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The changing face(s) of moral theology

by James F. Keenan

Commentary

Trent was a follow-up to an initiative taken four years ago at Padua, 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, discourse with many experts from all different fields by the nature of our work: 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 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 Padua 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.

At Padua, many recommended that our next meeting should have greater defined context. We decided on Trent, the city that both hosted the Council of Trent and gave the church seminary formation and the independent fields of theology, among them moral theology.

All the major ethicists from around the world came: Margaret Farley, David Hollenbach, Lisa Sowle Cahill, M. Cathleen Kaveny, Charles Curran, Bryan Massingale, Enda McDonagh, Marciano Vidal, Klaus Demmer, Linda Hogan, Benezet Bujo, Laurenti 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 six years of teaching. There in Trent, 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 worshiped daily, but on Sunday we worshiped with the people of Trent. Archbishop Luigi Bressan of Trent 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 laypersons and fewer still are women.

I invited the people of Trent 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 laywomen. 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 Trent, 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. Therein, in the common faith and tradition that we hold, we discovered how Catholic we really are.

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NCR coverage of the meeting of moral theologians in Trent.

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