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Edward Schillebeeckx: A herald of God among us

by Mary Catherine Hilkert



Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx in 1980 (NCR photo/Bill Kenkelen)

“That baby is God.” When asked about his first conscious memory of Jesus, the Flemish theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, who died in 2009 just before Christmas, recalled those words of his father as he pointed to the infant Jesus in the large Christmas crib in their home.

Schillebeeckx, who helped to revitalize interest in Jesus and to reshape the study of Christology in the second half of the 20th century, related the family story to an Italian journalist in 1982 on the occasion of his reception of the Erasmus Prize for contributions to European culture. He was the first theologian ever to be so honored.

If the graduate students at the University of Notre Dame are any indication, Schillebeeckx’s legacy continues. Just a month before his death, the students who were enrolled in a doctoral seminar on his thought, organized a birthday party in honor of the Dominican theologian who was to turn 95 the following day (Nov. 12). The participants were invited to bring a favorite passage from Schillebeeckx’s writings to share with the group.

The party would have delighted the scholar, who once described Jesus as a "copious host" and who pointed to his inclusive table companionship as a sign of the kingdom of God. Given Schillebeeckx's lifelong concern to communicate the Christian faith in terms that spoke to younger generations and to those who had serious intellectual questions about Christian belief, Schillebeeckx would have been pleased to see the range of the students' selections, from his early, groundbreaking volume *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, to the final volume of his Christological trilogy, *Church: The Human Story of God*, and his two collections of homilies, *God Among Us: The Gospel Proclaimed* and *For the Sake of the Gospel*.

He might, in fact, have been most gratified by the selection of the one non-theologian in the group, who chose to read a key section from the final part of Schillebeeckx's *Christ* book, which highlights a major theme in his later writings -- "God does not want human beings to suffer."

That conviction was at the core of Schillebeeckx's massive two volumes on Jesus and salvation written in the 1970s (appearing in translation in the United States as *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* in 1979, and *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* in 1980).

Writing in the context of radical and senseless human suffering around the globe and growing ecological devastation, Schillebeeckx wanted to retell the story of Jesus as disclosing the mystery of a God "bent toward humanity" in compassion, not a God who demanded suffering and death as recompense for sin. In one of his memorable ways of capturing this mystery, Schillebeeckx wrote: "God's cause is the human cause" (and the cause of all of God's creation).

As with his Christmas memory, Schillebeeckx traced the roots of his own Christian faith to his childhood. The sixth of 14 children, Edward Cornelius Florentius Alfons Schillebeeckx was born into a middle-class Flemish Catholic family in Antwerp on Nov. 12, 1914, soon after the German occupation of Belgium. After his primary education in Kortenberg (between Louvain and Brussels), Schillebeeckx attended a Jesuit boarding school in Turnhout. Influenced by mentors there as well as by his older brother, who was a Jesuit missionary in India, Schillebeeckx considered becoming a Jesuit himself, but chose instead to join the Dominicans in 1934. Schillebeeckx began his studies in philosophy at Louvain under the mentorship of the Belgian Dominican Dominic De Petter, who emphasized that human knowing includes an experiential element that goes beyond conceptual formulations. Initially, Schillebeeckx had little interest in the theology he studied in Louvain in preparation for his 1941 ordination, since it was largely limited to an analysis of Thomistic texts that failed to situate Aquinas's insights in either their own historical context or the larger ongoing tradition of the church.

All of that changed, however, when Schillebeeckx began his postgraduate theological studies in 1945 in Paris at the Sorbonne and Le Saulchoir, the Dominican faculty of theology. He credited Marie-Dominique Chenu, the Dominican medieval scholar who was also active in the worker-priest movement in Paris at the time, as having the greatest influence on his own theological work. From Chenu, Schillebeeckx learned the importance of reading texts in their historical context, of doing theology in dialogue with the social and political movements of the day, and of rooting theological claims in concrete activity on behalf of the Gospel. Schillebeeckx's later writings on tradition as a living history of experience and his lifelong ecumenical commitments also reflected the influence of French Dominican Yves Congar, the ecclesiologist and ecumenist whose masterful classic *Tradition and Traditions* paved the way for the Second Vatican Council's renewed understanding of "tradition" as the historical process by which the church hands on the mystery of Christ as living and active in every age.

Schillebeeckx's writings were investigated at three different points in his career -- his views on Eucharist in 1968 (when Jesuit Fr. Karl Rahner served as his defender), his *Jesus* book in a process that extended

from 1974 to 1980, and his writings on ordained ministry. None of those processes resulted in a condemnation or a silencing, although an official notification on the ministry book was issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1986.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, Schillebeeckx was most widely known in the English-speaking world for *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, which made a major contribution to the renewal of Catholic sacramental theology. Concerned that many Catholics viewed the sacraments as magical rituals that "bestowed grace," Schillebeeckx emphasized that grace is an interpersonal encounter -- a relationship of mutual friendship between God and human persons made possible in and through the Incarnation.

Recasting the traditional definition of sacraments as "an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace" in personal terms, Schillebeeckx emphasized that Jesus himself is the primary sacrament in whom God's gracious love became visible, tangible, historical and irrevocable.

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A fifth gospel

In that early volume, Schillebeeckx likewise identified the church as a sacrament since its mission as the body of Christ in the world is to make visible the invisible love of God. He described the seven sacraments as visible signs of the church's encounter in faith with the risen Christ. In the decades after the Second Vatican Council, Schillebeeckx continued to speak of the positive role of the witness of the church in and through communities of baptized Christians who "write a fifth gospel with their lives." But he grew increasingly critical of the institutional church because of the failure of those in leadership to implement the renewal called for by the council, particularly in terms of the collegial exercise of authority and recognition of the diverse gifts given to all baptized Christians.

When interviewed in recent years about his memories of the Second Vatican Council, Schillebeeckx highlighted the importance of Pope John XXIII's opening address and his intervention in calling for a new draft of the document on revelation (*Dei Verbum*) as well as his intervention in appointing additional members who represented more diverse viewpoints to the commission preparing the conciliar documents.

Schillebeeckx identified the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* on the collegiality of bishops as the most important teaching of the council. At the same time, he remarked that the council's most negative moment, in his judgment, came in the week that many identified as the "black week" of the council (Nov. 16, 1964), when an official interpretation of the doctrine of collegiality by "higher authorities" maintained that the pope could rule the church either alone or together with the world episcopacy. In Schillebeeckx's judgment, that interpretation not only opposed the thinking of the majority at the council, but also contributed to the perpetuation of a "monarchical papal regimen" rather than the exercise of the Petrine ministry *within* the college of bishops, as well as to the lack of reform of the Roman curia, which often blocked the proper exercise of authority by the bishops throughout the world.

The central theological question of how to speak of God and salvation in a secularized and suffering world was a primary focus in Schillebeeckx's writings since the mid-1960s. A lecture tour in the United States during the height of the death-of-God movement and discussions with university chaplains in France confirmed Schillebeeckx's own concerns about challenges to the very possibility of Christian faith, especially among intellectuals and the young in the secularized and developed countries of the Western Hemisphere. Responding to those concerns in a series of lectures that he delivered in the United

States (published in *God the Future of Man*), Schillebeeckx affirmed the dominant cultural conviction that human history was the responsibility of human beings and that God is not a *deus ex machina* who intervenes in the events of human history. Schillebeeckx argued that the Christian interpretation of the biblical "God of promise" was not a "God of the gaps" but rather a loving Creator who empowers and trusts creation, but who does not violate creation's autonomy or the freedom of human persons. In the face of the apparent absence of God, Schillebeeckx maintained that God's creative and saving active presence (grace) sustains and empowers human efforts on behalf of humankind and the Earth and holds open the future even for those whose lives appear to have been destroyed by sinful humanity or the destructive forces of nature.

Hope for a different future

Schillebeeckx's contact with liberation theologians, especially the Peruvian theologian Dominican Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, and his growing awareness of the radical suffering around the world led to an increasing emphasis in his writings on what he referred to as "negative contrast experience" as the starting point for most people's encounter with God. Rather than identifying experiences of radical and dehumanizing suffering and injustice as "fate" or "God's will," Schillebeeckx remarked that in those situations people rightly call out in protest: "This should not be." From a theological perspective, he identified God's Spirit at work in the powers of endurance, resistance, and the hope for a different future for those who are the victims of injustice and sin, and in the solidarity and action of all those who stand in accompaniment with them and who attempt to change the social and political structures that perpetuate that suffering.

The context of radical secularization and global radical suffering led Schillebeeckx to undertake the project for which he was most widely known in the final decades of his life -- a retelling of the story of Jesus as "salvation coming from God." Arguing that God has not given Christians a theoretical answer to the problem of evil, but rather a personal response in the life story of Jesus, Schillebeeckx proceeded to retell that story in a way that he hoped would move others to "go and do likewise." Rather than promoting the notion that God sent Jesus to suffer and die "for our salvation," Schillebeeckx insisted that the central theme of Jesus's life is echoed in the Gospel of John: "I came that you might have life and have it in abundance." It was human sin, rather than the divine will, that led to execution of Jesus. Hence Schillebeeckx wrote provocatively that "in one sense, we are saved despite the death of Jesus."

Schillebeeckx's theology of the Resurrection has been criticized as overly subjective because of his emphasis on the Easter experience of the disciples, which he interpreted as a conversion experience (of forgiveness and renewed mission). Schillebeeckx responded that his focus in the *Jesus* book had been to trace the faith journey of the first disciples and that it was only through the mediation of their faith experience and testimony that later believers have access to the mystery of the Resurrection. In an early revision of his Jesus book, he emphasized that the disciples' experience was possible only because of what happened first to Jesus himself -- his "personal-cum-bodily resurrection from the dead" and his ongoing life at the right hand of the Father.

Preaching on that same mystery at a later point, Schillebeeckx admitted that he found it most difficult to speak about what Christians mean by "resurrection of the body" not because he had any doubts about it, but because it is ultimately a matter of speaking of the very mystery of God and God's faithfulness in the face of the greatest challenges to that faith -- sin and death.

As he approached his own death, Schillebeeckx continued to work on a final book on the sacraments. Coming full circle in his theological interests, he remarked that all of human life -- and especially encounters with the poor and the marginalized -- provide the opportunity for encounter with God.

The final expression of his trust in the living God was a prayer he wrote on a notepad near his bed in his final days: ?Loving, gracious God, it is you who lay me in my grave. (Edward)?

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