

In Memoriam Edward Schillebeeckx (1914 – 2009)

This year we commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the influential dominican theologian which was Edward Schillebeeckx. But who was he?

Edward was born in Antwerp as the sixth child of a family which in the end numbered fourteen children. His birth happened at the beginning of the First World War. His father was a hard worker, with the kind of wisdom which leaves room for others and other things, his mother was a deeply religious woman. In these respects Edward certainly was a child of his parents. He followed a secondary education in the Jesuit college at Turnhout in Belgium, and his elder brother had become a jesuit, but he chose to become a dominican. He did not then know any dominicans, but the story of Dominic's life appealed to him. He was struck by the balance in Dominic's life, his serene happiness, his openness to the world and his emphasis on theological study directed towards preaching. And these qualities he had found in Dominic, became qualities which would very much be his own too.

Edward especially became committed to a scholarly approach, someone who did theology based on a deeply religious view of life.

In 1958 he came to Nijmegen as the successor of his Dutch fellow dominican Kreling as university professor of systematic theology. In Louvain already Edward had left neo-scholastic theology behind and he started his lectures in Nijmegen, surprisingly at the time, with eschatology and salvation history. And in the course of the following years he more and more made use of modern philosophy and social sciences. He was a great reader, both in quantity and in depth, and made notes all the time in his characteristic handwriting.

As a member of the Dominican community of the Albertinum Schillebeeckx was set free for scholarly work and therefore exempted from most community duties. He followed his own rhythm of strenuous study till after midnight, preferably with the radio going, and getting up rather late. In the community, though, he never passed up evenings when games were played. He loved to play scrabble.

Edward was not a theologian who pursued his studies for the sake of theology itself. As a theologian he felt himself a preacher. For him theology was a form of christian proclamation. He loved to preach during the Eucharist and the best compliment people could give him there was that his words were comforting and liberating. For his students and for the readers of his books his main concern was not just that his words would give them intellectual satisfaction, but also that they would strengthen them in their faith. For Schillebeeckx faith was a 'confession of a rational human being' {of anders, naargelang het citaat, dat ik niet ken, TS}. For him faith and reason had a critical function towards each other, which could only be beneficial to people. In the course of his whole life's work he tried to formulate in a personal, scholarly and spiritual manner who God wants to be for humankind.

That it is God's honour that true humanity may flourish was his basic conviction, to which he also directed his own life. His many honorary doctorates and the Erasmus Prize he accepted gratefully, but they certainly were not an occasion for pretensions. Typical for him was the following step. When he was still lecturing in the Louvain Dominican studium he also became the spiritual director of the student brothers. He then decided to go and live with them, because he did not want to be their superior, but their eldest brother. During all his life he remained accessible to everyone, and especially to students, who often came to him for advice. He was a good listener and was able to analyse matters sharply and quickly,

Schillebeeckx leaves an impressive oeuvre, as I realized again when I saw the eleven volumes of his Collected Works. And they are only about two thirds of all he published.

Of course, he is not only known for his publications, but also for his contributions 'behind the scenes' during the second Vatican council, and its sequel in Holland, the Pastoral Council, during the tensions around the publication of the New (Dutch) Catechism in 1966, and, of course, during the three investigations in Rome of several of his theological views, which never led to a condemnation.

In spite of setbacks he never contemplated leaving the church or the order. He continued to describe himself as a 'happy theologian' and remained optimistic

and full of hope till the end of his life. About the future of a certain theology he wrote in his 'Theological Testament':

Some forms of theology seem to be destined for a longer life than the author's life. They gain a new life ever again and will be actualised by others, without them becoming - as happened before - imitators. ('Theologisch testament', Baarn 1994, p. 172)

The future will decide in how far his theology will survive in this sense, but so far the indications certainly are favourable.

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