

**“Liturgy on the Street”**  
**Signature Theological Pedagogical Practice**  
**CrossRoad Summer Institute, Hellenic College Holy Cross**  
**Lilly Youth Theology Network**  
**Conference Plenary Session, February 12, 2015**  
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A. Theological Foundations

*1. Theological Foundations for Youth Theology Program*

CrossRoad is founded on the theological principle that human beings are by nature ‘called.’ Seen in its broadest definition, Christian vocation is a response to the divine call to love. The primal iteration of this call, however, is in the very act of Creation itself. Gregory of Nyssa writes in his *Great Catechetical Oration* that God created humanity, not out of necessity, but from his “superabundance of love” (Cat. Or. V). It was *out of* love and *for* love that God called human beings from non-being into existence. It was *out of* love and *for* love that he sustains and remains active in Creation; and it was *out of* love and *for* love that the Incarnate Word who, in pre-Incarnate form, was responsible for the creation of the world, was sent by the Father to *re*-create it and to *re*-call it from the non-existence of sin and death, into the super-existence of eternal life, i.e. communion with God.

If human beings were *created* with the vocation to know and love God, then who is this God who so fervently desires that we intimately participate in his love? Ultimately, it is a mysterious and transcendent God, a God who is beyond being as we conceive of it. Yet this is a God who appears out of the vastness of his unknowability as a trinity of persons. This God is not only *inter*-personal, within a community of three, but *extra*-personal, inviting non-being to exist in his image, in order to know and to love, to be known and to be loved. These created beings, who are able to know and be known by God, are also given the ability to reflect God’s capacity to love unconditionally with one another.

*2. Explanation of how theological foundations undergird the youth theology program*

The aforementioned theological presuppositions provide a three-part foundational structure which binds the many programmatic elements of CrossRoad together. Starting from an exploration of identity during the first few days, participants are asked to wrestle with who they are based on the many influential ‘voices’ in their lives—parents, society, church, peers, and self. They are then asked to reflect on who they are in light of *whose* they are from a Christian perspective. This leads them to take a serious look, with the guidance of seminary professors invited as guest lecturers, at their theological heritage from the vantage point of scripture within the context of an historical tradition. Who is this God that apparently called

them into existence and desires to know them intimately? Is he *worth* getting know, based on what is known about him? Once they are exposed to the rich Christian theological tradition and invited to root their own sense of identity in this sense of *God's* identity, they are encouraged to look outward and discover God (literally, through a unique service project known as a breakfast search) in the least likely of places—in their neighbor, and most especially in their marginalized neighbor or even their apparent ‘enemy.’ These inextricably united theological foci of self, God, and neighbor provide the essential framework within which the ten days of activities and presentations converge.

## **B. Signature Pedagogical Practice/Strategy/Tactic**

1. *Title:* CrossRoad Liturgy on the Street

2. *Theological purpose of the practice*

Symeon the New Theologian concludes, in a commentary on Matthew 25, that

Christ takes on the appearance of each of the poor and assimilated Himself to all of them so that no one who believes in Him will be arrogant towards his fellow being. On the contrary, he will look on his fellow being and his neighbor as his God, regarding himself as least of all in comparison just as much with his neighbor as with his Creator...<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of the Liturgy on the Street is to walk the streets of an urban neighborhood attuned to and reverencing the ‘God’ in every person, especially (but not exclusively) the person who appears homeless. The staff prepare the participants by encouraging them to see this experience as an extension of the liturgical life of the church—that they are reverencing the very human alters upon which Christ makes himself manifest and shareable as the “least of the brethren” (Matt 25). They are walking into the holy of holies where they have the opportunity to meet and commune with Christ face-to-face (if we truly take Matthew 25 and Symeon’s commentary seriously). With this heightened awareness to the sacredness of all of life, they are commissioned to meet a complete stranger—typically one who at least appears to be a person without a home. All they are asked to do is share a conversation and possibly even breakfast with this person.

3. *State succinctly the context within which you used this.*

The Liturgy on the Street occurs during the third and final stage of CrossRoad (Who is my neighbor?), with reflection sessions before and after the event itself. The students have completed two stages (Who am I? and Who is God?), and are now exploring the importance of loving and serving one’s neighbor.

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<sup>1</sup> Philokalia, vol. 2, “Practical and Theological Texts,” p. 49.

4. Describe the practice/strategy/tactic itself in brief, clear language.

The participants are broken up into groups of 3-4 each and assigned a staff member who will accompany them on their journey. The staff member is well trained (both theologically and practically) and instructed to play a ‘backseat’ role and only step in if completely necessary. Otherwise, the small groups scatter throughout urban areas surrounding Boston for the better part of a morning.

A high level of sensitivity is used when approaching individuals on the street given the fact that they may think they are being proselytized or exploited. These are common pitfalls that staff and participants strive in every way to avoid, and the groups make it explicitly clear that they are only interested in a conversation and potentially a shared meal.

The primary goal is to foster an attitude of attentiveness and openness to one’s surroundings and how these surroundings could be (mis)interpreted through the lens of certain underlying stereotypes or stigmas. Once the participants are aware of the fact that they do often stigmatize and label people around them (whether positively or negatively), they are challenged to examine *why* they give certain people the stigma of being “dirty,” “lazy,” or “a bum.” Drawing from a provocative essay entitled “Confronting Poverty and Stigmatization: an Orthodox Perspective,” by philosopher and Orthodox priest Rev. Dr. John D. Jones, participants reflect on how stigmas of people in poverty or homelessness are often created based on an unwritten core belief that the objectified person has been abandoned by God, and the subsequent fear of receiving the same divine retribution.<sup>2</sup>

Significant pre- and post-activity reflection time is built into the structure of the activity. Program staff lead an intensive 1.5 hour preparatory session the night before the Liturgy on the Street, in order to introduce participants to the guiding principles, questions, and logistics of the activity. This session includes an in-depth summary of Jones’ article, extensive journaling and discussion, and a well-researched multi-media presentation. Following the activity the next morning, students gather for small-group debrief sessions and time to share their experiences, followed by a staff-led wrap-up session (total of 2 hours). Students are actively discouraged to leave the breakfast search feeling ‘warm and fuzzy’ inside. They are challenged to see the personal suffering and systemic brokenness around them, but also to test their own God-given capacity to reflect and receive the radical love of Christ in the world around them. Without these staff-facilitated sessions, where participants collectively wrestle with how to interpret their time

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<sup>2</sup> Jones, John D. “Poverty and Stigmatization: An Orthodox Perspective.” [Source: <http://www.incommunion.org/2006/05/07/poverty-and-stigmatization/>]

on the streets of Boston, they could easily see themselves as “helping” or even “fixing” those whom they meet.<sup>3</sup>

*5. State why and how it was effective (i.e. how it supported student learning).*

After the activity and extensive reflection, students are asked to assess through another activity which we call “CrossRoad Learners” the answers to the following questions (a) in writing and then (b) to one another:

1. What important lesson(s) did your neighbor(s) teach you?
2. In light of these lessons, how can you better love your neighbor (family, friends, marginalized, enemies, etc.) at home?
3. Name a few practical steps that you will take towards this goal.

Through their answers it is clear that the immediate impact of the activity on them is that they are challenged to approach everyone with an attitude of awe and humility (the same way they would act within the context of the Liturgy and as they approached the Eucharist) seeking to *be* served and fed, rather than the other way around. Paradoxically, however, it is when they approach people with this attitude that they begin to see how they might actually start to make a real difference in the world.

Intermediate impact we are able to assess through responses to a Family Questionnaire that they are sent three months after the program. The vast majority of participants gives this activity the highest rating of “excellent,” and makes additional notes about how much it is what they point to as the “transformative” activity of CrossRoad. The informal feedback we receive from the wider community also regularly mentions this activity by name. In an email to the CR director, one participant’s father recounted an incident in which he and his son saw a homeless man asking for change as they were driving. The son pleaded with his father not only to give him change, but to get out of the car and give it to him face-to-face. In the father’s own words, “we looked about us to see if we had any food and I could tell that Nicolas was very keen to help/do something. While he has cared before, he was not enthusiastic about the actual contact phase of helping someone. This time was different... Upon his return to the car he spoke of the brief encounter with this homeless man as well a number of lessons he learned (in theory and practice) while at CrossRoad.”

We are eager to formally evaluate the activity’s long-term measurable impact on participants’ vocational choices and goals. Yet we have been stalled on this for methodological reasons: the difficulty of extracting the impact of this one activity from the overall program and their subsequent involvement in other ministry,

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<sup>3</sup> We use the following resource during the reflection session to help the students differentiate between helping, fixing, and serving: Remen, Rachel. “Helping, Fixing, Serving” [Source: <http://www.uc.edu/content/dam/uc/honors/docs/communityengagement/HelpingFixingServing.pdf> ]

missions, and outreach programs. We would be keen to learn if other programs have discerned methodologies to evaluate specific activities within programs, or alternate models/ideas.

*6. Categorize the signature practice according to Dr. Kenda Dean's book.*

The CrossRoad Liturgy on the Street could be categorized under three categories: 1) Catalyzing Community; 2) Service and Justice; and 3) Mentoring and Spiritual Accompaniment.