

Holding On To the Hand of God: Edward Schillebeeckx on the Mystery of Suffering

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Abstract

The experience of human suffering presents an ongoing challenge to believers who seek to sustain their relationship with God in the face of the tragedies of human history. Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P. is a seminal Christian thinker who has made a conscious attempt to take into account the harsh reality of suffering in his systematic theology. Rejecting theoretical attempts to reconcile belief in a good, all-powerful God with the reality of evil and suffering, Schillebeeckx employs the categories of narrative and memory in his articulation of a Christian response to evil and suffering. He tells the story of Jesus as the story of God. The God who is disclosed in the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus is the God who is “pure positivity” – the source of life and the opponent of evil and suffering. God’s action in and through Jesus provides clues to the way in which God is present and active in the lives of suffering human beings. This revelation summons Christians to become people of memory and of praxis.

Keywords

Schillebeeckx, suffering, evil, cross, kingdom of God, resurrection, theodicy

People of faith often find themselves engaging in talk about God in the face of human suffering. Though most religious people are keenly aware that the riddle of suffering defies explanation, they still have a need to speak of God and of God’s relation to them in this experience. And at some point in their encounters with pastoral ministers they expect this God-talk, even if it is uttered only in the simplest of prayers. Pastoral ministers, as well as believers who seek to deepen their faith, search for the most appropriate ways to speak about God when faced with experiences of suffering.

This became evident after the devastating tsunami that struck South Asia in December 2004, killing more than 100,000 people. Newspapers and popular magazines published articles in which representatives of Christian and other faith traditions attempted to talk about God and the 'ways of God' in the light of a natural disaster that had tragic consequences for so many innocent people. The destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina has spawned similar reflection among people of diverse religious affiliations in the United States.

The question of God-talk in the face of innocent suffering has been discussed vigorously by Jewish and Christian thinkers during the past fifty years. It is an exceedingly fertile and fascinating area of theological exploration which has given rise to a plethora of books and essays. In particular, it was the experience of the Second World War and the Shoah that impelled both Jewish and Christian thinkers to grapple earnestly with the mystery of suffering. This intense experience of evil and suffering — the systematic effort at the genocide of a people traditionally named 'God's chosen people' — compelled theologians to reflect afresh about the ways in which we envision God's relation to evil in the world and God's relation to suffering people. Subsequent experiences of war, ethnic cleansing, and other forms of systematic oppression have further catalyzed this reflection.

One of the most important voices in this conversation has been that of Edward Schillebeeckx, the prominent Dominican theologian and prolific author. Robert Schreiter notes that 'concern with the massiveness of human suffering has become a pervasive theme in all of Schillebeeckx's work since the late 1960's.'¹ In an analysis of the Christology of Schillebeeckx, John Galvin observes that 'his quest for a suitable starting point common to all human life and therefore accessible to all leads him to concentrate on the universal experience of evil, the bitter awareness that the history of the human race is a history of suffering.'² This central concern is evident in his various essays and books, particularly in *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (1979), *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (1980), and *Church: The Human Story of God* (1990). Schillebeeckx's theological reflection on God and human suffering offers valuable insight for all Christians who grapple with this mystery.

¹ Robert Schreiter, "Edward Schillebeeckx: His Continuing Significance," in Robert Schreiter and Mary Catherine Hilker (eds.) *The Praxis of Christian Experience: An Introduction to the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 151.

² John Galvin, "Retelling the Story of Jesus: Christology," *The Praxis of Christian Experience*, pp. 53–4.

The Experience of Suffering

Schillebeeckx acknowledges that suffering is a fact of life which often has positive effects. There is such a thing as a 'school of suffering' which can be transformative and lead to greater spiritual maturity. For one thing, the experience of suffering often leaves people with a greater sensitivity to the pain of others. This pedagogical view of suffering has been a recurring theme in the Judeo-Christian tradition and is especially prevalent in the writings of early Christian theologians.³ There is also self-sacrificial suffering for a worthy cause. Fidelity to any worthwhile commitment must include the willingness to suffer for it. Suffering, then, can be a quite meaningful experience. Nevertheless, Schillebeeckx insists that in our history there is a 'barbarous excess' of suffering and evil, much of which cannot be described as meaningful. In an oft-quoted passage, he says, "Furthermore, this suffering is the alpha and omega of the whole history of mankind; it is the scarlet thread by which this historical fragment is recognizable as human history; history is an 'ecumene' of suffering."⁴ This statement may sound at first hearing like a rather negative, pessimistic view of reality. Schillebeeckx, however, is not at all negative in his theological perspective. In *Church* he writes that one of the tasks of theology is to safeguard belief in and hope for a liberating, saving power which loves men and women and which will overcome evil. Theology, according to Schillebeeckx, must stand in opposition to any kind of 'doom thinking.' At the same time theologians recognize that 'we live in a bewildering mixture of meaning and meaninglessness.'⁵ These observations can be understood in light of the fact that Schillebeeckx has attempted to reflect upon the Christian tradition from a global perspective, one which recognizes that millions of people in our world live in substandard conditions, often with little hope for relief and no one to give voice to their concerns.

Consistent with this starting-point, Schillebeeckx often discusses a fundamental experience that marks the lives of all people – the 'contrast experience.' He argues that contrast experience "forms a basic human experience which I regard as being a pre-religious experience and thus a basic experience accessible to all human beings, namely that of a 'no' to the world as it is."⁶ There is a natural human reaction to evil and suffering in the world. When we hear of evils like child

³ For a compilation of patristic texts on God and the mystery of human suffering, see James Walsh, S.J. and P.G. Walsh, *Divine Providence and Human Suffering, Message of the Fathers of the Church*, volume 17 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1985). The theme of suffering as divine pedagogy and a means to Christian growth is treated in pp. 102–162.

⁴ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (NY: Crossroad, 1980), p. 725.

⁵ Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (NY: Crossroad, 1990), p. 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

abuse or ethnic cleansing, there is an instinctual feeling of revulsion and protest in normal people. This is the negative moment in a contrast experience. But there is more. This human indignation points to something positive, to a good that is intuited in the experience, a value that is the object of our hope and longing. Schillebeeckx writes, 'For Christians, the experience of contrast, with its inherent opposition to injustice and its perspective on something better, becomes that in which the unity of history comes about *as God's gift*.'⁷ In commenting on this idea in Schillebeeckx, Schreiter says, 'The contrast opens up not just the opposite of the previously experienced reality, but often new, unexpected worlds as well.'⁸ There is a profoundly revelatory dimension in contrast experiences.

The God of Jesus

Schillebeeckx is a Dominican and has been deeply inspired by the thought of Thomas Aquinas. In his fundamental conception of God he relies on the Thomistic notion of God as 'Pure Act' (*Actus Purus*). In the theology of Aquinas, this is a dynamic conception of God, a philosophical rendering of the biblical portrait of God as 'the living God.' In God everything is actualized; there are no unrealized possibilities in God. Schillebeeckx translates this Thomistic notion into modern parlance as 'pure positivity.' He thinks that this idea of God is not simply the fruit of philosophical reflection but in fact reflects the God of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. God is purely the source and ground of life, of the good. Death, darkness, negativity do not in any way find their source in God. Appealing again to Aquinas, Schillebeeckx argues that evil has its origins from the possibilities, not the necessities that are inherent in a finite creation. As soon as there are creatures there is the possibility of a negative and original initiative of finitude, a defect of the will. Evil and the suffering that comes from it result from finitude and finite freedom. One should not look for a ground or motive for evil and suffering in God. They have their origin exclusively from the side of the finite without any contribution from the side of God.⁹

Schillebeeckx argues that this conception of God can be gleaned from Jesus' own experience of God, the God he addressed as 'Abba' (Mk. 14:36). Jesus' 'Abba experience' was 'the source and secret of

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 6.

⁸ Robert Schreiter, "Edward Schillebeeckx: His Continuing Significance," *The Praxis of Christian Experience*, p. 151.

⁹ Schillebeeckx, *Christ: the Experience of Jesus as Lord*, pp. 726–730. Schillebeeckx appeals to the idea in Aquinas that the first cause of the lack of grace lies in creatures. See *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 112, a. 3, ad 2 and *II Sent.* d. 37, q. 2, a.1, ad 18.

his being, message and manner of life.’¹⁰ When Jesus proclaimed the reign of God and made that rule of God present in actions like healings, exorcisms, and table fellowship, he revealed a God whose concern is the concern of humankind, a God mindful of humanity, a God bent upon humanity. Schillebeeckx often appeals to the famous dictum of Irenaeus of Lyons that the glory of God is the human person fully alive. The God revealed in the public ministry of Jesus is the God of life, the God who has special concern for those in this world who have had the life drained out of them. As he reads the Gospels, Schillebeeckx sees that in and for Jesus God and suffering are diametrically opposed. Where God appears in the life, person and ministry of Jesus, evil and suffering have to yield.

Schillebeeckx claims that Jesus’ Abba experience was in fact a contrast experience. While this statement may at first sound strange, what Schillebeeckx means is actually easy to discern. The Gospels give us solid evidence that Jesus knows firsthand the pain of this world. He knows the power of evil and its effects in the lives of people. His gut-wrenching reaction to the leper who kneels before him, begging for relief from this dreaded disease, is but one example of Jesus’ intimate awareness of human pain (Mk. 1:40–45). So much of Jesus’ ministry is an engagement in a kind of mortal combat with the powers that take life away from people. But in and through these encounters, underneath all that Jesus says and does, is an intimate experience of God as the loving opponent of evil. This experience ‘is an immediate awareness of God as a power cherishing people and making them free.’¹¹ It is this God who is the God of life and the enemy of human suffering – the God who sustains Jesus in his own suffering. In the heading of one chapter of his book *Christ*, Schillebeeckx succinctly expresses his understanding of the way that the God of Jesus relates to human suffering: ‘God does not want mankind to suffer.’¹² His in-depth study of the New Testament leads Schillebeeckx to conclude that the God revealed by Jesus can be described as the God who does not want humankind to suffer and who opposes suffering.

Confronted with the reality of evil and massive suffering, Schillebeeckx opts for narrative over theory in his theological method. John Galvin comments, ‘Needed in response to the presence of evil is not an explanation of its existence or a theory about its origin or purpose.’¹³ Explanations and theories are more suited to problems. Evil and the suffering that results from it are not, however, a problem.

¹⁰ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (NY: Seabury, 1979), p. 256.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

¹² Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, p. 724.

¹³ Galvin, “Retelling the Story of Jesus: Christology,” *The Praxis of Christian Experience*, p. 54.

Schillebeeckx says, 'Thus, suffering and evil can provoke scandal; however, they are not a *problem*, but an unfathomable, theoretically incomprehensible *mystery*.'¹⁴ He argues that 'the only adequate response is via a practical exercise of resistance to evil, not a theory about it.'¹⁵ But such opposition, such praxis, requires some kind of support, some form of grounding. For this grounding, Schillebeeckx turns to narrative. He notes that 'people do not *argue* against suffering, but tell a *story*.'¹⁶ When faced with the mystery of evil and suffering, Schillebeeckx tells the story of Jesus as the story of God.

The Death and Resurrection of Jesus

Christians who are confronted with suffering inevitably look to the death and resurrection of Jesus in their quest for meaning and hope. They tell the story of Calvary. As he narrates this event, Schillebeeckx puts great emphasis on the fact that the suffering and death of Jesus were the outcome of his public ministry, his preaching and making present the reign of God. Schillebeeckx criticizes the tendency to treat the death of Jesus as an isolated act of redemption detached from what transpired in his life, a tendency he refers to as 'a Pauline kerygma without the four Gospels.'¹⁷ He insists that the crucifixion of Jesus was the intrinsic historical consequence of both his message and his lifestyle. His was a proclamation and a way of life that proved threatening to the religious and political status quo. Jesus was a threat especially because his way of life showed that all master-servant relationships are incompatible with the lifestyle of the reign of God.

Schillebeeckx has studied the work of the German Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann. Like Schillebeeckx, Moltmann is committed to a Christian theology that takes the reality of human suffering with utmost seriousness. And Moltmann, too, adopts a narrative style in his theology. He is well known for depicting Jesus' death as an intra-Trinitarian event, an event between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Moltmann thinks that what really happened at Calvary was that the Father handed over the Son to death for our sake. The Father suffered the loss of the Son and the Son suffered real abandonment by the Father. This abandonment is evident in Jesus' cry from the cross (Mk. 15:34). This rupture between Father and Son took place so that all the evil and suffering of human history could be taken up into God's very being and overcome by God's salvific love. In this moment

¹⁴ Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, p. 725.

¹⁵ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, p. 620.

¹⁶ Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, p. 698.

¹⁷ Schillebeeckx, *On Christian Faith: The Spiritual, Ethical and Political Dimensions* (NY: Crossroad, 1987), p. 27.

of divine suffering, the Spirit was poured forth, the Spirit of life who raised Jesus from the dead and who continues to create new possibilities of life for a suffering humanity.¹⁸

Schillebeeckx appreciates Moltmann's intention to narrate the story of Jesus in a way that will address the concerns of suffering humanity, but he disagrees with Moltmann's intra-Trinitarian interpretation of Calvary. He thinks that Moltmann ascribes to God what was in fact done to Jesus by human beings and that he unwittingly glorifies suffering. Schillebeeckx argues that when we look at the cross of Jesus we should see it in all its stark negativity. In one place he describes the cross of Jesus as 'the index of the anti-divine in human history.'¹⁹ The cross can be understood as salvific only in light of what God has accomplished in the resurrection. The crucifixion of Jesus should be envisioned as the ultimate expression of human rejection of salvation-from-God offered in Jesus. Schillebeeckx says this about God's relation to the crucifixion of Jesus: "God, who according to Leviticus, 'abominates human sacrifices' (Lev. 18:21–30; 20:1–5), did not put Jesus on the Cross. Human beings did that. Although God always comes in power, divine power knows no use of force, not even against people who are crucifying his Christ. But the kingdom of God still comes, despite human misuse of power and human rejection of the kingdom of God."²⁰

Although Schillebeeckx questions the authenticity of sayings in which the earthly Jesus ascribes salvific meaning to his impending death, he does affirm that Jesus integrated his death into his self-surrender to his Abba-God. His death became the ultimate expression of his surrender to God in and through his loving service to humanity. Schillebeeckx points to the Gospel tradition which refers to Jesus offering the cup to his disciples for one last time, with the trust that he will drink it anew in the reign of God (Mk. 14:25). Schillebeeckx finds in this tradition a sign of Jesus' radical trust that his communion with God and with his disciples was stronger than death.

As Schillebeeckx tells the story of Calvary, he depicts Jesus' relation to the Father in a different light than that of Moltmann. Like Moltmann, he comments on the cry of abandonment reported by Mark and Matthew. He argues that these words, the opening line of Psalm 22, should be interpreted in light of the entire psalm. Read as a whole, this psalm is indeed a prayer of anguish but also a confession of trust in God. And it concludes with an expression of praise and thanksgiving for deliverance by God. These words reflect Jesus'

¹⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 75–96.

¹⁹ Schillebeeckx, "The 'God of Jesus' and the 'Jesus of God,'" *Concilium* 93 (1974): 126.

²⁰ Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, pp. 120–1.

persistent trust in God even amidst the experience of darkness and the apparent failure of his mission. As Schillebeeckx likes to put it, Jesus continues to hold on to the hand of God in radical trust. God does not intervene to save Jesus, but neither does God abandon Jesus. For Schillebeeckx, speaking of Jesus' real abandonment by God at Calvary could lead to the mistaken impression that suffering human beings are also forsaken by God. Instead, he insists that we must speak of God as silently present to Jesus at this terrifying moment, just as God is silently present to all those who suffer. There is enduring communion between God and Jesus even in this 'anti-divine' event. God's presence to Jesus is an experience of the divine which does not negate the feelings of darkness and alienation that would have been inherent in such a horrific execution. But we must say that for Jesus and for all suffering human beings, '*God nevertheless remains near at hand* and that salvation consists in the fact that man [sic] still holds fast to God's invisible hand in this dark night of faith.'

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In the resurrection this silent presence of God to Jesus becomes manifest; the faithful presence and the power of God erupt from within. For Christian theology, the resurrection can be interpreted in two related but distinct ways. First, it can be seen as the ultimate completion of Jesus' life and death. Here resurrection is viewed as the other side of death and Jesus' death is interpreted as a death into resurrection. This viewpoint is reminiscent of the depiction of Jesus' death in the Gospel of John, and it is articulated in a compelling way in the theology of Karl Rahner.²² Second, resurrection can be envisioned as a new creative act of God, a corrective to what happened to Jesus in his death. Resurrection is God's 'yes' to Jesus, spoken definitively in the face of the deafening 'no' to Jesus shouted by all who opposed him. In his discussion of the resurrection, Schillebeeckx incorporates the notion that the resurrection of Jesus confirms and completes all that Jesus was about in his life. It is God's endorsement of Jesus' life. Nevertheless, he places greater emphasis on the resurrection as a new creative act of God and a corrective to what was done to Jesus. It is God's corrective to the negativity of Jesus' death. In raising Jesus from the dead, God breaks through humanity's rejection of the offer of definitive salvation in Jesus. 'In the risen Jesus God shows himself to be the power of anti-evil, of unconditional goodness that in sovereign fashion refuses to recognize, and breaks, the overweening power of evil.'

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²¹ Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, p. 825.

²² See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (NY: Seabury Press, 1978), pp. 264–285.

²³ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, p. 641.

Christian Response to Suffering

His interpretation of the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus becomes the guiding light for Schillebeeckx's understanding of the way in which Christians should think and speak about God in the face of human suffering. As noted above, he stresses that Christians should not try to explain suffering. We should not try to construct theories about the reasons for suffering in the world, systematic explanations that seek to reconcile innocent suffering with belief in a good and all-powerful God. Like many recent thinkers, Schillebeeckx is convinced that the pervading presence of senseless suffering in the world falls outside the bounds of every rational system.

Schillebeeckx also has difficulty with language that has traditionally been part of Christian theology and spirituality – the language of 'permission' or 'allowance.' In classical theology, as well as in popular piety, it is usually said that, while God does not actively will evil and suffering, God does permit it in view of a greater good. Usually that 'greater good' is related to the gift of human freedom. Schillebeeckx understands the point of such language but he thinks that talk about God's permitting evil and suffering can be very misleading. On this point, Schillebeeckx is complex and not easy to interpret. He does affirm a kind of blanket permission of God in creating the world, particularly a world in which human beings have freedom. As he puts it, seen from God's side creation entails a sort of 'divine yielding' – a making room for the other. By giving creative space to human beings God makes Godself vulnerable; history becomes an adventure full of risks. Schillebeeckx even employs the metaphor of signing a blank cheque: "The creation of human beings is a blank cheque which God alone guarantees. By creating human beings with their own finite and free will, God voluntarily renounces power. That makes God to a high degree 'dependent' on human beings and thus vulnerable."²⁴

Schillebeeckx, then, is willing to admit a kind of blanket permission granted by God in the act of creating and bestowing the gift of human freedom. Nevertheless, it appears that Schillebeeckx finds permission language problematic when it is applied to particular instances of human suffering, e.g., God's 'allowing' this woman to contract breast cancer, or God's 'permitting' that teenager to be killed in an automobile accident. Such God-talk can easily evoke the idea of God as a neutral bystander to the suffering of human beings, one who simply stands back and watches people suffer. For Schillebeeckx, we should never speak of God actively willing or causing evil and suffering, nor should we speak of God permitting or allowing it. We should simply

²⁴ Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, p. 90.

say that God is busy about the work of overcoming evil and suffering, as exemplified in God's raising Jesus from the dead. Believers should envision and speak about a God who is on the move in overcoming, conquering, the evil and suffering that plague the human family.

This position seems to imply that God in some sense has a struggle on God's hands, that God's power is a power to respond to us in and through all of the turmoil of human history. This is the way in which Schillebeeckx sees it. Schillebeeckx does not adopt the famous language of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who, in his writings from a Nazi prison, spoke of a God who is 'weak and powerless' in the world.²⁵ Schillebeeckx thinks that describing God as 'powerless' would leave the final word to evil and suffering rather than to the God of life. The bottom line of the Christian faith is that God will be victorious over evil and suffering, as exhibited and effected in the death and resurrection of Jesus. But he adds that God never breaks in from the outside to effect salvation. Rather, God works faithfully, quietly, patiently from within. God's power to save is inwardly present, just as it was for Jesus on Calvary. It is a power of love which challenges, which gives life and freedom to human beings. God does not retaliate against those who refuse God's offer. Appealing to Rev. 3:20, Schillebeeckx says, 'Out of respect for our freedom God refuses to force the door of our heart and our free will. But God continues to be present in redemption and forgiveness: God does not go away and continues to knock.' Schillebeeckx adds, however, that 'God is also present to save beyond this limit, if necessary as the final judge'²⁶

For Schillebeeckx, this conception of God and God's relation to suffering has practical consequences for Christian life. It means that Christians are called to be people of narrative and praxis — people of memory and action. First, believers in Christ keep the memory of human suffering — the memory of the ongoing passion of humanity. Christians are summoned to live in solidarity with suffering people and to enable suppressed stories of suffering to be told, whether they be the stories of individuals in pain or stories of peoples who are victims of systematic oppression. Christians also keep the memory of another story — the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. It is this story, remembered and lived out, that speaks to us about the God of the kingdom, the God of pure positivity who overcame the death of Jesus in the resurrection and who is on the move to overcome all evil and suffering. The story of Jesus assures us that entering into communion with suffering people and acting to bring life out of death is what God does for a living. This memory is not the same as an explanation, for suffering remains a mystery. As Schillebeeckx puts

²⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison*. Ed. Eberhard Bethge. (NY: MacMillan/Collier, 1972), p. 360.

²⁶ Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, p. 91.

it, 'It is just not possible to speak meaningfully about Auschwitz and, however hard you try, you can't situate it anywhere in God's plan.'²⁷ The only appropriate response of the believer is the 'nevertheless' of faith in the God revealed by Jesus. Suffering is a scourge, a terrifying mystery that is intractable to rational explanation. Nevertheless, we believe in the God of Jesus, the God who is present to and in communion with all the suffering and who is on the move to overcome this suffering.

This memory should lead to action, to praxis. It leads believers to thoughtful, reflective action in seeking to alleviate human suffering and to fight against the causes of suffering. Believers are summoned to offer resistance to evil, to refuse to allow evil the right to exist. In the face of evil and suffering, then, Christians are those who remember and who act. And they engage in that memory and praxis in the light of faith in a God who is pure positivity.

Schillebeeckx would be the first to admit that his discussion of God and suffering is inadequate to the mystery. He notes that 'the picture of God which we produce is constantly broken.'²⁸ He does not claim to construct a comprehensive theological framework within which we could neatly situate human tragedies like those associated with tsunamis and hurricanes. And, as is true with the work of every theologian, his arguments invite critical comment. It is not at all clear how the original initiative of finitude account of the origin of evil (a variation on the traditional theme of original sin) can be applied to the human suffering that results from natural disasters. With regard to Schillebeeckx's treatment of the death of Jesus, John Galvin has suggested that Schillebeeckx's emphasis on the passivity and negativity of Jesus' death may not do justice to the complete reality of the crucifixion.²⁹ It seems clear, too, that Schillebeeckx needs to offer a more coherent account of his perspective on God's 'permission' of evil and suffering.

Despite these lingering questions, I believe that Schillebeeckx offers insights about the mystery of God and human suffering that are both theologically fruitful and pastorally helpful. His way of narrating the story of Jesus' public ministry elucidates the character of the God whose drawing near means life for people. His account of Jesus' death and resurrection illumines the communion between God and Jesus that endured at the nadir of the crucifixion, and it discloses the way in which the power of God was effective from within. Schillebeeckx's sober presentation of the negativity of suffering, even

²⁷ Schillebeeckx, *God is New Each Moment: Edward Schillebeeckx in Conversation with Huub Oosterhuis and Piet Hoogeveen* (NY: Seabury Press, 1983), p. 107.

²⁸ Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, p. 74.

²⁹ Galvin, "The Death of Jesus in the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 50 (1983–84): 176.

of Jesus' suffering on the cross, and his testimony about a God who opposes this suffering and fights to overcome it, can provide hope and guidance for those who battle to the end against the suffering they must endure. When a person is confronted with inexplicable suffering and the question of the 'why' of this suffering will not go away, perhaps Schillebeeckx's advice about prayer in this situation is as helpful as anything that can be said: 'It [prayer] shouldn't continue with your saying: God must have an intention here, but rather with your saying: we are still in God's hands, even in grim situations like this one. This terrible event isn't the last word. And you have to say that with all the strength that is in your being.'³⁰

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³⁰ Schillebeeckx, *God is New Each Moment*, p. 108.