

Edward Schillebeeckx – In Memoriam

Prof. Dr. Edward Schillebeeckx OP
12 November 1914 – 23 December 2009

Eulogy by his successor **Prof. Dr. Hermann Häring**

In the evening of 23 December 2009 Edward Schillebeeckx OP passed away in Nijmegen. Edward Schillebeeckx was born on 12 November 1914 and in 1934 he joined the Order of St. Dominic. He was one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century. From 1957 to 1982 he worked as Professor of Theology at the Faculty of Theology in Nijmegen. He lived through, actively shaped and also suffered through one of the most interesting eras in the Catholic Church. He studied philosophy (1935), then theology (1939) and started his first job as theology lecturer in 1943 in Löwen. This marks the beginning of an exceptional career. From the start he was most interested in the relationships between faith, contemporary culture and human existence. At the same time he was influenced by the impulses originating from the new *nouvelle théologie* in France. He presents the truths of the Catholic faith not as a rigid system but as a true-to-life interpretation of a living faith into the living god. His first major publication about the sacraments (1952) is received with great enthusiasm. This is followed in 1955 by a book about Maria, and in 1959 by the second version of a work about Christ which was translated into several languages: Christ, Sacrament of the Encounter with God (1960). By now Schillebeeckx had become a recognized publicist and a sought-after speaker.

In 1957 Schillebeeckx received a call to join the Faculty of Theology at the Catholic University Nijmegen. This represented a significant gain for the Church in The Netherlands. At the time he still was pretty much alone with his sensitivity for cultural and societal questions, and at the same time he opened up channels for the Catholic theology in The Netherlands to join in the international Catholic discussion.

In January of 1962 John XXIII announced the Second Vatican Council. This is the hour of Schillebeeckx; this event will shape his life, his thinking and his actions. He is very much and with great intensity involved in the preparations and will be the most important advisor to the bishops of The Netherlands. Their pastoral letter about the Council (1962), which came for the most part from the pen of E. Schillebeeckx, caused an international stir. Throughout the Council period (1962-1965) he gives lectures to experts, bishops and bishops conferences in Rome. He appears on Dutch TV and puts the Church of The Netherlands on the map.

Soon the tremendous dynamics emanating from this Council become evident. An era of renewal for the Church seems to be on the horizon, however, the disappointments are fast in coming and start as early as the 1960's. But Schillebeeckx sticks to his purpose. He cares about the people with their "joys and hopes, their grieves and fears", and asks ever

more insistently about the sense of suffering and those who suffer, like it is so emphatically being discussed by the later theology of liberation. Schillebeeckx will never abandon this theme which he often discusses under the key word “contrast experience”. He pursues this topics into its deepest hermeneutic and epistemological aspects.

At the same time Schillebeeckx championed a theology that could be understood by a wide audience. As early as 1960 he initiated the launch of *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* the purpose of which was to deal with and debate contemporary questions. Together with other prominent Council theologians (Y. Congar, H. Kühn and K. Rahner) he founded in 1965 the international periodical *Concilium*. Published in seven languages its mandate was to push forward the renewal of the Church. Both periodicals are still alive today. In the period after the Council he continued working, “furiously” as he himself described it, on the pressing questions. The themes revolve around a new relationship between the church and the world; questions in relation to the ever advancing secularization; ideological, cultural and economic changes in the faith and in theology. In countless articles he pursues all these questions. His approach is a highly critical one but he never resists these developments and he systematically takes the theological reasoning towards a new way of thinking.

Apart from fundamental articles about hermeneutics, his big studies about Jesus and his significance: *Jesus. An Experiment in Christology* (1974), and: *Christ and Christians. The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (1977), are pioneering works. With few others on a comparable level these books provided a new foundation for our faithful speaking. Schillebeeckx works not only as a systematic theologian but also as exegete. He manages to join the exegetical discussion of the time competently and without bias and – in conjunction with the contemporary debate about the history of dogmas and church – to make it fertile for a Christian believing view of the world, history and mankind, of salvation, redemption and liberation. On this basis he delves into various forms of social theory, in particular into the New Polistic Theology and the later Latin-American liberation theology. Until well into the 1990s he follows with great sympathy the developments in contextual theologies in Africa and Asian countries.

Against this backdrop Schillebeeckx continues his intense examination of developments within the church that stagnate after the Council and – as it was stated quite rightly – mark the beginning of a cold winter in the church. In 1980 and 1985 he publishes two books about the church ministry that attracted considerable attention: *Ministry: A Case for Change* (1981), and: *The Church with a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry* (1985). Regrettably the church leadership does not appreciate at all these important and extraordinarily constructive contributions. Three times he is called to account by the Vatican institutions. He is never officially condemned, the state of his enemies’ evidence is too weak for this. But right up to the end his entire works are shrouded in an atmosphere of distrust and untenable suspicions. Eventually a new generation of Dutch bishops uncritically assumes this position, and Schillebeeckx’ deepest ecclesiastical intentions are thereby very much misunderstood. However, with a deep trust in God together with his profoundly Dominican spirituality he never shows bitterness throughout this confrontation.

After his retirement in 1983 Schillebeeckx continues to be theologically active. In 1989 his book: Church: The Human Story of God (1990) appears which completes his trilogy about Jesus, grace and God. For many this is his most emphatic and forceful book. In 2000 a last article is published to this topic. In it he returns to his deepest spiritual wellsprings which he regularly finds in the liturgy, the sermons and in the celebration of the Eucharist. Therefore his many smaller publications to spiritual themes, his sermons and his thoughts to the current meaning of the Christian faith must not be forgotten. Schillebeeckx always remains a deeply religious and a content man. Characteristic for him are two book titles: God is new each moment (1999), and: I am a happy theologian (1994).

Both with regard to content and to methodology the many impulses that came out of Schillebeeckx' theology will continue to be influential. I list six points:

- (1) The discovery of Jesus of Nazareth as a renewing impulse for teaching and proclamation. On the official level this impulse is still being blocked, however, the more the passing on of the faith will become a problem the more important this will be.
- (2) The analysis and interpretation of biblical texts, the New Testament in particular, for the faith and spirituality. The two Jesus books will continue to have a long-term impact.
- (3) The express introduction of hermeneutics into Catholic systematic theology as antidote against any type of a rigid and rationalistic dogmatism. In his "critically expanded hermeneutics" Schillebeeckx efficiently safeguarded this approach against an ideological conservative abuse.
- (4) The intensive attention toward those who suffer and are marginalized; this as a fundamental option of any Christian theology in western societies.
- (5) The fundamental openness of the theological thinking to the world and society which for Schillebeeckx culminates in the slogan "no salvation outside the world".
- (6) And finally the appeal to theology for an interdisciplinary and inter-religious co-operation which can be found in Schillebeeckx' works already early on.

Edward Schillebeeckx was always convinced: A new springtime will arise for the Catholic Church as well. Unfortunately he did not live long enough to witness it himself. This always friendly and sympathetic theologian left us a rich and inexhaustible legacy in his works. We cannot thank him enough for this. He will be buried on 31 December, the last day of the year. May his angels accompany him into paradise.

28 December 2009
Hermann Häring