in "Part II: Practices, Contexts, and Conversations." While all of the essays in this section are superb, two stand out as exceptional contributions to the field. Terrence W. Tilley's chapter, "Practicing the Faith: Tradition in a Practical Theology," engages the important role of tradition in Catholic faith. Using the examples of the Eucharist and reconciliation, Tilley bridges the often-perceived gap between practical theology and systematic theology. In one of the most powerful essays of the volume, M. Shawn Copeland engages the practices and rituals of African American popular religion in "Weaving Memory, Structuring Ritual, Evoking *Mythos*: Commemoration of the Ancestors." Copeland examines the practice of Commemoration of the Ancestors by the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University of Louisiana, New Orleans. She weaves together popular religiosity with in-depth theological reflection, presenting the reader with a more robust understanding of the ritual as well as theological concepts.

The final section, "Part III: Teaching and Research" addresses particular topics related to education. In an effort to expand the conversation beyond the United States, Annemie Dillen (Leuven, Belgium) and

Robert Mager (Quebec, Canada) address diverse research methods in scholarship in their chapter, “Research in Practical Theology: Methods, Methodology, and Normativity.” This final section is the most specialized and of particular interest to religious education scholars.

Notably, not all of the contributors identify themselves as “practical theologians,” but rather, are more comfortably housed in systematic theology, ethics, religious education or pastoral theology. This is an intentional effort, identified as a “collaborative venture” among a diverse array of scholars (9). The collaboration is clear throughout the book, with several authors referencing other chapters, creating a sense of integration throughout the collected works. Looked at from one point of view, the contributors reflect the diversity of the field of Catholic practical theology. This collaborative approach results in a robust dialogue among various fields. At the same time, it also reveals the nebulous state of the field, mingling and co-existing with many subfields with few claiming the title of “Practical Theologian” proper. I hope this volume will be successful in offering an invitation to Catholic practical theology that will result an expansion in this field.

This book addresses several audiences, including graduate students, advanced undergraduates and parish-based adult education groups. Importantly, it fills a void in Catholic theological education through serving as a graduate-level Catholic practical theology text. While thoroughly Catholic, people from all faith traditions will find this book engaging and an important contribution. At its best, speaking to several audiences highlights the far-reaching aspects of this field while avoiding theological jargon. However, the ambitious task of addressing multiple audiences also runs the risk of speaking to no one. I found the vast majority of essays to effectively address the varied audiences. Only a few essays fail to speak to the multiple audiences, yet even those will resonate with a specific, targeted audience. In addition, several chapters would make fine additions to syllabi and parish curriculum. In particular, Roberto Goizueta’s chapter “Practicing Beauty: Aesthetic Praxis, Justice, and U.S. Latino/a Popular Religion” is an excellent essay to include surrounding the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe for undergraduate and graduate courses as well as parish faith-sharing groups. Wolfteich’s introductory chapter is also an excellent framing article for an undergraduate or graduate survey course to introduce the field of practical theology. Essentially, the introductory chapter includes lesson plans for selecting chapters as well as methods for using with groups, such as *lectio divina*.

Overall, *Invitation to Practical Theology* is a welcome contribution to the budding field of Catholic practical theology. It goes beyond the goal of filling a void of graduate-level textbooks in practical theology by becoming a valuable contribution to the theological academy as well as the larger church.

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