

CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL ETHICS in the WORLD CHURCH

How do you capture an experience and an event in which 600 theologians from over 70 countries meet for 4 days, to discuss multiple issues, publicly using 4 major languages?

Thanks to the dream and energy of Fr. Jim Keenan, SJ, from Boston College and a worldwide team of organizers, 4 years of work brought people from all over the world to Trent, a beautiful Italian Alpine city, the same place where a Council was held (1545-63). It was the birth place of Moral Theology as a separate branch of theology.

Priests over 45 know of the science of Moral Theology which was created to help clerics hear confession and judge sins. Now *Catholic Theological Ethics* has replaced it, because it treats so many more issues: immigrations, gender, sexual abuses, torture, war and peace, bioethics, health care, death and dying, the common good, economic solidarity in a materialistic world, etc. etc. etc.

What follows is an attempt to capture what went on at Trent from July 24-27th. Another person might offer a completely different perspective. A basic question has to be how many languages the reporter is comfortable in. Yet the Trent experience was no Tower of Babel, but very Pentecostal. No matter what

language was being spoken public or private, each one heard something in his or hers own native tongue.

The Congress alternated between large plenary sessions and diversified seminars going on simultaneously. While a French speaking group might be discussing AIDs in Africa, next door an English speaking group could be treating Health Care in the USA or Britain.

The only rule, besides treating others with respect, was the 15 Minute rule for talking, not an easy feat for gifted intellectuals.

In one seminar Bishop Dowling of South Africa was asked why more bishops do not speak out like he has on difficult moral issues. Fear was his answer, but then he challenged the theologians present to put their lives and careers on the line by speaking out also, advancing the limits of orthodoxy. The time has come for church leaders, lay or clerical, to be more prophetic than good administrators.

Sr. Nuala Kenny from Canada reminded participants that the Church teaches certain human needs cannot be subject to the market (e.g. Confer Pope John Paul II and Health Care). Other groups discussed end of life issues, of death and dying. Are we, people of the Resurrection, putting too much emphasis on maintaining people alive? What about utilizing valuable and scarce resources without regard for the needs of others?

Kenneth Himes spoke that torture can be worse than dying because it robs a person of his dignity, violates his integrity. Victims frequently ask to die. It may not be justified as a means of obtaining information, even if some insist knowing that this immoral means is not always a reliable source for gaining information.

The ban against it is more absolute than killing, even though some torturers convince themselves that they are doing a noble work to allow others to live in peace, comfort and security.

Julie Clague from Scotland brought laughter into a full plenary session with her humorous description of the 50th anniversary of Moral Theology and Gender hocking up with one other, how each has enriched the other. One line from Gender to Moral Theology: how naïve you were about sex 50 years ago.

The theme of the Common Good ran through various presentations. There was a session in Italian where you could thrash out thoughts on a Just War or Pacific solutions; next door was Religious Liberty, past and present, in Spanish; or Absolute Moral Norms, in English; or the Social Doctrine of the Church, in Spanish.

David Hollenbach spoke on Refugees and Immigration. Migration has been part of human history. Now it is an ethical issue. Good Discipleship, however, can make for good citizenship.

While people like Lisa Fullam were treating Marriage issues, in English, Gender and Sexual Orientation was debated in Spanish; the Common Good and Economics in English, or Human Dignity and Rights: the Resolving of Conflicting Identities in Africa, in French

Brian Johnson, now teaching at Catholic University, treated War and Peace. Can there ever again be a Just War?

The Principles of Autonomy in Bioethics was treated by Mark Miller from Canada.

Joseph Selling from Belgium talked about plotting a course between Casuistry and Virtue Ethics.

Thomas Shannon enlightened his listeners on Assisted Nutrition, Hydration and the Magisterium.

Lisa Cahill talked about the relationship between Theology and Ethics.

John Pawlikowski from Chicago's C.T.U. offered a reflection on the Implications of the Holocaust for Christian Ethics.

Bryan Massingale from Marquette spoke in name of the Missing Voices of Blacks in History.

The list went on and on. It was like being in a great restaurant. You could only pick one dish at a time. Which seminar do I was to choose?

One minor point of tension arose after Bishop Reinhard Marx from Munich had spoken on the Future of Catholic Theological Ethics. His presentation was considered too angelic and unreal for a prominent theologian from Belgium. Unfortunately no time had been reserved after his talk for questions. A brief anti-episcopal reaction went on until others intervened in defense of the bishop.

The organizing committee accepted responsibility for not having scheduled time for cross examining. The role and relationship between the Magisterium, the hierarchy and theologians is headed for even rougher days of dialogue. There is a healthy need, however, for theologians to maintain a tension with the Magisterium and the world.

The coffee breaks and meal time were happy and busy moments of conversation. I only wished that I could have discussed certain topics with people from Poland, Germany, Spain, Italy or God only knows other places of origin and tongues.

Charles Curran was invited to offer a brief reflection at the closing banquet. His analysis of what is going on in the American Church was probably right on the mark, but came across as sad and almost pessimistic. In stark contrast with the joyfulness of the Africans, South Americans and Asians, who breathed a more hopeful and joyful spirit, of a Church which looks to the future with hope and expectation.

Catholic Theological Ethics has moved more and more to dialoguing with people of other faiths and those of no faith. With the Sciences, with Culture, with History. Treating future questions will include liberty of conscience, solidarity, charity and love, option for the poor, the ecology and respecting nature, social Justice. Less prohibition, more promotions of positions.

There will always be papal and ecclesiastical teaching, but more and more writings on social service, economical issue and spirituality will cross in common interests. Treatment of economic questions will include *Economics as Though People care.* A memorable quote that was attributed to Fr. Jim Keenan, “We do not choose to practice solidarity. We have an obligation to do so”.

The Congress closed manifesting a strong desire that a 3rd International Congress be held. 9 people were left with the task of keeping the ball rolling,

while the rest were encouraged to seek out the national groups of theologians existent in their country or region of the world. Not only the local bishop and the people of Trent, the speakers and the organizers, but all felt that something special had happened, that the Holy Spirit had been among us, that Catholic Theological Ethics is alive and well in the Church and that theologians were ready to march forth and announce the Gospel truths in many different manners.

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