Global South ethicists take center stage

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

Padua, Italy

Ugandan Fr. John Mary Waliggo, a widely influential African theologian as well as a member of his country’s Human Rights Commission, smiled when asked what he makes of Western debates over whether the correct response at Mass should be “and also with you” or “and also with your spirit.”

“Look,” he said, “I was part of the fight to get rid of Idi Amin, when my country was bleeding. I went into exile for five years, but we finally got rid of him. I came back and fought against [Milton] Obote. I had to go into exile again, to Kenya, but we got rid of him too in 1986.

“I then became the general secretary for writing the new Ugandan Constitution. We went up to all the villages to consult the people, including women, people with disabilities, everybody. It took six years to do it, but in the end the constitution is full of Catholic social teaching.”

Waliggo’s bottom line: Given the poverty, violence and dysfunctional social systems that are the daily realities facing his people, some theological conversation in the West, such as the fine points of liturgical translation, strikes him as fiddling while Rome burns.

He spoke to NCR during an international conference of Catholic ethicists held in Padua, Italy, July 8-11.

“We see our role as social change agents,” Waliggo said of African theologians. “We’re doing theology for those who are suffering … to help them have life to the full.”

During this sprawling four-day event, a first of its kind, dozens of theologians from Africa, Asia and Latin America spoke about their intellectual and pastoral concerns, and most served up an agenda that tries to bring the tradition of Catholic moral reflection to bear on issues such as globalization and economic justice, HIV/AIDS, armed conflict and genocide, violence and discrimination against women, and assaults on human life in various forms.

Given that two-thirds of the 1.1 billion Roman Catholics on the planet today live in the Global South, this conference may have offered a preview of what the Catholicism of the future will look like -- less preoccupied with internal debates or campaigns for church reform, and more energized about changing the world.

A sampling of southern voices:

- Redemptorist Fr. Vimal Tirimanna of Sri Lanka discussed the joint efforts of Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Muslims to oppose stringent anti-conversion laws recently floated
in his country under pressure of what he called “religious extremists.” Sri Lanka is a majority Buddhist nation that has fought a long-running Hindu rebellion in the south, leading to an upsurge in Buddhist nationalism; the government has a “minister of Buddhist affairs.” Rumors of proselytism by Christians in recent years have led to attacks on Christian churches by angry Buddhist mobs. Tirimanna said promoting dialogue across confessional lines is an urgent task in this culture.

- Fr. Emmanuel Katongole of Uganda warned against “overconfidence” in the West surrounding anti-retroviral drugs as a solution to the HIV/AIDS crisis. Katongole argued that the AIDS epidemic reveals that “something is sick and sickening in Africa’s modern ways of living, playing and working,” and that fascination with “miraculous medicines” could obscure what he called this “ugly truth,” making it seem as if deep structural and cultural problems can be solved with a simple drug cocktail. For example, Katongole said, many Africans have no access to safe water with which to take the medicine, no watches to keep them on a schedule, no place to store the drugs, and no food so that they won’t vomit up medicines taken on an empty stomach. Until such problems are addressed, he suggested, the provision of anti-retrovirals will not affect the underlying crisis.

- Salesian Fr. Ronaldo Zacharias of Brazil explained that given the explosive social conditions in the mega-cities of his country, the rich are increasingly fleeing into the countryside, constructing their own “paradises.” The resulting decline in civil society in major urban areas has opened the door to organized crime, which Zacharias said sometimes exercises greater real power in the cities than the elected authorities. He described the country’s political class as largely a refuge of “robbers and thieves.”

- Elisee Rutagambwa, a Rwandan theologian writing his dissertation at Boston College, addressed the 1994 Rwandan genocide, which left 1 million people dead in just 100 days -- the most rapid genocide in human history, a rate of killing three-and-one-half times more rapid than the Nazi extermination of the Jews during the Second World War. Rutagambwa said the Rwandan genocide was especially tragic because it was preventable. There were United Nations resolutions in force, as well as a U.N. peacekeeping team on the ground. The fact that people could have been saved, he said, is illustrated by the fact that an internationally organized evacuation effort succeeded in extricating Westerners, “including their cats and dogs,” while leaving Rwandans to fend for themselves. Rutagambwa also described the failure of post-genocide efforts at reconciliation, including the cruel irony that perpetrators of the crimes who are currently detained by the International Criminal Court for Rwanda have decent housing, eat three times a day, and receive Western-style health care, including anti-retroviral medications for those who are HIV-positive, while the victims have largely returned to the poverty and benign neglect that they suffered prior to the outbreak of violence.

Participants at Padua cited the opportunity to hear such firsthand experiences as among the most valuable dimensions of the meeting.

“So much of our conversation as theologians is about what comes from Rome, because that’s what we have in common,” said Lisa Sowle Cahill, feminist theologian at Boston College.

“The wonderful thing here is that we’re sharing experiences from around the world, so it becomes local churches talking to local churches,” Cahill said.

The principal organizer of the Padua conference, titled “Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church,” was Jesuit Fr. James Keenan of Boston College. Keenan spearheaded efforts to raise $450,000 to cover the lodging and airfare of 140 theologians from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe, to make the event “the first international cross-cultural conference for
Catholic theological ethicists."

It’s not that southerners lack concerns for internal church matters. Fr. Marcio Fabri dos Anjos from Brazil, for example, argued that liberation theology, the movement that developed in Latin America following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), declined in part because church leaders saw it as a threat to their power. His fellow Brazilian, Zacharias, asserted that bishops appointed under John Paul II were part of a “precise program” of marginalizing Catholics involved in social action.

Such frustrations aside -- which seemed fairly widely felt in Padua -- Tirimanna of Sri Lanka said it’s “very fair, very applicable” to say that the lion’s share of theological energy in the Global South is focused on bringing the Gospel to the street.

“Could that be because we’re new churches, young churches, trying to find our own way of being church?” he asked. “I have an inkling that could be the case.”

While the exchange in Padua was stimulating, differences in theological judgment occasionally flared up.

For example, Polish Fr. Piotr Mazurkiewicz, representing Eastern and Central Europe, spoke about recent actions of the European parliament that he warned could criminalize public expressions of official Catholic teaching on homosexuality, seeking to define the church’s opposition to same-sex marriage and adoption by homosexuals as a form of “hate speech.”

His presentation brought challenges, especially from several Western Europeans and Americans. Spanish Redemptorist Fr. Marciano Vidal, for example, insisted that some church language on homosexuality, such as the idea that it is “objectively evil” or “intrinsically disordered,” cannot be used in public conversation. (Vidal’s moral theology was the object of a critical notification from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in February 2001).

For the most part, however, the spirit was deeply sympathetic, and participants said repeatedly they would come away with a deeper appreciation of the universality of the church.

Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley of Yale University, who helped organize a dinner for women theologians on Sunday night, said she defines theology as “the effort of a faith community to articulate what it believes,” and ethics as “the effort of a community to articulate how to live given what it believes.”

In that light, Farley suggested, the broadening of cross-cultural horizons at Padua can’t help but shape the way Catholic theology is done.

Jesuit Fr. Tony Mifsud, a Maltese priest who has been living and teaching theology in Chile since 1974, said he hopes that this will mean a theology focused less on changing the church -- not, he said, that the church couldn’t use some changing -- but more on changing the world.

“That’s where we should be,” he said. “That’s where people are suffering.”

American theologians urge critical look at church, society

American concerns surfaced most directly in Padua during a Tuesday afternoon panel on North America, which featured presentations by two well-known American theologians: Jesuit Fr. David Hollenbach of
Hollenbach began by describing the reaction at Boston College when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was recently awarded an honorary degree. Hollenbach said more than 200 professors signed a letter of protest, asserting that her support of the Iraq war was inconsistent with the “Catholic and Jesuit values” of the university.

The newspaper of the Boston archdiocese, Hollenbach said, replied that because the church’s opposition to war is not absolute, the protest was a matter of politics as opposed to doctrine.

Hollenbach said that response was emblematic of what he sees as a worrisome tendency in the church to subordinate questions such as war or the death penalty to positions on issues of sexuality and reproduction, such as abortion, seen as matters of faith independent of context.

Conceding that moral judgments about war and the death penalty depend upon circumstances, Hollenbach argued that the same thing is true of abortion, asserting that variables such as the stage of pregnancy should come into play. In assessing laws on abortion, he said, one also has to consider legislative alternatives.

Hollenbach called for “careful casuistry” on all of these issues, as opposed to appeals to “allegedly timeless positions.”

At the same time, he said, he did not mean to suggest that all prudential judgments are equal, stating that he believes the just war teaching of the Catholic church “means that the United States' war in Iraq is an unjust war.”

Hollenbach also called on American Catholics to become more active in critiquing what he called the country’s “hegemonic power in the world,” saying that this overwhelming power can “distort what seems reasonable to many Americans, and what the natural law requires.”

Porter called upon Catholic theologians and ethicists to engage what she described as a disturbing erosion of “the rule of law, due process, consistency and transparency” in the United States, justified by the exigencies of the war on terrorism and a perceived need for security.

“U.S. citizens and foreign nationals are being held without being charged with a crime, and without a hearing,” she said. “We’ve recently learned the government is practicing clandestine electronic surveillance. Most worrying of all is torture, which is now defended in principle and incorporated into the practices of the United States.”

Such shifts, Porter warned, have the potential to undermine America’s own democratic ideals.

For Catholics to address such issues, Porter added, they must first engage in “self-examination” about the ways in which the “structures and practices of the Roman Catholic church” are inconsistent with these ideals, including an “authoritarian, top-down church government, culminating in the papacy itself.”

“It is difficult to see how the concentration of power in one individual is consistent with the rule of law.” Porter said.

She called for a return to the “conciliarist movement,” which developed in the 15th century in response to schisms and rival claimants to the papacy. It asserted that an ecumenical council, not the pope, is the supreme authority in the church.

Porter argued that the sexual abuse crisis in the United States is pushing the church in this direction.

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