

# CHRISTIAN ETHICS TODAY

## *Is the Ground Shifting?*

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**A**N EARLIER ISSUE of this journal carried an overview of significant developments in Christian Ethics since the second Vatican Council.<sup>1</sup> This entailed a deeper appreciation of the spiritual basis of the moral life, the formative role of Scripture, the centrality of the person, the importance of conscience and the function of the virtues. The article anticipated current studies, both international and national, prompted by the fiftieth anniversary of the commencement of the Council in 1962.

Here, I would like to take that discussion further. In the first decade of this millennium, Christian Ethics, in becoming more clearly global, offers a different and expanding context as a discipline. While a comprehensive survey is beyond the scope of this article, some representative soundings can be made.

So this prompts the question: are we seeing the beginnings of a seismic shift in Christian Ethics? This article examines evidence for this statement and some reasons underlying it under three headings: moral consciousness as international and global; global discourse on suffering and solidarity; Catholic social teaching and Moral Theology leading to concluding comments.

### *Moral Consciousness as International and Global*

At the outset, it should be noted that cross-cultural theological discourse was the aim of the international journal *Concilium* since its inception over forty years ago. It is published five times a year in five linguistic editions. Again, between 1998 and 2007 *Theological Studies*' 'Notes on Moral Theology' reveals an emerging sense of pluralism in Moral Theol-

ogy which is inclusive in its scope and its participants.<sup>2</sup>

Our discussion is best guided by two landmarks in the past decade—the International Conferences of Catholic Theological Ethics in Padua, 2006 and Trento, 2010.<sup>3</sup> Padua's Mission Statement captured their aims, though, as will be noted later, Trento had a more specific context. The Statement's key points indicated: a) need for an international exchange of ideas amongst Catholic Theological Ethicists; b) need to interconnect within a world church; and c) the opportunity for cross-cultural dialogue from and beyond local cultures motivated by mercy and care.<sup>4</sup> To be truly international, the organisers ensured the presence of scholars from the developing world by underwriting their expenses.

Each conference was shaped by its overarching purpose. 'At Padua we gathered to meet and listen to one another', observes James Keenan.<sup>5</sup> In 2006 'cross-cultural' and 'global' are the key words. Foundation papers responded to 'How can Theological Ethicists respond to the World's Needs?' Speakers from each of the five continents (Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America) addressed the same three questions: what are our moral challenges; how are we responding; and what hope do we have for the future? Following these were presentations under the rubric of 'applied ethics'—ranging from globalization, justice and the environment, questions about gender, HIV/AIDS, Bioethics and Justice, sexuality and marriage and questions concerning method in Moral Theology

In 2010, rather than a gathering for listening and interchange, Keenan suggests there was a 'need for a defining context.' Hence, the choice of Trent—for many reasons, but per-

haps the most important was that ‘theological ethics was defined by the Council of Trent: we became a specific discipline within theology.’ It was fitting that Trento, given its historical and ecclesial significance, was the location where theological ethicists could ‘share fundamental insights and claims, to reflectively and respectfully consider the needs of today within the context of a world church and its evolving and constantly emerging traditions.’<sup>6</sup>

Again, this conference, rather than build on the five continents, attempted (and successfully so) to ‘target seven populations’: more representation from theologians from some European national groups and moral specialist (such as the Redemptorists); participation of the hierarchy and some formal, institutional recognition of the Conference; scholars engaged in inter-religious dialogue; women theologians together with financial assistance for women scholars on the African continent for further graduate studies; ‘new’ or young scholars and financial assistance for them to attend; senior theological ethicists; finally, the support of a local committee at Trento and its Archbishop.

The opening theme for Trento was ‘Ethics and Religious Dialogue in a globalized world (Catholic, Protestant and Muslim perspectives).’ It then moved in three stages: the past - evaluation of the Council of Trent, interaction of history and theological ethics and the ‘unheard’ and ‘missing’ voices in that history; the present—moral reasoning, political ethics and health issues; the future considered identity, reciprocity and familial relations, pressing global social challenges and theological ethics in the future.

What was achieved in these gatherings? They were clearly about a *theological* approach to ethics. The international ‘conversation’ continued through the publication of plenary papers and selected presentations in applied ethics. For the participants, Keenan notes that a frequent comment after Padua was ‘We shared the same vocation.’<sup>7</sup> This was experienced as a strong intellectual and affective



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solidarity of participants and a renewed sense of their contribution to the Church. It was both ‘inter-national’ and ‘inter-cultural’. It brought a solidarity that reached across generations, gender and cultures. With good will and respect in place, there was a freedom to challenge and question each other. Finally, the process generated the need for other groups and structures to continue the dialogue in local conferences and associations.

Another consideration is pertinent here. A key area of development in Moral Theology in the past two decades has been virtue ethics. The virtues provided a needed conceptual ‘bridge’ and common moral vocabulary between differing historical and cultural contexts—relevant for cross-cultural and global dialogue today.

Other religious and cultural traditions have virtues that function in ways similar to the cardinal virtues. Across all cultures there seems to be a call to treat all people fairly and impartially, to be faithful to one’s commitments and promises and to care of ourselves. These are guided by practical wisdom (prudence) that adjudicates between their claims. Again, Keenan notes that the more ethicists use the virtues, the more they work beyond local contexts.<sup>8</sup> Finally, compassion and solidarity are needed, virtuous dispositions for ‘receiving’ the texts and experiences from within any tradition (whether one’s own or others’) and ‘for developing the moral perception to understand them.’<sup>9</sup>

As the Trento conference closed, the young African women scholars summed it up for

James Keenan: ‘Jim, we are so surprised that we actually belong to something so big, so dedicated, and so dynamic.’ Keenan then concludes ‘At Trento we discovered our catholic vocation.’<sup>10</sup> That vocation, he explains, is a call to read the signs of the times ‘as they actually are.’ That involves the search for the truth, ‘and in part that means naming what is lacking, not yet seen, understood or articulated. It also means being *aware of those not heard, rejected oppressed or abandoned*.’<sup>11</sup> This brings us to our next shift in the landscape of Christian Ethics.

### *Suffering, Solidarity and Global Discourse*<sup>12</sup>

With some exceptions, for all the advances made by European moral theologians in the twentieth century, their concerns were predominantly conceptual and concerned with ‘in-house’ issues arising from their theological community and amongst their peers. *Suffering* and poverty were only addressed in general terms and from a distance.

Three main strands form the historical backdrop to an increasing response to suffering: the Holocaust, liberation movements in the developing world and the various forms of struggle for human rights at the global level. In that context, we are reminded of René Girard’s comment that the emerging concern for victims in history is ‘the secular face of Christian love’ and of Anthony Kelly’s added comments that this unprecedented ‘stirring of conscience’ is the transforming effects of one particular ‘risen’ victim—Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup>

Theologically, one can detect initial changes in perspective in the final third of the twentieth century. European theologians such as Metz, Schillebeeckx, Moltmann and liberation theologians from Latin America (Sobrinho and Boff) found common cause on the tasks of theology. They saw suffering (and its ‘dangerous memory’) as the appropriate starting point for praxis—the interaction of faith with lived experience.

During this period, an increasing sensitivity to the poor and marginalized appears amongst a handful of European Theological ethicists (*e.g.*, Enda McDonagh, Kevin Kelly, Enrico Chiavacci, *etc.*) and this was further developed in the next generation of moralists, especially, in the USA, by women scholars. In the new millennium, when combined with theological work outside Europe, especially in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the overall effect today is summed up by Keenan: ‘...the call to respond to human suffering shapes contemporary theological ethics’<sup>14</sup> In the USA, Lisa Sowle Cahill is typical of women ethicists (and others) who offer responses that are specific and concrete, based on a theological approach that is both personalist and relational but also formative of communities of concern and solidarity.<sup>15</sup>

Representative of this call is Australia’s Robert Gascoigne’s discussion of suffering as a source for moral reasoning. He observes that ‘although it is suffering that most confounds our search for ethical intelligibility, it is likewise suffering that is the most profound source of insight and conversion.’<sup>16</sup> Human experience is a contested source for Christian Ethics. But when, as here with suffering, it provides an occasion for self-transcendence in terms of moral response to what is truly good, truly just, it is both authentic and normative.

We have noted above some of the many current studies in Christian ethics that probe suffering in its various forms (injustice, alienation, oppression, poverty, HIV/AIDS).<sup>17</sup> It may help to glance back to 1975 for Dorothy Soelle’s *Suffering*—a landmark study of the dynamics of how to engage with suffering.

In the first step, one is mute, dumbfounded with the evil as experienced. At this stage, it is just about survival. In the second phase, one makes explicit and conscious the horror, the pain of what has been experienced (whether from human agency or nature, whether personal or social). It is named and claimed in two ways. ‘We can feel the suffering in solidarity with others and give voice to our an-

guish.<sup>18</sup> We can tap resources from Scripture of crying out from the depths, such as with Jesus on the cross. Then, it is through Lamentation that we are enabled to acknowledge suffering and loss.

We are also empowered for the third phase, namely to act – to ‘aim’ in a constructive manner what we have experienced. Justice demands that these sources of suffering and evil can be alleviated or eradicated as part of the ongoing redemptive work of Christ. At times, such suffering can be transforming through deepening and expanding our consciousness of what is true and good at the personal or communal level.<sup>19</sup>

Going beyond Soelle, complementing suffering is the call to *solidarity*. Interdependence is a reality in human society. John Paul II argues that this is the grounding of solidarity as a moral virtue, attainable for everyone. It is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the sufferings of others. It is a ‘firm persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, since we are all really responsible for all.’<sup>20</sup> Together with the theologians mentioned above, there is a call to human solidarity amidst suffering. God enters into and shares in all human suffering. In a special way, those ‘who suffer injustice remain indelibly etched in God’s memory and ought to be inscribed in human consciousness.’<sup>21</sup>

In surveying Moral Theology in the past decade, what stands out is the increasing concern for suffering and solidarity. This is associated with a deeper sense of social sin and structural evils. Its overall perspective is not autonomous ethics but the Reign of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Further, the overall impression is that, at times, studies couched in the language and style of the academy, resemble extended exercises in theological reflection. One can trace the triadic dynamic of a) experience (describe it, enter it); b) reflection (learn from it in light of Christian tradition and human science); c) move to action. Robert Kinast suggests theological reflection in similar terms: a) Word-from-God (God’s

ongoing self-communication in history and creation; b) Word-about-God: Faith as gift involves confession, interrogation, investigation; c) Word-to-God: Christian living in personal, social and Church life.<sup>22</sup>

Overall, amongst Christian Ethicists, we have seen a growing awareness of those who are ‘not heard,’ of those ‘rejected or abandoned.’ This leads to our third consideration: Catholic social teaching on justice as an indispensable constituent of contemporary Moral Theology. .

### *Catholic Social Teaching and Moral Theology*

From what we have seen, with the two International conferences, the associated literature and the increasing attention to suffering and solidarity, what stands out is the frequency of a concern for social justice. We can only take a few examples.

At Padua, the social justice emphasis clearly resulted from the three questions guiding the plenary papers from the five continents. For instance, the challenge of world poverty; from Africa, issues concerning identity, instability and democracy, horrendous suffering and theology needing to be located with ‘the wretched of the earth’, ‘anthropological poverty’—what affects the deepest recesses of the personality in terms of self-belief and initiative; from India, Christian ethics in relation to cultural complexity and social inequality.

At Trento, while the focus was different, we still find, for instance, Bryan Massingale exploring the absence, if not erasure, in the U.S Catholic ethical reflection, of ‘Black Experience’ and hence of the bodies of those who experienced survival amongst oppression. Again, we find papers under headings such as ‘Justice and Equity in the Health Care world’ and ‘Pressing Social and Global challenges’ concerning Economics, Sustainability and Citizenship.

Keenan’s detailed and extensive surveys show that the social justice direction is also

evident in theological journals in many languages. *Theological Studies* in the English speaking world is representative of this. Earlier in the decade we find discussions on a global ethic and on the overlap between natural law and human rights and their implications for marginal individuals and groups.<sup>23</sup> It is present in the March issue of the 'Notes' in 2008, 2009, 2010 amongst commentaries on the two volumes of the Padua conference. For instance, we find a discussion on identity crises in a globalized world.<sup>24</sup> In a broader ecclesial context, we also find in the 2010 'Notes' a series of essays on *Caritas in Veritate* from Maura Ryan, Lisa Sowle Cahill, Phillip Gabriel Renzes and Drew Christiansen.

Overall, what emerges is Moral Theology 'from below.' It is a critical ethical reflection on real problems that face real people, communities and nations and their structural roots. Issues of injustice, poverty, health, human rights, political and social life are the staples of life experience for inhabitants of Africa, Asia and Latin America. They are increasingly the concern for the global community in the light of the 2007 GFC and its impact on economic and social life.<sup>25</sup>

*Participative Bioethics* (a phrase from Lisa Sowle Cahill) underlines the practical, embodied and communal nature of ethical life and responsibility. She sees Bioethics in the context of social justice. This mirrors a more explicit presence of Bioethics within Catholic Social thought and of both seen within the broader sphere of Theological Ethics.

But there are other signs of ethical involvement on the ground level. Fordham University's Maureen O'Connell, in her innovative work on muralism, explores the connections between theological aesthetics and ethics.<sup>26</sup> In 2007, *Time* magazine ran a short feature on Philadelphia's Mural Arts Project (MAP). In the space of twenty years, it changed the city's visual landscape. By bringing together artists, inner-city neighbourhood associations, and charitable trusts, MAP helped to transform the city's neighbourhood wastelands. Jane Golden,

MAP's executive director says 'Art saves lives. Murals can play a catalytic role in healing the wounds of the city.'<sup>27</sup>

Such a phenomenon is found earlier in Australia. In 1976, David Humphries worked with the Lower East mural movement in New York. From the late 1970s to the early 1990's Humphries and Rodney Monk pioneered the Community Mural Movement in Sydney. The murals were a cause of pride to local communities. They were eloquent visual statements about issues and associated values, namely peace, ecology, multiculturalism, concern for the aged etc. Art was at the service of social change, to expand a community's moral horizons.<sup>28</sup>

Recently, in Sydney, the *Ambrose Centre For Religious Liberty* was established. It is 'committed to strengthening democratic life in Australia and to ensuring that genuine pluralism flourishes in our country through a unity of religious faiths pursuing this common purpose.'<sup>29</sup>

August 2011 saw the inaugural meeting of the *Sydney Alliance*, a non-party political organization that brings together unions, with community and religious organisations 'to advance the common good and achieve a fair, just and sustainable city... by providing opportunities for people to have a say in decisions that affect them, their families and everyone working and living in Sydney.'<sup>30</sup>

In Melbourne, the *Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy* acts as 'an independent, ecumenical organisation established to conduct research into the implications of Christian social thinking for formulating public policy in Australia, and to teach Christian social thinking and its implications for public policy in Australia.'<sup>31</sup>

### Conclusion

Returning to our opening question: are we seeing the beginnings of a seismic shift in Christian Ethics? It may not be 'seismic' but the ground has somehow moved and the landscape

is not quite the same. While the person, conscience, Scripture, spirituality and the virtues are still clearly visible, one's gaze is caught by the insistent presence of social justice and inequality. With this, there is a deepening sense of evil and sin as social and structural. These are viewed through the lens of Christian faith and the Reign of God.

Further, there seems to be emerging, perhaps instinctively, a stronger sense of a praxis methodology, or alternatively, on a 'theological reflection' approach to Christian Ethics. Allied to this is an enhanced (and more confident?) appreciation of the place of experience in moral reasoning that guides action. This is particularly the case with the normative potential of suffering. But it is also evident in how the descriptive aspect of experience relates to what is normative. John Paul II argues that interdependence is a reality in human society and that, as a source of ethical insight, it grounds solidarity as a moral virtue.

Perhaps rather than a move of social ethics to centre-stage in Christian Ethics, global

changes are bringing a new local awareness of social, economic and political issues in people's lives elsewhere. With global discourse (cultural, gender, national), the moral horizons of those living in the developed world are being broadened by contact or interchange with the developing world. Perhaps there is occurring, in Lonergan's words, a differentiation of consciousness.

James Keenan observes that Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate*, as a development in Catholic Social Teaching, offers resources from Scripture and the Church's tradition to make judgements guided by practical wisdom, to respond to specific practical challenges facing the world today. Its focus is on justice centred on, and animated by, *love*—now better appreciated as at the heart of the Christian moral life. As both a mirror and a catalyst of Theological Ethics becoming more integrated with Church Social Teaching, *Caritas in Veritate*, in many ways, exemplifies 'the developments in theological ethics over the past seventy years.'<sup>32</sup>

## NOTES

1 Tom Ryan, SM, 'Christian Ethics: Moral Dilemmas or Something More?', *Compass: A Review of Topical Theology* (46:1), Autumn 2012, 33-37. In current usage, 'Christian Ethics', 'Moral Theology' and 'Theological Ethics' are used interchangeably – which I will do in this article.

2 This was noted in Ryan, 'Christian Ethics: Moral Dilemmas', 36.

3 See James F. Keenan, S.J., ed., *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church: The Plenary Papers from the First Cross-cultural Conference on Catholic Theological Ethics* (henceforth *CTEWC*) (New York: Continuum, 2007); Linda Hogan, ed. *Applied Ethics in a World Church: The Padua Conference* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2008); James F. Keenan, S.J., ed., *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present, and Future: The Trento Conference*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Qrbis, 2011).

4 Keenan, *CTEWC*, 3.

5 James F. Keenan, 'Notes on Moral Theology: What Happened at Trento 2010', *Theological Studies* 72:1 (2011), 131-149 at 139.

6 Keenan, 'Notes on Moral Theology: What Happened at Trento 2010', 139-140.

7 Keenan, *CTEWC*, 5.

8 James F. Keenan, S.J., *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 217.

9 Keenan, *A History*, 77.

10 Keenan, 'Notes on Moral Theology: What Happened at Trento 2010', 149.

11 Keenan, 'Notes on Moral Theology: What Happened at Trento 2010', 148-9. Italics added.

12 Adapted from Keenan's heading for chapter 9. See Keenan, *A History*... 197.

13 René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 161 and Anthony J. Kelly, C.Ss.R., 'The Resurrection and Moral Theology: Does It Make Any Difference?', *The Australian Ejournal of Theology*, Issue 10, Pentecost 2007, 5.

14 Keenan, *A History*, 198

15 Keenan, *A History*, 213.

16 Robert Gascoigne, 'Suffering and Theological Ethics: Intimidation and Hope', *CTEWC*, 163-6, at 163.

17 Keenan in his various 'Notes' and Chapter 9 of his *History* gives detailed evidence supporting this and for our next section on social justice from papers, authors, institutes and journals from Europe, Asia and Africa.

18 Richard Sparks CSP, 'Suffering' in Michael Downey (Ed.), *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 950-3, at 952. See D. Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

19 Sparks CSP, 'Suffering', 952-3.

20 John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38.

21 Sparks, 'Suffering.' 953. With the announcement of a Royal Commission into sexual abuse in Australia, in the light of what is said here, what should be a theological response from the Catholic community? Perhaps Dorothy Soelle has something important to offer us about solidarity in suffering.

22 R.L. Kinast, *Let Ministry Teach: A Guide to Theological Reflection*, (Collegeville, MN.: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 5 seq.

23 Jean Porter, 'The Search for a Global Ethic', *Theological Studies* 62 (2001), 105-122. Lisa Sowle Cahill, 'Towards Global Ethics', *Theologi-*

*cal Studies* 63 (2002), 324-44. There is also an excellent discussion in Anthony J Kelly, C.Ss.R., 'The Global Significance of Natural Law: Opportunities, Quandaries and Directions,' *The Australian EJournal of Theology*, Issue 12, July 2008.

24 Keenan, James F. 'Notes on Moral Theology: Crises and other developments', *Theological Studies* (69.1), (March 2008): 125 -144.

25 From an Australian source, see Neil J Ormerod and Shane Clifton, *Globalisation and the Mission of the Church* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2009).

26 O'Connell, Maureen H. 'Painting hope: the murals of inner-city Philadelphia.' *Commonweal* 135.1 (2008), 19-21. Her most recent book is *If These Walls Could Talk: Community Muralism and the Beauty of Justice* (The Liturgical Press, 2012).

27 O'Connell, 'Painting Hope', 19.

28 <http://www.publicartsquad.com.au/index.html> accessed 27 December 2012.

29 [http://ambrosecentre.org.au/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=18&Itemid=35](http://ambrosecentre.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=18&Itemid=35) accessed Dec. 27, 2012.

30 <http://www.sydneyalliance.org.au/> Accessed Dec. 27, 2012.

31 <http://www.wyarrainstitute.org.au/AboutUs/Mission.aspx> accessed Dec 27, 2012.

32 Keenan, *A History*, 242.

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*'It costs so much to be a full human being that there are very few who have the enlightenment or the courage to pay the price...One has to abandon altogether the search for security, and, reach out to the risk of living with both arms. One has to embrace the world like a lover. One has to accept pain as a condition of existence. One has to court doubt and darkness as the cost of knowing. One needs a will stubborn in conflict, but apt always to total acceptance of every consequence of living and dying'*  
 —**Morris West: *The Shoes of the Fisherman***

*'For my part I believe in the forgiveness of sin and the redemption of ignorance'*

—**Adlai E. Stevenson Jr. (1900 - 1965), retort to a heckler asking him to state his beliefs, *Time*, November 1, 1963.**