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A truly international gathering of Catholic ethicists

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

I'm reluctant to use the term

"unprecedented" to characterize events I cover, mostly because, upon inspection, such claims almost always turn out to be hype. Yet it's really the only way to describe an international gathering of more than 400 Catholic ethicists that took place in Padua, Italy, July 8-11, which lived up to its billing as the "first international cross-cultural conference for Catholic theological ethicists."

I've attended any number of theological congresses over the years styled as "international," which usually means a slew of Europeans and North Americans, and a smattering of people from other parts of the globe. What happened in Padua, on the other hand, really was something of a microcosm of the global church, with dozens of leading thinkers from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania mixing with their opposite numbers from the north.

The conference, titled "Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church," was the brainchild of Jesuit Fr. James Keenan from Boston College. Keenan spearheaded efforts to raise \$450,000, in order to cover the airfare and lodging of some 140 theologians from Eastern Europe and the global south. A total of 420 people took part, from 63 countries. (The conference web site is here: <http://www.bc.edu/ctewc/>)

The result was the most culturally diverse gathering of Catholic theologians in recent memory, and maybe ever.

Held at the Collegio Antonianum in Padua, the conference was a sprawling event, with scores of sessions on specific ethical concerns, along with major panels on the challenges facing each of the continents. Over four days, a bewildering welter of discussions ensued. Most participants said that the chance to hear the experiences of theologians from around the world was among the most valuable aspects of the experience.

"So much of our conversation as theologians is about what comes from Rome, because that's what we have in common," said Lisa Sowle Cahill, a distinguished American feminist theologian at Boston College.

"The wonderful thing here is that we're sharing experiences from around the world, so it becomes local churches talking to local churches," Cahill said.

A sampling of voices from the global south:

- Redemptorist Fr. Vimal Tirimanna of Sri Lanka discussed the joint efforts of Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Muslims to oppose stringent anti-conversion laws recently floated in his country under the pressure of what he called "religious extremists." Sri Lanka is a majority Buddhist nation that has fought a long-running Hindu rebellion in the south, leading to an upsurge in Buddhist nationalism; the government even has a "Minister of Buddhist Affairs." Rumors of proselytism by Christians in recent years have led to attacks on Christian churches by angry Buddhist mobs. Tirimanna said promoting dialogue across confessional lines is an urgent task in this culture.
- Fr. Emmanuel Katongole of Uganda warned against "over-confidence" surrounding anti-retroviral drugs as a solution to the HIV/AIDS crisis. Katongole argued that the AIDS epidemic reveals that "something is sick and sickening in Africa's modern ways of living, playing and working," and that fascination with "miraculous medicines" could obscure what he called this "ugly truth," making it seem as if deep structural and cultural problems can be solved with a simple drug cocktail. For example, Katongole said, many Africans have no access to safe water with which to take the medicine, no watches to keep them on a schedule, no place to store the drugs, and no food so that they won't vomit up medicines on an empty stomach. Until such problems are addressed, he suggested, the provision of anti-retrovirals will not affect the underlying crisis.
- Salesian Fr. Ronaldo Zacharias of Brazil explained that given the explosive social conditions in the mega-cities of his country, the rich are increasingly fleeing into the countryside, constructing their own "paradises." The resulting decline in civil society in major urban areas

has opened the door to organized crime, which Zacharias said sometimes exercises greater real power in the cities than the elected authorities. He described the country's political class as largely a refuge of "robbers and thieves."

- Elisee Rutagambwa, a Rwandan theologian writing his dissertation at Boston College, addressed the 1994 Rwandan genocide, which left one million people dead in just 100 days - the most rapid genocide in human history, a rate of killing three and one-half times faster than the Nazi extermination of the Jews during the Second World War. Rutagambwa said the Rwandan genocide was especially tragic because it was preventable. There were U.N. resolutions in force, as well as a UN peace-keeping team on the ground. The fact that people could have been saved, he said, is illustrated by the fact that an internationally-organized evacuation effort succeeded in extricating Westerners, "including their cats and dogs," while leaving Rwandans to fend for themselves. Rutagambwa also described the failure of post-genocide efforts at reconciliation, including the cruel irony that perpetrators of the crimes who are currently detained by the International Criminal Court for Rwanda have decent housing, eat three times a day, and receive Western-style health care, including anti-retroviral medications for those who are HIV-positive, while the victims have largely returned to the poverty and benign neglect that they suffered prior to the outbreak of violence.

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Faced with such a spread of perspectives, it's always hazardous to try to boil things down to a few generalizations or broad conclusions.

One observation that seems safe, however, is that in the eternal Catholic tension between a theological focus *ad intra*, meaning on the church's internal life, and *ad extra*, meaning engagement with the broader world, the needle at Padua clearly swung in the *ad extra* direction. Most speakers seemed concerned with bringing the tradition of Catholic moral reflection to bear on issues such as globalization and economic justice, HIV/AIDS, armed conflict and genocide, violence and discrimination against women, and assaults on human life in various forms.

While

Padua had its fair share of grumbling about the bishops and about Rome, theologians from Europe and North America seemed more likely to make this into an explicit focus of theological debate. Generally speaking, theologians from the south were less likely to go down that path, whatever

their opinions on the issues may have been.

One moment captured the difference.

Tuesday afternoon, the conference had a panel on North America, which featured strong presentations from Jesuit Fr. David Hollenbach of Boston College and Jean Porter of Notre Dame. Both urged American Catholics to engage justice questions, and both argued the church is hampered from doing so by internal problems. Hollenbach criticized what he sees as a tendency to "absolutize" sexuality and reproduction over questions such as war and the death penalty, and chastised appeals from what he called a "small number" of bishops and theologians to "allegedly timeless prohibitions." Porter said that the church can't preach democracy and the rule of law to the secular world when "structures and practices of the Roman Catholic Church" are inconsistent with these ideals, including what she called an "authoritarian, top-down church government, culminating in the papacy itself."

The comments galvanized responses from other European and American theologians in the audience, who wanted to talk about a "climate of fear" in the church and what might be done about it.

When a female participant from Kenya took the floor, however, her question picked up on comments from Canadian theologian Kenneth Melchin, the third member of the panel, about usury. She wanted to know how that might relate to the African problem of "payday loans," meaning small loans given to people against their next paycheck, often at exorbitant rates of interest. She said it's a "micro" version of the unjust lending practices that created the international debt crisis.

The point is not that the Kenyan speaker agreed or disagreed with the case for church reform, but that her mind was somewhere else.

To be clear, this southern focus on *ad extra* concerns, at least as far as most in Padua were concerned, was not about an option for "orthopraxis" over "orthodoxy," as if doctrine is no longer important, or that doctrinal claims have to be judged by their capacity to bring about social change, as some strains of Latin American liberation theology used to insist. In fact, some Africans and Eastern Europeans in Padua expressed doctrinal views that, by the standards of northern theological debate, could seem quite "conservative," especially on sexual ethics.

The dynamic did not seem to be about setting up some tension between doctrinal fidelity and social engagement. Rather, it was a question of what one emphasizes, where the accent falls. For many in the south, the burning pastoral realities of poverty, violence, and social exclusion seemed to command the lion's share of their imagination.

Since two-thirds of the 1.1 billion Roman Catholics in the world today live in the global south, the gathering in Padua may provide an intriguing

hint about what the coming "southern moment" in Catholicism will look like
- more focused on changing the world, and correspondingly less on changing
the church.

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