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6

## Salvation: Living Communion with God

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AT THE BEGINNING of the twenty-first century, we have become increasingly aware that the concrete realities of our human existence as a history of ongoing suffering and oppression now seriously threaten the very survival of humankind, as well as that of the natural environment. Science and technology, once trusted to bring us total emancipation, are now a source of disillusionment and grave anxiety. The precariousness of the situation presses the question of salvation as a secular as well as a religious concern. These times challenge the Christian claim that God's definitive and universal salvation has been given to us in Jesus the Christ. What bearing does Christian faith in Jesus as universal redeemer have on the realities of the contemporary world? What is the universal and salvific relevance of the Christian gospel of salvation in the context of the crucial issues that confront us today on a global scale?

It was with the intention of addressing these questions that Edward Schillebeeckx initiated a process of investigation and critical reflection that resulted in the monumental trilogy *Jesus, Christ, and Church*. The structure of Schillebeeckx's soteriological project consists of three distinct but interrelated movements: the christology of *Jesus*, an analysis of New Testament understandings of salvation, and basic moves toward a contemporary soteriology. Schillebeeckx's investigation is motivated by the hope of providing a new focus for traditional Western christology, a perspective he feels is much needed in light of the critical question whether it is still possible to experience Christian salvation. He sees the challenge to be that of creating new traditions in and through

which the good news of God's salvation in Jesus becomes activated and actualized in today's world.

In his christology Schillebeeckx seeks to discover, in the image of Jesus reconstructed by historical criticism, what is unique and particular about Jesus of Nazareth that led from pre-Easter discipleship to the New Testament confession of Jesus as definitive salvation from God. Schillebeeckx contends that only after a critically reconstructed picture of Jesus' message, way of life, and consequent execution is it possible to discover how the whole of this could have been experienced as his "salvation" at that time. In a further step, it can be asked how people today might experience the "final good" in this Jesus event.

In the introduction to *Christ*, Schillebeeckx clarifies the immediate connection between the first two moments of his emerging soteriology. Whereas in *Jesus*, Schillebeeckx's concern was with those aspects of the "historical Jesus" that may have led to the New Testament confession of him, in *Christ* his attention shifts to the New Testament elaboration of the ongoing experience of Jesus as salvation from God. In other words, the focus of *Christ* is the continuation of the process of identifying Jesus of Nazareth that began with an initial encounter between Jesus and some first-century Jews, who "followed after" him during his ministry and then later knew him to be alive and present beyond death in the community of believers.

Through this encounter with Jesus, the first community of disciples found renewed meaning and purpose in their lives. The experience of renewed life in Jesus, the crucified-and-risen One, led the disciples to further reflection. They began to analyze their experience and to consider its various aspects in terms of available socioreligious models. Familiar things were viewed from a new focal point. "On the basis of their common experience they arrived at what we might call a Christian theory of grace, the beginnings of what in Christian tradition is called a 'theology of grace': soteriology, a thematic account of the meaning of Christian redemption and Christian salvation" (*Christ*, 19-20). The experience of salvation from God in and through Jesus found written expression in the corpus of writings that form the New Testament. In these documents, the meaning of grace points to a Christian oneness of experience that found great variety in expression

according to the historical socioreligious circumstances of the New Testament communities.

Schillebeeckx understands this basic experience to be the constant unitive factor of Christian faith. By "oneness of experience," he means a communal-ecclesial encounter "which obliges people to define the ultimate meaning and purport of their lives by reference to Jesus of Nazareth." In more traditional terms, this means a common experience "which causes people to interpret Jesus' life as the definitive or eschatological activity of God in history for the salvation or deliverance of men and women. The constant unitive factor . . . is that particular groups of people find final salvation imparted by God in Jesus of Nazareth" (*Jesus*, 56; see *Christ*, 463).

In part 2 of *Christ*, Schillebeeckx explores the question of how the New Testament communities expressed the one basic experience of salvation from God in Jesus according to the horizons of their concrete historical experiences and understandings. The purpose of this inquiry is to discover a normative orientation and inspiration for a contemporary soteriology. In part 3, he concludes his investigation with a synthetic description of the four structural elements he contends must be present in any contemporary theology of grace that is both faithful to the gospel and relevant to the present.

At the time he wrote *Jesus* (1974) and *Christ* (1977), Schillebeeckx's soteriological investigation was motivated by the hope of providing a new focus for traditional Western christology, in light of the critical question whether it was still possible to experience Christian salvation in the ambiguities and paradoxes of the late twentieth century. The changes that occurred not only in the world but also, and especially, within the Roman Catholic church during the 1980s caused Schillebeeckx to shift somewhat the perspective of *Church* (1989) from his original plan to complete the trilogy with an ecclesiology. Although disheartened that the Second Vatican Council's vision of the church had not been given institutional form, Schillebeeckx found great encouragement in "an unprecedented and authentic flourishing of the gospel" in grassroots movements among the laity (*Church*, xiv). Thus while still an ecclesiology, as originally intended—albeit "in a minor key" (xix)—the focus of *Church* is a "church of men and women bound to God which . . . has a critical presence in solidarity with men and women 'in the world,' with their problems, great and

small, and their 'secular,' authentically human and inhuman history" (xiv).

With *Church*, Schillebeeckx's emerging soteriology completes the "turn to the world" that he decidedly took in *Christ*, making more evident and developing more fully the identification between salvation and God's absolute presence in creation that undergirds his entire soteriological project. God's universal salvific intention for creation is realized whenever and wherever evil is resisted and good is furthered. In the first chapter of *Church*, Schillebeeckx establishes a clear distinction between salvation and revelation. Religions and churches are not salvation, but rather contexts in which and through which people become explicitly aware of God's saving activity in the whole of creation. Christians find God above all in Jesus Christ, in whose life, death, and resurrection is disclosed the being of God as human salvation (see chapter 5). But questions of Christ's uniqueness and universality emerge with new significance in *Church*, with Schillebeeckx's understanding of the universality of salvation in and through the liberating praxis of men and women. Addressing these questions in chapter 3 of *Church*, Schillebeeckx concludes that Jesus is universal, but not absolute, savior. Moreover, the uniqueness of Christianity is found in the ways that the followers of Jesus continue to actualize the history and memory of Jesus' praxis of the kingdom, that is, the very being of God as salvation of men and women.

Although Schillebeeckx identifies salvation with God's absolute presence in creation, he develops his emerging soteriology almost exclusively in relation to human history, and thus emphasizes the political relevance of the Christian gospel, that is, justice and peace. Nevertheless, in *Church*, especially the final section, he begins to address the cosmic dimensions of redemption and liberation.

#### NEW TESTAMENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF GRACE

From his analysis of New Testament scholarship, Schillebeeckx derives a descriptive theological synthesis in which grace emerges as a new way of life, given by God in Jesus the Christ. In the New Testament, grace means the sovereign, free, and unconditional love of God, manifested in history as a merciful and compassionate concern for human beings,

especially for those who experience the greatest need. It is asserted throughout the New Testament that the historical appearing of Jesus is the grace of God. Although the entire earthly life of Jesus is the proffer of God's salvation, Jesus' self-giving to the point of death—that is, his suffering and death on the cross—is the all-embracing sign of grace in the New Testament. Without the resurrection, however, the earthly life and dying of Jesus remain open and problematic. Thus in the New Testament, "the death and resurrection of Jesus are the determinative climax of the grace of God in Jesus the Christ" (*Christ*, 467). Only then does Jesus become the source of God's saving grace. Only the risen Jesus imparts eschatological salvation: the gift of the Spirit.

In the resurrection, the community of the followers of Jesus is empowered to proclaim in human history the good news of God's salvation in Jesus the Christ. By grace, the Christian is given a new identity in Christ that is a new mode of existence. As existence in grace, Christian life is patterned after God's unconditional love as manifested in Jesus' person, message, and praxis of the kingdom even unto death. This way of life is a new alternative for human living that is made possible through a share in the relationship that binds Jesus to the Father through the Spirit. Thus, the New Testament understanding of grace has both a mystical and an ethical dimension.

As a way of life, Christian existence in grace is given concrete form in specific sociohistorical circumstances. Schillebeeckx sees the New Testament churches as graced communities sent forth as a critical and creative consciousness to actualize the righteousness of God in human history. In this way, the New Testament indirectly provides a model for "the building up of Christian communities in the world and for the forming of a better society" (*Christ*, 560). The particular form that grace takes is something that must be continually decided anew, according to the sociocultural conditions of historical existence. Therefore, it is necessary to complement a theological analysis of grace with an analysis of historical circumstances.

On the basis of his investigation of New Testament understandings of grace, Schillebeeckx makes several observations that he judges as pertinent to a contemporary appropriation of the Christian experience of salvation. First, a given tradition of grace undergoes continual development and reinterpretation as it is lived out historically. Second, since it is historically situated, an experience of grace takes place within already

existing sociocultural and religious patterns of experience and interpretation. While being sympathetic to these patterns of interpretation, Christianity must maintain a critical function in regard to the structures and models that it assimilates into its experience. Third, the New Testament theology of grace comprises distinct, alternative, and complementary traditions, namely the synoptic, Pauline, and Johannine traditions. From this fact, Schillebeeckx concludes that in new historical situations, it is not only permissible but necessary to develop new traditions that are faithful to the one basic experience of salvation from God in Jesus. Thus "every community throughout the world has to write its own history of the living Jesus. . . . The account of the life of Christians in the world in which they live is a fifth gospel; it also belongs at the heart of Christology" (*Christ*, 18, 425).

Before taking up the question of a contemporary experience of Christian salvation, Schillebeeckx proposes four structural elements that must be taken into account in any current soteriology that is both rooted in the apostolic tradition and relevant to the present historical situation. The first of these is God and the divine history with human beings: God has self-revealed as a sovereignly free God of unconditional love, whose "cause" is the furthering of human well-being and happiness. "As Creator, God is the author of good and the antagonist of evil . . . the guarantor that human life has a positive and significant meaning" (*Christ*, 638). God's glory lies in the happiness and salvation of humankind.

Second, the nucleus of God's history with human beings is found in Jesus the Christ. The person of Jesus, in his life and above all in his death, in unbroken communion with God reveals the meaning and purpose of human existence, which has its source and fulfillment in the God of Jesus who is unconditional love.

Third, human history can be seen as discipleship: the gift of the Spirit, as the bond between Jesus and Christian communities, is both a share in Jesus' relationship with God and a mandate to continue the history of Jesus in the world. "Therefore we can only speak of the history of Jesus in terms of the story of the Christian community which follows Jesus" (*Christ*, 642).

Fourth, human history will have an eschatological consummation: definitive salvation belongs to the absolute freedom of God, who will bring the good begun in human history to its final consummation in a

way that transcends all expectations. The way that the New Testament gives specific form to these four dimensions of the experience of grace provides a normative orientation for future generations of Christians. In fidelity to the apostolic tradition, the present generation must articulate its own theology of grace.

#### THE PRESENT SITUATION

The demands and responsibilities that confronted the first generations of Christians were of a different kind than those faced by Christians today. Hence, a conscious fidelity to the apostolic norm of the gospel necessitates a critical understanding of the urgent demands and responsibilities of people today, to whom the same good news is directed. At the beginning of the third millennium, it has become increasingly evident that science and technology, once regarded "as the historical liberators of humankind," now pose the greatest threat to survival. If used to further the well-being of people and the environment, science and technology can be in genuine service of human liberation.

But in reality the sciences function as the instrument of human power, of rule over nature, power over society, power over human beings, both female and male. Science is the key to the military might of nations; science is the secret of their economic and social prosperity, in fact often to the detriment of others. Faith in verifiable knowledge and technical know-how as the only instrument for overcoming human disaster is a dominant factor in our present-day cultural world, regardless of whether we look to the north or the south, the west or the east (*Church*, 2-3).

The problem does not lie with science and technology per se, but with the nonscientific and absolute claims that human beings accord them.

In the process of secularization that began in the Enlightenment, science proclaimed that religion had become obsolete. As a consequence, ethics was separated from religion. Now, ironically, it is science and technology that press the religious and ethical questions. The potential for self-destruction that lays in the absolute and value-free claims of science raises a question: is a finite being "ever to be understood and liberated on its own terms? Does not the relationship to 'the transcendent' (he? she? it?) which men and women experience and live out belong with the unfathomable ground of our human creativity and therefore



with the deepest and ultimate inspiration of all humanism?" (*Church*, 4) Indeed, in the current situation it is the responsibility of theology to safeguard belief and hope in a transcendent, liberating power that loves human beings and that will overcome evil. Moreover, a theology that is relevant to our times will be one that relates religion to the world and "is concerned for humankind and its humanity in its social and historical context" (4). Given the precariousness of the present situation, this concern carries an ethical mandate.

The risk of detaching the human person from ethics is a danger today, in the demand for a value-free ethics that rejects not only religion but also modern secularized standards based on a human foundation. As Schillebeeckx observes, value-free ethics are "setting our very humanity at risk" (*Christ*, 658). In his assessment, the situation of estrangement between ethics and religion means that Christianity must accord ethics a certain priority over religion. This is not at all to deny the reciprocal relationship between the two (see *Church*, 30–33, 91–99). Ethics are essentially concerned with the basic questions: what the human being is; how, therefore, people should live; and for what kind of humanity must we finally decide. These basic ethical questions are intrinsically connected with worldviews and religious options. In other words, the question of the final significance of human existence is implied in every question of ethical immediacy.

The concrete historical reality, however, is humankind in need. The fact is that the vast majority of the world's population suffers at the hands of the privileged few. Thus:

[T]he specific starting point for ethics is . . . our indignation at human beings in concrete history who are everywhere injured: at the disorder both in the human heart and in society and its institutions. The actual threat and attack on the *humanum* . . . is a specifically ethical challenge and an ethical imperative, embedded in very specific negative experiences of contrast, of human misfortune and unhappiness, here and now (*Church*, 29).

The ethical imperative is not an abstract norm, but "an event which presents a challenge: our concrete history itself" (*Christ*, 659). In specific terms, this means that the "ethically good" is that which realizes the good and overcomes evil with respect to the actual situation. Put another way, "what is ethically good will emerge only from a praxis of liberation and reconciliation" (*Christ*, 659).

Furthermore, because of the vast expansion of scientific technology, the consequences of human activity no longer simply pertain to individuals and small groups. Regardless of the cultural and ethical traditions particular to them, all nations are facing the worldwide ethical problem. What is at stake is the future of humankind. On a global level, humankind is faced with the critical charge of deciding the future of the world and of humanity, while also determining humanity's meaning. What is needed is an ethics of worldwide responsibility that can guarantee not only human survival, but also meaningful human survival. This challenge, however, poses the further question of what is a meaningful humanity. Is there a universally valid view on this question?

The human person is a "being caught up in history." Human "nature is itself a history, a historical event, and is not simply given" (*Christ*, 732). That is to say, humanity is a future reality that can only be achieved in the course of human history. The dilemma of our history as one of suffering makes the task of realizing the *humanum* both pressing and perplexing. In matter of fact, the question of how to achieve a livable humanity has arisen from concrete conditions of alienation and woundedness of various kinds. "Salvation and humanity, being saved, integrity in a truly human and free way is in fact the theme of the whole of human history" (*Christ*, 732). Thus, people have become conscious of the fact that history is the place where salvation or human wholeness is decided or rejected; and the decision is an explicitly conscious one.

Given that the *humanum* is a future reality, Schillebeeckx contends that in directing the task of achieving a livable humanity, people have at their disposal no more than a set of anthropological constants. These constants present constitutive conditions that must always be presupposed in any human action, if humanity is to be livable. Schillebeeckx identifies six such constants, which he sees "as a kind of system of coordinates, the focal point of which is personal identity within social culture" (*Christ*, 733). In delineating these constitutive aspects of humanity, Schillebeeckx's expressed concern is "the creative establishment of specific norms for a better assessment of human worth and thus for human salvation" (*Christ*, 734).

The first anthropological constant is the relationship of human beings to their corporeality and, via this, to nature and the ecological environment. A balance must be maintained between the value of technology and that of aesthetic and enjoyable converse with nature. The

second constant is the human being's essential relatedness to others. The structure of personal identity includes the element of being together, through which one shares oneself with others and is confirmed in existence and personhood.

The third essential dimension of humanity is the relationship of the person to social and institutional structures. As a dimension of personal identity, social structures deeply influence human inwardness and personhood. Although structures and institutions develop into an objective form of society, they do not exist independently of human reason and the human will to preserve them. In situations when they enslave and debase human beings rather than liberate and protect them, there exists an ethical demand to change such structures.

Schillebeeckx identifies the fourth anthropological constant as the conditioning of people by time and space. The abiding dialectical tension between nature and history means that there are forms of suffering and threats to human life and well-being that cannot be removed by technology and social intervention. Because of its historicity, human existence involves a task of understanding one's own situation and unmasking critically the meaninglessness that human beings bring about in their history. This means "that the presumption of adopting a standpoint outside historical action and thought is a danger to true humanity" (*Christ*, 739).

The fifth anthropological constant is the essential relationship between theory and practice. As a historical process of changing meanings, human culture needs permanence. A mutual relationship of theory and practice is the only responsible guarantee of a permanent culture that is increasingly worthy of the humanum.

The sixth dimension of humanity is religious and "parareligious" consciousness. This constant finds expression in a variety of different utopian conceptions of life that seek to give meaning and context to human existence in the world. In most utopias, the human person is understood as the active subject of history, without being the all-controlling principle that is responsible for the whole of history and its final outcome. This principle is called fate by some, evolution by others, and humankind by yet others. For the religious person, this is the living God. A utopian view "is always a form of faith, in the sense of a 'utopia' which cannot be scientifically demonstrated, or at least can never be completely rationalized" (*Christ*, 741). Schillebeeckx asserts

that in this way "faith" is an anthropological constant throughout human history, a constant without which humane and livable human life and action become impossible.

Because human culture is an irreducible synthesis of the six anthropological constants, the synthesis itself is a constant. This synthesis constitutes the reality that heals human beings and brings them salvation. The six constants mutually influence one another. They delineate the basic form of human existence and hold one another in balance. Undervaluation of one of these dimensions threatens the whole, thereby damaging human society and culture. The anthropological constants, however, do no more than present constitutive conditions for a livable humanity. Specific norms must be worked out on the basis of these values: the task of creating such norms is an imperative that confronts human beings here and now. Moreover, there will always be pluralism in the area of specific norms, even though the same basic values are recognized. Learning to live with pluralism is one of the tasks of a livable modern humanity. Nevertheless, if ethical norms are to be viable, they must be capable of being tested in valid intersubjective discussion. This holds even if the basic inspiration comes from a religious belief.

#### CHRISTIAN SALVATION

The problem of the relationship between the ethics of human liberation and the grace of redemption is of central concern for a contemporary mediation of Christian salvation. There is ample evidence that a widespread pluralism exists in respect to this question. The relevance of the Christian gospel for a social and political world order is neither clear nor self-evident. In a first move toward offering a solution to the problem, Schillebeeckx affirms the dialectical relationship between interior and social freedom, as well as between religious traditions and the sociohistorical circumstances in which they originate and develop.

True liberation or salvation is overcoming all personal and social forms of alienation. It is the "being-in-wholeness" of the person and history. To the extent that history liberates men and women for true humanity, it is "God's saving history, and is so independently of our awareness of this gracious structure of salvation, but not without the

occurrence of intentional human liberation" (*Church*, 10). Moreover, if people are to grasp what Christians mean by salvation, they must have some experience of human liberation. It is only in a history in which people are liberated for true humanity that God can self-reveal as salvation of and for men and women.

[W]here human good is furthered and evil is challenged in the human interest, then through this historical practice the being of God—God as salvation for men and women, the ground for universal hope—is also established and men and women also appropriate God's salvation—in and through acts of love. Human history, the social life of human beings, is the place where the cause of salvation or disaster is decided on (*Church*, 12–13).

The decisive factor is whether we stand in solidarity with the suffering humanum or are on the side of the oppressors. Schillebeeckx therefore raises the question "whether the freedom of the children of God is not pointed towards a social liberation as an integral ingredient of eschatological salvation from God. In other words, the question whether Christian freedom or redemption is not directed towards political and social liberation as a condition of its own possibility" (*Christ*, 745).

It is characteristic of the structure of the development of Christian faith that Christians uncover latent dimensions in their tradition as a result of stimuli introduced by sociocultural circumstances. Although the gospel of Jesus is an inclusive message of freedom and love for all people, the consequences of this "good news" are only gradually revealed in the ongoing development of human consciousness. It is quite possible, then, that at a particular historical moment, an emancipatory process of liberation can become a necessary demand of historically situated Christian love. Nevertheless, because it is precisely in their service to God that religions are also a service to human beings and the world, it is necessary that Christians investigate the particular religious and critical force of their solidarity with emancipation movements. At issue here is whether believers and nonbelievers simply do the same thing under different names, or whether the Christian gospel gives a service to the world that is specifically religious.

Whereas religion must draw on an experience of God in order to be of service to the world, Western scientific technology has created sociocultural conditions in which belief in God is no longer simply taken for granted. On the one hand, a highly scientific and technological

experience in Western societies has made faith more difficult than in the past. On the other hand, the enormity and extent of innocent human suffering in the past century have challenged belief in the presence of a divine omnipotence in human history. If men and women can nowhere experience God's presence and saving power at work, belief in God "is sheer ideology, a loose statement the meaning of which cannot be verified in any way" (*Church*, 88).

But Schillebeeckx posits the experience of creatureliness as the foundation of all religious awareness. By this he means "an experience of ourselves, others and the world in which we feel as a norm something which transcends at least our arbitrary control of ourselves" (*Christ*, 811). It is an experience of givenness that is the root of all religion, as a mediated immediate relationship with God. "Mediated immediacy" concerns the unique relationship between finite beings and the infinite God who is absolute origin. Whereas the term *immediacy* refers to the divine manner of the real presence of the creator to the creature, *mediated* describes the mode in which people encounter the divine presence. God is directly and creatively present in the creature. In this case, mediation does not destroy immediacy but produces it. All that is not God derives the totality of its existence and activity from the creator, who, as absolute freedom, transcends all things through interiority. This means that the living God is the depth dimension of all reality. The fundamental medium of the creator is creation. The relationship between the infinite creator and the finite creature are mediated through an encounter with the world, human history, and human beings.

The structure of the presence of God as mediated immediacy implies that the human response to God has a similar structure of mediation. In other words, although religion cannot be reduced to cohumanity and sociopolitical concerns, it cannot do without this mediation. God's saving power never breaks in from outside human history. Rather, God's grace is present in the structure of historical human experience and praxis. Because of the constitutive relationship between personal identity and the social structures that provide freedom, sociopolitical improvements form an integral part of what is experienced as the grace of God. "Here the divine reality proves itself to be a reality, as the one who wills good and opposes evil, the liberator from alienation" (*Christ*, 814). It follows that wherever human liberation is possible, it remains a universal human task in the name of God. "We cannot shift on to God



what is our task in the world, because of the unsurpassable boundary (on our side) between the finite and the infinite" (*Church*, 231).

In creating human beings with finite free will, God entrusts creation and human history to human beings. In so doing, "God voluntarily renounces power," and "in this world becomes 'defenceless' and vulnerable . . . sin in the world of creation in fact renders the Creator defenceless in the extreme." Although the human choice to break communion with God and to refuse human solidarity "puts limits on God's power," God remains "present in redemption and forgiveness. . . . In other words, this limit is not God's limit but our limit: the limit of finitude and above all our free sinfulness. But God is also present to save beyond this limit, if necessary as the final judge" (*Church*, 90–91; see also 120, 125–26, 128). A final healing of the division in human existence in the world can only be the consequence of an absolute freedom and creative love that embraces the whole of reality.

Consequently, all hope for the future based on human creativity must be taken up into a hope founded on God's own saving creativity. "For believers, this surplus of hope over and above what is constantly realized in history is grounded in what they call God's creation-for-his-saving-purposes," that is, God's absolute presence in all of creation (*Church*, 99). A critical religious consciousness recognizes the manifestation of God's saving nearness in any action that promotes human well-being, while, at the same time, it opposes a complete identification of human salvation with any given or anticipated sociopolitical form. All human liberation stands under the divine proviso. The history of redemption can neither be identified with nor detached from the history of emancipation. Christian salvation is a historical mediation of God's saving immediacy. As such, it includes both mystical-contemplative and sociopolitical dimensions.

Schillebeeckx calls the fundamental awareness of God's mediated-but-nevertheless-real immediacy the mystical aspect of belief in God. This mystical depth in which the immediacy of God is the essential element can be experienced in both positive and negative ways. There are positive disclosure experiences of the givenness and goodness of life, in which there occurs a change in perception from the mediating to the mediated, that is, God's presence. Schillebeeckx understands "explicit prayer" as a person's effort to see this immediacy. Immediacy can also be experienced as a "dark night," that is, as "a nothingness of fullness":

God's presence as a pure experience of faith, communicated in the mediation of extreme negativity. Faith is certainly more than a theoretical conviction when it persists even when "every empirical foundation and every guarantee have been removed and one weeps over the fiasco of one's life" (*Christ*, 815).

The mediation of God's presence in negative experience is particularly relevant to contemporary circumstances and awareness. Human beings have created and perpetuated a history that is dark with suffering and oppression. Moreover, the reality of the history of human suffering continues in spite of the progress of emancipation and in spite of God's redemptive action in Jesus. The fact that both redemption and emancipation are found within conditions of suffering gives an inner tension to any understanding of redemption and any attempt at self-liberation.

Human suffering, however, also has a productive and critical epistemological value. As an experience of contrast, suffering includes characteristics of both contemplative and practical forms of knowledge. On the one hand, although in the form of negative experience, suffering comes upon one in a way that is similar to the passive structure of positive contemplative experiences. On the other hand, under the aspect of critical negativity, the reality of suffering resists the passivity of the contemplative dimension in a way that leads to a possible action that will overcome both suffering and its causes. As an experience of contrast, suffering indirectly implies an awareness of the possible positive significance of the humanum. It follows that action to overcome suffering is possible only through an implicit anticipation of a potential universal significance to come. Thus, the particular productive and critical epistemological value of the experience of contrast in suffering is a knowledge that looks for and opens up the future. Schillebeeckx concludes that in the present historical circumstances, contemplation and action can only be connected through the history of suffering and the ethical awareness that comes to birth in it.

The particular story of Jesus of Nazareth is part of the history of accumulated human suffering. Jesus' message of the unconditional love of God and corresponding praxis of solidarity with socioreligious outcasts met in his day with violent opposition and rejection. "Like God, Jesus identifies himself par excellence with the outcast and rejected men and women, the unholy, so that he too himself finally becomes the one



who is rejected and outcast." Because of the continuity between Jesus' praxis of the kingdom and his death, "the saving significance of Jesus finds its climax in the crucifixion and does not lie in the crucifixion taken in isolation" (*Church*, 124). Jesus' suffering and death in solidarity with the rejected and broken of the world give unconditional validity to his message and praxis: God is irrevocably present as salvation for men and women, even in situations of extreme negativity. The notion of God's saving immediacy in the mediation of extreme negativity is central to Schillebeeckx's understanding of the saving significance of the death of Jesus. The redemptive force of this death does not lie with suffering and the negativity of failure as such, but with unbroken communion and solidarity to the point of death.

In the radical alienation of suffering and death, Jesus lives out the meaning of God's rule as sovereignly free but in total solidarity with people. "This means that God determines in absolute freedom, down the ages, who and how he wills to be in his deepest being, namely a God of men and women, an ally in our suffering and our absurdity, and also an ally in the good that we do" (*Church*, 126).

As the correction of the negativity of death, Schillebeeckx understands the resurrection as an event that is both new and different from Jesus' suffering and death. Yet this does not mean that he views the resurrection as an extrinsic addition. He cautions against detaching the significance of the resurrection from the career of Jesus, which includes his death. In the sense that God's saving power was already at work in Jesus' proclamation and praxis of the kingdom in which his death shares, his career is a historical anticipation of his resurrection. As Schillebeeckx reminds us, "we cannot detach the defencelessness of Jesus on the cross from the free power and the positivity which revealed itself in his actual career of solidarity with oppressed men and women on the basis of an absolute trust in God." On the cross God is absolutely present with Jesus, but this presence is "without the misuse of power" (*Church*, 127-28). God expresses the divine power over evil in the defenselessness of the suffering death of Jesus, to give human beings the space to be themselves in solidarity with victims of injustice. God and Jesus are not thwarted by suffering and death.

The surmounting of death in the resurrection is God's definitive acceptance, validation, and final fulfillment of the earthly life of Jesus. It is precisely in this way that the cross of Jesus acquires a productive and

critical force in the dimension of human history. In spite of the disruption caused by the fatal rejection of Jesus' person and message, there is continuity between the hidden dimension of what took place on the cross and its manifestation in the resurrection, namely, the living and unbroken communion between Jesus and God. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, the human rejection of God's offer of salvation and the persistence of this offer extended in the risen Jesus meet each other. "Through the resurrection, God actually breaks that rejection of definitive salvation" (*Jesus*, 641). God's living presence is an "undeserved abundance" of meaning stronger and more penetrating than the abundance of nonmeaning that is the ultimate enemy: death. Schillebeeckx describes God's triumph over death as the "eternally new event" of God's divinity, which brings earthly life to fulfillment.

The living God who is the future of human history is in the risen Jesus, the presence of the future. In this way, Christian faith finds in Jesus the promise and the possibility that human history can be realized as a history of salvation. The promise of the eschatological future, anticipated in Jesus' career unto death on the cross, "is confirmed by his resurrection from the dead by God as in fact a praxis of the kingdom of God: salvation for all men and women" (*Church*, 176). For Schillebeeckx, Jesus has universal significance precisely because he reveals the true identity of the one God and in and through the disclosure of true humanity. In his career and praxis, Jesus of Nazareth "points essentially to God and to the coming of the kingdom of God for which he himself gave his life. . . . For Jesus, God's cause—the kingdom of God as salvation for men and women—is more important than his own life" (*Church*, 121).

Likewise, "the risen Jesus of Nazareth continues to point to God beyond himself. . . . God is absolute, but no single religion is absolute" (*Church*, 166). As definitive revelation of the one God who is redeemer of all, Jesus has unique and universal, but not absolute, significance. The "distinctive and unique feature of Christianity is that it finds the life and being of God" manifested in the historical, and thus limited, particularity of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is "indeed a 'unique' but nevertheless 'contingent'. . . manifestation of the gift of salvation from God for all men and women" (*Church*, 165).

The saving significance of Jesus becomes effective in history through his followers. Jesus was convinced of an essential connection between

his proclamation and praxis and the coming of the kingdom of God as salvation for men and women. Likewise, "the consequent faith conviction of his followers that the mission of Jesus has a definitive, eschatological and universal significance . . . necessitates a continuation of Jesus' earthly mission by his disciples beyond the limited time of his earthly life. . . . The fact is that becoming a disciple of Jesus is an essential element of his message . . . the 'church' is essentially discipleship of Jesus" (*Church*, 155).

The abiding presence of the Spirit of the risen Jesus puts the community of disciples into contact with Jesus' praxis of the kingdom. *Pneuma* and *anamnesis*: the living memory of Jesus' career, handed on in the living tradition of the church, and the abiding presence of the Spirit in the church community. As the living *memoria passionis Christi*, Christians must "go the way of Jesus," that is, reject oppressive powers in a praxis of solidarity with the poor and oppressed of the world, even to the extent that this commitment includes the *via crucis*, the way of the cross. It is only in this way that redemption through Jesus has concrete universal significance, that the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Christianity has meaning and intelligibility. The universality of the Christian gospel is a task to be realized in specific historical situations.

Schillebeeckx sees the present situation of structural world poverty as the current context in which the challenge of the Christian gospel assumes a specific social dimension. To the extent that the church opts for the poor, it has a universal significance that includes both the poor and the rich, in that the gospel's predilection for the poor and oppressed is at the same time a judgment on oppressive power structures and, thus, a call to conversion. A praxis of liberating the humanum for good and true humanity through the creation of a just world order is an essential part of the universality of Christian faith, "and this is par excellence a non-discriminatory universality" (*Church*, 170).

Given the ambiguity of human history as a mixture of sense and nonsense, belief in a universal meaning of history only validates itself in a course of action that tries to overcome suffering, on the strength of the religious conviction that things can be otherwise. The thematization of universal meaning can be achieved meaningfully only with a practical-critical intention that, through historical commitment, attempts to remove meaninglessness from human history step by step. That is to say, the Christian gospel will be critically productive, credi-

ble, and capable of offering hope to the world only if it is a consistent praxis that gives concrete form to a living communion with God.

The current environmental crisis, which is fundamentally related to unbridled economic gain, has raised the question whether the Christian understanding of the kingdom of God includes the material milieu. With inorganic and organic creatures, human beings share in "one creation." While there is "something in human beings that cannot be reduced to nature," they and nature are interrelated. In contrast to the rest of creation, "human beings have a somatic spiritual awareness, something transcendent, as a result of which they can recall their relationship with God" (*Church*, 238). Consequently, they have been entrusted with creation as a task to be achieved. On the basis of the environmental crisis, human stewardship is subject to ethical values and norms. "In and through human action it must become clear that God wills salvation through humankind for all . . . creation" (*Church*, 245).

Definitive salvation transcends present experience. Although everything is decided in human history, the last word is not with history but with the living God, whose absolute presence supports finitude. The possible despair that can be caused by the contingency and woundedness of existence is taken up and transcended by the inexhaustible abundance of God. Divine possibilities cannot be limited to earthly expectations and achievements. Nevertheless, partial salvation is realized whenever and wherever the goodness of creation is confirmed and furthered. In this way, human love supported by absolute love becomes the sacrament and promise of God's redemptive love offered to the whole of God's creation. "The challenging call from God is thus: 'Come, my dear people, you are not alone'" (*Church*, 246).

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Schillebeeckx's investigation of the New Testament theology of the experience of grace is found in part 2 of *Christ: The Experience of Jesus As Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1980). This lengthy study is followed in part 3 by a concluding synthesis in which Schillebeeckx proposes four structural elements that he sees as indispensable for a contemporary theology of grace. Pertinent passages from this material are found in part 4 of *The Schillebeeckx Reader* (Robert J. Schreiter, ed. New York:

Crossroad, 1984). While he directly addresses the question of a contemporary soteriology in part 4 of *Christ* and in *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), especially chapters 1, 2, 3, and the epilogue, Schillebeeckx anticipates issues pertinent to this undertaking in part 4 of *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury, 1979). Significant selections from *Jesus, Christ, and Interim Report on the Books "Jesus" and "Christ"* (New York: Crossroad, 1980) are found in part 3 of *The Schillebeeckx Reader*. A number of homilies in *God Among Us: The Gospel Proclaimed* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) highlight aspects of Schillebeeckx's developing soteriology. See in particular "I Believe in Eternal Life," "Belief in a New Heaven and a New Earth," and "Belief in Jesus As Salvation for the Outcast." God's salvation in Jesus is discussed in connection with creation and the biblical notion of the kingdom in "Kingdom of God: Creation and Salvation," in *Interim Report*. See also "I Believe in God, Creator of Heaven and Earth" and "I Believe in the Man Jesus: The Christ, the Only Beloved Son, Our Lord," in *God Among Us*. Another book that examines issues and questions pertinent to a contemporary praxis of salvation is *On Christian Faith: The Spiritual, Ethical, and Political Dimensions* (New York: Crossroad, 1987). See especially "Who or What Brings Salvation to Men and Women? The World and God," and "Jesus As the Question of Men and Women to God: Mysticism, Ethics and Politics."

For Schillebeeckx's recent discussion of Jesus as universal, but not absolute, savior, see *Church*, chapter 3; and "The Religious and the Human Ecumene," in Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, eds., *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutierrez* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 177-88 (also in *The Language of Faith: Essays on Jesus, Theology, and the Church*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995, 249-64).