

## Human Rights, Justice and the World Church

**By David Hollenbach**

When more than 400 Catholic moral theologians from around the world gathered in Padua, Italy, from July 8 to 11, the meeting evoked an awareness of God calling the church to deeper communion and generated among them a powerful desire to work for greater unity throughout the global human community. The theologians experienced the concrete meaning of the words from the Second Vatican Council that proclaimed that the church is a sign and instrument of "communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race" ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," No. 1). They also vividly realized Karl Rahner's claim that the Second Vatican Council launched a new epoch for Catholicism as a truly world church, rather than as a European community with missionary outposts.

The theologians assembled in Padua to discuss "Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church." Yet the assembly was much more than an academic discussion of how to pursue moral theology in a global context. The participants, from places as diverse as Chile and Congo, Poland and the Philippines, Ireland and India, the United States and Uganda, experienced the world church in action. They grasped that the Catholic community can make a contribution, perhaps an indispensable one, to a just future for our increasingly interdependent global community.

### Signs of Our Times

While the cultural and social diversity of our world was evident to all present, the need to respect the common human dignity of the whole human family was equally clear. Participants found a remarkable convergence on basic ethical standards for social and political life. They affirmed human rights as a common standard across all cultures and social systems. This is what the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights had sought in 1948, when they formulated that document. In recent years, however, some political leaders, particularly in East Asia and Africa, and some postmodern theorists have challenged the universality of human rights in the name of respect for cultural diversity. Religious differences in the Middle East, the former Yugoslavia, and between India and Pakistan have led some to predict a clash of civilizations and religions, in which the idea of a common humanity would be lost in the midst of conflict. Though all who gathered in Padua were Catholic, they were keenly alert to the cultural and social contexts of their own societies. So the consensus on human rights signaled that a greater unity of moral vision is possible, both in the church and the larger world, than is predicted by the clash-of-civilizations theorists. The consensus was a striking sign of our times.

A Korean participant, for example, described the moral challenges in his society as human rights issues. He treated the rising use of abortion to select the gender of offspring as a high-tech, sexist violation of the right to life and described his government's restriction of religious expression as a violation of the right to a fundamental freedom. Theologians from India and the Philippines also relied extensively on language of human rights to express the challenges of interreligious conflict that they faced. The Korean thinker argued that when politicians in Singapore and China claim that human rights and "Asian values" are incompatible, it reflects the self-interest of authoritarian governments. He also contended that duties to rulers and parents in the Confucian traditions of East Asia could be reinterpreted in light of the equally binding Confucian obligation of reciprocal respect among siblings and friends. Such stress on reciprocity and equality among persons would enable societies rooted in Confucian traditions to support human rights in communities marked by

the democratic participation of all citizens. The church has been a leader in advancing this way of thinking in Korea.

African participants made similar arguments. Overcoming the legacy of colonialism and racism that has so wounded their continent, they said, calls for the respect for the equal dignity of all persons that is central to the human rights ethos. A Rwandan theologian made an impassioned plea that the future agenda of global politics and ethics be founded on the truly basic right to be free from the threat of genocide. It was in the aftermath of the Nazi genocide of the Jews that the contemporary human rights ethos emerged. In a similar way, the 1994 Rwandan genocide, in which more than 800,000 people perished in 100 days, and the massacres that continue today in Darfur powerfully demonstrate what can happen when we ignore our common humanity. The cry of conscience against genocide is a negative protest that takes positive form in the affirmation of the dignity and rights of all human beings.

### **Convergence and Divergence**

The economic plight of the poor of the southern hemisphere, in the face of the growing wealth of the north, took center stage in the discussions. Many of the participating theologians not only study issues of economic justice and injustice in their countries but also participate in and minister to communities of the very poor. They noted the importance of capitalist markets for economic growth. But the voice of the very poor echoed powerfully in the presentations of theologians from Latin America, Africa and Asia, who lamented that markets often do not serve the poorest. Indeed, the group reached a consensus on the moral values grounded in our common humanity, that all persons have rights to fulfill their most basic human needs for food, medical care and education. These economic rights express every person's claim to be treated as a full member of the human family and to share in its common good. Economic participation, hand in hand with political participation, enables all, including the poor, to have a voice in shaping the institutions that often determine their fate.

To be sure, the theologians diverged at times on the full implications of these underlying human rights. Differences surfaced on the issue of gender and the rights of women. When a panel of three male theologians, for example, addressed the moral challenges facing the African continent, they did not even mention the injustices faced by African women, including their disproportionate vulnerability to the deadly scourge of H.I.V.-AIDS. Several African women theologians strongly challenged them. In a similar way, a North American woman challenged a Mexican man who characterized first-world feminists as desiring to be excessively "manly." There were similar differences on issues related to homosexuality.

These points of divergence are important and need to be addressed by deeper dialogue and theological reflection. Yet it is notable that the differences did not follow the lines separating developed from developing countries. They were more likely to be within than between the major cultural traditions of our world. That suggests that the conference's consensus on the basic human rights of all people arises from a lived experience of our common humanity, while the practical divergences arise from different ways of interpreting the meaning of this shared humanity in such areas as gender. It also means that we theologians need to continue listening to one another's experiences as we seek to advance our understanding of human rights and justice. This is a precondition for advancing as a world church that seeks to respond more adequately to the needs of all people.

### **Pointed Challenges**

The conference also raised some pointed challenges for both civic society and the church in North America. A theologian from the United States made a powerful argument that respect for the right to due process of law is in danger of being subverted by what is happening at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and in the government's surveillance of U.S. citizens in response to

fear of terrorist threats. She traced the origin of the right to due process back to medieval canon law and showed that its roots lay in the respect due to every person as created in the image and likeness of God. The church, therefore, has a stake in defending the right to due process and should address violations in the United States today. Taking this right seriously also calls for revisions in the way the church governs itself.

North Americans were also challenged to respond much more effectively to the massive poverty in the world today—a central implication of the Gospel and our common humanity. The theologians at Padua found a consensus that this is a central requirement facing the church in the United States. Since the United States is the world's most powerful nation, it has the greatest capacity to advance or impede our common humanity. Heightened capacity entails greater responsibility.

Moral theology in a world church thus calls the whole church to renew its commitment to human rights and justice. Such a commitment is essential if the church is truly to be a sign and instrument of "communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race." The Padua gathering was both a challenge to live this commitment and an encouragement that we can do so.

***David Hollenbach, S.J., is director of the Center for Human Rights and International Justice and Flatley Professor of Theology at Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Mass.***

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