

Remembering Edward Schillebeeckx

Robert Schreiter, C.PP.S.

Two days before Christmas, the theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., passed away peacefully in the Netherlands at the age of 95. He will be remembered as one of the great Catholic theologians of the twentieth century, for his work at the Second Vatican Council and his enormous scholarly output on a wide range of topics in Catholic faith.

Born in Belgium, he spent his early years in Flanders teaching and forming the students in the Dominican study house in Louvain. In 1957 he was called to teach dogmatic theology at the Catholic University in Nijmegen in the Netherlands, where he remained until his retirement in 1982. In the years thereafter he continued to write and lecture.

He first came to the world's attention in the late 1950s with a break-through book on the sacraments. Rather than hewing to the traditional understanding of the sacraments as instruments of grace, he retrieved understandings of the sacraments from the early Church and brought that together with modern trends in philosophy. The result was a vision of sacraments as a living encounter with God's primal sacrament to humankind, Jesus Christ.

This pattern of wedding the ancient wisdom of Catholic faith with the questions and questions of modern men and women was to become a hallmark of this theology. Two events shaped his direction as a theologian. The first was his work at the Second Vatican Council. Curia officials in the Vatican had blocked his direct participation as an expert or peritus, but this turned out to be providential: it freed him to conduct continuing

education sessions for the bishops in the evening, and work behind the scenes in drafting documents for discussing on the Council floor.

The second event was his visit to the United States in 1966. The first stop was Chicago, where he addressed an overflow crowd at McCormick Place, sponsored by (then) St. Xavier College. The experience in Chicago and subsequent stops around the countries opened him to the vigor of American life and Catholicism, and introduced him to secularity for the first time. In later years, he frequently spoke about how formative this experience had been for his theology.

His theology after this was always done with an eye to the challenges that ordinary men and women faced in the modern world in believing in God. He was the first Catholic theologian to take ordinary human experience seriously as a place where God is revealed to us. In later years he turned to one set of human experiences in particular: the experience of suffering. He spoke of it as a “contrast experience,” that is an experience in which we say, “This shouldn’t be!”

His trilogy on Jesus, written over a period of fifteen years (called in English, *Jesus*, *Christ*, and *Church*), was a breath-taking achievement. He used the work of biblical scholars to an extent no theologian before him had done. He wanted to reproduce as much as possible what it was like for Jesus’ early disciples to come to faith in Him; in that way, we modern people might be able to do the same.

Schillebeeckx’s commitment to his calling as a theologian was unwavering. He came into conflict with the Vatican and was investigated three different times (on his views on the Eucharist, on Christ, and on his understanding of priestly ministry). None of the encounters ended in a sanction on his teaching or his writing.

His sometimes dense and meandering prose did not make him easy reading for his students. But this always had to be understood in light of the rest of his personality: a warm human being with a passionate commitment to his faith. Much of this comes out in his preaching. Three volumes of his sermons are available in English. He was completing the introduction to yet another volume of sermons—that included preaching for all the Sundays in the lectionary—at the time of his death.

More than seven hundred people attended his funeral in Nijmegen on New Year's Eve, despite very snowy conditions. There he was celebrated as a great man of faith and a gentle human being. Little attention was paid to his fame or his great influence on the Church. A favorite phrase of his was that God was always “*rakelings nabij*”—so near that you could touch Him. So too, for many of us, was Edward Schillebeeckx.

So much, then, about Schillebeeckx the man. I turn now to his theological legacy. I believe that there are three dimensions of his thought that will endure well into our century. They are: (1) his method of doing theology, (2) the centrality of God and God's salvation, and (3) 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 human 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 cultures and ethnicities, between the powerful and the oppressed. Yet rather than allow these divergent voices 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 particularities and limitations.

Second, the primacy of narrative over abstract thinking. The subtitle of the first Jesus-book in the Dutch edition 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 than ourselves through the use of narrative. 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 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 solidarity 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—outside the world there is no salvation. The presence of God in our world, and God’s intention 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 the future of humankind in his first encounters with secularity; in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ—form together a paradigm that can guide us in our own quest for the living God.

An example here might be of help. If one notices the salience of the concept of reconciliation that has so marked the last fifteen years, one might see there the working of God. In 1998, it was the chosen theme for the meeting of Catholic and Protestant churches in Europe; in 2005 it was the theme of the mission conference of the World Council of Churches; in 2009, it was the focus of the second Special Synod of African Bishops in Rome. This all points to a rediscovery of how God is working in the world.

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 devoted to that topic in the last ten years. Suffering first became prominent in his thinking in the second volume of the *Jesus*-trilogy in 1977. The contrast

experience produced in suffering expresses itself in protest: this is something that should not be! For him, the suffering of Christ in no way is to be gloried as an appeasement of divine wrath or necessary for expiation. Rather, it is to be seen as 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 far beyond Europe and North America, where much of his theological attention had been directed. This emphasis on suffering will no doubt be one of his enduring contributions to theology into the future.

Conclusion

In December, 2008, a conference was held at the Catholic University in Leuven for the purpose of assessing what Schillebeeckx's theology will mean for the twenty-first century. Schillebeeckx himself was not able to be present, but he sent a letter to the participants, thanking them for their attention to his thought. Characteristically, he said: "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 a starting point. He saw his task as a theologian not as starting a school of thought, but rather helping theologians stand on their own feet and think imaginatively and faithfully. Such an attitude shows the greatest respect for what the theological task should be.