

Why Does Practice Matter Theologically?

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In a recent book on Catholic practical theology, Julie Hanlon Rubio discusses “family ethics” in terms of “practices of love and solidarity.” She presents a “vision” for an activist-style practice of “resistance” by way of everyday family practices grounded in Catholic and, more broadly, Christian theological claims. It looks like it all holds together quite well. In the last few pages of the chapter, however, Rubio honestly states that “as [her] children grew up, it began to unravel.” Her children took up other life-models than Jesus, rendering her family effectively “interfaith.”¹ She suggests that much of the way Christian theology speaks of practice cannot accommodate the “mixed families” like the one hers became when her children grew up and went their own way. This is because most of our inherited theologies of families imagine a religiously homogeneous faith situation, wherein parenting is normatively Christian and children are meant to stay within the Christian fold.² It is a poignant, although very common and increasingly typical, story for Catholicism in particular and mainline Christianity in general in the United States.

Rubio’s story, as well as my own experience attempting to re-situate my Catholic heritage within a larger frame, and the larger familiar patterns of religious switching and deconversion in the United States, have made me curious about why and whether practical theology has to make its prime task the discovery of Christian significance in practice. I wonder if practices modeled from the outset as having pre-Christian, Christian, and post-Christian dimensions, or practice construed as “empty of”/“indifferent toward” Christianity, might help things go differently for families like hers and all of us who find ourselves at times outside religion or declining affiliation. Rubio gestures toward the possibility of imagining a kind of Christian parenting that does not further Christian affiliation, a situation of “respecting where each person is,

1 Julie Hanlon Rubio, “Practices of Love and Solidarity: Family Ethics,” in *Invitation to Practical Theology: Catholic Voices and Visions*, ed. Claire E. Wolfteich (New York: Paulist, 2014), 227.

2 Rubio suggests that theology inherits two influential trajectories regarding family: the shared-faith model, emphasizing the importance of maintaining the family religious tradition through parenting practices; and the missionary model, emphasizing adults as evangelizers with less of an emphasis on parenting practices (“Practices of Love,” p. 228).

asking not for total agreement but for companionship on the way, and agreeing to support each other in the quest for truth.” She suggests that this practice might be one of “living together in a loving community that respects, honors, and supports differences”—including differences of religion and spirituality.³ Indeed, families that are able to accommodate the “breaking” of affiliation and end up able to affirm its importance and goodness probably have some way of interpreting practice along the lines I end up suggesting in this chapter. It will take understanding how and how much (Christian) practical theology has practiced an investment in the reproduction of Christianity—a phenomenon that I will later refer to as “christianicity”—and then of imagining doing something different with practical theology’s Christian heritage, something more along the lines of “respecting, honoring, and supporting difference.”

So what is it about practice?⁴ Energy for responding to this question unites practical theologies. The actual responses, however, divide them. No practical theology avoids presuming or arguing that practice is of vital importance. In the renewal of practical theology of recent decades, that conviction became the working assumption of the field and remains central to its distinctiveness among academic theological enterprises.

The definitions of “practice” in practical theology are many, and I am using “practice” in this chapter to stand for a complex matrix of overlapping concepts used in the field: practice, praxis, action, performance, experience. Practice, however understood, is that domain of life in relation to which the practical theologian intentionally makes her moves. And by suggesting that practical theologies take practice to be of “vital importance,” I mean that practice is taken to be theologically significant. For every practical theology, and for a range of reasons always traceable in principle to an account of God, practice is a crucial theological focus. The practical theologian’s distinctiveness becomes manifest in the capacity to show how practice constitutes theological material. This means that practice “signifies” (that is, it bears/carries or indicates/points-to) some essential relation to *theos*. This signifying can take place “directly” or “indirectly” in relation to God-related material, such as experience-concepts that point toward God, such as Jesus, sacrament, Spirit, anthropology, grace, sin, saints, virtue, mercy, or incarnation. In short, practical theologies render practice as divine material. This understanding of theol-

3 Rubio, “Practices of Love,” 228.

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