

SUFFERING IN THE THEOLOGY OF EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX

KATHLEEN McMANUS, O.P.

[Reflection on human suffering is a formative factor in the development of the theology of Schillebeeckx. The dynamic of "negative contrast experience" is significant not only for his approach to suffering but for his method of doing theology in the face of the world's suffering. Schillebeeckx dialectically incorporates the reality of suffering into the construction of a theology that nevertheless proclaims God's desire for the happiness and flourishing of human beings and of all creation.]

AT THE THRESHOLD of a new millennium the world possesses unprecedented capabilities for advancing the quality of human life, transforming social structures, and restoring the damaged balance of nature. As inhabitants of this world, we have unprecedented power not only to realize our role in the divine-human partnership in creation and salvation, but also to destroy creation and each other—all that God has entrusted to us. We hope for the blessed outcome and occasionally, in fragmentary ways, we experience the realization of such aspirations. Too often, however, we experience hope thwarted, salvation opposed, the human situation threatened. Sorrow overpowers rejoicing in too many human lives, and the thread of suffering woven through human history seems to gain texture and density in proportion to human progress. Suffering is the greatest challenge to our belief in the goodness of creation and the possibility of salvation.

Edward Schillebeeckx has not only taken this paradox into account but has dialectically incorporated the reality of suffering (*lijden*) into a theology defined by its focus on the interrelated themes of creation, salvation, and eschatological hope. He has spent his life as a theologian proclaiming God's commitment to the flourishing of the human and has done so in a world more schooled in suffering than in joy. Schillebeeckx has grounded his entire theological project in the promise of a divine-human future made visible in creation and entrusted to human freedom. If he has given a

KATHLEEN McMANUS, O.P., received her doctorate in theology from the University of St. Michael's College, in the Toronto School of Theology. Prior to that she also studied at the Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis. Now a resident of Blauvelt, New York, she is teaching theology and researching a theology of suffering in relation to the field of health care.

privileged theological locus to the experience of suffering, it is against the background of a creation originally good and the horizon of eschatological promise. Because suffering is so tangibly present in human experience, it provides the means, dialectically, of imaging the horizon of our hope. Schillebeeckx has demonstrated that salvation can be articulated only in counterpoint to the reality of suffering. This is the essence of the notion of “negative contrast experience” that emerges in his later theology.¹ In other words, his method of doing theology corresponds to the content of his theological message. The dialectic of human suffering and salvation is most identifiable after Schillebeeckx’s dramatic shift in which human experience assumes center stage in his theology. The fundamental elements of this dialectic are present however even in his earliest work, suggesting that suffering operates as a formative factor throughout the whole of his theological development.

WHAT KIND OF SUFFERING?

Human suffering in all its forms confronts ordinary people with the essential questions of life’s meaning and purpose. This brings us squarely up against the question of what “suffering” means for Schillebeeckx and for us. Suffering constitutes the raw and immediate challenge to countless concrete lives running desperately short of expectation, characterized by rawness, immediacy, and dearth of hope. These are the defining characteristics of the term “suffering.” The quality of agony, the experience of affliction is part of the concept. The cause of affliction may be internal or external, emotional or physical, social or economic. Suffering may be the result of natural disaster, international violence, political injustice, or subtle personal oppression. It may be one’s excruciating battle with terminal illness, or another’s agonizing loss of a loved one to death. The term “suffering” may conjure up the unfathomable civil terror in Rwanda or Kosovo, ongoing starvation from India to the Sudan, and the ravaging of societies by earthquakes and hurricanes. Suffering evokes the increasing

¹ Human suffering appears in stark contrast against the horizon of the eschatological promise. “Negative contrast experience” is a term that emerged after Schillebeeckx opened himself and his theology to the impact of critical theory. The term refers to those experiences of injustice, oppression, and suffering that give rise to protest and the ethical imperative toward active transformation. Schillebeeckx emphasizes that “these contrast-experiences show that the moral imperative is first discovered in its immediate, concrete, *inner* meaning, before it can be made the object of a science and then reduced to a generally valid principle. . . . The initial creative decision which discovered the historical imperative directly in its *inner* meaning in the very contrast experience *is*, for the believer, at the same time the charismatic element of this whole process” (“Church, Magisterium, and Politics,” in *God the Future of Man*, trans. N. D. Smith [New York: Sheed & Ward, 1968] 155–56).

scourge of homelessness throughout North America. And in the drug- and crime-ridden streets of inner cities, suffering is exacerbated by society's brutal stripping of basic human services from the most destitute among us. It cries out in the overwhelming spectrum of human rights abuses in countries such as present-day China, as well as in the exploitation of women and children by multiple industries throughout the world. The many facets of the AIDS crisis give rise to suffering in its physical, psychic, and spiritual dimensions. Suffering simmers in the seasoned, principled hatreds of centuries in the Middle East, in Eastern Europe, and in Northern Ireland. It is evident in the solemn devastation of Guatemalan and Salvadoran peasants digging up loved ones from the mass graves of the disappeared. Worn down by now-stilled violence, the weary seek merely to entrust the dead to God by name in burial as they take up life again under a false and corrupt civil peace. The concrete, trusting simplicity of this active handing-over to God touches on something central to Schillebeeckx's theological reflection. Suffering challenges us to resist its causes on every front, but when earthly efforts fail we are held by the mystery of a hidden God in whom life is stronger than death, and in whom human acts of truth triumph beyond earthly limits.

Suffering is at once more immanent and more ambiguous in its existence under the contradictory signs of modern comfort and success. The most common suffering is no less painful for being invisible. It is hidden away in middle-class homes and behind the polished facades of the affluent. The immediacy of loneliness, the rawness of broken relationships, the incomprehensible pain of mental illness, the dearth of hope when the fulfillment of our desires leaves emptiness unassuaged, the slow relinquishing of life with age: these are part of what Schillebeeckx understands by suffering.² What remains constant in the myriad scenarios of suffering is the experience of affliction.

² Schillebeeckx notes that beyond those areas where human efforts can effect healing, we are still constantly confronted with the fundamental suffering of the human person, "suffering from love, suffering as a result of guilt, because of our finitude and mortality, suffering through failure and inadequacy, and finally suffering over the invisibility and hiddenness of God. No human techniques of healing or emancipating practices can ever remove or diminish this suffering" (*Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden [New York: Crossroad, 1980; orig. Dutch 1977] 764; the British title of this volume is *The Christian Experience in the Modern World* [London: SCM, 1980]). Later Schillebeeckx speaks of the culmination of the authority of experiences in the particular authority of human stories of suffering, "stories of suffering over misfortune and failure, the suffering of pain, the suffering of evil and injustice, the suffering of and in love, sorrow or guilt. Here lie the great elements of the revelation of reality in and through finite human experiences" (*Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden [New York: Crossroad, 1990] 28).

EXPERIENTIAL CONTEXT OF SCHILLEBEECKX'S THEOLOGY

Schillebeeckx's writing is marked by his engagement with history, with varied philosophical disciplines, and with his own religious tradition, Dominican and Catholic. Amid many influences, his theological project has been consistently shaped by suffering as mystery and as challenge. These two dimensions are equally present in his fundamental engagement with the concrete experience of suffering persons and the religious and philosophical approaches to this experience. Indeed, in the course of Schillebeeckx's development, the practical and the theoretical become one in the ground of his *own* experience. The ground of his own experience emerges as the locus of synthesis for his theology. For Schillebeeckx, theological method arises from the narrative structure of experience. The historical situatedness of his own understanding is the experience from which he examines suffering. My analysis of his thought is directed by the widening and deepening spiral emanating from the central point of his experience as a Dominican whose life and work passed through the crucible of Vatican II and its aftermath.

Schillebeeckx experienced his childhood in Belgium during the period after World War I, and his intellectual and religious formation during the era marked by World War II. As a theologian he has both assimilated and influenced the progressive nature of the Church in the Netherlands. His early formation as a Dominican was influenced by Dominic De Petter at Louvain and by Marie Dominic Chenu in Paris. The former trained him in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, the latter in an appreciation of the historical character of theology. Both men facilitated Schillebeeckx's appropriation of the thought of Thomas Aquinas in a way that upheld an incarnational view of the human person who participates in the divinely created order. In the course of his development, he deeply appropriated Aquinas's method as a theologian who synthesized doctrinal theology and human experience of the salvific God. This experience is meant to incorporate not only everyday experience, but also the intellectual currents of the time. The most significant currents shaping Schillebeeckx's later theological development have been hermeneutics, critical theory, and modern biblical exegesis. How these disciplines interface with suffering in his thought illustrates his way of incorporating the pervasive force of suffering in the world. Especially through his immersion in modern methods of biblical exegesis, Schillebeeckx retrieves the image of God as liberator who wills that oppressed people begin to experience freedom and happiness this side of eternity.³ The Hebrew Testament and the Christian Testament

³ Schillebeeckx discusses the exegetical responsibility of the systematic theologian whose starting point is Jesus of Nazareth and whose theological context is the

witness to a God who leads men and women out of all kinds of slavery and misery toward an eschatological fulfillment intended to have tangible beginnings in this world. This gracious God of salvation is definitively revealed in the Jesus of the New Testament. Ultimately the gospel reflecting Jesus' praxis and message becomes the norm for living and proclaiming salvation amid suffering.⁴

Schillebeeckx's emphasis on Jesus' humanity increases throughout the development of his writings. This correlates with his increasingly explicit awareness of suffering. Yet even in his early, sacramental theology he emphasized the efficacy of Jesus' humanity in the work of salvation.⁵ The significance of relational human encounter provided the framework for his presentation of a new, experiential understanding of sacraments. The implications of his emphasis on humanity and relationality develop as his theology develops, particularly vis-à-vis suffering. This relational emphasis emerges in how he treats human solidarity in sin and suffering as well as in creation and salvation. While the gospel message reveals Jesus' solidarity with humanity, the source of what has been called Schillebeeckx's "relational ontology" lies in Jesus' own relationship of unbroken communion with God through suffering and death. One finds an element of mysticism at the core of Schillebeeckx's engagement with suffering. The inseparability of this mysticism from the concrete immediacy of human experience is evident in his pervading conviction that incarnational faith reveals humanity as a fundamental symbol of God. As a result of his engagement with critical theory, hermeneutics, and exegesis, Schillebeeckx speaks of the *humanum* (most often known by desire in contrast to the *threatened humanum*) as the criterion of truth, secular or religious. He speaks of a hermeneutic of humanity from which we must interpret the gospel, and vice versa: "In the light of Jesus Christ, the gospel itself is a hermeneutic of

living faith of the concrete local congregation (*Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* [New York: Crossroad, 1979] 36–40).

⁴ Explaining how Jesus in his own person presents God as salvation for suffering men and women, Schillebeeckx writes: "Jesus is about God's business, and the business of humanity, the *humanum*, is to search after God 'for God's sake.' Jesus is the man whose joy and pleasure is God himself. God's lordship is God's mode of being God; and our recognition of that engenders the truly human condition, the salvation of humankind. For that reason God's lordship, as Jesus understands it, expresses the relation between God and humanity, in the sense that 'we are each other's happiness'" (*Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* 142).

⁵ *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1963; orig. Dutch, 1959). Here Schillebeeckx is still operating out of an old paradigm, starting with the doctrinal formulas of Chalcedon and transposing them into the realm of common human experience and language. Nevertheless, this truly groundbreaking study shattered the prevailing mechanistic understanding of grace and sacraments and established the human basis of Christ's mediation of God.

fundamental human experience."⁶ This assertion sounds very contemporary, but its roots lie in Schillebeeckx's earliest insights drawn from Thomas Aquinas, namely that the humanity of Christ is the mode of existence of the Son of God in the world.⁷

AQUINAS AND HUMAN EXPERIENCES OF CONTRAST

To understand how suffering operates as a formative factor in Schillebeeckx's early works one must turn to Aquinas. The problem of suffering leads inevitably to questions about the nature of good and evil and ultimately to original sin.⁸ In Aquinas's teaching on evil and original sin one can recognize the patterned roots of Schillebeeckx's anthropology. The goodness of God and the fundamental goodness of humanity are basic to Aquinas's thought. Aquinas's discussions on the nature of evil and sin frequently evoked what Schillebeeckx came to call experiences of negative contrast. God is to be found on the underside of even life's darkest, most threatening experiences. Over and over again Schillebeeckx argues that, when all worldly evidence attests to the malevolence of reality, God is to be found as mercy at the heart of reality. This sense of God on the underside of the negative reality of evil and suffering is central to Aquinas's system, despite the difference of his language from that of Schillebeeckx. In particular, this assertion of the fundamental power of goodness contextualizes all Aquinas's discussions of suffering, sin, and evil. There is no first

⁶ Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* 76.

⁷ Philip Kennedy asserts, "In much the same way as Schillebeeckx's entire theological corpus, with its governing preoccupation of explaining religious knowledge, can be described as an extended excursus on a single text of Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 1, a. 7, ad 1), Schillebeeckx's Christology . . . can also be understood as a gradually unfolding commentary on yet another passage of Aquinas . . . (ST III, q. 2, a. 10)" (*Deus Humanissimus: The Knowability of God in the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx* [Fribourg, Switz: University Press, 1993] 297). Kennedy explains that, over against the Leonine text, which speaks of "Christ in whom human nature is so assumed as to belong to the person of the Son (*in quo humana natura assumpta est ad hoc quod sit personae Filii Dei*)" . . . the majority of manuscripts reflect Thomas' intention of indicating that the humanity of Jesus is itself a manner of being of the Son of God. Most manuscripts speak of Christ, 'in whom human nature is so assumed as to be the person of the Son of God (*sit persona Filii Dei*)'" (ibid. 298-99).

⁸ Some contemporary thinkers will critique my assumption of the givenness of original sin in this study. I am aware of a current view that original sin is merely a human, and specifically male, construct which our new knowledge of the universe challenges us to move beyond. I choose, however, to retain its givenness both on existential grounds and, more to the point, because Schillebeeckx is clearly grounded in Aquinas's teaching on the subject.

principle of evil.⁹ Evil has no existence, no substance of its own apart from the good to which it adheres.¹⁰ If this is true, then even when all that one knows is suffering, when all that one can see is the evil of a concrete situation, one must believe that God is present and that good will ultimately prevail. Still questions remain: How is God present? How will good prevail? How do we know this?

God is present as the pure power of "anti-evil." Good will prevail in the very act of trust in God at the heart of the struggle of resistance and in spite of every outward failure. The reasoning lines of Aquinas's system are clear and precise. Schillebeeckx's "non-system" reflects his understanding of the ambiguity of human experience as well as the intellectual plurality of the contemporary context. At bottom, however, Aquinas and Schillebeeckx both maintain that "we know this" by faith. What is most fundamental to theology and to human experience is ultimately the same. Aquinas calls upon our faith-knowledge of a sustaining God as the background for any possible discussion of the meaning of suffering and evil. Suffering and evil in fact have no existence except insofar as they alter, diminish, disfigure, or do violence to a preexisting good. Further, in Aquinas's system God has no responsibility for evil, no part in suffering. God is present to human experience of evil and suffering as the force of pure positivity. Point for point Schillebeeckx echoes Aquinas, though he speaks from his base of experience in a world more complex and ambiguous than Aquinas could have imagined.¹¹

Schillebeeckx consistently maintains that certain assertions can only be made on the basis of an experienced faith.¹² Christian tradition provides us with language and symbols to give expression to experiences of faith. These experiences, however, are fundamentally human experiences in and

⁹ *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 49, a. 3.

¹⁰ "Good and evil are properly opposed as privation and possession of a quality. . . . But privation is twofold: one of which consists of an actual loss of being, like death or blindness; the other which consists of a gradual loss of being, like sickness or ophthalmia, which is a process leading to blindness. And privations of this latter kind are sometimes called contraries, inasmuch as they still retain something of that which is being lost; and in this way evil is called a contrary, since it does not deprive of all good, but something of the good remains" (*De malo*, q. 1, a. 1, ad 2.); see also *ST* 1, q. 48, a. 3; q. 49, a. 1-2.

¹¹ Schillebeeckx expresses impatience with a tendency in the tradition to argue away the real horror of evil by defining it as "nothing" or "non-being." He calls this an "escape hatch," and emphasizes the very concrete forms of evil in sufferings such as hunger and poverty. In the face of this, God is the concrete "no," the pure force of "anti-evil" (*Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* 178).

¹² For example, when discussing the unique and definitive character of Jesus amidst the plurality of world religions, Schillebeeckx explains that when Christians acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Christ, we are using confessional, relational language, not scientific language. Statements of faith arise from one's subjective, per-

through which God may be disclosed. Schillebeeckx maintains that it is a fundamentally human intuition that mercy lies at the heart of reality; it is a fundamentally human experience to expect to be happy, despite every evidence to the contrary.¹³ Even skeptics are skeptics because they have grown accustomed to being dissatisfied with reality. Something within our experience indicates that we are meant for something better. People somehow believe that there is a reality corresponding to this expectant longing.¹⁴ Religious people call both the source of this longing and its expected fulfillment "God." But ultimately, for Schillebeeckx, it is the experience that counts for the kind of knowing that Thomas classifies as faith-knowing.¹⁵ Once we get to this common ground, we can talk about the reality of suffering and evil in the only way possible: in contrast to the good in which we believe and for which we hope. It has even been said that our knowledge of God and our knowledge of evil are mutually dependent upon each other. This notion, so evocative of Schillebeeckx's negative contrast experience, was also central to Charles Journet's analysis of evil based on the theology of Thomas Aquinas. Journet called it a law of the world's spiritual history that it advances in two directions. "Thus the face of God and the face of evil are together uncovered as time goes on."¹⁶

For people who have wrestled with suffering and uncovered in the ex-

sonal experience of One who is really, objectively *there* (*Church: The Human Story of God* 145).

¹³ "Where salvation is hoped for, it is in the express form of this expectation that evil and suffering are unmasked: in it both are put on exhibition. . . . It has been felt instinctively that [suffering] is not to be contained within a merely human reference. And so where people have hoped for salvation their hope has received a religious name. Reaching above and beyond themselves, people learned to expect that this good must come 'from God.' They look for mercy and compassion at the very heart of reality, despite every contrary experience" (*Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* 20).

¹⁴ For Aquinas, the lost state of innocence corresponds to the transnatural longings of the person; see Charles Journet, *The Meaning of Evil*, trans. Michael Barry (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1963) 239.

¹⁵ Schillebeeckx elucidates Aquinas's understanding of the experiential aspect of faith: "We perceive this content of faith from what is heard (we see it in the life of the Church), but it is only recognized as a value that has meaning for us because it corresponds to a tendency of the human spirit, a tendency that goes back to the living God himself" ("The Non-Conceptual Intellectual Element," in *Revelation and Theology* [London: Sheed & Ward, 1968] 2.45).

¹⁶ Journet, *The Meaning of Evil* 23. Speculating on a possible answer to evil, Journet writes: "At the level of life, only the experience of God can resist the experience of evil; at the level of intellect, only the progressive discovery of God can resist the progressive discovery of evil. At both levels, only the mystery of God allows us to confront the mystery of evil as a whole. One mystery is opposed to another mystery, an absolutely infinite mystery to a relatively infinite one" (*ibid.* 24).

perience a hidden grace, the common ground we speak of in Aquinas and Schillebeeckx may be self-evident. But for those who have found no good or discernible grace, for those who experience suffering without hope, there remains only one question, the bottomless "Why?" Why evil and suffering at all, if God is all powerful, all good, all love? Aquinas explained that suffering is the result of evil unleashed in the world by the fall. Philosophers and theologians have struggled with the question. But Schillebeeckx in his later theology dismisses metaphysical speculation on the theodicy problem as a waste of time.¹⁷ He becomes increasingly intent upon how people are to negotiate the concrete and immediate reality of suffering in the light of the promise of salvation. Yet even in his later work, his own approach to suffering reflects important dimensions of Aquinas's thought. Schillebeeckx's explicit references to the classical understanding of original sin in his early work bear within them the seeds of suffering-related themes in his later theology. For this reason I wish to explore Aquinas's teaching on original sin within the context of original justice.¹⁸

ORIGINAL JUSTICE AND ORIGINAL SIN

The state of original justice in Aquinas's thought strengthens the perception that God wills human happiness and fulfillment. According to this construct, the first humans were given supernatural gifts, beyond even the

¹⁷ Articles furthering such speculation abound in contemporary journals of philosophy and theology, testifying to the continued exigency of the theodicy question. Against this background, however, emerge studies both reflecting and reinforcing Schillebeeckx's engagement of suffering in its concrete immediacy from the standpoint of gospel praxis. For example, one philosopher of religion, examining reasons for the inadequacy of theodicy formulations, opts for a "practical theodicy" that operates from the point of view of sufferers and embraces a *theologia crucis*; see Kenneth Surin, *The Turnings of Darkness and Light* (New York: Cambridge University, 1989) esp. 1–19. Writing of the impact of the Holocaust's particular evil and concrete suffering, Susan Shapiro asserts that one cannot hear the claim of suffering in general; see "Hearing the Testimony of Radical Negation," in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and David Tracy, ed., *The Holocaust as Interruption* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1984) 5. For a praxis-based feminist perspective, see Kathleen Talvacchia, "Learning to Stand with Others through Compassionate Solidarity," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 44 (1993) 177–94; for an illustration of Schillebeeckx's emphasis on solidarity and presence, see Scott W. Gustafson, "From Theodicy to Discipleship: Dostoyevsky's Contribution to the Pastoral Task in *The Brothers Karamazov*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 45 (1994) 209–22. Schillebeeckx himself has recourse to Dostoyevsky in this vein.

¹⁸ Original justice refers to the state of perfect rectitude in which the first man and woman were created. Aquinas catalogues in detail the state of innocence in terms of righteousness, knowledge, immortality, and perfection of relationship of the first humans with regard to God, each other, and potential offspring; see *Summa theologiae* 1, qq. 94–102.

full perfection of human nature, to attain this desired end.¹⁹ In this exalted state, the decision to turn away, to choose self-sufficiency over dependence upon God, was clearly a matter of human freedom and responsibility. Thus, the evil and suffering released into the world were released through human agency. For Aquinas, the paradisaical existence was forfeited through the misuse of freedom. Schillebeeckx echoes this when he attributes the universal suffering of death to the human refusal to “walk with God in the garden.”²⁰ Even in his early article “The Death of a Christian,” he has moved well beyond a literal understanding of Genesis.²¹ But he retains the metaphorical significance of the mythical construct. We might even theorize that the eschatological promise that sustains hope in his later theological reflection finds its material in this image of original justice. If original sin leaves a legacy of suffering, then original justice leaves a trace of memory which, refined by modern thought and experience, is no longer a remnant evoking guilty loss, but a life-giving taste of what human beings are meant for.²²

In Schillebeeckx’s later development, the early symbolism of human

¹⁹ “St. Thomas shows himself most interested in God’s purpose in enriching Adam’s nature: (these gifts) were given to Adam to make his return to God easier and less fraught with the risk of failure” (Edmund J. Fitzpatrick, *The Sin of Adam in the Writings of Thomas Aquinas* [Mundelein: St. Mary of the Lake Seminary, 1950] 12).

²⁰ “The Death of a Christian,” in Schillebeeckx, *Vatican II: The Struggle of Minds and Other Essays* (Dublin: Gill & Son, 1963) 61–91.

²¹ Many studies on original sin published in the 1950s testify to the struggle of theologians to come to grips with new currents of biblical interpretation altering the reading of Genesis; see, for example, a series in the *Downside Review* from 1953 to 1958 on original sin, paradise, pain, and the mystery of evil. Commenting in 1975 on the constant stream of Roman Catholic publications on original sin since the early 1950s, George Vandervelde noted that “in the last decade alone, one can count at least seventy titles” (Vandervelde, *Original Sin: Two Major Trends in Contemporary Roman Catholic Interpretation* [Washington: University Press of America, 1981] 42). Tracing the roots of this phenomenon, Henri Rondet recalls how Lagrange’s groundbreaking 1897 publication on innocence and sin, initially controverted, was canonized by Pius XII in *Divino afflante Spiritu* (1943). The work of Protestant exegete Hermann Gunkel, among others, similarly had a profound impact on the interpretation of Genesis. Though *Humani generis* (1950) seemed to close doors to further interpretation, it actually allowed some room for formerly rejected theories and for the utilization of the sciences; see Henri Rondet, *Original Sin: The Patristic and Theological Background*, trans. Cajetan Finnegan (New York: Alba House, 1972) 218–30.

²² Not only modern methods of theology and exegesis, but also the tradition of some Church Fathers, notably Irenaeus, support this view. Schillebeeckx, steeped in *ressourcement* under the mentorship of Chenu, frequently invoked Irenaeus’s maxim “the glory of God is the human person fully alive” (see *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* 790).

agency in the fall is transposed into responsibility for the concrete structures of social sin. As his engagement with critical social theory combined with an increasing awareness of the complexity of evil and suffering on a world scale, the inadequacy of the classical explanation became evident. The Holocaust and all that it symbolizes of humanity's capacity for evil make it impossible to encapsulate so neatly the source of evil and the reason for suffering. Schillebeeckx never seeks to unravel or rebuke the classical construct. He simply moves forward, retaining its metaphorically meaningful strands as he expresses the profound ambiguity of the human experience of evil and suffering. Natural disasters and especially the excess of innocent suffering defy explanation and are trivialized by religious platitudes. In the end, Schillebeeckx lifts up the still-relevant point of the classical fall construct: however we conceive or express it, it is only obedience to God that can save us from—or rather *through*—suffering, sin, and evil. “Obedience” here has the relational connotation of committed trust and unbroken communion. Christians cannot think away suffering or the surd of evil damaging God's good creation. They can only look to Jesus, in whom God has the last word over the very real and destructive experience of suffering.²³

Thus it is the Jesus of the Gospels that ultimately focuses Schillebeeckx's engagement with suffering. Surveys on original sin have pointed out that the Gospels are silent on the subject.²⁴ Jesus is concerned only with the concrete suffering before him. His only reference to the origin of sin has to do with the mystery of the human heart. The famous “original sin” passages of Paul²⁵ began to be developed by certain Fathers of the Church only in response to gnostic heresies. Augustine eventually formulated the doctrine which, in Aquinas's metaphysical systematization, continues to dominate Western thought. What is important for us is that Schillebeeckx is conditioned by this tradition. More to the point, he pulls forward the elements of the tradition that most fruitfully correspond with the urgent needs of contemporary human experience. It is no accident that the hermeneutical turn in biblical exegesis should reinforce in Schillebeeckx's later work the scriptural foundations of the Church Fathers in whom he

²³ Ibid. 698–99, where Schillebeeckx speaks out of the place of convergence he finds in Augustine and Irenaeus: above all, the experience of suffering is a quintessentially human experience.

²⁴ See, e.g., Henri Rondet, *Original Sin: The Patristic and Theological Background*; and Piet Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin*, translated by Joseph Donceel (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1965); also helpful is the succinct presentation by Anthony Padovano, *Original Sin and Christian Anthropology* (Washington: Corpus, 1969).

²⁵ Especially Romans 5:12–21.

had been trained. It is all part of the evolving hermeneutical spiral in which his life and theology are caught up as one organic whole.

In his early works Schillebeeckx spoke explicitly of our solidarity in the legacy of original sin. Later he came to speak of the other side of this legacy: our solidarity with the oppressed, the outcast, the suffering *anawim* of the world—the solidarity that makes us God's partners in redemption. The impact of critical theory is evident in his emphasis upon political protest and transformation of the social structures responsible for oppression and injustice. For Schillebeeckx, orthopraxy became essential to any theology with claims to orthodoxy. At the heart of the call to Christian praxis in an unjust world is the call to conversion (*metanoia*). If the imperative to social action dominates his later work, it is because the imperative to personal conversion in his early work had intensified and developed in the face of increasing global suffering.

MYSTICISM AND EXPERIENCES OF NEGATIVE CONTRAST

Central to the experience of *metanoia* is Schillebeeckx's notion of "negative contrast experience," which has been variously analyzed with regard to its implications for a liberative Christian ethic.²⁶ The dimensions of negative contrast experience operative in the experience of conversion are most often developed in relationship to the concrete demands of an ethical praxis. This notion is of critical importance for the elucidation of Schillebeeckx's theology and particularly for our understanding of suffering as a formative factor in his theological development. Particularly important too is the mystical dimension of negative contrast experience in *metanoia*. In his earliest naming of negative contrast experience, Schillebeeckx focuses on the root of the imperative to ethical praxis. This root is found in the essence of the experience of contrast. For the person of faith, the inner essence of contrast is "the charismatic element of this whole process."²⁷ It is the immediate, concrete experience of meaning at the heart of struggle that gives rise to the moral imperative. In many cases, both personal and political, this leads to resistance of evil and positive action for good. Sometimes these efforts bear fruit in visible transformation; sometimes they are thwarted by reality. In either case, the root of that moral imperative effects an authentic process of conversion. That inner dynamic of conversion becomes the key to our understanding of how suffering operates as a forma-

²⁶ The most thorough and focussed analysis and application of Schillebeeckx's negative contrast experience in conjunction with the thought of liberation theologians is to be found in Patricia McAuliffe, "A Liberationist Ethic: Some Fundamental Elements and Their Logic" (Ph.D. diss., Regis College, Toronto School of Theology, 1990).

²⁷ See above, n. 1.

tive factor in Schillebeeckx's theology. It is key, also, to the continuity of the formative effect of suffering across the shifts in Schillebeeckx's development, a key that lies precisely in the realm of mysticism.²⁸

In this space of dark mystery the essence of negative contrast reaches back to a time before Schillebeeckx knew such language, a time when he spoke of our solidarity in fallenness and in a sorrowful Mother's embrace.²⁹ Schillebeeckx's early language of original sin and redemption unfolds an image of God's solidarity with suffering humanity in very personal terms. In *Mary, Mother of the Redemption*, he speaks of original sin over against the redeemed humanity of Mary. Original sin, the universal solidarity of humankind in sin, is thrown into sharp relief by the Old Testament spirituality of the *anawim* embodied in Mary. The *anawim*, Schillebeeckx writes, "are God's saints, the just, whose life on this earth is not particularly happy, but who, despite the humiliations they are called upon to endure, remain the trusting and faithful servants of Yahweh."³⁰ What may sound like the passive piety of a former age is rather the essence of the mysticism that remains at the heart of Schillebeeckx's later political theology. Trusting in God's mercy despite all evidence to the contrary involves the use of every available resource to fight evil and oppression. But the fight is sustained and transcended by a quite simple relationship of trust in God.

Mary's *fiat*, as described in this early work, comes to mind later when one reads Schillebeeckx's statements about commitment to life and humanity as the essence of faith.³¹ Similarly, it seems to be the basis for what much more recently he has termed humanity's "open yes."³² The *fiat* that goes to the ultimate limit in love is the key to Jesus' identity and to the significance of suffering in the unfolding of Schillebeeckx's theology.

In the spectrum of Schillebeeckx's works, one article stands forth be-

²⁸ Philip Kennedy concluded that Schillebeeckx's mystical approach to God is the thread of continuity throughout his work (*Deus Humanissimus* 355).

²⁹ "The solidarity of the human race with Adam in original sin is only the reverse side of our solidarity with Christ, the Redeemer, in grace. Original sin and redemption are two sides of the same divine mystery—even though God totally transcends the initiative to sin, which is man's [sic] sole responsibility" (*Mary, Mother of the Redemption* [New York: Sheed & Ward, 1964; orig. ed. 1954] 45). Further, Schillebeeckx alludes to our suffering finding its resting place in the arms of Mary: "She is the great Pieta who casts her mother's cloak of mercy over our suffering humanity" (*ibid.* 175).

³⁰ *Ibid.* 28.

³¹ "Acceptance of God is the ultimate, precise name which must be given to the deepest meaning of commitment to this world" (Schillebeeckx, "Secularization and Christian Belief in God," in *God the Future of Man* 76).

³² Schillebeeckx emphasizes that the fundamental human "no" to evil discloses a more fundamental, though unfulfilled, "open yes," which is the positive condition for opposition (*Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden [New York: Crossroad, 1990] 6).

tween his earlier and later periods to illustrate the key constants in the formative role of suffering both as mystery and challenge, with the emphasis at this point on mystery. In "The Death of a Christian," Schillebeeckx examines the question of "what the answer of our life to death should be." His focus on the very particular yet universal experience of death incorporates the critical elements of sin and suffering, and the attitudes of faith, hope, and love. Schillebeeckx analyzes the historical development of the understanding of death throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition in terms that evoke such major themes of his later theology as negative contrast, solidarity, and eschatological hope. For instance, his yet-to-be developed political mysticism,³³ as well as his later Christology, are hinted at in statements such as this: "It is the sinful world that makes the breakthrough of the divine mercy in the man Jesus have the character of suffering and death."³⁴ His discussion of personal spirituality in the face of death points to the role of suffering in cultivating the detachment necessary for self-abandonment to God. This traditional formulation will develop in later works as an understanding of redemption manifest in ethical praxis based on our human solidarity. Our detachment will be expressed in terms of being freed from ourselves for the service of each other, freed so as to love. Ultimately the mystical centrality of trust at the heart of the experience of suffering remains constant throughout Schillebeeckx's major shifts. "The Death of a Christian" merits attention as a pivotal, embryonic manifestation of the ways in which suffering operates as an increasingly formative factor in the development of his theology.

At the end of many turns in the hermeneutical spiral that encompass hermeneutics, critical theory, and modern biblical exegesis, one finds Schillebeeckx still speaking of God's solidarity with humanity incarnated in the life of Jesus Christ. The mysticism underlying his conviction about this solidarity remains at the center of the spiral. It is the mysticism of the cross, experienced in each personal turning or *metanoia* which does not take place outside of history or apart from one's social, communal situatedness but in the depths of the human heart. This is where Schillebeeckx's theology begins, and this is where it ends. By mysterious twists and turns, the reality of suffering illumines the paradoxical truth of our human existence: uniquely solitary in personhood before God, we are yet created for com-

³³ During the period of his conscious development of "political mysticism," Schillebeeckx defines mysticism as "an intensive form of experience of God or love of God" and politics as "an intensive form of social commitment" (*On Christian Faith: The Spiritual, Ethical, and Political Dimensions*, trans. John Bowden [New York: Crossroad, 1987] 71-72).

³⁴ "The Death of a Christian," in *Vatican II: The Struggle of Minds and Other Essays* 72.

munity, structured as mediators of grace for one another.³⁵ To the degree that we respond to our human vocation as mediators of grace, the reign of God (human happiness) is advanced on earth; to the degree that we fail to respond, it is diminished. The inclination to withdraw from mediatorship has long marked our race. Nevertheless, as Schillebeeckx insists, God continues to invest us with the divine trust and to place creation and the future in our hands. A large portion of the world's suffering is the result of our personal and collective failure at mediatorship; yet, through the reality of suffering we are simultaneously called more deeply into both human communion and mystical solitude. It is not suffering itself but the way human beings live with suffering's reality that advances God's reign on earth.

PRAXIS OF SOLIDARITY AND DISCIPLESHIP OF PRESENCE

The experience of *metanoia* in this dynamic of salvation is integrally bound up with experiences of negative contrast.³⁶ Those intertwined realities depend upon the power of story for their meaning and efficacy. The saving narrative begins on the sure ground of God's graced creation and promised future.³⁷ It proceeds with the bold naming of suffering, sin, and evil in concrete human situations. This negative theology of protest issues in concrete political praxis to recreate human structures in the image of divine justice proclaimed by the gospel. The crisis of meaning and faith enters in when the praxis of justice is thwarted, and, more critically, when radical, gratuitous suffering renders the presence of evil more evident and potent in the world than the presence of God or goodness.

At the place where human effort or understanding reaches its limit and where God seems absent, there is evoked a praxis of solidarity. One concludes that this praxis of solidarity becomes the crucial substance of Schillebeeckx's implicit theology of suffering. It has different manifestations in accord with the vastly different types of individual and communal suffering. The praxis of solidarity is manifest in transformative action as well as in resistance and protest. In situations of extreme suffering, it appears as faithful waiting: attentive love in a "now" that belies the promise that

³⁵ "It is only in the warmth of God's saving love, to which (perhaps only implicit) consent has been given, that our humanity becomes a grace. It is in this way that we become an offer of grace for each other or the concrete form of the *initium fidei* which through God's grace also feels its way in our fellow men and women" ("The Non-Conceptual Intellectual Element" 71).

³⁶ The idea of a "discipleship of presence" as a response to suffering is developed in Scott W. Gustafson, "From Theodicy to Discipleship: Dostoyevsky's Contribution to the Pastoral Task in *The Brothers Karamazov*" 209–22.

³⁷ See "The Death of a Christian," in *Vatican II* 72.

sustains us. The praxis of solidarity is a contemplative, relational praxis, demanding the hard work of reconciliation together with the paradoxical knowing that reconciliation is a gift of grace. The praxis of solidarity is rooted in Jesus' intimacy with God that sustained the cross and issued in his Resurrection. It is manifest in hopeless situations by the courageous, ministering human presence that alone witnesses to God's final word over suffering, sin, and death.

CONCLUSION

Schillebeeckx has absorbed the fact of human suffering into the motive, method, and content of a theology which unflinchingly insists that God's deepest desire is the happiness of human beings; God is committed to the human cause. In the end, one is left with the question of that dark residue of suffering that seems removed from the ground of hope that sustains meaning. For human beings whose dignity is destroyed, for all of those whose spirits are quenched by the brutality of oppression, there are no words that have meaning. In the face of all those persons whose deepest suffering is the isolating loss of reflective and relational capacity, one stands powerless and silent. But one remains in a discipleship of presence, extending a sorrowful embrace. Where suffering is in vain, its victims depend upon those still free to act in hope or wait in the fruitful silence of reverent solidarity. Ultimately, in silence or in speech, in waiting or in activity, we are all dependent upon God whose initiative finds fulfillment beyond the limits of our time or judgment, and whose intentions for our unity, wholeness and flourishing will not be thwarted.