



A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices

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Midway through *Tender Mercies*, a 1984 film featuring an Oscar-winning performance by Robert Duvall, something happens that is rarely the stuff of movies. In a modest service in an unremarkable church in a small Texas town, a boy and a man are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Entering into Christian life that Sunday morning are Mac Sledge, a once-successful country singer whose recent marriage to Rosa Lee has reversed a tailspin brought about by alcohol and thwarted ambitions, and Sonny, Rosa Lee's ten-year-old. As the minister lowers first Sonny and then Mac back into the water, Rosa Lee watches from her seat in the choir. Riding home afterwards in their pickup truck, Sonny asks a question, "Do you feel different, Mac?" Mac looks unsure at first. "Not yet," he replies. But laughter wells up in him as he speaks, gentle laughter that soon embraces all three. Something has happened that is beyond mere feeling.

In the water, under the threefold name, Mac and Sonny have been given new life as children of God. And this new life is already finding expression in a family marked by self-giving love. Hardships and temptations will not simply disappear; troubles remaining from Mac's former marriage will soon visit his new home, and it will be a while before Sonny can come to terms with his father's death. Even so, this is a story of gift upon gift. Though burdened by difficult emotions and the strain of eking out a living from the country gas station she owns, Rosa Lee consistently notices God's grace. "Every night, when I thank God for all his blessings and his tender mercies to me, you and Sonny are at the top of the list," she tells Mac when he is disheartened.

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In *Rosa Lee and Sonny*, and like *Rosa Lee and Sonny* thanks to his presence in their lives, Mac has received a gift, a tender mercy. The grace that opened him to receive this gift was God's prior gift of a new, true self. Mac—a has-been who lay drunk on the floor in the movie's opening scene—would have found the account of salvation given in the letter to the Ephesians an apt description of his new condition: "It is God's gift, not a reward for work done. There is nothing for anyone to boast of. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to devote ourselves to the good deeds for which God has designed us" (Eph. 2:9-10). With new life, Mac is learning, comes a new way of life: caring for Sonny, weeding Rosa Lee's garden, and casting his lot with a struggling young band in Texas rather than racing back to Nashville when given the chance. Mac's good deeds are humble ones, and his faith is humble, too: the last words he speaks in the film show that he is still far from serenity. In the spirit of his agonized questioning, however, it is evident as he plays catch with Sonny in the film's closing scene that he has been "made new in mind and spirit, [having] put on the new nature of God's creating" (Eph. 4:23-24). Mac has been and is still being restored—from bondage to freedom, from isolation to community, from despair to hope. He has even been restored to music, Saturday night country music, though in a different way than before. Coming to faith he enters a new way of life, one that is truly life-giving.

Romero is another, quite different movie about the Christian way of life. This film biography of the martyred bishop of El Salvador tells the story of how a new way of life characterized by freedom, community, and hope emerged among the poor in Latin America. At the film's beginning, the behavior of the church hierarchy is guided by a centuries-old habit of special favor the rich and mighty of the land. In the barrios and countryside, however, priests, nuns, and other grassroots leaders have begun to share a theology of liberation with the oppressed and marginalized. As Bishop Romero's eyes are opened to injustice, he gradually joins their efforts and comes to understand and participate in Christ's solidarity with the poor and the suffering. One implication, he realizes, is that Catholics of all classes and ethnic groups, belonging as they do to "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph 4:5), should bring their children, together, to a common font of water for the liturgy that incorporates them into the one Body of Christ, the church. The decision is presented as a key point of rupture between Romeo and the social and economic elite, which is represented in the film by a wealthy young woman who is Romero's own goddaughter. She has planned a lavish private baptism for her baby, and she is

appalled that anyone expects her to stand side by side with peasants and allow water that has touched their children to touch hers.

That elites were permitted to rely for centuries on privileged treatment at the baptismal font suggests that the baptismal rite itself does not automatically bestow either new life such as that experienced by Sonny and Mac or solidarity such as that which emerged in El Salvador as faithful people struggled against injustice during that country's long civil wars. Indeed, the best-known cinematic depiction of baptism shows just how thoroughly the rite can be abused. In the *Godfather*, the scene in which the infant godson of Don Michael Corleone is baptized is intercut with scenes of several murders, which the Don has ordered for that same hour. Viewing this abuse of baptism makes Christians recoil, however, aware that this basic act of initiation in the Christian community means to give life, not death—indeed, abundant life, life that is joined to the life and love of Christ.

Life Abundant

In this essay we set forth a way of thinking about how a way of life that is deeply responsive to God's grace takes actual shape among human beings. To be sure, many of us feel that we already know such a way when we see it: Salvadorans struggling for justice, yes; the Mafia, no. This essay proposes, however, that learning to think more systematically and theologically about the shape and character of such a way of life may be helpful as we seek to discern its contours in new situations, to enjoy and give thanks for it, and to share it with others.

In a sense, what we offer here is a specific way of engaging in a dynamic that exists within the Christian life itself. Because the circumstances in which human beings live are always concrete, conflicted, and in flux, those who seek to live faithfully must necessarily wonder where and how to discern the specific shape that a way of life abundant might take in a given time and place. What moves do people make as they encounter one another in the context of God's grace? What words do they say, what gestures do they perform, what relationships do then enter? These questions may be asked consciously, or they may be implicit in the day-to-day decisions of a community, but they are surely somewhere in play, for the contours of a life-giving way of life are usually not readily apparent. Moreover, these questions are theological. Addressing them is one of the most difficult tasks confronting theologians, whose vocation it is to

reflect not only on God but also, in light of God, on human life and all creation.¹

Reflection of this sort takes on special urgency in a time and place where far more attention is given to *life-styles of abundance than to ways of life abundant*. Thus we offer this essay because we hope to contribute to the building up of ways of life that are abundant not in things but in love, justice, and mercy. Today rapid social change and intense spiritual restlessness evoke fierce yearning in many people, in our own neighborhoods and around the world. Some observers see this yearning as a quest for meaning, others as a longing for spiritual consciousness or experience. Important as these quests are, we think that they arise from a deeper longing, a longing for a life that adds up to something that is in a deep sense good for oneself, for other people, and for all creation. As Christians, the two of us affirm that such a way of life—right down to the specific words, gestures, and situations of which it is woven—finds its fullest integrity, coherence, and fittingness insofar as it embodies a grateful human response to God's presence and promises.

Awareness of the possibility of a way of life shaped by a positive response to God pervades the Bible and Christian history—as do examples of the human tendency to fall short of God's invitation to such a life, from the Garden of Eden to the churches of ancient Asia Minor to the inequities that divide contemporary Christians. Without neglecting the sin that is part of Christian history, it is vital that those who seek to walk in such a way today learn to recognize the lived wisdom of Christian people over time and across cultures as a constructive resource. The earliest accounts of Christian origins depict groups of people doing things together in the light of and in response to God. Jesus gathered disciples, with whom he healed and taught, ate and sang, and prayed and died, while immersed in Jewish communal life and walking Roman roads. In later years, as these disciples and those who came after them gathered into communities to celebrate the presence of the risen Christ, their communities too were immersed in the ordinary stuff of specific times and places. The Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul give us glimpses of people breaking bread together in memory of Jesus, sharing their possessions with those in need, singing, healing, and testifying together—men and women, slaves and citizens, Jews and Greeks, makers of tents and dyers of cloth. Over the centuries, ways of living that shared this deepest source and purpose would take shape in the quite different daily experiences of the Egyptian desert, European cities, Salvadoran villages, American small towns, suburbs, and cities

and countless other places. In all these places, specific human beings have sought to live in ways that responded to the mercy and freedom of God as it is made known in Jesus Christ. They have done things that other people also do, simply because these things are part of being human—they have cared for the sick, buried the dead, brought up children, made decisions. But they have done them somehow differently because of their knowledge of God in Christ.

By “Christian practices” we mean things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world.

When we reflect on this heritage as theologians concerned about building up ways of life abundant in our own time, we must ask not only whether it provides resources that seem helpful, but also whether what we find there is true, as far as we can discern, to the purposes of God. In a sense, each community of Christians in every generation is already engaged, implicitly or explicitly, in just such discernment. Inheriting much but also drawn into relationship with God in Christ in the present moment, they care for the sick, bury the dead, bring up children, tell stories, and make decisions, sometimes pausing in midstream to ask whether the forms these activities take in their own time and place are faithful to God's purposes. Theologians take up these questions in a more deliberate and ordered manner. But to describe this entire way of life is a daunting task, particularly when done in a way that is responsive to the purposeful presence of the Triune God who has created and is bringing redemption to everything that is. The task is rightly and necessarily large, potentially attentive to the entire universe. Yet it would fail if it lost sight of the One who understood the value of a single lost coin to a housewife and of one lost sheep to a shepherd.

The effort to offer a theological description of a way of life abundant, then, is complicated by *the problem of the too big and the too small*. The problem of the too big is that the task is all-encompassing; reflecting at this level would be too grand to be of much direct use by itself, conceptually or strategically. The problem of the too small is the opposite. In theological reflection, and also in the actual work of living as Christians and trying to

guide others in doing so as well, it often seems that we do a little of this and a little of that and a little of something else; too often it becomes difficult to keep in view the larger wholes to which these smaller pieces belong. The connections get lost, and when that happens we lose any sense of the overall significance and import of particular activities, ideas, doctrines, biblical texts and narratives, and beliefs.²

Christian Practices

Rather than speak of a Christian way of life as a whole, therefore, we shall speak of the “Christian practices” that together constitute a way of life abundant. By “Christian practices” we mean *things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world*.³ Thinking of a way of life as made up of a constitutive set of practices breaks a way of life down into parts that are small enough to be amenable to analysis, both in relation to contemporary concerns and as historic, culture-spanning forms of Christian faith and life. At the same time, practices are not too small; each Christian practice is large enough to permit us to draw together the shards and pieces of particular understandings, beliefs, events, behaviors, actions, relationships, inquiries, and skills into sets that are capacious and cohesive enough to show how they might guide one into a way of life.

We advocate a concept of practices that allows us to draw together under a single rubric ideas and activities of many kinds, and the fact that this move gives us a concept of manageable size is only one reason for doing so. Even more important is the fact that such a concept enables us to recognize the practice and theological kinship of certain beliefs, virtues, and skills with certain behaviors, relationships, and symbols, because all of them contribute to building up a recognizable, and finally coherent, Christian practice.

In the book *Practicing Our Faith*, which the two of us wrote with eleven colleagues, we identified a list of twelve practices that meet this definition: honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping sabbath, discernment, testimony, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, and singing our lives to God. We did not claim that these twelve practices are the only things Christians do together over time that could be identified as practices. We did, however, intentionally limit the list, wishing to focus concern for a way of life on a number that was small enough to be comprehensive but sufficient in scope to address fundamental

human needs. We also excluded those shared activities whose primary use is in liturgy, arguing that each of the practices we treated has both liturgical expressions and expressions in others settings.⁴

Take, for example, the practice of hospitality to strangers. As we understand this practice, the action that occurs when the staff members of a homeless shelter provide a homeless man with a bed is only one movement within it; it is not in itself a practice. The practice of hospitality, as we understand it, also encompasses, among other things, the biblical stories that have shaped the way in which the hosts perceive their guests; the specific habits, virtues, knowledge, and other capacities of mind and spirit that the hosts bring to the situation, many of which could have been developed only within the context of the practice itself; the liturgical words and gestures that make manifest in crystallized form the hospitality of God to humankind and our obligations to one another; and the domestic hosting that prepares family members to break bread with strangers in less familiar surroundings as well.

Over the centuries and still today, countless Christians have actually engaged in this practice. Often they have done so without a high degree of theological articulation—a lack that does nothing to exclude them from being numbered among practitioners. But the theological scholar who carefully researches the history of the Christian practice of hospitality, assesses the ethical tensions in which it involves practitioners, and analyzes the strengths and limitations of the current state of the practice, has also done something that is an indispensable aspect of this Christian practice: she has provided hosts and guests with an opportunity to reflect critically and constructively on the practice itself and thus to understand more fully what it is they are actually doing.⁵ Within a social and intellectual context in which connections are often severed or obscured—connections between thinking and doing, domesticity and public life, liturgy and social justice—the capacity of this concept of practices to show how such apparently different things do indeed belong together seems to us to be of great value.

The two of us are aware, however, that others use the term “practices” in different ways. Drawing on the social sciences, many contemporary scholars refer to much small bits of action by this term; in this use, a “practice” can be almost any socially meaningful action, such as keeping records for the homeless shelter, or welcoming visitors to a worship service, or sharing a family meal. An older, more specific use of the term applied it to the ascetical and spiritual disciplines and exercises by which people

deliberately seek to become more attuned to the sacred.⁷ A third understanding of practices arises from moral philosophy, especially the work of Alasdair MacIntyre; this use grounds a concept of virtue in what MacIntyre calls “social practices,” complex social activities that pursue certain goods internal to the practices themselves. Our own understanding of practices reflects the influence of MacIntyre, while also differing in crucial ways from MacIntyre.⁸ All three basic approaches, agree, however, on the key claim that beliefs and practices can and should be understood in relation to one another: they all reject the separation of thought and action, seeing in a practice a form of cooperative and meaningful human endeavor in which the two are inextricably entwined.

The distinctive understanding of *Christian practices* set forth in this essay focuses on practices as the constituent elements in a way of life that becomes incarnate when human beings live in the light of and in response to God’s gift of life abundant. Thus, when we refer to Christian practices, we have something normative and theological in mind. Each element in our approach presumes that Christian practices are set in a world created and sustained by a just and merciful God, who is now in the midst of reconciling this world through Christ. Christian practices address needs that are basic to human existence as such, and they do so in ways that reflect God’s purposes for humankind. When they participate in such practices, Christian people are taking part in God’s work of creation and new creation and thereby growing into a deeper knowledge of God and of creation. This is something that is necessarily done with other people, across generations and cultures. And it is something that is always done imperfectly, and sometimes even in such a distorted manner that practices become evil. We hope that the definition that follows will clarify our distinctive way of using this term. Even more, we hope that it will suggest some of the characteristic features of the way of life abundant whose edification is our central concern.

Christian practices address fundamental human needs and conditions.

Christian practices, theologically understood, are directed to humanity’s most basic needs, needs that arise out of the very character of human existence. They address conditions fundamental to being human—such as embodiment, temporality, relationship, the use of language, mortality—and they do so through concrete human acts joined

inextricably to substantive convictions about how things really are.

A fundamental human condition is that we all have bodies; the Christian practices we call “honoring the body” insists in myriad ways that human bodies be honored—nor violated, not ridiculed, not murdered—because they are made in the image of God. A fundamental human condition is that we are all mortal; the Christian practice we call “dying well” takes shape as Christians help one another to know that they are upheld by the One who is the source of life itself and that their lives have mattered, profoundly and appropriately, to themselves and to others, ultimately because they have mattered to God. A fundamental human condition is our vulnerability to the unknown and thus potentially threatening stranger; the Christian practice of hospitality involves practitioners in presuming the stranger to be guest and neighbor, rather than enemy, by acknowledging the stranger’s own vulnerability and enfolding the stranger in care.

A practice is a practice in our meaning of the term only if it is a sustained, cooperative pattern of human activity that is big enough, rich enough, and complex enough to address some fundamental feature of human existence. Christian practices have a normative dimension that is thoroughly theological in character. That is, our descriptions of Christian practices contain within them normative understandings of what God wills for us and for the whole of creation and of what God expects of us in response to God’s call to be faithful. Christian practices are thus congruent with the necessities of human existence as such, as seen from a Christian perspective on the character of human flourishing.

Normatively and theologically understood, therefore, Christian practices are the human activities in and through which people cooperate with God in addressing the needs of one another and creation. As parents honor the body of a teen-aged daughter, she begins to understand her God-given strength and beauty. When mourners surround the bereaved with song and prayer, the bereaved become able to thank God for the life of their beloved. When an overstressed worker takes one day every week to worship, feast and play, he is renewed in relation to God, other people, and the work that he does on the other days of the week. Because these people have done certain things together in the light of and in response to God’s active presence, they have in a sense shared in the practices of God, who has also honored the human body, embraced death, and rested, calling creation good. And the other practices are like this, providing concrete help for human flourishing that is informed by basic Christian beliefs

about who human beings really are and what God is doing in the world.

The wisdom about fundamental human needs that is embedded in historic Christian practices can be a profound resource for contemporary people who seek to sustain a measure of freedom within the prevailing economic culture, where “needs” for specific, often branded, material products seem to multiply as global markets expand. Being able to tell the difference between fundamental human needs and manufactured ones can mean the difference between lives that are grasping and lives that are in a deep sense free. For most North Americans, for example, this would mean the difference between being driven by market-induced desires and being free to share possessions and keep Sabbath. In a situation in which the cultural celebration of what Miroslav Volf has called “product-needs” subjectively overwhelms attention to “the fundamental non product-needs [that] are objectively rooted in the nature of human beings as creatures made in the image of God,” Christian practices embody the freedom that is rightly ours.⁹

Theological reflection plays an essential role in sustaining the capacity of Christian practices to embody such freedom. As Martin Luther learned during his years as a monk, ardent engagement in practices can become a form of self-securing, an effort to win one’s own salvation apart from God. His reading of Paul’s epistles led him to a revised account of the Christian life as a response to God’s grace.¹⁰ Alternately, a self-satisfied grasp of God’s grace can seem to make participation in Christian practices unimportant—a view criticized by virtually every theologian.¹¹ Sin can urge us toward either mistake; indeed, it is difficult to think of a time in which we humans are more likely to deceive ourselves and others than when we are distinguishing between our desires and our needs. Thus helping one another to understand what God-shaped fundamental human needs and conditions actually are and what a God-shaped faithful response to them actually consists of a crucial theological task. Any such reflection will encounter the quandary with which Calvin began the *Institutes*: “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern.”¹² A full understanding of a set of Christian practices includes both a profound knowledge of humankind in its most fundamental and orienting needs and capacities, including its capacity to sin, and a profound knowledge of God’s purposes for all creation. In other words, both theological anthropology and theological assessment

of what God is doing in the world are relevant to a theological account of practices, and to the community’s ability to engage in authentically Christian practices.

Christian practices thus involve a profound awareness, a deep knowing: they are activities imbued with the knowledge of God and creation.

Indeed, we believe that it is precisely by participating in Christian practices that we truly come to know God and the world, including ourselves.

When we participate over a long period of time in addressing fundamental human needs in the light of and in response to God’s active presence in the life of the world, we grow into a double-sided knowledge of God and ourselves. This knowledge is not first and always articulate and ordered; many worthy practitioners would be unable to offer a coherent theology. Rather, this knowledge has first to do with knowing that the world and oneself belong to God, who is present and active in certain ways. To grow in this kind of knowledge is also to grow in trust, generosity, and freedom as a practitioner. Christine Pohl’s account of the Christian practice of hospitality depicts generations of hosts who have come to know God in this way.¹³

Christian practices also open possibilities for knowledge that is theological in other ways. First, insofar as a Christian practice is truly attuned to the human condition in a given time and place and to the intentions of God, participating in it increases one’s knowledge of humanity and all creation. Entering the Christian practice of healing, for example, develops in practitioners certain skills, habits, virtues, and capacities of mind and spirit; one learns the properties of certain foods and remedies, the effects of different kinds of touch, and the locations of organs and bones. The content of each practice challenges, lures, and sometimes drags its practitioners into new ways of being and knowing that are commensurate with that practice—and thus, if it is rightly attuned, commensurate with the well-being of creation. Living within such a practice gives men and women certain capacities that enable them to read the world differently—even, we would argue, more truly.

Second, insofar as a Christian practice is truly attuned to the active presence of God for the life of the world, participating in it increases our knowledge of the Triune God. For example, Christians who keep holy a weekly day of rest and worship acquire

through the Christian practice of Sabbath-keeping an embodied knowledge that the world does not depend on our own capacity for ceaseless work and that its life is not under our control. Observing Sabbath on the Lord's Day, Christian practitioners come to know in their bones that creation is God's gift, that God does not intend that anyone should work without respite, and that God has conquered death in the resurrection of Christ. And this knowledge is not only embodied; the words of liturgies, the songs of people gathered for worship, and the difficult decisions that must be made about the actual characteristics of a "holy" day are an intrinsic part of this practice. Across the centuries, certain Christians who are highly conversant with the history, texts, and liturgical forms of the tradition (and often of the Jewish tradition as well, especially in this case) have led reforms in the shape of Sabbath-keeping, urging stricter or more relaxed observance. They have also written hymns, prayers, and books that they hoped would deepen the capacity of the larger community to know this practice and, through it, to know God more fully. Thanks to their creative work, which may serve the community for centuries without attribution, practitioners who are not in any academic sense "theologians" may draw from the rich language and the embodied experience of Sabbath, a knowledge of realities toward which more formal theologies point, and which they seek to explicate: grace, justice, and salvation.¹⁴

Christian practices are social and historical. They are activities people engage in together over time.

Practices, as understood here, are patterned activities carried on by the whole communities of people, not just in one particular location, but across nations and generations. Since each individual human being is mortal, only corporate, social action can be extended over long periods of time and across a wide variety of social and cultural circumstances. An individual person may engage in a certain practice in solitude for a while, of course, but even then the practice has been learned from, and exists in continuity with, other people who have done it in the past and who do it around the world today. When a practice is vital and authentic, however, it is also necessarily concrete and particular, taking appropriate shape in a distinctive time and place in the form of a cluster of apparently small gestures, words, images, and objects. Therefore specific forms are flexible enough to take on the contours of many societies and cultures. Each practice can, and indeed

must, be crafted in varied ways and forms, some of them not yet imagined. Practices allow for—indeed, they thrive on—such improvisation and negotiation.

So far, these claims that practices are social and historical contain nothing that is especially theological or Christian. A *theological* account of our understanding of Christian practices, however, could be founded on God's decision to work in and through human communities living in particular times and places. The biblical stories of Israel and of the church suggest these trans-generational human communities are intrinsic to God's way of being in and for the world. Subsequently, Christians have also linked the specific congregations in which they gather to other Christian congregations across generations and cultures and to the unifying power of the Holy Spirit by affirming their belief in the "the holy catholic church." Indeed, we would argue that the practices of all Christian congregations are intricately linked to one another as well as to the practices of communities long ago. Historians trace these links, but on occasion those involved in a Christian practice also experience them, sensing the unity of their singing or testimony or forgiveness with the practices of their spiritual forbears. At the same time, Christian practices are always oriented toward the future as well; just as communities in the past and present have appropriated and altered for their own contexts the specific moves and signs that embody hospitality or forgiveness or healing, so also will future practitioners devise improvisations that we cannot yet imagine.

Christian practices share in the mysterious dynamic of fall and redemption, sin and grace.

For Christians, any theological discussion of human beings and our activities must also take account of the problem of sin and evil. Both individual human failings and unjust social structures set countless obstacles in the way of practices that are good for all people. Moreover, in history and in the present day, practitioners who bear the name of Christ have participated in shared activities that are distorted, damaging, and manifestly not embodied responses to the active presence of God for the life of the world. Egregious examples leap to mind, but the quieter damage that can be wrought in the course of everyday life also evokes this problem, as people who bear the name of Christ fail to practice forgiveness, or discernment, or hospitality. Indeed, any given practice—including any practice that is historically Christian—can become so distorted that its pursuit and outcome are evil rather than good. Therefore,

much of the thinking we need to do about practices is critical thinking, thinking that discloses how destructively the basic activities of human life are often organized—globally, in American society, in our churches, and in our homes.

The normative and theological concept of Christian practices that we propose situates Christian practices themselves within the mystery of fall *and* redemption, of sin *and* grace, that informs Christian reflection on the problem of evil. Within the history of any given practice, there have been points at which the social forms of the practice became unjust—for example, by becoming allied with national hostilities or rigid class boundaries. Christian Pohl's fine history of the Christian practice of hospitality to strangers describes the gradual removal of hospitality from homes to institutions and the impact of the church's shift from marginal to established status—changes that combined to destroy the personal and egalitarian qualities of early Christian hospitality. In some times and places, hostility to certain strangers has gone and continues to go virtually unchallenged among Christians. Yet Pohl's account also tell how a theologically normed practices of hospitality has been retrieved by Christians called to be hosts to refugees and the poor in more recent times, including our own. Even so, Pohl argues, the possibility that hosts and guests will abuse or demean one another continues to be an intrinsic danger within this practice. That the danger is sometimes not avoided provides evidence of the continuing power of human sin within Christian practices.¹⁵

Even practices that are in modest disrepair can provide the space within which selves made new by God can respond to God's grace by extending it to others. On the other hand, even apparently sound practices can become abodes of bondage rather than freedom for practitioners who forget that it is God's activity rather than their own that is healing the world. The theological shape of Christian practices, as we understand them, substantively addresses the human tendency to grasp more control than is rightly ours—a grasping that can be harmful even when it seems to be for a good purpose. While the point of most human practices is the achievement of some form of mastery over a specific kind of conflict or chaos. Christian practitioners do not *master* death in the practice of dying well, or enmity in the practice of forgiveness, or sound in the practice of singing our lives to God. Instead, in trying to engage in such practices faithfully and well, they seek to enter more fully into the receptivity and responsiveness, to others, and to God, that characterize Christ and all who share in the new creation.

Engagement in Christian practices, indeed, provides situations in which practitioners can live into the promises made at the baptism. Freed of the impossible task of mastering death, they can live in the shadow of death in a way that does not paralyze but rather grants freedom., freedom to offer hospitality or forgiveness or healing to those who need it, and to sing their lives to God, even when death's shadow looms large and immediate. Even when this kind of freedom is not perfectly realized to know it is to see the world and all who dwell therein as belonging to a gracious God.

Christian Practices—A Way of Life Abundant

A critical theological awareness of the Christian practices that constitute a way of life abundant press practitioners to see things whole at several levels. This is crucial to the criticism, retrieval, and strengthening of practices, for when the concern of practitioners does not reach beyond the self or the cares of a self-absorbed community, Christian practices lose touch with the larger realities within which they are normatively embedded. One of these realities is the historic and global church. Even the most parochial examples of Christian practice exist in relation to and indeed are part of a movement that spans centuries and cultures, and this movement has always provided resources for mutual criticism and renewal, resources that are especially accessible and pertinent in the contemporary context of globalization. In addition, as constituent elements of a way of life abundant, the various Christian practices are deeply integrated with one another: when practicing hospitality, one is drawn in forgiving those once considered alien, and into perceiving one's own forgiveness as well; in keeping Sabbath, one honors the body, reorders economics of the household, and grows in capacity to participate in the practice of saying yes and say no. Other connections emerge as well: we begin to understand the family table, the table provided for the destitute, the table of holy communion, and the eschatological table where all people will feast in the fullness of God are not isolated from one another, but are part of a coherent whole constituted by the encompassing, unifying reality of God's active presence for the life of the world.

A way of life abundant keeps connections such as these strong. Its pieces add up to something that is good because it is responsive to the grace that is at the heart of everything. Thinking about this way of life in terms of the practices that constitute it

discloses some of its characteristics, each of which we have already encountered as the characteristics of Christian practices themselves. This way of life addresses fundamental human conditions and needs. It involves its adherents in God's activities in the world. It arises from and imparts a profound knowledge of God and creation. It is lived together with others, and in continuity across many years. It catches up those who live it in the mysterious, dynamic process by which God is bringing a new creation into being.

This is the way of life abundant that Mac Sledge begins to glimpse in *Tender Mercies* when he decides that he wants to be baptized. It is a way he has not so much found as been found by, mainly through Rosa Lee, who as she offers him her trust and her love also offers him her faith in Christ. His needs have been transfigured: this man who once "needed" alcohol and fame now needs only love and music and a modest living. He knows the limits of his knowledge of God—"Why?" he cries in anguish after his daughter dies in a car crash—but he also knows that the only appropriate responses to his new life are gratitude to God and kindness to the people around him. He is caught up in the new creation that is coming into being right there in the small town in Texas.

This is also the way of life that began to shape the vision of the people of El Salvador as they brought their children to Archbishop Romero for baptism. The shadow of death would not paralyze them, they promised and were promised, even when it burst into their villages in the form of government-sponsored death squads. Resisting the powers of death, they would embrace the Christian practices of discernment, testimony, shaping communities, and dying well. They had long known the suffering of poverty and marginalization, and they were preparing to add the suffering of resistance to these more familiar forms. Their suffering would take on a different character, however, when joined to one another's suffering and the suffering of the great company of those united in and through the passion of the One who suffered, died, was buried, and rose again.

Baptism is the rite that marks entry into such a way of life. It involves the pouring of actual water on a unique human body, as a specific individual is honored and received in his or her embodied integrity. At the same time, it incorporates the baptized person into a social and historical Body that spans centuries and cultures. And it incorporates that person into the very mystery of Christ. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" writes Paul to the Romans (6:34).

"Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." When it is detached from a way of life abundant, as in the Corleone baptism, the pouring of water accomplishes nothing. We cannot be sure what becomes of the little godson, but is clear that the godfather himself has only a lifestyle of abundance, not a way of life abundant, however impressive the riches and might he secures for himself.

This way of life addresses fundamental human conditions and needs. It involves its adherents in God's activities in the world. It arises from and imparts a profound knowledge of God and creation. It is lived together with others, and in continuity across many years. It catches up those who live it in the mysterious, dynamic process by which God is bringing a new creation into being.

At its heart, baptism is not so much a distinct practice as it is the liturgical summation of all the Christian practices. In this right, the grace to which the Christian life is a response is fully and finally presented, visibly, tangibly, and in words. Here all the practices are present in crystalline form—forgiveness and healing, singing and testimony, Sabbath-keeping and community shaping, and all the others. Unlike each particular practice, baptism does not address a specific need; instead, it ritually sketches the contours of a whole new life, within which all human needs can be perceived in a different way. Under water, we cannot secure our own lives, but we can know, in a knowing beyond words, that God's creativity overcame the darkness that covered the face of the deep at earth's beginning, and that water flowed from Jesus' side on the cross, and that the new creation to which we now belong anticipates a city where the river of the water of life nourishes the roots of the tree whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. When a new Christian rises from the baptismal water, human needs are not just met; they are transformed. Even the need not to die no longer overpowers all other needs, and the

true freedom of a life formed in love, justice, mercy, and hope is no longer too frightening to embrace. “In baptism,” said St. Francis, “we have already died the only death that matters.”

Part of the work of Christian theologians in every age is to reflect on the shape and character of the way of life Christians enter when we rise from the watery death of baptism. How should the new selves we have been given walk in newness of life?

Exploring the question involves us both in contemplating the deepest foundations of Christian faith and in figuring out the shape our living should take amidst the immediate concerns of each day.

The letter to the Ephesians may be read as an articulation of this kind of reflection on a way of life, written for the sake of guiding people more fully into it.¹⁶ The letter begins with a vision of the situation of the faithful that is cosmic in scope, they are “blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” and “chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world” (1:3-4). In a sense, the letter’s author is telling his readers who they really, most fully, most truly are. As the letter nears its end, however, the author describes the specific moves and gestures that would result from bearing this identity in the face-to-face social arrangements of a first-century city in Asia Minor, urging men and women of high estate and low to “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21).

The way of life set forth in Ephesians is not without suffering; the letter’s author writes of imprisonment (3:1, 4:1) and of the need of the faithful to withstand “all the flaming arrows of the evil one” (6:16). Nor is it without division; the reconciliation of Gentile and Jew is the letter’s urgent theme. But it is, in the midst of all this, a way of life that is whole, because it is in the keeping of the Triune God who was and is and shall be, and because it is responsive to and reflective of the character of that God:

With this is in mind, then I kneel in prayer to the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name, that out of the treasures of his glory he may grant you strength and power through his Spirit in your inner being, that through faith Christ may dwell in your hearts in love. With deep roots and firm foundations, may you be strong to grasp, with all God’s people, what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ, and to know it, though it is beyond knowledge. So may you attain to the fullness of being, the fullness of God himself (Eph 3:14-19, NEB).

End Notes

- ¹ The New Testament epistles characteristically address this concern. Ellen T. Charry has identified the centrality of this concern to key theologians in Christian history and urged it upon the attention of contemporary theologians in *By Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- ² Craig Dykstra considered “the problem of the too big and the too small” from the perspective of the Christian educator in *Growing in the Life of the Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999), pp. 66-67.
- ³ This is the definition of Christian practices that provides the basis of *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997); it is explained in the book’s first chapter, which we coauthored. In retrospect, we think that the definition of practices quoted here would be strengthened by the addition of the words “in Jesus Christ” at the end, which would clarify the character and content of the active divine presence that is so central to our understanding of practices. The authors of *Practicing Theology* were first convened for the purpose of reflecting on how the concept of practices that informs *Practicing Our Faith* might contribute to and be challenged by the work of systematic theologians. As will be seen later in this essay and in other essays in the present volume, some of them conceptualize “practice” differently than we have done.
- ⁴ *Practicing Our Faith* was written by a team that included Amy Plantinga Pauw and L. Gregory Jones, who are also contributors to the present volume, as well as M. Shawn Copeland, Thomas Hoyt Jr., John Koenig, Sharon Daloz Parks, Stephanie Paulsell, Ann Maria Pineda, Larry Rasmussen, Frank Rogers Jr., and Don E. Saliers.
- ⁵ See Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
- ⁶ See the chapter by Kathryn Tanner; Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).
- ⁷ An example is Margaret Miles, *Practicing Christianity: Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1988). Authors in this school of thought tend to use “practice,” “discipline,” and “exercise” almost interchangeably.

- ⁸ Our own reflection on practices began with, and is still deeply indebted to, Alasdair MacIntyre's concept of "social practices" in *After Virtue* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 187-88. Each of us relied on MacIntyre in our earlier work on practices; see Craig Dykstra, "Reconceiving Practice," in *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics* after MacIntyre, ed. Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenburg, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 1997), and Dorothy C. Bass, "Congregations and the Bearing of Traditions" in *American Congregations*, vol 2, ed James P. Wind and James W. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Our present understanding of practices differs from MacIntyre's account in *After Virtue* in that ours is now theological and thus normed not only internally but also through the responsive relationships of Christian practices to God.
- ⁹ See Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 152-154. Volf identifies five "non-product-needs" that are fundamental to people's humanity and argues that "product-needs" should not be indulged to the detriment of these. The five are the needs for communion with God; solidarity with nature; tending to the welling-being of one another; the development of moral capacities and practical and intellectual skills; and the new creation, the kingdom of freedom. Margaret Mile's treatment of Christian asceticism in *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981) also makes a relevant argument, i.e., that ascetical practices have historically been the means by which Christians have sought freedom from cultural mandates and from whatever within themselves would restrict their communion with God.
- ¹⁰ Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Martin Luther: Selected Works*, ed. John Dillenberge (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961), pp. 52-85.
- ¹¹ Virtually all Christian theologians commend engagement in acts of faith, hope, and love that fall without our notion of practices. Specifying this aspect of the Christian life is an important part of the theological task—one, indeed, to which Luther himself turns in the final sections of "The Freedom of a Christian."
- ¹² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) I.1.1, p. 35.
- ¹³ Pohl, *Making Room*

- ¹⁴ The relation of what is here called "the Christian sabbath" to the Sabbath of Judaism is treated further in Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000). At issue in this essay is how a practice such as keeping sabbath bears theological content, which can become articulate in theological terms. Jewish reflection on the Sabbath provides an excellent example within Jewish theology; e.g., Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1952).
- ¹⁵ Pohl, *Making Room*
- ¹⁶ David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), offers such an interpretation of Ephesians, which Ford calls "a testimony to the quality of transformed life in a worshipping community. Its horizon for human flourishing is unsurpassably vast. . . . Within that, its special focus is on what it means to have a particular social identity in relation to God and other people (pp. 107-8).

Practicing Our Faith Web Site www.practicingourfaith.org

The Valparaiso Project launched PracticingOurFaith.org as a way to extend the invitation offered in the 1997 book *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. Both book and website explore twelve time-honored practices shaped by the Christian community over the centuries, yet richly relevant to contemporary experience.

The web site includes:

- **Descriptions** of each of the twelve Christian practices with ways to practice, worship materials, and books and films.
- **The Library** with essays, study guides, sermons, and other items that explore the concepts on which *Practicing our Faith* is based and treat different aspects of specific practices.
- **A Bookstore** of project-sponsored and -related books.
- **What Others are Doing:** descriptions of projects funded by the project.

Reflection Guide

What is Christian Practice?

Dorothy C. Bass

(This article is reprinted with the permission of the author from the Practicing Our Faith web site: www.practicingourfaith.org.)

Christian practices are shared patterns of activity in and through which life together takes shape over time in response to and in the light of God as known in Jesus Christ. Woven together, they form a way of life.

Each practice is a complex set of acts, words, and images that addresses one area of fundamental human need. Hospitality. Sabbath-keeping. Forgiveness. Making music.

First of all, practices are things we *do*. A child or adult can participate in a practice such as hospitality through warm acts of welcome, even without comprehending the biblical stories and theological convictions that encourage and undergird this practice. Most of our practicing takes place at this unreflective level, as we go about our daily living.

At the same time, practices are not *only* behaviors. They are meaning-full. It is important to note that within a practice, thinking and doing are inextricably knit together. Those who offer hospitality come to know themselves, others, and God in a different way, and they develop virtues and dispositions that are consistent with this practice. When people participate in a practice, they are *embodying* a specific kind of wisdom about what it means to be a human being under God, even if they could not readily articulate this wisdom in words.

While affirming the unreflective character of most participation in practices, I believe that it is also helpful to reflect deliberately on the shape and character of the practices that make up our way of life. Indeed, such reflection may be especially important at this point in history, when the shape of our lives are changing so rapidly. These are practices in which Christian communities have engaged over the years and across many cultures, practices which it is now our responsibility to receive and reshape in lively ways in our own time and place.

When we do reflect on practices such as those explored in *Practicing Our Faith*, we can see that central themes of Christian theology are integrally related to each Christian practice: our practices are shaped by our beliefs, and our beliefs arise from and

take on meaning within our practices. For example, Stephanie Paulsell bases her chapter and book “Honoring the Body” on the theological convictions that God created human bodies and declared that they are good; that God shared our physical condition in the incarnation of Jesus; and that God overcame death through Christ’s resurrection. Through everyday activities—for example, resting, bathing, and caring for those who suffer—we live out our deepest convictions about who we are as embodied children of God in specific, often stumbling, ways. We learn to do so from those with whom we share our lives, and likewise, it is with them that we need to reflect on practices as they take shape in the light of and in response to God’s grace.

A practice is small enough that it can be identified and discussed as one element within an entire way of life. But a practice is also big enough to appear in many different spheres of life. For example, the Christian practice of hospitality has dimensions that emerge as (1) a matter of public policy; (2) something you do at home with friends, family, and guests; (3) a radical path of discipleship; (4) part of the liturgy; (5) a movement of the innermost self toward or away from others; (6) a theme in Christian theology; and probably much else. Thinking about this one practice can help us make connections across spheres of life—connections that often get disrupted in our fragmented society. For example, reflection on the Christian practice of hospitality would provide a way of exploring the relations between spirituality and social justice.

Note that our concept of practices describes a larger chunk of life than most uses of this term imply. For example, we would not call tithing a practice; rather, it would be one discipline within the larger practice of household economics.

Notice that each of the practices (keeping sabbath, honoring the body, hospitality, discernment) necessarily leads to the others; in fact, you can tell when you are doing one well when it necessarily involves you in the others. For example, if you are practicing hospitality so intensely that

you neglect sabbath and don't honor your body, your practice of hospitality is misshapen.

Is worship a practice? Yes. However, it is important to note that worship is an overarching master practice rather than one practice among many. The term "worship" has a double meaning: it is what we do together in church (as we speak, sing, listen, and gesture, *embodying* the wisdom of Christian faith in a specific form), and it is the purpose of the entire Christian life. Bringing these two meanings into right relation requires us to ask questions like these: How does the way we worship together form us to engage in Christian practices in other contexts? And how can our participation in practices beyond our worship services also be offered up as worship to God?

Some would call the sacraments "practices." However, in Valparaiso Project literature we have seen the sacraments as more normative and all-encompassing than any given practice can be. Craig Dykstra and I put it this way in our essay in *Practicing Theology*:

At its heart, baptism is not so much a distinct practice as it is the liturgical summation of all the Christian practices. In this rite, the grace to which the Christian life is a response is fully and finally presented, visibly, tangibly, and in words. Here all the practices are present in crystalline form—forgiveness and healing, singing and testimony, sabbath keeping and community shaping, and all the others. Unlike each particular practice, baptism does not address a specific need; instead, it ritually sketches the contours of a whole new life, within which all human needs and ways of living can be perceived in a different way. Under water, we cannot secure our own lives, but we can know, in a knowing beyond words, that God's creativity overcame the darkness that covered the face of the deep at earth's beginning, and that water flowed from Jesus' side on the cross, and that the new creation to which we now belong anticipates a city where the river of the water of life nourishes the roots of the tree whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. When a new Christian rises from the baptismal water, human needs are not just met; they are transformed. Even the need not to die no longer overpowers all other needs, and the true freedom of a life formed in love, justice, mercy, and hope is no longer too frightening to embrace. "In baptism," said St. Francis, "we have already died the only death that matters." [pp. 30-31; see also Miroslav Volf on this point, p. 248]

Why does all this matter? How does this idea of "practices" help us think about—and live—the Christian life?

- **It points beyond the individualism of the dominant culture** to disclose the social (i.e., *shared*) quality of our lives, and especially the social quality of Christian life, theology, and spirituality. Our thinking and living take place in relation to God and also to one another, to others around the world and across the centuries, and to a great communion of saints. I remember a line that got cut from *Practicing Our Faith*: "This is not a self-help book but a mutual-help book."
- **It helps us to understand our continuity with the Christian tradition—an important matter during this time of change and in the midst of a culture infatuated with what is new.** The way of life we are describing is historically rooted. Practices endure over time (though their specific moves have changed in the past and will surely change again). This perspective can help contemporary people to treasure their continuity with the past. Continuity is not the same as captivity, however. Caring for a *living* tradition includes adaptivity and inventiveness within ever-changing circumstances. Moreover, the history from which Christian practices emerge is expansive, encompassing many cultures and denominational traditions.
- **It makes us think about who we truly are as the created and newly created children of God.** An important claim is that Christian practices address "fundamental human needs." We live in a culture that is very confused about what people need—a culture where "needs" are constructed and marketed. In contrast, awareness of Christian practices helps us to reflect theologically on who people really are and what we really need. (Our vulnerability and our strength are disclosed in the practice of honoring the body, our finitude and gratitude in the practice of keeping sabbath, etc.)
- **All of this means that people need to craft the specific forms each practice can take within their own social and historical circumstances.** This approach thus requires attention to the concrete and down-to-earth quality of the Christian life. It invites attention to details such as gestures and the role of material things. This crafting is

an important responsibility of ministers and educators.

All people engage in most or all of the practices in *Practicing Our Faith* in one way or another. After all, all human beings necessarily rest, encounter strangers, help one another to find healing, and so on. However, those who embrace Christian practices engage in these fundamentally human activities in the light of God's presence and in response to God's grace as it is known in Jesus Christ. Ultimately, Christian practices can be understood not as tasks but as gifts. Within these practices, we do not aim to achieve mastery (e.g., over time, strangers, death, nature) but rather to cultivate openness and responsiveness to others, to the created world, and to God.

Christian Practices: A Summary

A Christian practice is a cluster of activities, ideas, and images, lived by Christian people over time, which addresses a fundamental human need in the light of and in response to God's active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ.

A practice. . .

- addresses fundamental human needs and conditions through practical human acts.
 - involves us in God's activities in the world and reflects, in the way we participate in the practice, God's grace and love.
 - is social in character
 - we learn practices with and from other people
 - though we sometimes do some of the activities that comprise a given practice alone.
 - endures over time
 - each practice arises out of living traditions, having taken numerous forms in the past and in various cultures around the world, and
 - will carry those traditions into the future, in specific forms not yet imagined.
- involves a deep awareness, a profound knowing; a practice
 - is imbued with thought; it is embodied wisdom
 - carries particular convictions about what is good and true;
 - embodies these convictions in physical, down-to-earth ways;
 - becomes articulate in concepts, ideas, and images, expressed through rich vocabularies and carefully developed bodies of thought;
 - incorporates both words and gestures, some of them grand but others apparently small and mundane.
 - is done within the church, in the public realm, in daily work, and at home.
 - shapes the people who participate in it
 - as individuals and as communities,
 - in ways that conform to the particular content and patterns of the specific practice, thus
 - nurturing specific habits, virtues, and capacities of mind and spirit.
 - possesses standards of excellence
 - having that which is good as its purpose and goal
 - relying on certain competencies and embodying certain norms
 - though practices often become distorted and corrupt
 - and so are open to criticism and reform, particularly with reference to the shape of God's practice.
 - comes to a focus in worship
 - which makes manifest in words, gestures, images, and material things the normative meaning of the practice and its place in the mysterious life of God, and
 - discloses the practice as gift, not task.
 - adds up to a way of life when interwoven with other practices
 - through their mutual interdependence, as each practice strengthens the others, and
 - in their reliance on the God of Life.

Reflection Guide

Twelve Christian Practices

Practicing Our Faith

(The twelve Christian practices are summarized from *Practicing Our Faith*, edited by Dorothy C. Bass and reprinted with permission from the Practicing Our Faith web site: www.practicingourfaith.org.)

Honoring the Body

To hold a newborn in one's arms is to know both the sacredness and the vulnerability of the body; indeed, it is to know that there is an intimate connection between sacredness and vulnerability.

(Stephanie Paulsell)

The practice of honoring the body is born of the confidence that our bodies are made in the image of God's own goodness. As the place where the divine presence dwells, our bodies are worthy of care and blessing and ought never to be degraded or exploited. It is through our daily bodily acts that we might live more fully into the sacredness of our bodies and the bodies of others. Stephanie Paulsell writes, "The practice of honoring the body challenges us to remember the sacredness of the body in every moment of our lives... Because our bodies are so vulnerable, we need each other to protect and care for them."

Hospitality

To welcome the stranger is to acknowledge him as a human being made in God's image; it is to treat her as one of equal worth with ourselves - indeed, as one who may teach us something out of the richness of experiences different from our own.

(Ana Maria Pineda)

The need for shelter is a fundamental human need. None of us ever knows for sure when we might be uprooted and cast on the mercy of others. But how do we overcome our fear in order to welcome and shelter a stranger? The Christian practice of hospitality is the practice of providing a space to take in a stranger. It also encompasses the skills of welcoming friends and family to our tables, to claim the joy of homecoming.

Household Economics

To choose simplicity is to live into complicated questions without easy answers, taking one step that may make another step possible.

(Sharon Daloz Parks)

Good economic practice—positive ways of exchanging goods and services—is about the well-being, the livelihood, of the whole household. In the face of great economic and environmental challenges, the Christian practice of household economics calls on us to manage our private homes for the well-being and livelihood of the small planet home we all share.

Saying Yes and Saying No

Christian asceticism is not spiritual boot camp, but neither is it effortless. Learning when and how, to what, and to whom to give our yes or our no is a life long project. (M. Shawn Copeland)

Tough decisions and persistent effort are required of those who seek lives that are whole and holy. If we are to grow in faithful living, we need to renounce the things that choke off the fullness of life that God intended for us, and we must follow through on our commitments to pray, to be conscientious, and to be in mutually supportive relations with other faithful persons. These acts take self-discipline. We must learn the practice of saying no to that which crowds God out and yes to a way of life that makes space for God.

Keeping Sabbath

Sabbath keeping is not about taking a day off but about being recalled to our knowledge of and gratitude for God's activity in creating the world, giving liberty to captives, and overcoming the powers of death. (Dorothy C. Bass)

"I'm so busy... I just don't have enough time to complete all my work." Do you need a break, but doubt you have time for it? What about those who don't have sufficient work to sustain themselves? The practice of keeping Sabbath helps us to resist the tyranny of too much or too little work.

Testimony

Testimony occurs in particular settings — a courtroom or a church — where a community expects to hear the truth spoken. (Thomas Hoyt, Jr.)

In testimony, people speak truthfully about what they have experienced and seen, offering it to the community for the edification of all. The practice of testimony requires that there be witnesses to testify and others to receive and evaluate their testimony. It is a deeply shared practice—one that is possible only in a community that recognizes that falsehood is strong, but that yearns nonetheless to know what is true and good.

Discernment

Our decisions and our search for guidance take place in the active presence of a God who intimately cares about our life situations and who invites us to participate in the divine activities of healing and transformation. (Frank Rogers, Jr.)

Christians believe we are not alone in the midst of uncertain insights and conflicting impulses. Discernment is the intentional practice by which a community or an individual seeks, recognizes, and intentionally takes part in the activity of God in concrete situations.

Shaping Communities

Coordinating a community's practices through good governance helps to make its way of life, clear, visible and viable. (Larry L. Rasmussen)

The shaping of communities is the practice by which we agree to be reliable personally and organizationally. This practice takes on life through roles and rituals, laws and agreements—indeed, through the whole assortment of shared commitments and institutional arrangements that order common life. In one sense, then, shaping communities is not just a single practice of its own. It is the practice that provides the choreography for all the other practices of a community or society.

Forgiveness

Practicing forgiveness can produce dramatic transformations in our imaginations and the psychological, social and political horizons of our lives. (L. Gregory Jones)

The practice of forgiveness is not simply a one-time action or an isolated feeling or thought. Forgiveness involves us in a whole way of life that is shaped by an ever-deepening friendship with God and with other people. The central goal of this practice is to reconcile, to restore communion - with God, with one another, and with the whole creation. L. Gregory Jones writes, "Forgiveness works through our

ongoing willingness to give up certain claims against one another, to give the truth when we access our relationships with one another, and to give gifts of ourselves by making innovative gestures that offer a future not bound by the past."

Healing

Healing is an indispensable part of the coming wholeness that God intends for all creation.
(John Koenig)

The practice of healing is a central part of the reconciling activity of God in the world. Healing events are daily signs of the divine mercy that is surging through the world and guiding it toward its final perfection. This is true whether they take place by the sharing of chicken soup, the performance of delicate surgery, or the laying on of hands in a service of worship.

Dying Well

Those who face death experience the living presence of God through the living presence of the community that cherishes and mourns them.
(Amy Plantinga Pauw)

Death is a frightening prospect, for the specter of death destroys any illusion that we are in full control of our lives. How is it, then, that some people are able to die with the assurance that death is not the final word? In the Christian practice of dying well, Christian people do things with and for one another in response to God's strong love, translating into concrete acts our belief in the resurrection of Christ, and of ourselves. Dying well embraces both lament and hope, and both a sense of divine judgment and an awareness of divine mercy.

Singing our Lives

If music is the language of the soul made audible, then human voices, raised in concert in human gatherings, are primary instruments of the soul.
(Don Saliers)

What we sing and how we sing reveals much of who we are, and entering into another's song and music making provides a gateway into their world, which might be much different from our own. Something is shared in singing that goes beyond the words alone. This something has taken shape over many centuries in a practice that expresses our deepest yearning and dearest joy: the practice of singing our lives to God.

