

**The International Congress of Moral Theology at Sarajevo.
Populist Politicians Want to Build 'Walls', Moral Theologians Want to Build 'Bridges'!**

By Fr. Leo Pessini¹

Over five hundred moral theologians and bioethicists will meet on 26-29 July 2018 in Sarajevo, the capital city of Bosnia-Herzegovina, for their third international conference. The subject of the congress will be ***'A Critical Moment for the Construction of Bridges: Catholic Theological Ethics Today'***.

This initiative to bring from all parts of the world moral theologians and academics dedicated to the study and the teaching of ethics and bioethics in the Catholic Church has been coordinated by a group of North American scholars of morality who constitute an important global network of contacts and exchanges of experiences with scholars of morality, ethic and bioethics in the five continents of the world. This organisation (or movement) is called ***'Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church'*** (hereafter CTEWC) and it is coordinated by Fr. James Keenan, an American Jesuit religious, of Boston College.

The CTEWC has already organised two international congresses. The first was held in Padua (Italy) in 2006, with 400 delegates from 54 countries, and it addressed the subject: ***'Catholic Theological Ethics in the Global Context. The First Intercultural Conference on Catholic Theological Ethics'***. In 2010 in Trento (Italy) the second international conference took place, in which 600 participants from 72 countries took part and it addressed the general subject: ***'Catholic Theological Ethics: Past, Present and Future'***.

The mission of the CTEWC offers us an idea of its commitment and its work over the last sixteen years. Today it is structured around a network of 1,400 experts in morality from every part of the planet.

Given that theological ethics is so widespread today that many professionals and academics are involved in our specific cultures and their interlocutors are also involved in other disciplines, a real need exists for an international exchange of ideas in the field of Catholic theological ethics.

Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church (CTEWC) recognises the need to appreciate the challenge of pluralism; to engage in dialogue starting from, and going beyond, local cultures; and to interconnect within a world Church that is not dominated by a single paradigm of the 'North' of the world.

In this light, the CTEWC is developing four areas of activity: to train new scholars of theological ethics, to sponsor regional conferences, to support the exchange of ideas through its own web site (***catholicethics.com***), and to publish a series of books.

For this third international congress in Sarajevo about 500 moral theologians from 80 different countries have been invited, with about a hundred participants from each continent. The city of Sarajevo itself offers relevant contexts for moral theology: interreligious and intercultural dialogue; the construction of peace as a response to ethnic conflict; and resistance to economic problems (40% of the population is unemployed)

The questions and issues for this congress are an alarm bell, a call to action in the face of two great emergencies: the crisis of the climate and its impact on the environment and marginalised populations, and the tragic banality of contemporary political leadership in many countries.

For James Keenan, one of the coordinators of this congress, 'this is a congress that is very different from the others because it is a matter of acting. Almost everything concerns 'what am I doing?' 'What are we doing?' 'How can we do it?' It is not a matter of pointing out data. It concerns action'. Keenan argues that the event of Padua, the first meeting of scholars of global ethics, 'concerned mutual listening'. The conference of Trento was 'about how to obtain a notion-concept of history'. 'The 2018 event is concerned with the present. It relates to the fact that we are living a kairotic moment, when we have environmental problems and we are facing up to this enormous problem of migrants and refugees'. 'The third event concerns the present and action...it concerns urgency'.

Sigrid Muller, the Dean of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Vienna, one of those taking part in this congress, has stated that this event is of special importance because populist leaders in various

¹ Our Superior General **Fr. Leocir Pessini** has been invited to this congress and has been given the subject: ***'The Ecological Crisis and Planetary Health – Person and Planet – Our Ethical Responsibility'***.

countries are 'speaking about building walls and fences to defend national interests. In such a political climate it is very important for experts in ethics to come together because it is they who are really worried about humanity at an international level. As experts in ethics, I think that we must ask for a new responsible way to find solutions at a global level because these problems cannot be limited to one nation-state. They have global origins'.

In the view of Muller, 'Sarajevo has a history of interreligious cooperation, with a population where the Muslims are in the majority, but with significant communities of Orthodox and Catholic Christians. I think that this is also a sign of the challenge that we will address: in the future we will need much more interreligious dialogue and cooperation'. In addition, 'Ethical concerns can also unite different religious groups in the task of helping and strengthening society to solve problems'.

For Pablo Blanco, of the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina, this event 'is trying to approach reality not only by considering a theoretical vision of the world but also by trying to discover how much God is present in reality'. Blanco also stated that the decision to hold the congress in Sarajevo, which was subject to a brutal siege for almost four years during the war in Bosnia from 1992 to 1995, is very significant. 'To be there, means to be near to injustice', he observed, 'to go to Sarajevo is to listen to the call of Pope Francis to go to the fringes'.

Some of the most important personalities of Catholic moral theology will be present at this event, amongst whom: Paul Schotsmans (Belgium), Linda Hogan (Ireland) and Fr. Charles Curran (USA). Three Cardinals will also take part: Vinko Puljic of Sarajevo, Blase Cupich of Chicago, and Peter Turkson, the President of the new Vatican dicastery for the promotion of integral human development.

Without any doubt this will be important event; certainly a watershed in this field, in the sense of building a new dialogue and cultural encounter; building bridges of communication and communion (Pope Francis) and not walls and fences of separation in the face of the diverse! Let us also remember that the first book on bioethics published in the world in 1970 was entitled *Bioethics: Bridge to the Future*, and it was written by the North American Van Rensselaer Potter (1909-2001). Almost fifty years ago bioethics was spoken about as a bridge of dialogue and encounter between science and humanity, as a well as bridge to the future.