

“Review of Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter With God*”

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Father Schillebeeckx, whose reputation is already as notable as his name, has previously attracted English readers with his chapter in the Callahan-Obermann-O’Hanlon symposium, *Christianity Divided*. That chapter, like this book, was on the sacraments, with the consequent risk that this versatile theologian might just become typecast as the Roman specialist on the sacraments and little more -- like Kung used to be thought the specialist on justification and Rahner, on death.

But such a fate, even if it should befall Schillebeeckx, would not be all loss, for his theology of the sacraments, far from consigning them to a topic in dogmatics or a monopoly for liturgics, so universalizes them that they emerge as “the properly human mode of encounter with God” – not in the exclusive sense that merely the sacramental is encounter with God but in the inclusive sense that all encounter with God is at least implicitly sacramental. (Which, incidentally, allows Schillebeeckx to value the sacraments also in the “separated Christian Churches.”)

The way the implicit sacramentality in all religion comes to light, however, is not by its being made explicit logically through the theologian’s analysis but by its being fulfilled in God’s gracious and purposive conduct of redemptive history, culminating in the incarnation of his Son, “the primordial sacrament.” Indeed, the incarnation is itself the Son’s consummating his sonship with the Father in the form of man, bodily. When, in turn, he is glorified and “leaves the world,” his incarnation is prolonged in the world in the church’s sacraments. The result, so different from the old scholastic picture of us as substances with sacramental grace as something “put into us,” is “that the Church’s sacraments are not things but encounters of men on earth with the glorified man Jesus by way of a visible form.” Here, then, is fulfilled the universally human nostalgia for a personal relationship with God in the only way in which a person is accessible to us at all, through bodily encounter.

But let it not be thought that Schillebeeckx, for all his newness and freshness, is a Dominican upstart turning against his scholastic masters. On the contrary, seldom has Thomas Aquinas looked so good, or at least so adaptable to modern biblical studies (the treatment here of Johannine Christology is a marvel), so continuous with the Greek fathers (for example, on the “sacraments of nature”), so misconstrued by some of his (especially post-Tridentine) interpreters, so congenial to the anthropology of today’s phenomenologists. (I was reminded throughout of Zaner’s recent *The Problem of Embodiment*.) It is all there – *ex opere operato, gratia praeveniens*, all seven sacraments, even (once or twice) “trans-substantiation” - but with a difference.

Of course, so are many of the old differences still there, some of them perhaps even aggravated. For example, for all the new reminders that there is no personal encounter without embodiment, the result is that sacramental embodiment for Schillebeeckx serves almost exclusively an optical function: it renders the invisible visible. That strikes us as less realistic and less Johannine - though admittedly more, shall we say, palatable - than the "flesh" in John 6. There is one mechanical defect that could quickly be remedied in the next edition: the book is too good and too re-readable not to have an index.

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