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Reports: Exploring the Heights and Depths: Boston College Center for Human Rights and International Justice

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Reports

EXPLORING THE HEIGHTS AND DEPTHS

Boston College Center for Human Rights and International Justice

David Hollenbach, S.J.

The Center for Human Rights and International Justice was founded in fall 2005. It conducts both education and research on some of the key human rights issues facing humanity today. Are human rights truly universal moral standards? How can religious communities, particularly Catholicism, support human rights and avoid exacerbating in-group/out-group conflicts? What are the human rights of the millions refugees and other displaced persons in the world today, 80 percent of whom are women and children? What are the human rights of the hundreds of thousands of persons being annually deported from the U.S today?

Center faculty are drawn from across the university, not only from fields obviously related to human rights like law and political science, but also from disciplines addressing broader dimensions of the human reality, such as psychology, theology, and ethics. Programs are conducted in close cooperation with practitioners working on human rights issues in the field. For example, the Center has worked with Jesuit Refugee Service to publish several volumes on the rights of refugees and with agencies in New England and in Central America who aid people being deported from the US.

Educational programs include a Certificate in Human Rights for students in graduate and professional schools, undergraduate courses such as one on human rights and humanitarian crises recently co-taught by a BC professor with Oxfam's director of humanitarian programs, and numerous lectures and seminars open to the BC community and the larger public. Overall, the Center seeks to advance the humanistic and Christian aims of the university by exploring not only the heights to which humanity can rise in the great achievements of culture but also the depths to which it can fall when human dignity is not respected. ■

David Hollenbach, S.J., is director of the Boston College Center for Human Rights and International Justice.



David Hollenbach, S.J., (left) and Michael Delaney, humanitarian director of Oxfam America (rear), talk with class members Emily Gannam '11 and Avila Stahlman '12. Photo by Lee Pellegrini.

ETHICISTS MEET: “NOT THE USUAL SUSPECTS”

James Keenan, S.J.

In 2003, I realized the need for Catholic theological ethicists to meet one another. Why? Years ago, Catholic theological ethicists were for the most part trained at one of the Roman universities. When we studied in Rome, we pretended that we were studying the universal church. The truth was, however, that we studied the Germans and the French, and a few Dutch, Belgians, Italians and Spaniards. Today we study elsewhere: in Italy, Spain, and France, but also in the U.S., Brazil, Kenya, the Philippines, India, etc. But the theologians we read today are as local today as they were 50 years ago.

Ironically, in the globalized world the occasion for studying together, as we did in Rome, becomes more and more rare, and more and more local. How could we study locally, and be aware of the theological ethics arising on each and every continent? I proposed we meet in order to aim at a theological ethics truly global and truly catholic.

On July 8, 2006, nearly 400 theological ethicists from 53 countries traveled to Padua and inaugurated the “First Cross Cultural Conference on Catholic Theological Ethics.”

On July 24, 2010, over 600 Catholic ethicists from 72 countries gathered in Trento, Italy, for our second international conference.

Did I say 53 and 72 countries were represented at Padua and Trento, respectively? Doesn't that seem more than normal? On both occasions, we anticipated Father General's call to “go beyond the loose family relationships we now have as institutions, and re-imagine and re-organize ourselves” in this globalized world. Therefore, we raised funds and invited — i.e., covered the transportation and housing expenses — of nearly 150 persons for the Padua conference and about 250 for the second. This was no easy feat, but the result was not “the usual suspects.” Instead, we had at Padua and Trento, voices from the developing world, including women and junior scholars.

As we plan for the future, we are in the middle of our scholarship program. We have now awarded to eight women full scholarships to study for Ph.D.s in theological ethics (in Kampala, Nairobi, Yaounde, and Kinshasa). Meanwhile we are considering what we can do in Latin America and Eastern Europe.

You can see records of both events as well as our plans for the future at www.catholicethics.com. ■

Jim Keenan, S.J., teaches ethics in the theology department at Boston College.