The Relevance of Professor Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P. For the Twenty-First Century

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Introduction

The twentieth century was a time of profound development and change in Catholic theology, a time that might only be compared with the thirteenth century in that regard. In the thirteenth century, theology shifted its locus from the monastery to the new universities in the burgeoning cities of Europe, and developed new methods for exploring divine truth. It gave us towering figures such as Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure. In the twentieth, theology renewed itself by at once returning to its sources and by engaging a rapidly changing world. In that century that now lies just behind us, we see once again what makes for the most important advances in the theological articulation of faith: a rediscovery of the depths of Tradition, of the faith that has been handed down to us from the apostles; and its wrestling with the great issues that re-emerge in a time of change in society and the Church.

By any reckoning, the Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx would have to be ranked as one of the great theologians in the Catholic Church during the twentieth century. His career as a theologian carries both of these characteristics just mentioned: his being schooled in the great *ressourcement* or return to the sources that marked French and German theology from the first decade of the century up to its midpoint, an influence that marked the publications in the first third of his immense output; and a direct

engagement of a wide range of contemporary issues from the mid-1960s onward. Both the methods he introduced into theology and the way he engaged great theological themes have, in some instances, changed how we do theology. His dialogue with the larger world can be seen as exemplary of how to at once engage the world and still be critical of it.

We are now nearing the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. It is an appropriate time to ask: where do we find ourselves today, especially vis-à-vis the century that lies behind us and, to what extent does the century now immediately behind us give us guidance in our present journey? What is the significance of Edward Schillebeeckx's work for the time in which we now find ourselves?

In this presentation, I wish to address those questions, focusing especially on how and to what extent this Dominican theologian's trajectory as a theologian can help us navigate our current situation. I will do this in three parts. The first part will look at Schillebeeckx's life and work as it can be related to the twentieth century. Trying to discern patterns within the way his theology is interwoven within the texture of the times might give us some insight into how we might comport ourselves in living up to the call of the Gospel in our own situation. The second part will try to point to some of the emerging issues of our own time that theology must try to address. Put another way: what is the theological agenda before us today? A third part will then return to the work of Schillebeeckx to see how and to what extent his work can illumine our path today. By proceeding in this way, I hope to contribute both to the ongoing research into the theology of Edward Schillebeeckx as well as help us continue to find our way in the current situation.

Edward Schillebeeckx: Theologian of the Twentieth Century

The British historian Eric Hobsbawm has called the twentieth century the "short century."[1] If one looks at the idea of "century" from the perspective of a number of events that had great impact on one another, and have drawn together in order to create a certain coherence, one comes to realize the "centuries" are not created so much by the turn of numbers, like some kind of chronic odometer. Centuries are created in our minds by the events that occur within them.

Hobsbawm sees the twentieth century beginning in 1914, with the First World War, and ending in 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union. 1914 marked the beginning of the end of European Empires, those expansionist and colonizing adventures that had so marked the previous era. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the other end of Hobsbawm's short century, ended the dominance of totalitarian ideologies that had marked the century and had created, especially in its second half, a bipolar political and economic world. It was a time of significant shifting in at least one view of the world, as seen from Europe and—to some extent—our own country. Two wars on a scale that had never before so occurred on our planet, the struggle with the totalitarian ideologies of fascism and communism, and the nuclear threat during the second half of the century—these represent some of the defining events of that century.

The beginning of Hobsbawm's short century certainly marks Edward Schillebeeckx's own life. He was born in November, 1914 in Antwerp in Belgium. His family lived in Kortenberg, some kilometers to the southeast, but had been evacuated to Antwerp ahead of the advancing German troops into Belgium. The family was able to return to their home shortly after this time. But the fact that such a significant event as the World War

[1] Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes:The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (New York: Time, Inc.:1994).

was prominent in where Schillebeeckx was to be born helps provide one kind of perspective on his life and work.

His education in philosophy as a Dominican scholastic in nearby Leuven in the 1930s came at a time of great ferment in the Catholic Church. An attempt in the nineteenth century to bring theology into dialogue with new historical methods and developments in philosophy had been brought to an abrupt halt in 1908 by Pope Pius X. This movement in theology came to be known from its condemnation as Modernism. While that condemnation stopped a certain direction in theology, philosophy could be pursued with some attention to new developments, as long as it remained in close connection with Scholasticism. These developments were not considered proper fare for feeding the minds of the young, but at least it made philosophy a forum where creative thought could be engaged.

The Dominicans in Leuven were fortunate to have someone such as Dominicus De Petter (1905-1971) teaching philosophy. De Petter, little known outside the Flemish-speaking world, tried to bring together Thomism with the new currents in phenomenology. Phenomenology tried to begin philosophy by attending closely to experience. As such, it might be considered a more inductive approach to philosophy—an approach that moves from experience to theory, rather than beginning with theory to make sense of experience. Experience as a starting point was largely unknown in Catholic theology at the time. If anything, experience in itself was to be mistrusted, inasmuch as it was corrupted by sin and humankind's fallen nature. De Petter's turn to experience was undergirded by a confidence in the graciousness of God, a confidence that makes possible a worldview wherein one begins with the goodness of creation and

the presence of a gracious God, and then moves to its fallen character. This might be contrasted with a more Augustinian reading that would tend to begin with fallenness and move to the infusion of God's grace into human beings.

The relative optimism of De Petter's approach makes a dialogue with the world both possible and necessary. It is possible because the world makes for a worthy dialogue partner, inasmuch as it is viewed first of all as God's creation and secondly as continually suffused with God's presence. It is necessary because it too is a site of God's revelation to us. Revelation is not restricted to what is found in Bible and Tradition. Following Augustine's dictum, one must always read two books at once: the Book of Divine Revelation (the bible) in one hand, and the book of nature in the other.

Schillebeeckx's own use of phenomenology in his pioneering work on the sacraments and his appeal to experience in his later theology will become important for theology, not only for the insights he produced, but also for what he offers us today as to how to come to terms with our own situation.

Schilleeeckx's advanced theological education took place in Paris immediately after the end of the Second World War. He was prepared to begin that course of study already earlier, but that war postponed his departure. (Again we see his own development intertwined with the events of his time.) He studied at Le Saulchoir, the Dominican house of studies. Le Saulchoir, along with the Jesuit house of studies at Fourvière near Lyon, was at the center of the *ressourcement* in France. After Pius X had condemned modernism in 1908, speculative and philosophical theology became impossible, other than as elaborations safely within the confines of a prescribed Scholasticism. Theologians in France, as well as some in Germany, turned their attention instead to

historical theology, a rereading of Patristic and Medieval sources. This retrieval of the Tradition led to a veritable revival of Catholic theology. It opened up a fruitful and authentic alternative to the Scholastic speculation that had marked the most recent history of Catholic Theology. This re-sourcing of theology paved the way for the Second Vatican Council in the mid-twentieth century, especially for a renewed understanding of the Church.

The best-known names in this movement at the Saulchoir were Marie-Dominique Chenu, O.P. (1895-1990) and Yves Congar, O.P. (1905-1988). Chenu's retrieval of the thought of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries stand still today as important landmarks.[2] Congar might be reckoned the single most influential theologian at the Second Vatican Council.[3] Schillebeeckx wrote his doctoral dissertation under the direction of Chenu, a Patristic and medieval retrieval of a theology of the sacraments.[4] Even though it was for a long time only available in Flemish (a French translation has appeared in recent years), it was remarkably influential. In 1959, Schillebeeckx published *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, which was soon translated into several other European languages. Here we see the confluence of his philosophical and theological training. A phenomenological view of the sacraments is paired with a retrieval of a patristic view of sacrament as *mysterion*, to present Christ as the primordial sacrament of God's presence and grace within our midst. Sacraments are not just instruments by which grace comes to us, but rather represent a profound and transformative encounter with God. Here modern

[2] See especially his *Man, Nature and Society in the Twelfth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).
[3] See his two-volume work, *Mon Journal de Concile* (Paris: Edition du Cerf, 2002) for a record of his immense activity and involvement in the Council.
[4] *De sacramentele heilseconomie. Theologische bezinning op St. Thomas' sacramentenleer in het licht van de traditie en de hedendaagse sacramentenproblematiek* (Antwerp: 't Groeit, 1952).

phenomenology meets the Church Fathers: engagement with contemporary life and the best of the Tradition takes place. *Christ the Sacrament* remains of the great examples of makes for the best of Catholic theology.

Chenu was more than a great medievalist. He was also very much engaged with the issues of his time. He was a leading figure in the worker priest movement, an effort in France in the 1940s and early 1950s to evangelize the urban working class. But he was also what we might call today a public intellectual. On Saturdays, in the best of Parisian fashion, he would hold a *salon* to which some of the leading intellectual figures in Paris would come. There they would discuss new books and follow the intellectual currents of the time. Even those who did not count themselves believers would occasionally attend. Perhaps the best known of these today was the (then) young existentialist philosopher Albert Camus.

I mention this about Chenu because one sees much of the same impulses in the life of Schillebeeckx himself. While undoubtedly a first-rate scholar of theology, he would also read extensively beyond his field, especially in philosophy. His training in the *ressourcement* would reassert itself throughout his career, most notably in his retrieval of the history of the priesthood in the 1980s. It led him to read more widely in contemporary exegesis of the New Testament than any other theologian of his time in his production of the first volume of the *Jesus* trilogy. (Indeed he was berated by some of his colleagues in theology for spending so much time on this in that work!). He was also engaged very much in issues of his time. This was especially evident during his long tenure as professor of dogmatic theology and the history of theology in Nijmegen (1958-1983), where he was involved in Church life at all its levels, and even the political life of

the country.[5] He was the first (and only) theologian to be awarded the prestigious Erasmus Prize in 1982 for his contributions to European culture.

In 1959, when Pope John XXIII announced that he would hold an Ecumenical Council, the bishops in the Netherlands wrote a Christmas letter to all the Catholics in that country, expressing their hopes for renewal within the Church that the impending Council might bring. Their vision of a more open, participatory Church caught the imagination of Catholics across Europe, and was quickly translated into most of the Western European languages. It managed to send shock waves through the Vatican; in Rome, the Vatican banned the letter from Italian newsstands. It was an open secret that Edward Schillebeeckx, the new *ordinarius* for theology at the University of Nijmegen, had provided the draft with which the bishops worked. The Roman Curia took note of that, especially Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, the prefect of the Holy Office. From this point we begin to see confrontations with curial officials.[6]

Schillebeeckx accompanied the Dutch bishops to Rome as their theological advisor in 1962. However, when list of the official theological experts or *periti* was published, Schillebeeckx's name was not among them. Thus he had little direct influence since he was not formally incorporated into the commissions that were drafting the documents. (He did have some direct influence on parts of the Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation, *Dei verbum*, and substantial influence on the section on marriage in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*). But this banning

[5] He was involved in the 1960s in drafting the constitution for the PPR (*Politieke Partij Radikalen)*, an offshoot of the Catholic People's Party (KVP) that sought a more radical implementation of Catholic Social Teaching in Dutch politics.

[6] It should be noted that that Schillebeeckx was investigated formally three times by the Holy Office and its successor forms (the Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith), but was never found to be in theological error.

from the official channels had a paradoxical effect. It freed him to move about, advising bishops and other theologians on a variety of points. It made it possible also for him to compose lengthy critiques of drafts of the documents that found their way into the hands of those serving on the commissions. And, perhaps most importantly, it allowed him to give series of lectures on theology in the evenings for interested bishops, who took the opportunity of the Council and the presence of so many theologians to get some continuing education in theology. In all of this, he exercised perhaps more influence on the Council than had he been a *peritus*.

Schillebeeckx attended all four sessions of the Council.[7] Rubbing shoulders with theologians and bishops from around the world broadened his horizons beyond his life in Belgium and the Netherlands. But was perhaps additionally important was his first visit to the United States in 1966, where was went on the lecture circuit of some seventeen cities. It was his first experience of the United States, and he found its vitality and energy fascinating, reminiscent of that of de Tocqueville a hundred thirty years earlier. Talk of secularization in society was much in the air at that time, and it challenged Schillebeeckx to think more deeply about the Church in the modern world. The lectures from that first visit to this country, published as *God the Future of Man* in 1968, mark an important turning point in his work.

Heretofore, his theological writing was couched in a prose common to theologians at that time, carrying with it more than whiff of the prose of Scholasticism of the theology of that era. It would sometimes read as though it were a somewhat stilted translation from the Latin. With *God the Future of Man*, Schillebeeckx's prose would now seem to

[7] During those sessions, he regularly sent letters back to his confreres, giving his own impressions of the Council. These are being collected and will be published (in English translation), most likely in 2011.

be more directly addressed to his audience. To be sure, his writing is marked by lengthy sentences, with nouns often surrounded by a veritable bevy of verbs, with qualifying adverbs throughout. But it had the sense of an urgency to share with a larger public in an almost breathless manner the riches of faith as those riches encountered the contemporary world. Schillebeeckx sees his theology as addressed to ordinary believers (and at times, ordinary non-believers), even though his prose might seem daunting to that intended audience. Theology more than ever became for him something that was to be addressed not to fellow theologians, but to the entire Church.[8]

In order to be addressed to the entire Church—and indeed the entire world—Schillebeeckx began a course of reading that was to take him across the breadth of contemporary European philosophical thought in the English-, French-, and German-speaking world. His writings from the late 1960s onward would engage British analytic philosophy, German hermeneutics, French structuralism, and the critical social theory of the Frankfurt School. He also began to reach out to movements in theology beyond the North Atlantic world, especially to the work of Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez and some of the other leading Latin American theologians. What emerged in his thought in the 1970s and 1980s was a rich and deep engagement with the modern world, especially as it was manifested in Europe and North America, but also beyond.

His work reflects the idea that the world was moving into a new situation, and for that situation to be properly understood, one could not find a single theory that could *a priori* describe and explain that world. As a result, he moved his starting point to the idea of

[8] Although his theology could be seen to be embarking in a new direction, his return to the tradition to provide resources for responding to new situations continued to mark his work throughout his career. His book on the Eucharist, the first two volumes of the *Jesus* trilogy, and his investigation into the nature of ordained ministry all bear strong marks of that.

experience. One needed to attend to ordinary people's experience in order to see how they were encountering God and what consequences this had for their thinking and acting. While this appeared in a number of essays in the early 1970s, it becomes most powerful in his first two volumes of the *Jesus* trilogy, published in 1974 and 1977.[9] "It began with an experience"—the "it" being the disciples' faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. For this reason the first volume is a long study on the historical Jesus, so that we might as it were follow along with the disciples as their minds and hearts were awakened to faith. The second volume opens with a long reflection on experience, on how human experience can lead us to embrace the gift of faith. This was a far different approach from traditional Catholic christologies that would begin with the Chalcedonian formula of the hypostatic union (that is, the union of the divine and human natures of Christ in a single person), and then deduce from that what we might know about Jesus Christ.

If there are two key concepts that underlie his Christology here, they are experience and soteriology. Schillebeeckx is interested in the experience of coming to believe and the life of faith that follows upon it. In that encounter, he highlights how we experience God. Hence soteriology, or what God means for us, is of paramount importance. Common phrases that run through these two volumes are that God is a God of human beings, and that the human cause is God's cause. By these he means that God is not some distant reality, but is intensely engaged with human beings and partisan to the things that matter most to us. A special concern of his is for human suffering, and the ways to be freed of it. An important concept for him here is the "contrast experience." A contrast experience occurs when we encounter something that should not be: the

[9] The trilogy appeared in English as *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (1979), *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (1980), and *Church: The Human Story of God* (1990), all published by Continuum. These titles all deviate from the Dutch originals.

suffering of a child, acute poverty, domination or humiliation. The contrast between what is and what should be opens up a new consciousness wherein the workings of grace might occur.

Extra mundum nulla salus—outside the world there is no salvation. This is a phrase that figures prominently in the third and final volume of the *Jesus* trilogy, published in 1989. It is an obvious play on the classical theological formula *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*—outside the Church there is no salvation—that characterized Catholic belief from the Middle Ages down into the mid-twentieth century. By substituting "world" for "Church" Schillebeeckx is not trying to downplay the importance of the Church in God's salvific plan. Nor is he denying the transcendent dimensions of salvation. What he is intending to say is that the world must be taken seriously and that God works salvation through the world as well as through the mediating capacity of the Church. Some critics have accused him of being so preoccupied with understanding the world that he has lost sight of God and of theology. He has responded to this by saying that the *salus*, the salvation in this formula, cannot be forgotten—nor has he forgotten it. We need to attend closely to what God is doing in the world on behalf of humankind. Without keeping both world and salvation in critical tension we will fail to follow how God is among us.

In the 1990s, students of Schillebeeckx's work began to notice a pattern that was implicit in his writings but that had never been made entirely explicit.[10] That was the doctrine of creation. Our understanding of how God is active in the world relies on an understanding that God created the world and, as such, was intended to mirror the glory of God. The centrality of creation was important in three ways. First of all, it allowed us

[10] Especially the Australian Dominican Philip Kennedy. See his dissertation *Deus humanissimus. The Knowability of God in the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx* (Fribourg: Fribourg University Press, 1993).

to see in Christ "concentrated creation", that is, the whole of God's plan for creation is evident in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Second, it provides a basis for a theology of culture, which at once supported a vision of humanity's culture-producing process as an extension of God's creative act. And third, it gives a more solid theological grounding to the contemporary concern for the environment. In a way, this focus on creation can sum up the impact and influence of Edward Schillebeeckx's theology for the twentieth century: taking the world in all its manifestations seriously, and bringing that into intense encounter with the living God as manifested to us especially in Jesus of Nazareth.

As one can see, Edward Schillebeeckx's life as a theologian has been heavily intertwined with events of the twentieth century: from his birth during the first months of the First World War, the delay of his graduate studies by the Second World War, the impact of the Second Vatican Council, the emerging secularization in North America and Europe, the concerns for the world Church, especially in Latin America, to the challenge of environment degradation at the end of the century. His influence has been especially strong in North America and northwestern Europe. His work has been translated into fourteen languages. A professorial chair was established in his honor at his university in Nijmegen in 1999. He has been the subject of seventy doctoral dissertations. He tried constantly to address the issues of his time during his active career, and continues to follow contemporary debates today with great interest. Yet such engagement with the contemporary situation runs the risk of a certain ephemeral impact: the one who marries today's opportunity is a widower tomorrow, as the old saying goes. And so we can ask: Is there a role for his theology in the twenty-first century? Schillebeeckx himself has said

on many occasions that he wished to speak to people in his own time, and that he had no intention of establishing a school of followers. But theology is not only about addressing concerns in the immediate present; it is also about deeper, abiding realities as well—something Schillebeeckx also recognizes. But is his work relevant for the twenty-first century? In order to answer that question, we must first discern what are some of the issues that a theology that tries to engage the world must face in these early years of the twenty-first century.

Issues in the Twenty-First Century and Their Meaning for Theology

As we near the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, can we discern issues that will be facing us in the years ahead? There are of course a number of difficulties in trying to do so. As I have already maintained, centuries are probably not best reckoned by referring to the calendar alone. So when did the twenty-first century begin? Following Hobsbawm, would we say that it began in 1991? One could make a plausible case for this. The collapse of the Soviet Union ended the bipolar political arrangement that had defined the world since 1945. It did not mark the "end of history," as some proposed at the time. Rather, we saw the onrush of what came to be called "globalization" with market capitalism as the sole reigning economic force in the world. It did also end for most the attraction of utopian thinking that promoted the human engineering of societies from the top down.

Or did the new century begin on September 11, 2001 when the political, economic, and social dominance of the United States was forcefully challenged—ushering in perhaps the end of the "American Century" and the rise of Asia, especially China? Did the events of 9/11 issue in a new international insecurity through the threat of terrorism?

Both of these possibilities are plausible, and we are probably not yet far enough into the century in order to decide clearly for one or the other—or among other possibilities that may arise. For the sake of this presentation, let me suggest three salient features that are taking shape in the twenty-first century with which, in my estimation, we will have to reckon. They are: the resurgence of religion, the end of postmodernity, and concern for the environment.

The Resurgence of Religion

God is Back is the title of a new book just published by two editors of *The Economist*.[11] The title of the book comes from the fact that *The Economist*, at the beginning of this decade, had declared that God was dead. The authors now see evidence of a vibrant belief in God, even in highly secular societies. Their vision is not a polyannish one that sees all light without shadows. They recognize that secularization has not gone away, and not all manifestations of religion are benevolent. Religion is sometimes used to legitimate violence.

What the authors are catching up to in saying that "God is back" is something that sociologists have been noticing since the early 1990s, namely, a reversal of the secularization hypothesis. That hypothesis once suggested that as countries modernized, they would become increasingly secular, that is, religion would retreat from the public sphere to the private realm and then, would disappear altogether. Northern Europe was seen as the paradigm and vanguard of this movement. Today Europe is becoming to be seen as more the exception than the rule. Ever since the secularization hypothesis was put forward a century ago, religion has managed time and again to find a way back.

[11] John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).

This does not mean that secularization is going to disappear. In Europe and North America two models for the future have been proposed. The first is by the German philosopher and sociologist Juergen Habermas.[12] He has suggested that we live in what he calls a "post-secular society." By that he means that secularity in Europe has to recognize its religious roots, and that today secularity and religion live side by side. Secularity no longer can be utterly dominant, and it can no longer unilaterally govern the rules of public discourse, but must share the making of those rules with religion.

The Canadian (and Catholic) philosopher Charles Taylor has put forward a somewhat different model.[13] He sees three realities living side by side; namely, secularity, religion, and the remnants of European romanticism. By the latter he means fragments of the utopian movements that figured so strongly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—socialism, communism, nationalism. These together will shape the discourse in the public forum in the twenty-first century.

However one wishes to construe this, one part of the message is the same: religion has to take a place that it was long denied. This simply reflects both the reality of what we see today: immigrants to a secular Europe are raising the profile of religion there, and Pentecostalism and Islam are now filling the void in Africa and Latin America left by the collapse of secular ideologies.

The End of Postmodernity

In the 1980s and 1990s there was much talk in the air of "postmodernity," a condition that was growing up around the edges of modernity, and had become salient especially in highly developed post-industrial societies. It was characterized by a fragmentation of

[12] Juergen Habermas, *Zwischen Primitivismus und Naturalismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005).
[13] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

previous coherences, the breakdown of a shared vision of society, a pluralism that could not be reduced to any kind of unity, and a general instability kept in motion by the juggernaut of globalization. The postmodern was a coming unglued of modernity, a breaking down of a society that had held together by a sense of common history, vision, and purpose. Infinite choice replaced moral purpose, individuals fashioned their own stories and projects rather than finding them and their place within larger social configurations, and the ephemeral character of just about everything was evident throughout.

While this could be a fairly accurate picture of certain strata of such societies, especially the middle and upper middle class, the strain of such increasing pluralization started to show its limits at about the same time. Worldwide migration was creating multicultural societies that could not cope with it within the inherited postmodern models of multiculturalism. The experience of instability after 9/11 in this country, and 7/11 in Europe showed that the celebration of fragmentation and the indeterminate character of everything had reached their limits. There was emerging a great sense of search for meaning and purpose, of finding a moral compass to move through rather than merely accumulate ever more choices: just what could offer a coherent, shared vision that was not utopian or totalitarian, phenomena that had so shaped and misshaped the twentieth century?

Especially among the youngest generation coming of age, a "search for the whole" has come much more into evidence, a search that takes the complexity and plurality of the contemporary world seriously, yet seeks out patterns of coherence and direction within them. The experience of the globalization of the world has only made this quest more

urgent: the speed of communication and how it compressed time and space, the pluralization of our cities, and the ever-mounting drive to consume ever more appear to end either in exhaustion or nihilism.

Part of the resurgence in religion in Western societies has been a response to this end to postmodernity. We can no longer celebrate diversity without attending to foundations that anchor and guide us. People have been turning to religion (and in its softer form, what is called "spirituality", in the sense of religious feelings without institutional commitment) as one way to find a path through the kaleidoscope of change and choice.

Challenge to the Environment

The dangers of environmental degradation were first signaled in 1962 in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*.[14] Her call to action has become increasingly magnified, so much so that its concern for the environment is one of the overarching visions or "views of the whole" of many young people today. Environmental degradation challenges a whole range of assumptions about our lives on earth, the relation of culture to nature, the understanding of the human vis-à-vis other sentient beings and the earth itself. Theology has been rather slow in taking up these challenges, and there is still much written that is little more than a list of "shoulds" and "oughts" or an uncritical veneration of nature or holistic lifestyles. As the implications of environmental degradation for conflict, migration of peoples, and competition for increasingly scarce food resources become more evident, theologians will need to reflect upon where we are to find God, and the salvation coming from God through Christ, is to be found in the midst of all of this.

[14] (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

The Relevance of Edward Schillebeeckx for the Twenty-First Century

This brings me to the third and final part of this presentation: what is the relevance of Edward Schillebeeckx's theological thought for the twenty-first century? As was noted, one can read his theology as deeply intertwined with events of the twentieth century, events that had influence on his thought and theological development. He sought to address the theological issues that were most pressing for the men and women of his time: understanding God in a secular society, grasping how individual human experience is a pathway to God, the meaning of salvation in Jesus Christ for us today. Understandably, he could not anticipate entirely issues that at that time still lay in the future.

I have selected three salient issues that face us especially in our part of the world in the twenty-first century: the resurgence of religion, the turning from postmodernity to something new (I called seeking visions of the whole), and concern for the environment. Schillebeeckx has written some on the third issue regarding the environment, but the other two do not figure largely in his oeuvre. What might his thought contribute to all of these?

I would like to list four dimensions of his thought that I believe will endure well into our century and help us with these questions. They are: (1) his method of doing theology, (2) the centrality of God and God's salvation, (3) his concern for the human, and (4) his insights into suffering.

The Methods for Theology

There are three aspects of Schillebeeckx's reflection on the methods for engaging in theology that continue to be of great value for the twenty-first century. The first is his

inductive approach, by which he tries to begin with experience. To be sure, we see today that it is difficult at times to talk of "common human experience" without retreating to a high level of abstraction**.** We are more aware of difference in human experience: differences between men and women, between races and ethnicities, between the powerful and the oppressed. Yet rather than allowing these divergent voice to cancel one another out, they add to a symphony within which we can begin to discern some truths—or at the least, enduring questions that everyone must take up. Listening to experience is more than listening to an individual or a group; echoes of their location in culture and society resound here as well. This is humanity in all its concreteness, something that Catholic theology affirms again and again in the doctrine of the Incarnation. Christ became one of us, not as a universal archetype, but one of us in all our particular limitation.

Second, the primacy of narrative over abstract thinking. The subtitle of the first *Jesus* book in Dutch was *The Story of the Living One*. It has become more and more recognized that we discern our own identities and connect those identities with others and with something larger through the use of stories. Schillebeeckx's attempt to recast classical Christology as story carries this important insight. Images, metaphors, and stories make sense out of our experience and make it available to others. Truth itself has a narrative character as it reveals in its telling the verities by which we try to live.

Third, the importance of a critical but engaged encounter with our world and with God. Theology is more than the passive reception or acquiescence to truth. It is a realization that our world, even though created by God, carries within it deception, falsehood, and

even malice. These must be identified, critically engaged (either in resistance or in emancipation), and resituated in the social fabric in a transformed manner.

These tools for engaging our world—attention to experience, recognizing the power of narrative, and critical encounter—remain some of the best we have for dealing with the challenges of the twenty-first century. As we explore how religion and secularity might engage each other—sharing their strengths and criticizing their shortcomings—we need to attend to their concrete impact on persons and societies, how we discern the threads of meaning that can be woven together into bonds of solidarity, and how we can keep a critical edge for the sake of both fidelity to God's truth and authenticity in our existence.

The Centrality of God and of Salvation

Extra mundum nulla salus. The presence of God in our world, and God's intentions for the world need to remain a central focus. How Schillebeeckx was able to discern this in different moments of his theological work—in the encounter with Christ as the primordial sacrament, as God as the future of humankind in his first encounters with secularity, in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—all of these form together a kind of paradigm that can guide in our own quest today for the living God.

An example here might be a help. If one notices the salience of the concept of reconciliation that has so marked the last ten years or so, one might see there the working of God. In 2005, the World Council of Churches made it the theme of its mission conference, held each six years: "Come Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile!" In the Bishops' Synod that began this week in Rome, reconciliation amid the conflicts and challenges that face Africa is the central theme. The Church has been rediscovering the centrality of the mission of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the world as one of reconciling

all things. This, I believe, is an example of how we are reading God's activity in the world today, by focusing on the profound brokenness of humanity and its deep need for healing and for reconciliation.

The Place of the Human

Edward Schillebeeckx's thought shared much of the concern of developing a more anthropocentric theology in the twentieth century, following others such as Karl Rahner. It was not intended to replace the centrality of God in theology; rather, it hoped to restore the human being to its proper place. Schillebeeckx explored this especially in the concept of the *humanum*, by which he meant the human being revealed in each of us as the image of God, but tending toward the eschatological fulfillment in Christ for which we were intended. This was not a utopian concept, because it was not a matter of humanity being unfolded to show what had always been there and what needed to find its special place; rather, it realized, in an eschatological framework, that God was drawing us into the future.

At the same time, humanity was not entirely indeterminate. In the second volume of the *Jesus* trilogy, Schillebeeckx proposes a series of anthropological constants, that is, axioms that recur throughout human life, wherever it may be found on the planet, that together chart out what it means to be human. This proposal from thirty years ago continues to have great attraction (in fact, a growing attraction) among young theologians. It emphasizes the relatedness and interdependence of all human life, its embodied and its social character. As we look especially of how to situate the human in the great issues of this century—biomedical, cultural, spiritual, and environmental—my intuition is that these constants will continue to exercise a genuine impulse in

anthropological thinking. Christology dominated the theological agenda in the last quarter of the twentieth century; my guess is that it will be anthropology that will be the leading agenda in this first quarter of the twenty-first.[15]

Suffering

The theme that has captured the most attention among the youngest generation of scholars has been Schillebeeckx's understanding of suffering. No fewer than six doctoral dissertations have been published in the last ten years devoted to one or other aspects of this topic.[16] The geographical and cultural spread of authors of these dissertations is also notable: two from Asia (Malaysia and the Philippines), two from the United States, and one each from Australia and Canada. What this seems to indicate is that Schillebeeckx's understanding of suffering appeals across a wide variety of contexts.

As was noted above, suffering is an experience that has been central to Schillebeeckx's later thinking, especially evident since the publication of the second volume of the *Jesus* trilogy in 1977. The contrast experience produced in suffering in turn expresses itself in protest: this is something that should not be! He in no way glorifies the suffering of Christ as an appeasement of divine wrath or necessary for expiation, but sees it rather as a solidarity with the suffering of all oppressed humanity, and a cry to God for liberation. His capacity to bring this to words has found resonance in places far beyond Europe and

[15] I made this point in the lecture inaugurating the professorship of theology and culture sponsored by the Edward Schillebeeckx Foundation at the University of Nijmegen. Robert Schreiter, *Theologie en kultuur in een nieuw millennium* (Nijmegen: Nijmegen University Press, 2000).

[16] Kathleen McManus, "The Place and Meaning of Suffering in the theology of Edward Schillebeeckx" (Toronto 1999); Elizabeth Tillar, "Suffering for Others in the Thought of Edward Schillebeeckx" (Fordham 1999); Derek Simon, "Provisional Liberations, Fragments of Salvation: The Practical Critical Soteriology of Edward Schillebeeckx" (Ottawa 2001); Aloysius Rego, "Suffering and Salvation: The Salvific Meaning of Suffering in the Later Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx" (Melbourne 2001); Antonio Sison, "Political Holiness in Third Cinema: the Crystallization of Edward Schillebeeckx's Eschatological Perspective in Kidlat Tahimik's 'The Perfumed Nightmare'" (Nijmegen 2004); Michael Teng, "Be Merciful: The Tragedy and Productive Power of the Suffering *humanum* in E. Schillebeeckx and the *Analects* of Confucius" (Rome [Alphonsiana] 2009).

North America, where much of his theological attention had been directed. This will no doubt be one of his enduring contributions to theology in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

His methods of approach to theology, his concern for God and salvation, his contributions to an understanding of the human, and his approach to suffering—these are all things that will carry well into our century. In December 2008, a conference was held at the Catholic University in Leuven precisely for the purpose of looking at what Schillebeeckx will mean for the twenty-first century. Many younger scholars were invited who had written their dissertations on Schillebeeckx or had been influenced in important ways by his thought. Where his thought might be located in this post-secular (or, if you will, post-postmodern) age was a central point of those working in Leuven on Schillebeeckx's work. His contribution to a theology of culture, certainly a related theme, came especially from the study group in Nijmegen. But other themes explored here were well in evidence as well.

Schillebeeckx himself was not able to be present, but he sent a letter to the participants, thanking them for their attention to this thought. He added that he hoped his theology could in some way contribute to thought in the twenty-first century, but characteristically noted: "I thank you all for your willingness to take my thought as the starting point for doing theology in the 21st century—but only as a starting point." Yes, only as a starting point. Theologians draw inspiration from their forbears, but they must live and think—and pray—authentically and faithfully in their own times.

In a little over a month from now, Professor Schillebeeckx will be celebrating his ninety-fifth birthday. He is becoming physically more frail, but he still has a keen and

curious mind, continuing to engage current events, to read, and to discuss what is happening and what this means for theology. He was on my last visit also still writing, working on a theology of preaching to accompany a new collection of his sermons, certain a worthy task of someone who has been a member of the Order of Preachers for seventy-five years. Like his own mentor Marie-Dominique Chenu, he has pursued a life of theological scholarship that has been wedded to a keen interest of the challenges that face Christian living today. As such he continues to be a shining example to yet another generation of theologians who will be shaping Catholic theology in this century. This lecture this evening is dedicated in a special way to him. Even if there comes a time when his writings are forgotten, his example will still be with us—how to be a theologian for one's own time, yet help further an understanding of God and the response in faith long beyond our own.