

the next few years. By means of my questions I have attempted to offer an image of the possibility of polyphonic worship. My hope is that you will not only find a way to risk these questions for yourselves but also that you will find a way to make polyphonic worship a living image for your work and ministry. Reject sectarianism, individualism, and narcissism. Resist pragmatism and invitations to entertain a community called to offer itself in worship. Embrace difference, not because it is new but because it enriches the song. Resist separateness, not because it is easy but because it diminishes the song. Risk singing the Lord's song in what is increasingly a foreign land and sing it boldly. Be clear about what the Lord's song is and be wary of pretenders that avoid the partnership of suffering and joy. Believe that the Lord's song is worth singing. To the extent that we are "concentered all, through Jesus' name", we discover why we sing and worship in the first place.

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Practicing Political Holiness: The Call to a Life of Contrasts in the Work of Edward Schillebeeckx

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Divine Worship and Political Holiness

How might creative, constructive reflection on the doctrine of sanctification and its relationship to Christian worship provide a scholarly resource for the promotion of liturgical practice? The intimate link between divine worship and human sanctification in Christianity finds its origins in the New Testament, flourished among the patristic writers, was integral to the theology of grace and the sacraments in the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas and, of course, pervaded the work of John Wesley. In the late 1950s Flemish Dominican Edward Schillebeeckx masterfully recovered the principle and its sources—biblical, patristic, scholastic—for a worldwide theological audience in his groundbreaking *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*. It is commonplace to find this book, along with key texts by Karl Rahner,¹ at the front of historical and bibliographical surveys of the revolution in sacramental theology that coincided with the promulgation of the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum concilium)*.²

1. See especially Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments*, trans. W. J. O'Hara (Edinburgh: Herder, 1963); and "The Theology of the Symbol," *Theological Studies*, vol. 4 (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 221-52. See also Michael Skelley, *The Liturgy of the World: Karl Rahner's Theology of Worship* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991).
2. See Peter Fink, "Sacramental Theology After Vatican II," in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter Fink (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 1109-11.

While *Christ the Sacrament* is still the subject of critical review and appropriation,³ sacramental and liturgical theologians have generally neglected the larger, lengthier, and far more controversial corpus of Schillebeeckx's subsequent writings. This is unfortunate, for in both his more popular writings and his massive systematic trilogy⁴ Schillebeeckx has continuously developed the relationship between God's glory and humanity's salvation, mysticism and politics, liturgy and ethics, as foundational to the life—indeed, the viability—of Christian faith. An explication of his particular notion of holiness, including its relationship to worship can provide one entrance into Schillebeeckx's theological project.

In his seminal book Schillebeeckx crafted an argument for grace and religious worship as God's personal, mediated presence to a humanity longing for God. Through his incarnation, death, and exaltation Jesus brought to reality the fullness of divine-human encounter—the bodily manifestation of the divine love for humanity and humanity's love for God. With the Spirit of the Risen Christ bestowing grace and the capacity for religious worship, "the [Church's] sacraments are the visible realization on earth of Christ's mystery of saving worship."⁵ Drawing from deep patristic and medieval wells, Schillebeeckx refreshed Western sacramental theology by articulating the entire Christian life as the worship of God. Heavily influenced by his mentor, Marie-Dominique Chenu,⁶ he spelled out the implications of a

3. See Michael G. Witczak, review of *L'Efficacia dei Sacramenti e la Performance Rituale: Ripensare l' ex opere operato a partire dall' antropologia culturale*, by Alberto Dal Maso, *Worship* 75:1 (January 2001): 87-90.
4. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskins (New York: Crossroad, 1981); *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad 1981); *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1990).
5. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* trans. Paul Barrett; English text revised by Mark Schoof and Laurence Bright (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963), 45.
6. See Philip Kennedy, *Schillebeeckx* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 22-23.

sacramental Christology: Holiness is neither abstract nor exclusively inward but, rather, always realized in the faith-life of a church at service to a world hungering and thirsting for God's love. In continuity with the best thinkers of the Liturgical Movement, Schillebeeckx argued for the mutuality of the Church's sacramental-liturgical reform and an increasingly active Christian love in society, a "real love for our fellow men [*sic*]. . . a solidarity in human experience."⁷ Over the subsequent two decades Schillebeeckx's study of Scripture scholarship, hermeneutics, and critical theory, along with his extensive pastoral involvement in the Netherlands, all contributed to an increasing argument for the ethical and political dimensions of that love for humanity.

The central pastoral concerns that have motivated Schillebeeckx's theological writing from the 1970s onward are: (1) the viability—at times, even credibility—of Christianity in a contemporary society highly critical of religious authority, widely alienated from traditional practices, and increasingly skeptical of truth-claims, and (2) the overwhelming reality of suffering throughout the world on a scale unprecedented in history. The latter concern, moreover, is the primary one, for God's concern for humanity and the world far exceeds the bounds of Christianity or any religion. What Christianity has to offer the world, in Schillebeeckx's estimation, is the proclamation and praxis of the gospel as a word of divine salvation and redemption spoken to all efforts at human liberation. The practice of political holiness, or "politics," in conjunction with practices of "mysticism," is the greatest opportunity at this time in history for Christians to experience the grace that comes from God in Jesus Christ.⁸ In the contemporary social context, on either side of the Atlantic, discussion of either politics or mysticism, let alone the two in conjunction, can quickly become controversial, suspected of hidden ideological agendas, or dismissed as facile renderings of the gospel. For this reason the extensive scholarly work behind Schillebeeckx's prophetic call to holiness is a valuable resource for

7. Schillebeeckx, *Christ, the Sacrament*, 208.

8. See Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 98.

believers committed to the praxis of faith and justice in our global, technological, capitalist context.

In a popular article, "Jerusalem of Benares? Nicaragua of de Berg Athos?"⁹ Schillebeeckx proposes a bold thesis:

Holiness is always contextual. Given the current situation of suffering humanity which has now become conscious universally, political love can well become the historically urgent form of contemporary holiness, the historical imperative of the moment, or in Christian terms, the contemporary *kairos* or moment of grace as appeal to believers.¹⁰

Schillebeeckx wrote those words several years after the publication of the second tome in his systematic trilogy, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*. The statement contains in succinct and concentrated form many of the concerns and theological formulations that shaped the lengthy, scholarly book. The issues of suffering humanity, on the one hand, and the grace of God, on the other, constitute the fundamental anthropological problem and the Christian response structuring the entire work of Christ and guide Schillebeeckx's detailed study of the New Testament in the first two parts. In those first six hundred pages Schillebeeckx is in search of the experience of the earliest Christian communities that was the vital source of the faith they professed in Christ and the new way of life they embraced. Employing vast resources of contemporary Scripture scholarship, Schillebeeckx examines the theologies of grace generated by each community's culturally, societally, and religiously interpreted experience of the "fundamental grace," the encounter with Christ. This fundamental grace, "brought by Jesus," the earliest believers

9. Parts of this essay appear translated and retitled in *Edward Schillebeeckx, The Schillebeeckx Reader*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 257-59, 272-74.

10. *Ibid.*, 272.

experienced "first and foremost as a new way of life and fulfillment, as redemption and forgiveness of sins."¹¹

In the third part of *Christ*, Schillebeeckx gleans four "structural elements" from the various theological interpretations of the fundamental grace found in the various books of the New Testament. It is these elements that are essential, Schillebeeckx argues, to Christians' efforts to reinterpret the gospel of Jesus in today's circumstances, preserving the gospel while also enabling it to come to vital expression in word and deed in the present age. These four elements, then, are crucial to Schillebeeckx's understanding of contemporary holiness and, thus, warrant a detailed rehearsal. They provide the basis for the creative approach to sociopolitical action and religious worship, to mysticism and ethics, that Schillebeeckx constructs in the final part of *Christ* and in his subsequent writings. In the process, these four elements shall also provide opportunities for comparing Schillebeeckx's thought with that of various contributors to the historical development of the doctrine of sanctification.

The Gospel of Grace: God's Action Amid Human Suffering

God's History with Humanity

The first structural element of grace concerns God's history with humanity. The starting point is the human condition, "the bitter question, insoluble in human terms, of the meaning and purpose of human life in nature and history, in a context of meaning and meaninglessness, of suffering and moments of joy."¹² In Jesus of Nazareth God has revealed a positive and unexpected answer to the intractable dilemma of human suffering: God has placed God's honor at risk by identifying with "the happiness and salvation of mankind [sic]. God's predestination and man's

11. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 477.

12. *Ibid.*, 638.

experience of meaning are two aspects of one and the same reality of salvation."¹³

Three aspects of this initial structural element of New Testament grace are notable. First, Schillebeeckx thematizes the reticence of New Testament authors to speculate theologically about the origins of evil and suffering (Romans 5 being the stellar exception). Evil—including the sin that people generate in their own “hearts”—and suffering are taken as brute facts by and large in the New Testament. The principle concern is the good news of salvation that comes in the person of Jesus. Nowhere in his soteriology, therefore, does Schillebeeckx employ a notion of original sin, nor of an ontological condition in the human person (“nature” or “soul”) that is in need of healing or restoration. Schillebeeckx emphasizes the healing and wholeness of the entire person.¹⁴ An obvious contrast exists, therefore, between this position and the work of Scholastics such as Aquinas, who theorized about the addition of supernatural grace to the natural (and fallen) state of the person.¹⁵ While Aquinas certainly understood the supernatural as effecting the entire life of the person, the simplistic translation of his thought in catechetical and other ecclesial instruction historically resulted in a pervasive dualistic tendency in Roman Catholicism: religious versus secular (or natural) life, church versus world.¹⁶ Schillebeeckx is acutely aware of this practical problem and seeks to correct it.

This points, then, to the second notable aspect of this first element. Schillebeeckx, ever influenced by phenomenology,

13. Ibid., 639.

14. “Because he [sic] has been shaped by philosophy, Western man in particular finds it striking that in the New Testament, *charis* or grace is not set over against nature or creation (like ‘nature’ and the ‘supernatural’ in later scholastic theology), but over against sin and helplessness.” Ibid., 530.

15. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 109.

16. See Roger Haight, *The Experience and Language of Grace* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 72-73.

translates the struggle of human existence in terms of the search for meaning and meaningful life. Evil is that which defeats or destroys meaningful life; therefore, sanctification is the increase of meaning in the face of evil. Systemic evil undermines the *telos* of human life, the goal of fully realized, meaningful human existence (Schillebeeckx’s *humanum*, see below). Sanctification, then, is concerned with the end or goal of life, the defeat of all that robs life of meaning, and the promotion of the good that God desires for all of creation.

Finally, Schillebeeckx recognizes a predestination in God. God’s honor rests with the meaningfulness and happiness of human life; this is God’s fundamental position in relation to humanity. Predestination, then, is fundamentally a matter of God’s self-determined fate. The final, universal salvation of humanity is thereby assured; it rests in God’s predestination. This view of predestination, then, entertains no speculation on God’s destining some for eternal happiness and others for damnation—as one finds in the work of such thinkers as Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin.¹⁷ John Wesley, by contrast, had an aversion to the range of explanations for predestination that the Calvinists of his day put forth. While one can trace various ways Wesley approached the issue in polemical circumstances with the Calvinists, it seems that the heart of his opinion on the topic focused on divine prescience and human free will.¹⁸ Schillebeeckx alters the discussion by making God the referent of predestination.

Jesus of Nazareth: Nucleus of Divine-Human History

In the person, career, and destiny of Jesus of Nazareth God definitively revealed God’s cause as the furthering of good and resisting of evil. This constitutes the second structural element of grace in the New Testament. God identified Godself not only

17. In his further writing Schillebeeckx entertains the question of the final judgment of evil people in relation to the universality of God’s salvific intention. See *Church*, 134-39.

18. See John Wesley, “On Predestination,” Sermon 58, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2, ed. Albert Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985).

with Jesus' ideals and actions, but with the very person of Jesus. To see Jesus is to see the Father (John 14:9b) and thus, Jesus is "God's countenance turned towards man [sic], the countenance of God who is concerned for all men, especially and concernedly for the humble of the earth, all those who are crucified."¹⁹ Jesus' destiny does not end with his resurrection from the dead; rather, God's affirmation of Jesus continues in God's self-revelation as "solidarity with the people." Jesus' suffering had no value in itself. Only as suffering for a cause, for the sake of the kingdom of God, in the resistance against injustice, does Jesus' suffering bring redemption. In the resurrection Jesus' cause for humanity is affirmed as God's cause: "For the name of God is 'the one who shows solidarity with his people,' and this people suffers."²⁰

In this second New Testament element of grace Schillebeeckx articulates a principle concerning suffering upon which he elaborates at length in the final section of his book. Schillebeeckx's acute, pastoral awareness of the contemporary extent of suffering motivates his careful study of the question in the New Testament. The sanctified person suffers not for the sake of suffering but for the sake of the kingdom of God, for the sake of that which will ultimately prevail.

Schillebeeckx identifies this type of suffering with "sacrificial love." Love includes a capacity for suffering, and such suffering adds meaning to life. Indeed, Schillebeeckx considers suffering for the good and for righteousness as essential to a truly human world.²¹ This association of love with sacrificial suffering, so true to Scripture, resonates with the supreme quality of selfless love of neighbor—in union with love of God—which Wesley held as the summation of Christian perfection.²²

19. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 639.

20. *Ibid.*, 640.

21. See *Ibid.*, 724.

22. See John Wesley, "On Perfection," Sermon 76, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 3, ed. Albert Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 74.

Christian Community as the Ongoing History of Jesus

The third element of grace in the New Testament is the continuation of God's gracious action on behalf of humanity in the Christian community: "In the church community the future of Jesus, endorsed by his resurrection, is at the same time a remembrance of his life."²³ This remembrance (*anamnesis*) is not a matter of literally imitating what Jesus did but, rather, of responding to one's own situation on the basis of an intense experience of God. Filled with the Spirit of God (now also the Spirit of Jesus), Christians share in his *Abba* experience and his mission for the kingdom of God with a readiness to suffer for the cause of humanity. The history or story of Jesus only lives because of the history of the Christian community, the disciples who follow him: "Thus resurrection, the formation of a community and the renewal of the world in accordance with the life-style of the kingdom of God (in a particular set of circumstances) form a single event with a spiritual and a historical side."²⁴

In this third element Schillebeeckx gives a narrative expression to what Martin Luther and John Calvin understood by justification and its foundational relation to the sanctified life.²⁵ For both these Reformation theologians the heart of justification was one's assurance in faith that one is affirmed and accepted by God, even as a sinner. Romans 8:15 is a crucial text: "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!'"

23. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 641.

24. *Ibid.*, 642. In response to an investigation by Vatican doctrinal officials Schillebeeckx elaborated on his understanding of the resurrection in relation to the origins of the church. See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 92-102.

25. See Martin Luther, "Lecture on the Letter to the Romans," *Luther's Works*, vol. 25, ed. Hilton Oswald (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1973), 234, 252; "Treatise on Good Works," *Luther's Works*, vol. 44, ed. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 23-27; and John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 592-607.

(NRSV), Schillebeeckx brings the fruits of twentieth century scripture scholarship to bear on Luther and Calvin's recognition of justification as the basis for the freedom of sanctified life. The Abba experience of Jesus, in which believers now share through the Spirit, is the source of the mission of the kingdom. Much later in Christ, Schillebeeckx comments on Romans 5:8: "This justification through grace in faith is therefore the nucleus of salvation from God in Christ, in light of which all other aspects of liberation become comprehensible."²⁶ While the theologian might abstract from the experience of salvation so as to distinguish justification and sanctification, in the experience of Christians the two are united in the one life of grace.

A further implication of this third element points toward the nature and function of worship in Christian life. By seeing the Resurrection and the founding of the Church as one integral event, Schillebeeckx links the sanctified life of the Church with the life of the Sanctified One. The presence of Jesus in the Spirit makes Jesus the Christ the one who sanctifies the people of God. This people's mission is to the world, a mission of liberation (the reform of societal structures) and redemption (participation in the already but not yet fully realized life of the kingdom of God) in the one history of salvation of all people together: "[H]uman salvation is only salvation, being whole, when it is universal and complete. There cannot really be talk of salvation as long as there is still suffering, oppression and unhappiness alongside the personal happiness that we experience, in our immediate vicinity or further afield."²⁷ This thought resonates with and augments Schillebeeckx's earlier work, wherein he argued that the body of the Church and the heavenly body of Christ are "sacramentally identical," with sacramental liturgies serving as "markers, milestones" for the entire Christian life as worship, an ongoing, corporate act of communion with God. The moral life is the concrete shape that Communion takes in the world.²⁸ In his later

26. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 833-34.

27. *Ibid.*, 726-27.

28. Schillebeeckx, *Christ, the Sacrament*, 72-73, 183, 200.

work, as we shall see in further detail below, Schillebeeckx's exposition of the spiritual and historical dimensions of both the originating event of Christianity and the ongoing life of the Church grounds the necessity he sees for both mysticism (liturgy, prayer, contemplation) and politics (intense social efforts) in the contemporary life of holiness.

History and Beyond History

The fourth and final structural element of grace in the New Testament is teleological. The end of this history of God with Jesus and the community does not reside in the narrow confines of world history. While the final consummation of God's predestination and the wholeness of humanity is of God and therefore "beyond" the time and space of this world, still that end stands as the promise in which all present experiences find their perspective. This eschatological promise can only have real significance for people, however, if it is experienced in fragmentary ways in present human history. The promise proclaimed in the Word of God finds tangible reference now in Christians who follow Jesus by acting (and suffering) for the cause of the kingdom of God.

The focus on teleology in this fourth element inevitably brings to mind the work of Aquinas, who understood the *telos* as the beatific vision, the "eternal good" of participating in the divine nature. Aquinas understood the believer as receiving in justification the "grace of the wayfarer," whereas in the end he or she obtains the "grace of heaven."²⁹ Sanctification is a process of increasing numbers of meritorious acts (whose first mover, nonetheless, is always God). The meriting of eternal life depends primarily on charity and secondarily on the virtues. This "charity of the way is not annulled in heaven, but perfected."³⁰

29. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 113.9. I quote here from the English translation in *Nature and Grace: Selections from the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. and ed. A. M. Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 199.

30. *Ibid.*, I-II, 111.3, rep. 2, 169.

Schillebeeckx's understanding of New Testament eschatology places the emphasis more on the quality of the end realized in fragmentary instances in the present, especially as these are shared in common, whether in such sacramental communion as the Church's Eucharist or in instances of social justice. The relation between the present and the *telos* is dialectical, rather than a progression. In further contrast with Aquinas, who distinguished between charity and virtues in terms of the powers in the soul, Schillebeeckx avoids all such metaphysics. Instead, he writes of the "'orthopractic' love" Christians expend, often with suffering, wherein they experience "fragments of eschatological joy."³¹ By avoiding talk of distinctions in the soul, Schillebeeckx's approach again averts any tendency toward dualism in Christian living ("religious" charity versus "worldly" affairs) and conveys the power of love—divine and human—in actions of social justice.

Summary

On the basis of his study of the New Testament Schillebeeckx describes the experience of grace as God's abundant faithfulness and mercy toward suffering humanity. Both testaments of Scripture portray God as having staked God's honor on the happiness and wholeness of God's people. The narratives of the Hebrew's history consistently demonstrate that God sides with the poor and oppressed and that salvation is never simply an "interior" disposition or state but, rather, the realization of justice and peace among people. God's grace is an activity, the action whereby God rescues the oppressed in history, while also insisting that God's chosen people side with the poor and suffering as well. In Jesus of Nazareth God not only made God's cause a message to humanity, but also identified with the very person of Jesus. Jesus experienced God in prayer as his Abba and in his mission as the One bringing about a reign of righteousness for the suffering and outcast. For this reason—his faithfulness to God's cause as humanity's cause—Jesus was executed, and for this reason God raised him up. Christians are called to a life that continues the mystical and

31. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 834.

ethical praxis of Jesus, not as a literal imitation of his life, but as a critical engagement in the specific circumstances of the given moment in history.

Schillebeeckx concludes his narrative schematization of grace in the New Testament by emphasizing that grace is a way of life, a "critical life-style" that comes to expression in continually new consequences through the mediation of ongoing human history. The New Testament expressions of the four structural elements of grace are themselves bound to the historical circumstances and views of life held in the ancient world of those communities. For that reason they are not norms but models for the way in which Christians "add a chapter here and now to the history of Jesus, the living one,"³² that is, the way in which they experience salvation. Our study now turns to consider how salvation can presently take the form of a "political holiness," as well as how such holiness necessitates sacramental worship.

Contemporary Holiness: Political Love for a Suffering Planet

Christian Ethics in a New Context

In comparison to the New Testament era, Schillebeeckx perceives in our time a distinctive characteristic to the problem of human suffering, an oppressive dimension to human consciousness. Whereas the Bible's primary concern is with the innocent sufferer and, to a lesser extent, with the suffering of the prophet, "there is no direct discussion simply of suffering mankind [*sic*], whether saddig or not, believing or unbelieving."³³ In contrast, the contemporary awareness is of suffering humanity, the vast human suffering not only at the hands of individuals but under exploitive and oppressive sociopolitical, economic, and bureaucratic systems. This human consciousness is symbolized in the concept of human rights.

32. *Ibid.*, 644.

33. *Ibid.*, 650.

The challenge Schillebeeckx sees for Christianity at this moment in history is for believers to give new expression to the fundamental saving content of the Christian faith, just as the first generations of Christians did in their own historical circumstances, as recorded in the New Testament. Indeed, Schillebeeckx sees his present theological task as identical to that of the later New Testament writers, who sought to convey the apostolic faith in "critical solidarity" with their contemporaries' experiences, desires, and ways of thinking. The difference is that the "urgent demands and responsibilities" with which we grapple today are "on quite a different level from those of the men [*sic*] of antiquity who became Christians and whose voices we hear in the New Testament."³⁴

Schillebeeckx argues that ethics must hold a certain priority in Christian religion because ethics is basically concerned with the question of how people are to live out their lives or for what sort of humanity people finally opt. The ethical attitude "consists in resisting evil, furthering good and therefore bringing reconciliation in respect of the actual situation."³⁵ This definition of ethics obviously coincides with Schillebeeckx's description, based on the New Testament, of how God is committed to humanity and how Christians, therefore, should be also. It resonates as well with the inextricable connection, summarized in the third structural element of New Testament grace, between belief in the living reality of the risen Christ and a way of life committed to his prophetic vision of the kingdom of God. The ethical foundations of Christian life are christological and eschatological. A religious attitude, therefore, claiming ethical neutrality or a disinterest in social concerns must be suspected of allegiance to some other vision—some form of social, political, or personal ideology. In *Church*, the final book of his trilogy, Schillebeeckx argues that the modern ethical claim of autonomous self-obligation actually imposes excessive, "graceless" demands on people and often devolves into an ethics of vengeance and retribution. Christianity, on the other hand, offers the possibility of experiencing love for

34. *Ibid.*, 654.

35. *Ibid.*, 659.

fellow human beings as "a 'divine virtue,' a reflection of God's love for humankind in specific human action." Christian mysticism, in forms of spirituality, prayer, and liturgy, "gives us a moral capacity, to the death."³⁶

The present situation of humanity Schillebeeckx perceives as an emergency, wherein the very future of humanity is at stake. In addition to the growing awareness of the worldwide abuse of human rights, we are faced today with the potential consequences of scientific and technological knowledge and industrial and economic practices that threaten both humankind and the planet. For these reasons, Christian ethical commitment can no longer limit itself to the "micro-sphere" of interpersonal relationships or even to the "meso-sector" of the state. In addition to these forms of commitment to the liberation and redemption (the salvation) of humanity, Christians must participate in the "macro-sector," the level of activity involving the fate of all humankind.³⁷ The issue, however, is not mere human survival, but meaningful survival, the future of the *humanum*, the open-ended quest for the full realization of the human as a personal, embodied, relational, social, political, and religious being.³⁸

Dialogue with the Doctrine of Sanctification

Schillebeeckx's explication of Christian salvation in the contemporary context both resonates with and contributes to the traditional doctrine of sanctification. Fundamental to the history of the doctrine is attention to the scriptural revelation that the love of God necessarily entails the love of neighbor (Matt 22:37-38; Luke 10:27; 1 John 4:21). Gregory of Palamas, for example,

36. Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 31.

37. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 661. See also, Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 169.

38. For Schillebeeckx's detailed explication of his theory of the human condition as the *humanum*, see *Christ*, 731-43. See also, Kennedy, *Schillebeeckx*, 136, 139; and Bradford E. Hinze, "A Prophetic Vision: Eschatology and Ethics," *The Praxis of Christian Experience: An Introduction to the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx*, ed. Robert Schreiter and Mary Catherine Hilker (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 142-45.

taught that the Christian's love of God is the source of all social virtue, and that the latter prevents the former from lapsing into a vague ideal.³⁹ Wesley derived his doctrine of Christian perfection from this particular teaching in Scripture. In his sermon, "On Perfection," Wesley explains that Christian perfection "is all comprised in the one word, love."⁴⁰ Two connected "branches" of this love, love of God and love of neighbor, are primary to Christian holiness. Perfection does not concern the elimination of all human foibles and "infirmities" of the "flesh"; rather, this holiness is the outward movement of the love that God has placed inwardly in the Christian's heart. It is a love that seeks the good with and for fellow human beings. Christianity, for Wesley, is essentially a social religion.

Schillebeeckx's view of holiness, while set in a different key, recognizes this same compassionate love for neighbor. Schillebeeckx's contribution is a new, expanded awareness of how this love can occur in present world conditions. The question that the lawyer posed to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29), is one that Christians must continually ask in the circumstances of their day. Like Wesley, Schillebeeckx relies on empirical observation to answer the question. New to the present era in human history is the awareness of massive suffering on all points of the globe. The awareness is heightened by advanced abilities in global communication. The neighbor is now the anonymous throng of suffering humanity, and thus the political holiness of today's Christian seeks justice and liberation not only locally and nationally, as Wesley taught,⁴¹ but on a global scale. Christians can now join in sociopolitical activities which further the cause of human rights, as these are currently abused in various unjust systems throughout the world.

39. Georgios Mantzaridis provides this exegesis of Palamas's homilies in *The Deification of Man: St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition* trans. Liadain Sherrard (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimirs Seminary Press, 1984), 71.

40. John Wesley, "On Perfection," 74.

41. Examples include Wesley's call for the elimination of the slave trade, "Thoughts Upon Slavery [1774]," and his analysis of the widespread

Schillebeeckx extends the outward thrust of Christian sanctification into another area of concern: stewardship of creation. Advances in human technological abilities have brought with them new threats to the planet earth and its inhabitants. We might think here of nuclear proliferation, widespread deforestation, ozone depletion, the ongoing elimination of animal and plant species, and pollution. Christian holiness becomes political in this aspect of bodily and social life as well. As further discussion of his soteriology will show, Schillebeeckx holds a fundamentally sacramental view of the world (as the medium of human encounter with God) that cannot harbor indifference to the health (salvation) of the planet. Christian faith gives rise to a specific perception of the world, a call to action for its redemption, and a unique experience of God therein.

The *Imago Dei*: Mediation of God's Love in Human Action

Schillebeeckx is well aware that Christian socio-political involvement is susceptible to the accusation of reducing religion to political action or simply equating it with the ethical. Schillebeeckx's answer to this charge is based on his New Testament soteriology. Belief in the God of Jesus allows no view of religion as concerned only with "inner dispositions"; rather, salvation is a matter of the reconciliation and liberation of the entire human being, "the advancement of human dignity."⁴² Still, it is precisely this inner mystical relationship with God that empowers and motivates the Christian struggle for the liberation and redemption of people and the earth. Christian religion makes a unique and essential contribution to the cause of humanity by bearing witness to its experience of "the holy," which is fundamentally an awareness that "the question of God cannot be separated from the question of the nature of man [*sic*], which in the

poverty in Britain and the need for changes in the political and economic system. See "Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions [1773]," *Political Writings of John Wesley*, ed. Graham Maddox (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1998), 85-106, 107-13.

42. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 775. See also Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 12.

last resort must also have a religious determination, so that man can be wholly and completely man."⁴³

The bond between God's honor and human happiness that Schillebeeckx articulated in his first structural element of New Testament grace is operative at this point in his argument. The wholeness and completeness of the human person rests ultimately in relation to God. Put in the traditional words of the doctrine of sanctification, the human person is the image of God. For Schillebeeckx, belief in the human as image of God becomes a motivation for political love:

But if the fundamental symbol of God is the living man (*imago dei*), then the place where man [sic] is dishonored, violated and oppressed, both in his own heart and in a society which oppresses men, is at the same time the preferred place where religious experience becomes possible in a way of life which seeks to give form to this symbol, to heal it and give it its own liberated existence.⁴⁴

The restoration of the image of God that the Christian experiences through the healing of guilt and sin in one's own heart finds further realization in the renewal or sanctification of oppressed humanity in the wider world. The Christian participates in God's work of redemption, is "deified" in his or her active commitment to God's cause for humanity (the kingdom of God):

"we can say that everywhere where good is done and injustice is opposed by a praxis of love for one's fellow human being the very being of God, which is love for human beings, is imitated and brought into force."⁴⁵

43. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 776.

44. *Ibid.*, 837.

45. Schillebeeckx, *The Schillebeeckx Reader*, 274.

Schillebeeckx explains that religious consciousness of the holy is the awareness of God as the ground of the possibility of existence. As such, God is greater than any manifestation of Godself in the world, and yet God does indeed manifest Godself, albeit ambiguously, through the medium of creation. God is present to humanity in a "mediated immediacy." Christians, in light of their belief in Jesus, realize that "man [sic] in the world is the fundamental symbol of the holy, of God as the champion of all good and the opponent of all evil, and therefore a manifestation of God as grace and judgment."⁴⁶ Schillebeeckx thereby concludes that Christians can neither idealize any particular form of human living in the world nor choose to escape the world, which always contains the possibility of manifesting the holy. This openness to God's mediated immediacy in the world, in addition, constitutes Christianity's critical contribution to political activity, structures, and ideologies. Christian faith opposes any "complete identification of human salvation with politics."⁴⁷

For Schillebeeckx, then, Christian faith brings to the political sphere a critical check on the idolatrous tendency in human efforts for liberation. The believer realizes that all efforts at human liberation can only be partial, for total liberation rests with God. Any political cause or institution claiming total liberation of people is an "alienating claim."⁴⁸ Just as Luther and Calvin, with variation in emphases, saw in the complex of justification and sanctification the freeing of the person from idolatrous societal forces, so here Schillebeeckx makes the same case for the contemporary political scene. God has created human beings in God's image. Turning away from idealized or idolatrous beliefs about humanity or human structures frees the person to experience humanity as the image of God.

46. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 776.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*, 768.

The Eschatological Proviso

In the Christian experience of God as both manifested and concealed in the world Schillebeeckx also recognizes "God's proviso." For humanity now living in history it is an eschatological proviso. The future of humanity rests ultimately with the unseen God. A great danger lies, however, in such a statement of God's proviso if its specifically Christian content is not included. Without considering what God has brought about for humanity in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the eschatological proviso can neutralize any form of political policy: "God could just as well appear as 'salvation' in the sustaining and renewal of the world as in its suffering, its servitude and its decline." The Christian, however, believes in the God who "by nature . . . promises the good and opposes all evil."⁴⁹ In the desire to follow this God revealed in Jesus, the Christians direct their lives in the effort to further the good and to oppose all forms of evil, injustice, and suffering. The critical and productive force of God's eschatological proviso is the belief that God is the sole subject of universal providence. The eschatological proviso, therefore, does not neutralize but "desacralizes and radicalizes the manifold human concern for the future of a true, good and happy humanity in the best possible social structures."⁵⁰

At the Intersection of Liturgy and Ethics: The Contrast Experience

As we have seen for Schillebeeckx, while much suffering in the world is unjust and unnecessarily inflicted, still, all instances of suffering are not evil. Indeed, endemic to human experience is the "refractoriness" or resistance of reality to people's ideas, plans, or expectations, let alone the refractoriness of evil and meaninglessness. Knowledge requires struggle with such resistance, and reason (as Kant demonstrated) is aware of its limits in perceiving the object.⁵¹ The latter, according to Schillebeeckx,

49. Ibid., 778.

50. Ibid., 779.

51. See Ibid., 817-19.

opens up a space for human creativity. This is especially true in the ethical and mystical spheres of life, for in both these areas people encounter aspects of their lives and world that exceed the bounds of any scientific or technical explanation. In the mystical aspect, which includes prayer, liturgy, and creeds, people play—engage in "unproductive" activity—with the remembrance (*anamnesis*) of God's faithfulness and in expectation of God's final fulfillment of that faithfulness (eschatology). In the ethical sphere people continuously encounter others—individuals, groups, systems—in situations that resist simple identification with what has been done before and, thus, require new decisions for action. Moreover, as we touched on earlier, the ethical takes priority over the mystical insofar as prayer and liturgy become delusion or even support for unjust ideologies if not performed with an awareness of the ethical concerns that always press the *humanum*.

The intersection of the mystical and the ethical Schillebeeckx most poignantly articulates as the negative or critical experience of contrast, a concept he has developed and revisited over the decades of his writing. In *Church*, the final book of his trilogy, he undertakes to "radicalize"⁵² what he has previously proposed about the concept in a way that serves the highly apologetic quality of a book directed to an increasingly unchurched or even atheistic society. In presenting the contrast experience here, however, I prefer to follow earlier writings, some of which were pastorally addressed to audiences of more religiously engaged Christians.

The contrast experience has two facets. First, a Christian who is poor or oppressed or who has committed him/herself in solidarity with these people experiences the acute absence of God in a situation of injustice. This situation of suffering contrasts negatively with the divine love for humanity one has known in prayer, liturgy, and contemplation. Secondly, the Christian acts, then, to end the alienation. By thus acting he or she experiences "precisely in political love and resistance against injustice an intense contact with God, the presence of the liberating God of

52. Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 5.

Jesus."⁵³ It is in ethical practice on behalf of the suffering that the Christian experiences the grace of God, for God's grace is the very activity of bringing about the salvation of people. In this way Schillebeeckx speaks of the presence of God. One experiences the absence of God in the overwhelming instance of suffering, but in the effort to defeat that suffering one experiences God's presence. If one wants to know God, one engages in God's practice—the ongoing effort for the wholeness and happiness of people. Whereas Schillebeeckx describes the contrast experience as “the possibility of a new experience of Transcendence,”⁵⁴ it may well also be considered, in terms of the traditional doctrine of sanctification, as a new form of empirical evidence that the sanctified person participates in the divine life. The love the politically engaged Christian expends on behalf of suffering humanity discloses his or her participation in the life and love of God.

Contrast experiences can only occur if indeed Christians practice forms of mysticism in their lives. Schillebeeckx states directly, “Christianity without God is the end of all Christianity.”⁵⁵ The various ways in which God comes explicitly to Christians in their religious traditions of contemplation, prayer, and sacramental liturgy (all of which include engagement with Scripture) are the experiences that give rise to a critical commitment to humanity in the world. Thus, Schillebeeckx's promotion of political holiness, far from discarding the mystical and liturgical aspects of the life of faith, has an irreducible need for the latter: “Politics without prayer or mysticism quickly becomes grim and barbaric; prayer or mysticism without political love quickly becomes sentimental and irrelevant interiority.”⁵⁶

Schillebeeckx considers “mediated immediacy” the most adequate expression of the mystery of God as salvation of

53. Schillebeeckx, *The Schillebeeckx Reader*, 273.

54. *Ibid.*, 272.

55. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 814.

56. Schillebeeckx, *The Schillebeeckx Reader*, 274.

humanity and, therefore, as the basis for understanding the nature of prayer and liturgy, as well as the relationship between these “mystical” aspects and the political aspect of the Christian life.

Between God and our awareness of God looms the insuperable barrier of the historical, human and natural world of creation, the constitutive symbol of the real presence of God for us. The fact that in this case an unmistakable mediation produces immediacy, instead of destroying it, is connected with the absolute or divine manner of the real presence of God: he [*sic*] makes himself directly and creatively present in the medium, that is, in ourselves, our neighbors, the world and history. This is the deepest immediacy that I know.⁵⁷

This principle of mediated immediacy we have already seen operative in Schillebeeckx's explanation of the contribution that socially-politically active believers bring to the “cause of humanity”: They bring a critical awareness that denies any equation of human salvation with politics while also bringing a passionate commitment to justice based on their search for God in the world. “Churches are . . . communities which speak to God: praying communities of faith and not just one action group or another, however praiseworthy such groups may be. Their praxis is the realization of the story that they tell, above all in the liturgy.”⁵⁸

It is the Church's ministry of word and sacrament that provides “the hermeneutical key or code for reading world history and for bringing it to greater completion.”⁵⁹ This hermeneutic is needed so that human beings can recognize God's presence in history. This is especially true because the history of the world, fraught with suffering, is not simply equivalent to the history of salvation.

57. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 809.

58. Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 14.

59. Schillebeeckx, *The Schillebeeckx Reader*, 257.

The remembrance of God's salvific action in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—mediated through the words and signs of liturgy—is at the same time an anticipation of the fullness of liberation and redemption that God will give to all humanity at the end of history. The moments of eschatological joy experienced in liturgy become a protest against injustice when Christians encounter an experience that negatively contrasts with the vision of God's kingdom. The final healing of humanity and the world will embrace "both person and society" without doing violence to created reality; God is "the one who transcends all things through interiority, who goes beyond all things from within."⁶⁰

Schillebeeckx's contribution to the doctrine of sanctification comes into sharpest focus in the concepts of the negative contrast experience and mediated immediacy. The latter concept brings new sophistication to the theological attempt to explain the sacramentality of the world and of each human person's experience in the world, as well as situating the Church and its liturgical rites as sacraments of the salvation that God is bringing about in history. The healing and wholeness that God desires is for all aspects of human living. Sanctification is for the whole person, the whole of humanity, and the whole of creation. God has created humanity, the *humanum*, as an open-ended reality, a project in which humanity shares in God's creative but also redemptive love, for the *humanum* is ever threatened by evil and suffering. The contrast experience is the process whereby the Christian works and suffers for the cause of the world's healing and sanctification, which is God's cause, the holy cause. Holiness is a participation in God's very honor, the commitment to the happiness and salvation of people in the complex medium of human experience in history and the world.

60. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 815.

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We Are the Church: The Liturgical Construction of the Self

Dean G. Blevins

Professors and ministers working in the fields of Christian worship and Christian religious education live within a long-standing dialog between worship and discipleship, liturgy and catechesis. The conversation often revolves around the formative power of liturgy in relationship to congregational efforts to discern appropriate forms of worship.¹ Several theorists argue that the formative power of worship is crucial in shaping Christians.²

These theorists are limited, however, by an insufficient theological anthropology for describing the nature and outcome of this formative process. Christian religious educators equally interested in the formative process are also hampered as they rely heavily upon modern social sciences (particularly psychology) to describe human nature and the learning process. Many such psychological descriptions portray human beings in individualistic, unified, and insulated terms that confound any understanding of the relationship between persons and the communities they participate within. Such modernist descriptions, however, are also rapidly becoming problematic in light of newer, postmodern,

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1. Dean G. Blevins, "Worship: Formation and Discernment: A Wesleyan Dialogue Between Worship and Christian Education," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33, no. 1 (spring 1998): 111-27.
 2. Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999); Philip H. Pfatteicher, *The School of the Church: Worship and Christian Formation* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995); John Westerhoff and William H. Willimon, *Liturgy and Learning Through the Life Cycle* rev. ed. (Akron, OH: OSL Publications, 1994).