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Theologian Edward Schillebeeckx dead at 95

by Robert McClory



Photo by Margaret McClory

The Belgian-born Dutch Dominican theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx, died Dec. 23 at the age of 95 in Nijmegen, Netherlands, where he lived and taught for more than five decades. He wrote well into his 90s.

He died of natural causes.

Precious Blood Fr. Robert Schreiter, considered the leading U.S. expert on Schillebeeckx, said his legacy will live on, principally for several major contributions. He was the first Catholic scholar to take seriously all the historical research on Jesus that had been done in the 19th and 20th centuries and present it in an intelligible way.

"Anyone who ignores that will not be taken seriously today," said Schreiter, a professor of theology at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. Schillebeeckx also pioneered the idea of examining "the historical backgrounds of what seemed to be infallible truths and relating their real meaning" in an intelligible way, he said. "He insisted that normal people ought to be able to see a measure of reasonableness in Catholic teaching and be able to link their experiences with the revelation traditions of

the Christian faith."

From the time of his appointment to the theological faculty at Nijmegen in 1958, Schillebeeckx was a tireless advocate of a more pastoral, personal theology, one that would also take into consideration the experiences of people rather than base conclusions exclusively on abstract, intellectual concepts. His first major book, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, published in English in 1963, represented a serious attempt to apply this thinking to sacramental theology. It sharply challenged the more mechanistic approach to the sacraments as mere dispensers of grace and stressed them instead as interactive meetings with Jesus.

With the appearance of some 75 new dissertations on Schillebeeckx's work in the past year, Schreiter said he believes Schillebeeckx's theology may be on the verge of a comeback. "Younger scholars are showing interest in his approach," said Schreiter, who said he is working with the Schillebeeckx Foundation in the Netherlands to produce an 11-volume English translation of all of the theologian's writings, including some that have never before been available in English. Among these is Schillebeeckx's 1984 *Theological Testament*, which Schreiter said is the best unified presentation of his overall thinking.

According to Schreiter, anyone interested in a sense of how the man approached his work should first read his sermons, three volumes of which are available in English. Schreiter himself had planned to visit Schillebeeckx at his home in Nijmegen in early January.

When plans for the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) were announced, Schillebeeckx responded as coauthor of a statement, signed by the seven Dutch bishops, that anticipated virtually all the progressive changes that would come out of Vatican II on issues like liturgy, ecumenism and openness to other faiths and the encouragement of lay initiative. Although Schillebeeckx was not a peritus (expert) at the council, he worked closely with Utrecht Cardinal Bernard Alfrink and others to emphasize the collegial nature of the episcopacy, as a balance to papal infallibility pronounced at Vatican I (1869-70). The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church reflected his views on the subject. Also during the Second Vatican Council, Schillebeeckx joined with fellow theologians Hans Küng, Karl Rahner and Yves Congar in launching the theological journal *Concilium*.

After the council the Netherlands became the most progressive country in the world in implementing Vatican II initiatives, and Schillebeeckx, often behind the scenes, was at the center of this movement. Perhaps the most ambitious was the effort to form a Dutch National Pastoral Council, an ongoing body with 56 members (some clergy, some laity) elected by diocesan pastoral councils, and another 28 members chosen by the council itself.

Despite a lengthy, elaborate, nationwide preparation, the national pastoral council never got off the ground after the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy declared that members should be appointed by the bishops, not elected, and that the council should not have a permanent character and should not present itself as in any way representing the body of the faithful. The congregation said, "All believers have the right and duty to take an active part in the mission given to the church ? but they do not have either the right or duty to give advice to the hierarchy in their exercise of their pastoral task."

Schillebeeckx's personalist thinking was very much a part of the New Dutch Catechism, which became a worldwide Catholic best-seller in the mid-1960s, but the book failed after the Vatican persuaded bishops not to grant an imprimatur to translations of the catechism and suggested much of its content was suspect.

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Over the years, Schillebeeckx continued to produce volumes, largely on scripture, history and doctrine. His most influential work, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, was considered questionably orthodox by the Vatican in 1984 and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith summoned Schillebeeckx to Rome. The congregation questioned him again in 1985 regarding his views on the resurrection of Jesus and again the following year for his understanding of ministry in the church. But he was never officially charged or found guilty.

The international buzz that accompanied a booklet sent to all Catholic parishes in Holland in 2007 was not directly linked to Schillebeeckx, although it clearly contained his theological reasoning. The booklet, approved by the country's Dominican province, stated that, with the scarcity of priests today, Catholic parishes should begin selecting members who would preside over the Eucharist, as was the approved method in the early church. The Dominicans were aware that such a practice would be illegal, but they were undoubtedly basing their approach on something Schillebeeckx wrote in his 1980 book on ministry:

Against the background of the existing church order then, new and sometimes urgently required possibilities are often only to be seen through the medium of what is bound to be regarded as at least temporarily illegal. This is not a new phenomenon in the church ? it has always been the case. I am bound to say that an alternative praxis of critical Christian communities is both dogmatically and apostolically possible. It is, in my opinion, a legitimate alternative Christian possibility which is demanded by our present needs. Given the existing canonical order of the church, this alternative praxis is not even *contra* (against) the order but *praeter* (alongside) the order, that is, it is not in accordance with the letter of the church's order, but it is in accordance with what (in earlier situations) that church order really wanted to safeguard.

When I visited him in Nijmegen in 2007 I was impressed with his calm demeanor. It came, I think, from his confidence in God and in Christ. He knew the story was not over, though he was keenly aware of the hierarchical church today and had no misapprehensions about the direction in which it seemed to be heading. This is what he said in 1990:

My concern is that the further we move away in history from Vatican II, the more some people begin to interpret unity as uniformity. They seem to want to go back to the monolithic church which must form a bulwark on the one hand against communism and on the other hand against the Western liberal consumer society. I think that above all in the West, with its pluralist society, such an ideal of a monolith church is out of date and runs into a blind alley. And there is the danger that in that case, people with that ideal before their eyes will begin to force the church in the direction of a ghetto church, a church of the little flock, the holy remnant. But though the church is not of this world, it is of men and women. Men and women who are believing subjects of the church.

[Robert McClory is an author and frequent contributor to *NCR*.]

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