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Book Review

Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church. The Plenary Papers from the First Cross-cultural Conference on Catholic Theological Ethics, ed. James Keenan, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2009 (reprinted). Pages: 326+x.

As the subtitle indicates, this book contains the thirty papers presented at the plenary sessions of the first cross-cultural conference on theological ethics, held in Padua from 8-11 July, 2006. It was the first time that such a conference was organized and, hence, to understand the significance of this collection of essays, it is necessary to understand something about the conference. “Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church: The First Cross-cultural Conference on Catholic Theological Ethics” was the title of the conference and more than 400 catholic theological ethicists from 63 countries participated in it.

James F. Keenan, the Chairperson of the organization and the editor of this book, explains in the “Introduction” the vision behind the planning of such a conference and the different stages in its actualization. The uniqueness of this conference is clear from the mission statement given in the introduction: “Since moral theology is so diffuse today, since many Catholic theological ethicists are caught up in their own specific cultures, and since their interlocutors tend to be in other disciplines, there is the need for an international exchange of ideas among Catholic theological ethicists...” Keenan points out some of the achievements of the conference: It gave an opportunity to meet and discuss with others, who are working with the same concerns, but are known only through their writings; it gave the conviction that “we shared the same vocation”; it gave the impetus to continue the dialogue emerged. The uniqueness and significance of this book is that the essays included come from this context of a cross-cultural dialogue among catholic theological ethicists from around the globe. Those who read through these essays can feel this spirit of dialogue, mutual respect, solidarity with others who share the same concerns and the courage to challenge others with understanding and respect to grow to a greater level of collaboration and sharing.

The book is divided into three parts: (1) How Can Theological Ethicists Respond to the World’s Needs?, (2) Moral Theology on the Five Continents, and (3) The Central Themes. The first part consists of three essays by three European scholars, namely, Antonio Papisca (Italy), on “The Needs of the World and the Signs of the Times: The Challenge of Human Rights,” Adela Cortina (Spain), on “Challenges of Economic Activity in a Global World,” and Henk ten Have (France), on “Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights.” These three scholars

answer the question posed to them, “How can theological ethicists respond to the world’s needs?” Antonio Papisca declares that with the definition of human rights, we have entered a process of new and authentic universal law. The ethicists must work on different areas like universal citizenship, world economy, prohibition of war, international law and justice, ensuring within religions a sense of due process, etc. to promote a sense of human dignity. Adela Cortina states that there is no human activity free from moral evaluations, though many schools of economics claim to be free from moral evaluations. Theological ethicists should engage in a “critical hermeneutic of economic activity.” Henk ten Have narrates UNESCO’s attempts to develop a universal instrument on bioethics. This becomes necessary since the scientific practices are developing rapidly crossing national borders.

In the second part of the book, the first three papers are by theological ethicists from Africa. Mawuto R. Afan (Ivory Coast), Laurenti Magesa (Tanzania) and Sebastian Muyengo Mulombe (Congo) reflect on the identity crisis in Africa, the postcolonial moves to democracy, political instability, destruction of the environment, gender inequality, political and economic corruption, etc. Sebastian Muyengo Mulombe reflects on the moral challenges after the African Synod.

Following these essays from Africa, there are three essays by Asian theologians. Thomas Hong-Soon Han (Korea), in his “Moral Challenges and the Church in Asia Today, with a Specific Consideration of Korea,” presents the challenges facing Asia today, especially violations of right to life, violations of religious freedom and corruption. He also narrates how theological ethicists and the Church as a whole try to counter these violations. In “Globalization and Catholic Theological Ethics: A Southeast Asian Perspective,” Agnes Brazal (Philippines) presents, with special focus on Philippine and Indonesia, the challenges raised by globalization. Clement Campos (India), in his essay “Doing Christian Ethics in India’s World of Cultural Complexity and Social Inequality,” analyses in the context of India’s cultural complexity and social inequality, issues like globalization, environment, health care, caste, gender discrimination, violence, violation of human rights, etc. He urges theological ethicists to engage more in the public sphere and to develop a contextualized theological ethics for India.

From Europe there are essays by Marciano Vidal (Spain), Marianne Heimbach-Steins (Germany) and Piotr Mazurkiewicz (Poland), and from Latin America three essays by Ronaldo Zacharias (Brazil), Sebastian Mier (Mexico) and Tony Mifsud (Chile). David Hollenbach (U.S.A.), Jean Porter (U.S.A.) and Kenneth R. Melchin (Canada) have written essays on the North American Perspectives on Catholic ethics in a world Church.

The third part of the book deals with “The Central Themes.” The themes selected are, (1) Hermeneutics and the Sources of Theological Ethics (Robert Gascoigne, Maureen Junker-Kenny, Dionisio M. Miranda), (2) *Sensus Fidelium* and Moral

Discernment (Paul Valadier, Nathanael Yaovi Soédé, Giuseppe Angelini), (3) The Challenges of Pluralism and the Future of Moral Theology (Eberhard Schockenhoff, Lisa Sowle Cahill, Márcio Fabri dos Anjos), and (4) Globalization and Justice (Enrico Chiavacci, Vimal Tirimanna, John Mary Waliggo).

There are three essays each on each of these themes.

The book is, thus, a significant collection of essays dealing with the important issues about which theological ethics is concerned today – setting them in the tradition of the Christian community, analyzing the present day challenges and indicating the course forward. Above all, as already mentioned, the unique contribution of this book is that it has brought together theological ethicists from around the world, who share the same vocation, to reflect together, to engage in dialogue, to understand each other and to think about more meaningful collaboration. The readers thus get a profound vision of the Catholic theological ethics in the world Church today. James F. Keenan has done a unique contribution to theological ethics and to the Church and world at large by taking initiatives to organize such a conference and by publishing this book. A word of appreciation also for the Asian Trading Corporation for reprinting the book!

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