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Historic Gathering of Theological Ethicists

James F. Keenan[♦]

We are just returning from an “historic” meeting of 600 Catholic theological ethicists from 73 countries, having gathered for an international conference sponsored by “Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church” (CTEWC) in Trento, Italy from July 24-27. The conference was packed with conversations and discussions. Thirty plenary speakers (simultaneously translated into English, French, Italian and Spanish) presented on such topics as tradition, moral reasoning, war, economics, health, sustainability, citizenship, gender, family, and sexuality. There were another 240 presentations at concurrent sessions on other issues, from divine love to HIV/AIDS.

The meeting was a follow-up to an initiative taken four years ago at Padova Italy where 375 ethicists from 75 countries gathered for the first time in history. The idea for that meeting arose because moral theologians, or as we are called today theological ethicists, by the necessity of our work discourse with many experts from all different fields: from human rights lawyers and physicians to geneticists, philosophers, theologians and economists. We are the pragmatic side of theology. We have so many different interlocutors, that we felt a need to well, talk among ourselves, and this especially because unlike previous generations, we are not trained solely in one place, Rome, but now throughout the world. Whether studying and teaching in Boston or Bangalore, Nairobi or Belo Horizonte the Padova initiative made us ever more mindful that while understanding, studying and heeding the needs of local contexts, we still need to communicate beyond our local, linguistic and generally national frontiers.

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At Padova we fortified existing networks and prompted the establishment of others. Africans, East Asians and Indians laid ground work at Padova for subsequent developments. Europeans and North Americans took subsequent steps to invite more scholars from the developing world into their university centers. One pledge that CTEWC made at Padova was that if we were to meet again, we would make sure that more African women would be present. Because of that pledge, seven women were awarded scholarships for advanced studies in theological ethics to study in Kampala, Nairobi, Yaounde, and Kinshasa. They were among the participants at Trento.

At Padova many recommended that our next meeting should have greater defined context. We decided on Trento, the city that both hosted through three decades the Council of Trent (December 13, 1545 to December 4, 1563) and gave the church seminary formation and the independent fields of theology, among them moral theology. Today, the city is compact, beautiful, at the foothills of the Dolomites, an hour north of Verona, nestled along the Adige River where the wonderful Italian white wines are grown. It turned out to be the perfect place for the conference.

All the major ethicists from around the world came-- Farley, Hollenbach, Cahill, Curran, McDonagh, Merks, Vidal, Valadier, Chiavacci, Bastianel, Demmer, Arokiasamy, Bujo, Magesa. More than 200 scholars from the developing world were invited and supported with airfare and housing. And, then there were the "new scholars," people from doctoral studies and the first 6 years of teaching. A total of 147 new scholars came and presented at plenary, concurrent and poster sessions. There in Trento, the old and the young, men and women, archbishops, bishops and priests, religious and laity gathered to share our work and reflection on theological ethics.

We worshipped daily, but on Sunday we worshipped with the people of Trento. There the Archbishop of Trento, Luigi Bressan presided at the liturgy in the Cathedral and I had the occasion to tell the Trentini a little bit about us. Italy has more than 100 trained theological ethicists, but few are lay persons and fewer still are women. I invited the people of Trento to see that in our group, the face of moral theology was changing. Though nearly half of us were priests, there were at least 200 ethicists who were religious and lay women. Forty years ago, there were no women theological ethicists. Then I added, "Do you notice all the children here? The men and women holding them are themselves among the new generation of moral theologians." The Trentini broke out in applause.

Among the many networks we established at Trento, we also encountered a lasting insight: in a field as driven by controversy as Catholic theological ethics is, we have within our ranks very different voices. We are better and closer to the truth when we seek to include those voices from the right and the left, from ahead and behind, from hither and yon. And therein, in the

common faith and tradition that we hold, we discovered how Catholic we really are.

Trent 2010: Back to the Future

Clement Campos, C.Ss.R.♦

There is an apocryphal story told about Cardinal Ottaviani, the archconservative head of the Holy Office. True to his motto, *semper idem* – always the same, he did his best to prevent the progressive turn of the Second Vatican Council. As the story goes, one morning he was getting late for a session of the Council. He jumped into the nearest Roman taxi and yelled, “Take me to the Council!” The cabbie drove him straight to Trent!

What was it that drove 600 Catholic Theological Ethicists from more than 70 countries to Trent in July 2010? It was certainly not nostalgia or a hankering for the past – although it must be acknowledged, the Council of Trent marked a significant stage in the development of the discipline of Moral Theology. Trent certainly did make this group aware of their heritage and the solemn Mass celebrated in the Cathedral and presided over by the Bishop of Trent brought home to them the historical significance of the location and the canons and decrees that were proclaimed in that place.

But it was not just about the past. As the theme of the meeting proclaimed, we were “in the currents of history: from Trent to the future.” We were indeed looking to the future and, in a sense, the profile of the gathering was already indicative of things to come. Present among a veritable Who’s Who of Catholic Moral Theology were about a hundred and fifty young scholars. A good number of the participants were not from Catholic Seminaries or Theological Universities. Many were from secular universities and institutes. It was evident that their approach to theological ethics was in many ways radically different from the traditional methods.

Even more significant was the presence of a sizable number of lay people, men and women. It was only sixty years earlier, when Bernard Haring published his ground-breaking *The Law of Christ* that a reviewer wondered about the sub-title: Moral Theology for Priests and Laity. As far as he was concerned there was no need for lay people to know anything about moral theology.

To deviate a bit, I am writing this a little after Cardinal Newman’s beatification. I cannot help feel that he, who about a hundred and fifty years ago was speaking about the need to consult the faithful in matters of

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doctrine, would be delighted to see so many of them able to articulate their views on pressing ethical issues in a scholarly way.

The lay people, and especially the women, brought to the table a wealth of lived experience and, reflecting on their own experience (a *locus theologicus* in itself) added dimensions that were new and challenging.

That was the point of the exercise – to get people talking to each other. This was in response to a felt need for an international exchange of ideas among Catholic theological ethicists. As the Mission Statement expressed it, “Catholic theological ethicists recognize the need: to appreciate the challenge of pluralism; to dialogue from and beyond local culture; and to interconnect within a world church not dominated solely by a northern paradigm.”

In a sense this was a continuation of a similar gathering at Padua, Italy, four years earlier. It was an idea conceived by James Keenan, an American Jesuit, who with the help of a core team and some funding agencies brought together over four hundred theological ethicists for the first inter-continental and cross-cultural meeting. The success of that meeting prompted the organizers to have a bigger gathering that would carry the dialogue further.

The exchanges took place at various levels. Papers were presented in full plenary sessions, parallel plenary sessions and concurrent sessions. The first two types followed a thematic structure for each day – “History” on day one, “Present” on day two and “Future” on day three. The concurrent sessions (about 240 papers presented) covered a broad spectrum of issues. These were exchanges in a structured way. Perhaps a deeper and certainly more personal exchange took place in the long tea and lunch breaks or over a meal in the evening. It was here that people discovered well known authors whom they had only read, as well as budding scholars and people sharing similar theological interests and concerns.

Obviously not all opinions could be considered ‘orthodox’. If anything, Trento 2010 made us aware of a widespread pluralism that currently exists, of voices that need to be engaged and the urgent need for dialogue. Here, in an atmosphere devoid of fear and characterized by genuine openness, there was a healthy exchange of divergent views. This can only be good. It helps everyone come closer to the truth.

There may not be another such meeting for a long time. The planning committee is of the opinion that future encounters will take place more through networking and conferences held at a continental level.

Trent 2010 was an event, a joyful celebration of who we are as theological ethicists today. It also empowered us to face the challenges confronting modern society. Above all, it gave us an abiding sense that we are not alone but part of a wider community, a pilgrim group of faith within the community of the Church. As John Paul II said in *Fides et Ratio*, the Church serves humanity with the *diakonia* of truth. We are partners in humanity’s struggle to arrive at truth.