



Salvation “Thanks to” or “In Spite of” the Cross?

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“The suffering and death of Jesus brought us salvation. But salvation is a good thing. Therefore, suffering and death are good things.” *Something wrong here?*

What about this: “Suffering, as the destruction of something genuinely human and as an attack on the innocent, is of itself evil. The Father imposed suffering on His innocent Son for the good of us all. Therefore, the Father does evil to achieve good.” *Even worse?*

For a long time teacher of theology, these syllogisms were as easy to formulate as they are terrifying; I have heard them in one form or another from students for many years. Soteriology is not exactly a hot topic in contemporary Roman Catholic theology, yet how we understand the relation of salvation to suffering is absolutely crucial to our Christian lives. The Christian kerygma to the effect that Jesus went to his death for our sins needs to be understood in such a way that it precludes (at least) these two syllogisms, and opens the way to our recognition of both the terrible evil of human sinfulness and suffering, and the unblemished goodness of our creator God. All too often theologies of salvation have been unable to do this—to the harm of many of God’s people. Any theory that makes Christ’s suffering *itself* the cause of our salvation, or worse, sees it as a punishment for our sins visited on him by His Father in view of our good, attacks Christianity at its core, and leaves us to ponder the implications of those syllogisms: that we do others a favor by leaving them in their suffering so that they may work out their redemption more quickly and effectively, and that the Father is a murderer.

The recently deceased Flemish Dominican theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx, addressed this crucial question of the relation of Jesus’ suffering and death to our salvation and to the will of the Father in his two books on Christology,¹ anchoring his reflections (to the surprise of some) in the theology of Thomas Aquinas. I believe that these reflections remain critical to a proper understanding of the

¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus, An Experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskins (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), and *Christ, the Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Seabury Press, 1979).

acts that we believe brought about our salvation, and what follows is my development of his insights.

First, a note on suffering. The suffering that is at issue in soteriology is not, for instance, the pain of those who choose to forego some of the pleasantries of life in order to work their way through college, nor even (at least in its paradigmatic instances) the suffering of illness or accidental injury that may befall us. Rather, it is the suffering that is inflicted unjustly on human beings by human beings, and it is the suffering that as a matter of course results from a life lived with moral and spiritual integrity—in the case of a Christian, the suffering that results from a life of loving service to God and to others on account of God in the following of Christ. It is thus the suffering of the *innocent*, and suffering for a *cause*, that Schillebeeckx considers the paradigmatic forms of Christian suffering, and which raise the most critical theological questions.² These were the forms of suffering that Jesus endured and in some sense embraced—suffering inflicted unjustly on him by others that resulted directly from his faithfulness to the mission entrusted to him by his Father.

In his first work, *Jesus*, Schillebeeckx shows historically that the public ministry of Jesus was rooted in obedience to the will of the Father whom he loved, issuing in a life poured out in the loving service of others, both in his words and in his deeds. Following a number of contemporary theologians, he suggests that initially Jesus may well have supposed that the Kingdom of God (the salvific reality that was the object of his ministry) would be realized through that ministry alone, as first Israel, and finally the gentile nations, would heed his proclamation and embrace it. However, as concrete opposition to his preaching and manner of life increased, he came to realize that his proclamation of the Kingdom would be rejected by many (if not most) of his hearers, and that his continued proclamation and praxis of that Kingdom would lead ineluctably to his own death. Schillebeeckx' point is that, instead of abandoning his proclamation of the Kingdom and the life of loving service that flowed from it, he continued to fulfill the mission the Father had given him, even in the face of the possibility—and finally the inevitability—of a violent end. Thus he accepted his foreseen passion out of his love for his Father and his refusal to abandon his life of loving service for us.³ A number of critical theological points follow from this:

² But what of other forms of suffering—those that do not directly come to us as a result of our loving service of God and others? What about the suffering of illness, physical and mental? What of the suffering brought about by “acts of God”—earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, tsunamis? These forms of suffering can also be sacrificial and salvific, of course, insofar as they are formed by love of God and others. Schillebeeckx's point, it seems to me, is only that these are not the *paradigmatic* forms of suffering for a Christian, but they certainly give us the opportunity to be conformed to Christ in analogous ways.

³ Schillebeeckx believes the concept of “loving service” is key to understanding Jesus' life, because (among other reasons) it bridges the words and deeds of Jesus in the “active”

First, suffering only becomes sacrificial when it is accepted on account of the love of a good which it refuses to abandon, even in the face of that suffering: such love *forms* the suffering, making it sacrificial precisely on account of the love that animates it; the suffering *itself* is not good apart from the good that is loved. This is the very nature of sacrifice: not just suffering, but suffering *formed* by love of someone or something. Here the Aristotelian distinction of the formal and the material is illuminating: form alone gives meaning to that which is formed (the material element); without the form of love for a good thing, sacrifice does not exist, but only the evil of suffering. In sacrifice, however, it is impossible to separate out the “form” from the “matter:” when one sacrifices, one does not simply love, but one loves *in* a particular situation of suffering that is accepted *because* of that love. The sacrificial reality is one, although the love is the most formal and thus most essential element of it.

Second, it can be said that we are saved both “thanks to” as well as “in spite of” the suffering of Christ. The “thanks to” points to the fact that the suffering of Jesus was *de facto* the context in which He maintained his loving obedience toward his Father and remained faithful to his mission of loving service to humankind; it is, as implied above, the “matter” in which our redemption was wrought. On the other hand, that we are saved “in spite of” the suffering and death of Jesus reminds us that the injustice of innocent suffering is in itself perhaps the greatest of evils, and is no part of the Father’s will; we are saved *in spite of* the human efforts to destroy Jesus and his mission. As Schillebeeckx puts it, “Despite the execution which was the doing of men . . . God has not been checkmated . . . He took this historical fact into his plan of salvation.⁴ The necessity of the “in spite of” qualification stems also from the fact that “it is a senseless philosophical undertaking to look for a particular cause, a ground or motive for evil and suffering in God;” the source of evil lies completely in the human will. For that reason “we cannot look for a divine *reason* for the death of Jesus either.”⁵ In other words, the “in spite of” protects the Father from being a murderer, whereas the

first stage of his public ministry, when he served others by proclaiming (and explaining through parabolic words and actions) the dawning presence of the Kingdom, offering forgiveness (probably primarily in his table fellowship), healing, exorcizing, blessing, etc., and the more “passive” final stage in which his rejection led him to accept that the Kingdom would come now somehow through the Father’s action in his sacrificial acceptance of that rejection and the suffering and death it entailed. Schillebeeckx would like to answer the question: are we saved by Jesus words and deeds, or by his suffering and death, by responding “both” (because we are saved by his life of “loving service” which was manifested in both ways).

⁴ Ted Schoof, *The Schillebeeckx Case: Official Exchange of Letters and Documents in the Investigation of Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: 1976–1980* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), p. 125.

⁵ Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, p. 729.

“thanks to” points to the fact that Christ’s freely accepted suffering and death were sacrificial because that acceptance flowed from his love for the Father and specifically from his refusal to abandon his life of service for us, which was the Father’s will.

Third, Schillebeeckx holds that, at least from the human perspective, the mission of Jesus to Israel in view of its conversion to the coming Kingdom was an historical *failure*. Why would Jesus have so eloquently and powerfully pleaded for the conversion of his contemporaries had he not hoped they would indeed convert, and that the Father’s Kingdom would be realized through that conversion? It was only after the failure of this call to conversion, accompanied as it was by Jesus’ rejection and passion, that the Father saw to it that the Kingdom would be realized *in spite of* that failure, precisely through Jesus’ sacrificial love for the Father and for us in his *acceptance* of that failure. Schillebeeckx stresses here both the importance of Jesus’ efforts to fulfill his historical mission of proclamation and loving service, as well as the eventual historical impotence of those efforts; he was, after all, rejected by those he was sent to convert. And so he faced his approaching death in the knowledge that the Kingdom would have to be realized by the Father in another manner, somehow *through* or *in spite of* the historical failure of his proclamation.⁶ And so Jesus went to his death—as is particularly clear in the Last Supper traditions—entrusting that failure to his Father, in the certain hope that the Father’s love would transcend the rejection of human beings, and bring about their salvation in spite of their rejection of his proclamation of the Kingdom and his life of loving service.

Fourth, Schillebeeckx believes that it was precisely in this situation of rejection and historical failure, and their transformation into sacrifice by Jesus’ acceptance of them in love and in hope, that the Father was most intimately present to Jesus historically. Schillebeeckx will hear nothing of interpretations that take literally the Lucan “abandonment” of Jesus by the Father on the cross;⁷ *the Father does not*

⁶ Schillebeeckx constantly makes the point that, in reality, Jesus’ was not wrong in the proclamation of the coming Kingdom because it was indeed realized—in his resurrection; the glorified Christ *is* the Kingdom of God.

⁷ Many interpreters realize that the placing of the first words of Psalm 22 in the mouth of Jesus on the cross were meant to bring to mind the very positive character of the entire Psalm. For Schillebeeckx, Psalm 22

expresses the believer’s conviction that in situations where God’s redemptive help and support cannot actually be experienced, in situations in which men no longer experience any glimmer of hope, in impossible situations, God nevertheless remains near at hand and that salvation consists in the fact that man still holds fast to God’s invisible hand in this dark night of faith... There can be no question of the rejection and abandonment of Jesus by God... The resurrection of Jesus... will mean a break-through or manifestation of a presence of God which, though hidden

abandon those whom he loves. Rather, it was the very *closeness* of the Father to Jesus, and the Father's refusal to let go of Jesus, that resulted in the resurrection. Certainly Jesus did not have a "felt" experience of the joy of the Father's presence—he was, after all, being tortured to death—but he had to be certain of the Father's love and of his closeness to him.

Here Schillebeeckx sees an experience analogous to the "dark nights" of sense and spirit experienced, in analogous ways, by most great lovers of God. As one grows closer to God, one's faith, hope, and love are increasingly purified of all lesser consoling and sustaining realities as they are taken away. The *joys* of friendship with God are not experienced during periods of darkness, but the *friendship* itself remains, is known, and is deepened. The fact that one does not "feel" the friendship in no way diminishes the reality of it. Schillebeeckx believes it crucial that Jesus experienced the love of his Father throughout his life, and *particularly* during his rejection and torture by human beings. The Father "silently reveals himself in Jesus' historically helpless failure on the cross. God has man's interest at heart, but in a world which itself does not always appear to do so; for that reason God's love for man in Jesus takes on a coloring which we ourselves have mixed.⁸

Fifth, the Father did not offer to Jesus—nor does he offer to us—an *explanation* of the evil of innocent suffering, both because evil can have, properly speaking, no explanation (evil in itself represents the very *lack* of due being, of what is *intelligible*), and because the Father was much more interested in *overcoming* evil than in *explaining* it. And that is precisely the meaning of the resurrection: God's answer to the evil of innocent, unjust suffering was to make it as if it had not been, to utterly defeat its power, to bring life out of death. Christianity, for Schillebeeckx, does not offer an *explanation* of evil, but rather a *commitment* to work against it for the good of those whom God loves.

Thus the Father does not visit evil upon us, nor does he explain it to us—he struggles against it and finally overcomes it, sometimes during the course of history, but always eschatologically. Schillebeeckx, following Aquinas, even holds that it is a dangerous undertaking to say that God "permits" or "allows" the suffering of the innocent,

beforehand, was nevertheless real in and with Jesus - what seems to be failure is in fact nothing of the sort. In that case the resurrection is a new factor which is nevertheless in line with what was already a living reality on the cross, but in a hidden way, within the contours of earthly contingency. (Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, p. 825)

⁸ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, p. 638.

because this can imply that evil has some positive relation to the will of God. We ultimately do not know the relation of God to the existence of evil; we only know that the Father is totally and supremely good, and that He does not indulge in torture and murder—sinful human beings do. As Schillebeeckx says, “the expression ‘God’s permissive will’ has no theoretical meaning as an explanation: it simply describes the dead end of human thinking when it is confronted with the incomprehensible history of human suffering.”⁹

Sixth, our lives should follow, each in their own way, the pattern of Christ’s life of unrelenting loving service for God and others: to the degree that they do, we will be faced, just as Jesus was, with various forms of rejection and suffering. If we refuse to abandon this kind of a life in the face of such rejection, we too will have to accept this suffering because of our love, and our lives of loving service will become sacrificial. We will realize some accomplishments along the way—we will relieve some suffering, give hope to others whose suffering we cannot assuage, and be fortified and given hope by those glimpses of the Kingdom already in our midst—but in the end we will be more impotent than not, many of our efforts will fail or be rejected, and they will in any case end in death. But Schillebeeckx stresses that we will experience an intimate and transforming friendship with the Father in the darkness of this sacrificial suffering, which itself will confirm our hope in resurrection, the Father’s refusal to let us go: as he would not let go of Jesus, he will not let go of us. As Schillebeeckx puts it, “what the church tells and indeed *promises* us about Jesus is that in this way of life, which is in conformity with the message of Jesus and the kingdom of God, we are shown the *real possibility* of an experience of God.”¹⁰ The fact that Jesus

continued, when faced with his approaching death, to proffer salvation on God’s behalf constitutes for us the challenging message that historical failures are not the last word—that even in radical fiascos we may continue to trust in God. . . . The life of Jesus calls us to metanoia, to this effect: whatever may happen, go on trusting in God; then will be realized—how? ‘I know not’, just look at the cross!—a liberation, salvation for men, eschatologically completed.¹¹

For the Christian, “The last word does not lie with failure, but in a living communion with God, who leads a man to accept this failure. . . . and to hold it of less account than the value of living communion with God and faithfulness to men as the implication of this communion.”¹²

⁹ Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, p. 699.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 837.

¹¹ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, p. 638.

¹² Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, p. 824.

Finally, because Schillebeeckx stresses that a life of loving service for others on account of God is worthwhile in itself, that in such a life friendship with God is to be found, and that the future lies in God's eschatological actions confirming, perfecting and transforming the good that we do, we as Christians need not be consumed with anxiety over our failure to accomplish all good. Nor should we despair of the frustrations that come with trying to maintain our moral integrity in situations which seem to require its abandonment if more pressing good is to be achieved. In other words, we need not succumb to consequentialism, we need not begin to think that we must use evil means in order to achieve good ends—the realization of those ends is ultimately God's eschatological concern, after we have done the best we can do with the resources at hand. As long as we do all that we morally can do, we may leave the rest to God, we may leave the future in God's hands. Again, Schillebeeckx puts it eloquently:

As the intrinsic consequence of the radicalism of its message and reconciling practice, the crucifixion of Jesus shows that any attempt at liberating redemption which is concerned with humanity is valid in and of itself and not subsequently as a result of any success which may follow. What counts is not success... The important thing is loving service. We are shown the true face of both God and man in the 'vain' love of Jesus which knows that its criterion does not lie in success, but in its very being as radical love and identification.¹³

To conclude, the crucifixion of Jesus was the most evil of things, and thus hardly the will of God; the Father does not crucify those whom he loves. Our redemption did not result from suffering imposed on Christ by his Father, but from how deeply Christ *loved* his father in his willingness to accept the suffering imposed by human beings as a result of their rejection of his proclamation of the Kingdom and life of loving service, rather than abandoning that proclamation and life in face of its rejection. And so I believe that the cross must be both hated and venerated; *hated* because of the horrible human suffering it brought and brings, hated because of the depths of human cruelty that it expressed and expresses. But it must also be *venerated* because of the love and obedience of Jesus for his Father which he manifested in his acceptance of the cross, and venerated because of the Father's gracious response to that love.

Both perspectives on the cross (as a reality in the life of Christ, and as a symbol of all unjust suffering of the innocent) must be maintained in our own lives. *On the one hand*, we should not seek after such suffering for its own sake, for suffering is never good in itself, never directly the object of God's will for us. God does not want us to suffer, any more than he wanted his son to suffer; ours

¹³ *Ibid.*, 837.

is a God of the living, not of the dead, and it is our responsibility to relieve the suffering of others wherever and however we can. *On the other hand*, we should always seek, as did Jesus, after all that is *good*, after a life of care and compassion, of mercy and loving service for others, and then we must be willing to accept, in love and in obedience, the suffering that doing this will inevitably bring in the present conditions of this world. We must not *seek* suffering, but we must not flee from it either, especially when it is the outcome of our discipleship, of our attempt to live at least in some small way as Christ lived. Our salvation was not caused by the murder of an innocent man 2000 years ago—God did not punish Jesus in our place, as some have said (that, I think, is *blasphemy*)—it was rather caused by the mutual love of the Father and Jesus, stronger even than death, that was played out in that situation of suffering which resulted from Jesus’ life of loving service in a sinful world. And so it must be played out in ours as well, as we seek to be and to do good in a world that so often rewards such efforts with rejection and suffering. The way of the master is the way of his disciples, but it is a way that brings us into a present intimacy of friendship with the Father, and it is a way that the Father will consummate eschatologically beyond all expectation.

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