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Reseña

JAMES F. KEENAN (ED.),
Catholic Theological Ethics. Past, Present and Future. The Trento Conference.

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In July 2010, six hundred theological ethicists from seventy-two countries met in Trento, Italy for a conference entitled, “In the Currents of History: From Trento to the Future,” in order to explore the legacy of the Council of Trent and its influence on the development of Catholic moral theology. The essays in this volume derive from the plenary sessions at that conference and address pertinent themes in contemporary global Catholic theological ethics. Keenan explains the rationale for naming Trento as the focus of this worldwide conference: “Theological ethics was defined by the Council of Trent: we became a specific discipline within theology. The compartmentalization of theology into the plan for seminaries was what gave birth to a separate enterprise known as moral theology. Why not go back to Trento?” (1) In light of that significance, this volume accentuates the importance of understanding the historical effects of the Council in the subsequent development of Catholic moral theology. The task of this review, then, is to identify some of the major themes that emerged at this meeting and to elucidate their significance for the development of Catholic moral theology in the context of the Americas.

The Trento conference was fertile ground for dynamic encounters among Catholic ethicists from a variety of contexts. The essays in this volume reflect an impressive range of concerns and contexts and therefore serve as a testament to the relevance of Catholic moral theology worldwide. With the Council of Trent as the only explicit unifying theme, however, this volume is at times disorienting. Reading more than one section of essays in a sitting requires discipline and a previous background in a wide range of ethical approaches. At some points,
however, the cacophony resolves into a harmonious affirmation of the continued relevance of Catholic ethics in the 21st century and the potential for the Church to be a sign of hope, an agent of good, and an affirmation of human dignity in diverse global contexts. Besides discussing the importance of the Trento Council, many of the essays also note Vatican II’s significance in interpreting Trent’s legacy. The chorus of praise borders on valorizing the Second Vatican Council at the expense of obscuring Trent’s vital contributions to Catholic moral tradition. Most of the works, however, effectively temper their enthusiasm for Vatican II, using it as a lens for viewing the Council of Trent in the broader scope of history, elucidating the continual importance of this event for global ethics today.

Three significant and related themes for the development of Catholic theological ethics in the Americas arise from this volume: race and culture, pluralism, and moral methodology. The first theme identifies the systematic marginalization of certain groups of people which hinders contributions from Latin American, African, and Asian Christians in the development of moral theology. The second theme discloses the challenges of developing Catholic morality in a world characterized by cultural pluralism. The third, following from the first two themes, responds to the historic exclusion of some groups from moral discourse and the demands of cultural pluralism by discerning new ways to pursue common truths.

Race and culture feature prominently in several of the volume’s most provocative essays. Brian Massingale (United States) and Maria Teresa Davila (Puerto Rico) both level sharp critiques of the response to historical racial injustice in the American Catholic context. Massingale argues that black bodies are systematically erased from Catholic ethical reflection, truncating the development of a theological ethics that can adequately respond to the “original sin” of “race-based enslavement, conquest, and colonialism that link the Americas, Africa, Europe, and Asia.” (122) Davila further develops the moral connection between sin and racism, asserting the necessity of acknowledging and repenting for the historic sin of racism, “in order to highlight the human damage in which we continue to participate and of which we are complicit by virtue of our inadequate attempts at resistance.” (312) These American ethicists identify the sins of racism – including exclusion and marginalization of particular groups – as significant threats to fostering an ethics that affords every human being fundamental human dignity. According to Massingale and Davila, it is necessary to reveal and resist racist impulses in
historical and contemporary Catholic moral thinking which hinder the affirmation of human dignity in every context.

The second significant theme is the global reality of pluralism and its potential challenges and contributions to Catholic moral theology. Miguel Angel Sanchez Carlos (Mexico) writes a compelling essay on urban ethics, discussing pluralism’s influence on the moral concerns of urban Christians: “...just as city dwellers live in the context of great ethical pluralism, urban Christians live the same pluralism and develop different values in accordance with their worldviews.” (171) If Christianity is merely a religion of spirituality and doctrine, he argues, then there is no need for Catholic ethicists to address moral experiences in particular contexts. Since Christianity aims to respond to human experience, however, it is necessary for Catholic ethicists to take seriously the moral problems presented in diverse communities, viewing these challenges as an opportunity to build “more humane – and thus more Christian,” (174) urban cultures characterized by participation, solidarity, and justice. Further, African contributors Laurenti Magesa (Kenya), Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike (Kenya), and David Kaulemu (Zimbabwe) argue that engaging the emphasis on moral experience, community, and participation in their contexts can strengthen Catholic moral theology in general. By emphasizing both the reality and promise of pluralism, these authors seek to expand moral epistemology to promote a truly human morality.

These two themes reveal a strong concern for developing Catholic moral theology in a manner that recognizes and respects fundamental dignity of all human beings and their respective contributions to moral reasoning. The third major theme, moral methodology, arises from the afore mentioned themes. If greater inclusion, diversity, and participation are required for the development of a truly human and truly Catholic ethics, then it is necessary to promote moral methodologies that foster these conditions. In the section on method, Eric Gaziaux (Belgium), Margaret A. Farley (United States), and Benezet Bujo (Democratic Republic of Congo) explore the development of notions of rationality, moral discernment, and community in light of the demands of human equality and participation. Their essays derive greater force when read with the animating themes of the volume emphasized here, revealing the significance of Catholic theological ethics in relation to the challenges and promises of particular contexts.
Ultimately, the essays in this volume make a forceful case for greater diversity, inclusion, and critical engagement in Catholic theological ethics in the world Church. The themes of race and culture, pluralism, and moral reasoning gesture to the importance of a Catholic ethical discourse that recognizes and actively resists exclusion based on anti-Christian notions of human inequality. Given the breadth of the work, its best use is for introductory or supplemental essays on a particular topic. The essays noted in this review provide a helpful introduction to the basic problem of race and culture, difference, and methodology in Catholic theological ethics.