

Schillebeeckx Articulates the New Direction of Theology

Anselm Thomasma, O.P.

Of the many European theologians serving the Church today, Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P. is one of the most highly regarded. He is known and acknowledged not only by his professional colleagues in the field of theology but also by the bishops of the Netherlands for whom he served as personal spokesman at the Second Vatican Council and by the many priests and lay theologians in America who are reading his books as quickly as they can be translated from the Dutch into English. Fr. Schillebeeckx is presently professor of theology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, editor of the Dutch theological journal, *Tijdschrift voor theologie*, and one of the editors of the international journal of theology, *Concilium*. He has contributed extensively to the dictionary *Theologisch Woordenboek* under the general editorship of the Dutch Dominicans at Nijmegen, to numerous periodicals and newspapers, and has given lectures in Europe and the United States.

Because of these credentials the students of the Dominican House of Studies in Washington were honored to discuss with this famous friar preacher the various theological perspectives of the future, from which discussion the following exclusive report is taken. At the conclusion of this article there is a bibliography of the published works of Fr. Schillebeeckx as well as a listing of those projected for the coming years.

Having just returned from the symposium at Xavier College in Chicago, Fr. Schillebeeckx mentioned his delight in the fact that, although each of the theologians there had chosen his theme and presented it in his own accents, there emerged from the discussions a convergence of agreement. "Such common unanimity is urged by the Council and the contacts between the various theologians before the war as well as their use of the same sources for their theology, both in Scripture studies and in modern philosophy, have helped contribute to this concord." The point of convergence seems to lie in the rethinking of man's basic understanding of himself and of his relation to the faith, a faith "living in such a way that it can function in this

new view of man and the world." We can look forward with encouragement towards the future of theology since various meetings and dialogues have been arranged among internationally known theologians to continue under the auspices of *Concilium*. A similar organization is being considered for an ecumenical review between Protestant and Catholic theologians throughout the world.

The New Direction

We have entitled this report the "New Direction" of theology. Since the theology of the past was also concerned with man and his faith in the world in relation to his understanding of himself, we might very well wonder what the "newness" of this direction implies. At root it seems to lie in the difference between an historical and a non-historical theology. Throughout the remainder of the discussion Fr. Schillebeeckx constantly alludes to the insight that theology "is in history," that it develops, that its concepts and understanding change and grow within the Church. In fact this was the chief difference between the theologians at the Council: "I think the minority party could not understand, could not think in terms of evolution; they thought in a static way. For them essences are fixed once and for all. In a certain sense this is true! But the essence of a thing must always be in history remaining itself in a dynamic way, not in a fixed way. And I think this was the main difference between the minority and the majority among the theologians at the Council. I call this essential as against existential thinking, but this latter is not the same as existentialism."

As a result, the Flemish Dominican feels that the best document issued by the Council was the constitution on revelation, better even than that on the Church. "The dogmatic constitution on the Church is not on the whole so new, except for the new emphases, already present in previous theological thinking, on the collegiality of the bishops and the Church viewed as the people of God. And of course, the fact that this constitution placed the section on the people of God before the section on the hierarchy will influence theology to come in a profound way." On the other hand, the constitution on revelation will have an even more direct and important influence on theology as such. "The constitution on revelation has, in a certain sense, consecrated the new theological approach, for revelation is not seen as a revelation of concepts but rather as a *revelation in history*. Consequently, the theologian must go into this history of salvation, both as

it is found in the Old and New Testaments and throughout tradition, even to the present day.”

What this entails is really the same conception of theology that was present in the Middle Ages, namely, the notion that theology was nothing other than an understanding of the *sacra pagina*, the Scriptures. This was certainly Thomas' heritage and understanding of theology, but later on his *Summa Theologiae* came to replace the Bible as the central text and eventually the manualistic and rationalistic approach to theology tended to predominate. As seen by Fr. Schillebeeckx, the constitution on revelation will force us again towards the proper notion of theology, replacing these later tendencies with a vibrant and living word about God.

However, the central contribution of the Council does not lie in the documents themselves. “Documents are only a subordinate part of the Council; the principal contribution might rather be seen in the togetherness and dialogue of the bishops and theologians after their long isolation from one another.” As a result, many of the bishops basically changed their attitude at the Council, although there was a sort of mass psychology at work there in Rome whose influence on some bishops dwindled when they returned home. Nevertheless the door was opened at Rome for continued meetings and discussions. “The bishops themselves have entered into this new approach to theology, about which I have been speaking, since they studied the various documents deeply, but it has not yet entered into their very flesh and blood. Many bishops dangerously think that the documents themselves are the end and culmination of the Council.”

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the new direction of theology mediates between two dichotomous poles, that of viewing theology merely as history and that of seeing it merely as a system. “Theology is neither pure history nor pure speculation. We must practice the theology that dives into history, exploring history and man's self-understanding.” Hence, theology is seen as a penetration, an act of viewing both history and speculative thought in relation to revelation. “Positive and speculative theology are not two theologies but are two phases or functions of theology.”

What then is the place of St. Thomas Aquinas in this new approach? Since his canonization early in the fourteenth century his works have been approved by almost every pope, and today the study of them is mandatory for all seminarians and priests. “We must, as

it is demanded by the constitution on revelation, go back to the source of revelation. This source is of course the Old and New Testaments, but as these two are *read* within the Church. We see how the Church has read this source of revelation as well as testified to it in its life throughout the ages. In this work of the Church reading and re-reading revelation in the Scriptures and of living the realities of faith and salvation Thomas has a special place, but I would say *only* seen in the context of the historical Church. We cannot claim that Thomas is a ready-made history of salvation. He is instead a great witness of this theological tradition fed by Holy Scripture. But of course the history of the Church goes forth after St. Thomas! In this great line Thomas is pointing forwards, not backwards."

Consequently, it would be impossible for anyone to be a theologian simply by knowing St. Thomas, even though his *Summa* is constructed around Scripture and the fathers in an eminent way. "Thomas made his synthesis from the Scriptures and tradition, but with the *means* of his time. However the new approaches to Holy Scripture have obviously advanced enormously since Thomas. We must rather do what Thomas did in his time with the means we have of our own time."

Because of the great emphasis upon biblical studies and the concomitant biblical theology in our day there seems to be a divide between biblical and systematic theology, and the two are taught often as two separate disciplines. Fr. Schillebeeckx would maintain that, although there is a distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology, there is no gulf between them. In order to be a dogmatic theologian one must know the results of modern Scripture research. Anyone who is familiar with his works can recognize that this is precisely the method which Fr. Schillebeeckx employs. The final difference between the two emphases, scriptural and dogmatic theology, lies really in the focus and practise of the one theologizing. For our times Fr. Schillebeeckx urges: "Now we must study Holy Scripture and study the new phenomenological and existential philosophies in an attempt to construct some synthesis. These philosophies can also be Christianized, just as Plato's and Aristotle's were in the early Church and in the Middle Ages." By "synthesis" here is not meant "system." We can possibly synthesize many of the philosophical outlooks today, diverse as they are, around some quite basic psychological principles we have discovered, just as St. Thomas organized his own philosophy from the various streams in his day; Aristotle, Plato, Augustine, Al Farabi,

Maimonedes, and so on, all were combined by Thomas in reflecting upon problems and the result was a valid philosophical synthesis. On the other hand, it would be quite impossible today to construct a *system* as St. Thomas did, first of all because the phenomenology and existentialism synthesized would not allow a systematization, secondly because of our historical and dynamic approach, and lastly because of the vast wealth of knowledge even in one field beyond the capacities of any one man to control.

What will this phenomenology do to Aristotle's philosophy which is so much in the ground of St. Thomas' and the Church's thought? Should we simply drop Aristotle in our attempt to find an expression of and understanding of our faith today? For Fr. Schillebeeckx this cannot be the case: "We cannot understand phenomenology without understanding Aristotle. To try to do so would be to reject the continuity within philosophy itself. But now we must reformulate the faith and no longer express it in Aristotelian terms as we teach the message of God."

Our insight today is that reality is a *moving* reality, and the constant essences, as it were, are not fixed but move dynamically within history. This balance between constancy and movement as characteristics of our knowledge is principal to the new direction of theology. For example, to look to the constant source of our knowledge of the faith does not mean to check what *Denzinger* has to say, since it is by its very admission an abstract of decrees. Rather we must return to the proper documents and historical developments. As a result of this historical study of the real sources we find the dogmatic definitions are less a constant and fixed canonization of terminology than a determination of a portion of a mystery. Applying this approach to Trent, for instance, we discover that Trent *defined* the fact that there is a real, ontological change in the Eucharist and not the words, "substantia" and "species," used. This is evident from the acts of the Council of Trent. "If one were only to read *Denzinger*, one might get the impression that transubstantiation means that it is dogmatically defined that the substance changes while the *accidents* remain. That is not true! Trent says only that one must accept an ontological change, and the use of 'substance' and 'accidents' is a way in which this change might be explained in a philosophical way." In this manner phenomenology could be applied to explain this change as well as long as it saves the real defined meaning of an ontological change. "I

would say that not all the modern phenomenological explanations save this ontological change.”

Certainly one of the most important foci of the new direction of theology must be centered around the God is dead controversy. “It is a problem, and a great problem for the theologian today. Neither is it just a fad or a fashion. It is a real problem; this modern trend of secularization has something important to say to us. We have a tendency to consider faith as some kind of ideological superstructure placed upon being man-in-the-world. It is the task of the theologian to consider how being man-in-the-world with fellow men is a valid expression of being without losing the *theological* dimension of man in relation to God.”

A Brief Consideration

Unless some readers get the impression that there has been a tremendous split between “old” and “new” directions of theology working in the Church, we might point out the basis of viewing the new approach as a real continuity with Thomas’ theology. The dynamic notion of theology presented by Fr. Schillebeeckx is actually the same as Thomas’. Without minimizing the importance of the new contributions of Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, and Blondel to theological thought, we should emphasize that what has been superseded has been a rationalistic and fixed reading of St. Thomas by subsequent ages. For example, later theology came to identify “substance” with some fixed form, when for Thomas it meant simply the constancy within changing structures of reality—much the same insight as Schillebeeckx’s “dynamic sameness within history.” Hence, to express our theology in new philosophical terms as proposed by the famous Flemish Dominican is actually to continue the forward progression and continuity of the best of our theological heritage.

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7. *Het Huwelijk, Aardse Werkelijkheid and Heilsmysterie* (Bilthoven: H. Nelissen, 1963). Translated and published by Sheed and Ward as *Marriage: Human Reality and Saving Mystery*. The second volume will appear later.
8. *Openbaring en Theologie* (Bilthoven: H. Nelissen, 1964), part one of an eight volume series called: *Theologische Peilingen* [Theological soundings or investigations] not yet translated into English. Besides *Open en Theol.* [Revelation and Theology], the second volume has appeared in Dutch entitled: *God en Mens* [God and Man] (Bilthoven: H. Nelissen, 1965). If all goes well, the projected volumes will appear in the following order:
 Vol. 3: *Kerk en Wereld* [The Church and the World].
 Vol. 4: *Priester en Leek* [Priest and Layman].
 Vol. 5: *Jezus, de Christus* [Jesus the Christ].
 Vol. 6: *Kerk en Sacrament* [Church and Sacrament].
 Vol. 7: *Het "Geestelijk Leven" Van de Christen* [The "Spiritual Life" of Christians].
 Vol. 8: *Het Kloosterleven/Dominicaanse Spiritualiteit* [Religious Life/Dominican Spirituality].

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