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Two follow-ups: Padua and Valencia

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 21, 2006 All Things Catholic

Last week I wrote about a remarkable gathering of Catholic theological ethicists from around the world in Padua, Italy, July 8-10. The conference was engineered by Jesuit Fr. James Keenan of Boston College.

Among other observations, I reported that over these four days in Padua theologians from the global south tended not to pay much attention to internal Catholic questions, such as the balance of power between Rome and the local churches, or the limits of theological dissent. They preferred to concentrate on *ad extra* concerns -- how the church should engage the crises of poverty, HIV/AIDS, war, corruption, and so on.

Upon reflection, I suspect my report may have created the misleading impression that the focus in Padua among northern theologians, on the other hand, was largely *ad intra*. In fact, the center of attention across the board was strongly *ad extra*, from both north and south.

To the extent that northern theologians raised *ad intra* concerns, it was usually to argue that the church cannot effectively address matters of social justice without some sort of internal reform. (That was Jesuit Fr. David Hollenbach?s motive, for example, for flagging what he sees as an over-emphasis on sexuality and reproduction in official Catholic pronouncements on ethics.)

What I meant to suggest is not that northerners in Padua were hung up on inside Catholic baseball, but rather that they were more willing to at least put such issues on the table ? which reflects a broad tendency in Catholic theological conversation, in which the *ad intra* debates that have loomed large in the last 40 years in Europe and America tend not to attract much interest in the south.

This point is not intended as a value judgment, but as a descriptive observation. If in the course of making it I created a misleading context for understanding what happened in Padua, I regret it.

Once again, the conference?s web site is here: http://www.bc.edu/ctewc/ [1]

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In the late 1990s, when I was working on a biography of then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, I interviewed an Austrian theologian, Michael Waldstein, who knew Ratzinger well. At the time, Waldstein was teaching at Notre Dame, and said he was struck by the ?high level of irritation? with Rome he found in the academic theological community.

Waldstein said he felt that Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, wasn?t terribly concerned with turning around such mentalities in the short term.

?I think he and John Paul are thinking very much in the long run,? Waldstein said. ?In the present, the fronts of discussion are often very hard. It isn?t easy to sway people?s minds. I?ve yet to meet a theologian who said, ?Before *Humanae Vitae* I was in favor of contraception, but then I changed my mind.? That?s not the kind of response they?re looking for. In the long run, when some of the controversies of the present are forgotten, then you can expect an impact.?

No doubt that will be the spirit in which Benedict greets the latest news from Spain, just days after his July 8-9 trip to Valencia, where the pope minced no words in defining the family as ?founded on the indissoluble marriage between a man and a woman.?

As if in response, the Socialist government under Prime Minister José Luis Rodr'guez Zapatero announced July 14 that Spanish students in public schools are to be taught about same-sex relationships, unveiling plans for homosexuality to be part of a new school curriculum.

Pupils from the age of 10, government officials said, will be taught about tolerating and respecting the diversity that exists within society. Alejandro Tiana, general secretary for education, said such teaching is necessary because ?children need to learn there are various types of families.?

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