

12-14-07 - Schillebeekx thoughts on selection of religious leaders: At 93, renowned Dominican theologian still at work

National Catholic Reporter

Holland's towering Dominican theologian, Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx, is with us yet, though at 93 his physical presence has diminished even as his influence flourishes.

I requested a meeting with him, knowing that though he was not involved in writing the startling new booklet by the four Dutch Dominicans, the radical proposals they put forward stem directly from his thought.

The Belgian-born Schillebeeckx remains in Nijmegen, where he taught for so many years at the University of Nijmegen, and where, in a small house on a quiet street, he awaits publication of his next book. I had been told that he is in failing health and might be too weak to receive visitors. But when I phoned, his full-time caregiver, Dominican Sr. Hadewych Snijdewind, said we could come.

My wife and I found Schillebeeckx sitting in his study, thin but bright-eyed, clearheaded and ready to chat. This man's theological ideas, expressed in some 400 books and articles, published in 14 languages, have influenced several generations of Catholic thinkers. Although he has endured years of Vatican scrutiny and the Vatican has publicly rejected some of his ideas, he has managed to escape both silencing and censure.

It was Schillebeeckx who contended in his 1980 book *Ministry: Leadership in the Community of Jesus Christ* that the church had gone awry by connecting the faithful's right to Eucharist to some "magical power" of the hierarchy to ordain, thereby disconnecting it from the community of Christians. **He noted that the Council of Chalcedon in the fifth century had declared any ordination of a priest or deacon illegal, as well as null and void, unless the person being ordained had been chosen by a particular community to be its leader.**

Because the church has basically ignored that clear directive of the early church throughout the second millennium, Schillebeeckx recommended "new possibilities" for reconnecting the Eucharist to its community roots, even if such actions contradict current church law.

In "Church and Ministry," the newly released document, the Dominicans put forward such "new possibilities" as this: "Men and women can be chosen to preside at the Eucharist by the church community; that is, 'from below,' and can then ask a local bishop to ordain these people 'from above.'"

If, however, "a bishop should refuse a confirmation or ordination" of such persons "on the basis of arguments not involving the essence of the Eucharist, such as a requirement that deacons or priests be celibate, parishes may move forward without the bishops' participation, remaining confident "that they are able to celebrate a real and genuine Eucharist when they are together in prayer and share bread and wine."

This notion of community-based ordination was in the background as we sipped our wine, nibbled on cheese crackers and talked of other things. Schillebeeckx mentioned his many trips to the United States and shared his view that most young Catholics are "choosing their own vision of Christianity." He said he feared the institutional church did not "have enough movement toward Jesus Christ." And he spoke about his soon-to-be-published book, a collection of 60 of his homilies, with a title still being fine-tuned: something like *Weren't Our Hearts Burning Within Us: Theology as a Model for Proclamation*.

As for the future, Schillebeeckx is optimistic, "always optimistic."

"I believe in God and in Jesus Christ," he said, as if to ask: "And what else would one need?"