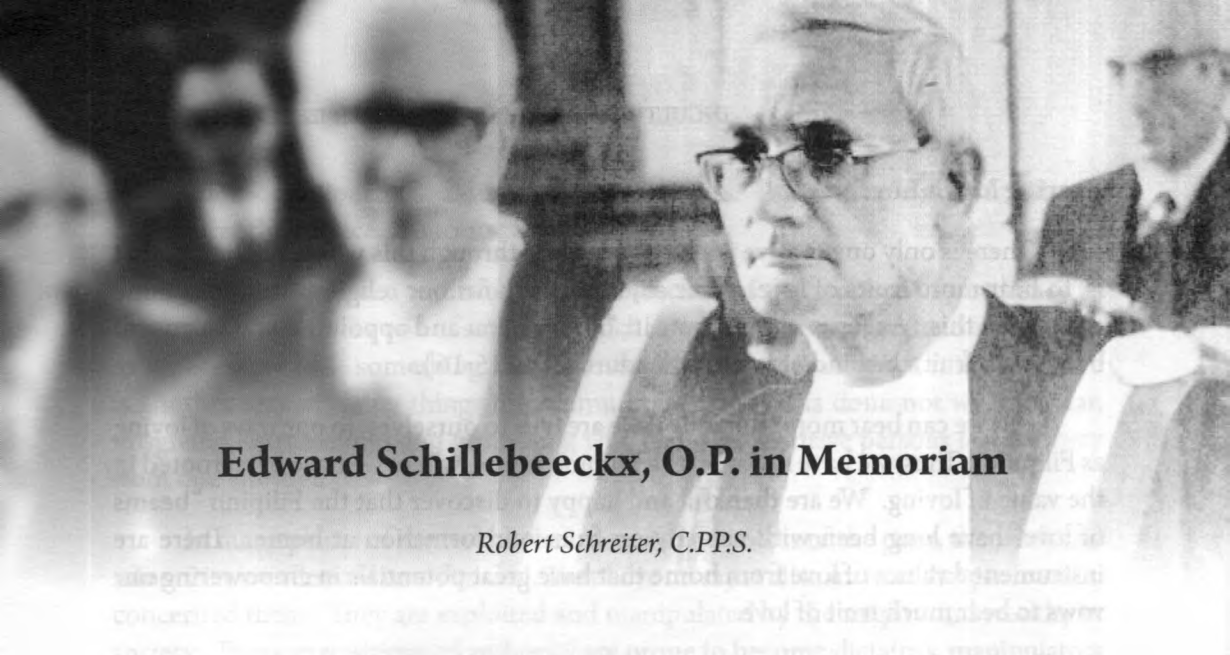




Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P. in Memoriam

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As you no doubt have heard, Professor Edward Schillebeeckx passed away peacefully at home on December 23. I was able to attend the funeral and burial in Nijmegen on the 31st. What follows here is an account of his final days and of the funeral, for the benefit of those of you who were not able to attend.

His Final Days

I was last able to visit Edward in early December of 2008. He had declined physically since my last visit a year earlier, but he was still mobile and completely alert. We spent several hours talking about a wide range of things, as was his wont.

This past summer, he suffered a mild cardiac incident and then in September a more serious TIA. (He had had numerous TIAs in the last few years.) After that time he began to weaken considerably. Some feared that he would not live to celebrate his 95th birthday on November 12. However, he rallied and was able to receive guests throughout that day. The decline became more noticeable again in the days thereafter.

In those final days, he made the remark that, for him, the best image of God that human beings could muster was God as light.

He had taken to sleeping more. On the evening of the 21st, he asked Hadewych (Sister Hadewych Snijdwind, O.P., his caregiver for the past ten years), for a "little drink." By that he meant a sip of wine. He wanted it from his favorite glass. He drank this and fell back asleep. On the 22nd, he would awake from time to time. That afternoon, he said: "I feel myself being called."

In the late morning on the 23rd, he said "I see so much light!" Hadewych was then joined by her niece Claire (who helped with caregiving from time to time and

was close to Edward as well) and Ben Vocking, O.P., the Provincial of the Dutch Dominicans, for what were clearly Edward's final hours.

Around two in the afternoon, Edward said: "God is calling me!" These were his last words. Around 5:15, he uttered a gentle sigh and, he was gone.

He died a grace-filled death, after a life of proclaiming a God who is so near to us. A theme that recurred in the coming days was "rakelings nabij" –which might be translated as "so near that you can touch it." This was the title of a *Festschrift* that the Dominican Studies Center had offered him for his ninetieth birthday—that God was always that close to us.

The Funeral

I got word of Edward's death from Ton Sison on the 24th, who telephoned me from Chicago (I was in Nebraska with family at the time). An e-mail from Ted Schoof came shortly after that. I had already booked a ticket to be in the Netherlands in early January (with an appointment to see Edward on the 11th) for some business with Cordaid, the Dutch Catholic Relief and Development agency. Thankfully, I was able to change the ticket so as to be able to be present for the funeral on December 31st.

On the evening of the 30th, there was a wake service for Edward in the Dominicuskerk in Nijmegen, a church near the old Albertinum and long staffed by the Dominicans (although no longer so). Some three hundred people were in attendance. I was only able to arrive in the Netherlands on the day of the funeral itself, the 31st and was indeed about ten minutes late for the service (a flight delay coming into Schiphol Airport).

The funeral was at noon in the Dominicuskerk, with more than seven hundred people attending. The Mass of Christian Burial was presided over by the Dutch and Flemish Dominican provincials, Ben Vocking and Domien Evangée. The tone was warm and full of thanksgiving, with hymns and Eucharistic prayer with texts of Huub Oosterhuis (who was also in attendance). The service was not a celebration of Edward's fame or academic achievement, but rather of his warm humanity and his deep faith in God, as a family member, a good friend and as a Dominican. The whole service had a distinctively Dominican cast, as well it should have (the Dominicans had been preparing for this for some time). Domien Vanagée gave an overview of Edward's life at the beginning of the service, using the metaphor of a Brueghel painting to sketch his ninety-five years.

Erik Borgman, a former student of Edward's and his intellectual biographer and now professor at the University of Tilburg (and a lay Dominican), gave the eulogy. He took as his theme "God is New Each Moment" to speak of Edward's faith

and passion for God. Within that framework, he spoke of his warmth as a human being, his commitment to theology as mediating the experience of God to ordinary believers, his incapacity to organize things (this drew a lot of knowing chuckles) and his unstinting generosity to others. There were a lot of tears shed at this point, but tears of happy memories and of endearment (mine included).

After Communion, a few others rose to speak a few words of memory, representing the different branches of the Dominican family. The final speaker was a young man in his late twenties, a Muslim, whose family had been close to Edward for many years. The young man now lives and works in San Francisco. He spoke in English (the rest of the service and testimonies were, of course, in Dutch). He spoke of “Uncle Ed” who had always been part of his family, even before the young man was born.

There were a number of bishops in attendance, who took their places in the pews with everyone else (this is the Netherlands, after all). Bishop Ad van Luyn of Rotterdam, a former student of Edward’s and the sole voice in the Bishops’ Conference who would say positive things about Edward, had attended the evening wake. At the service itself was the Bishop of Groningen, the retired Bishop of Antwerp and Bishop Jan Bluysen, retired Bishop of Den Bosch, who had always been very public in his support of Edward.

The Burial

When the Dominicans sold the Albertinum, they kept the burial ground in the garden behind the building. It was there that Edward was laid to rest. It is a short distance from the Dominicuskerk, so all present were able to form a cortege to accompany Edward to his final resting place. Prayers were said and the “Salve Regina” was sung, a custom that many religious orders have. We all had an opportunity to throw a handful of soil into the grave, as is the custom there. I thought of so many of you when I was able to do so.

There was a reception at the Hotel Erika in Berg en Dal after the burial. That, and the walk to and from the burial site, was something of a reunion for many of us. For those of you who had contact with Edward and with Nijmegen through the years, I would like to note those who I had a chance to greet and talk to, to give you some idea of who was all there.

Most of those who were teaching in the faculty during Edward’s time are now gone, but among those who were present for the service from that time were Ted Schoof, Wilhelm Dupré, Knut Walf, Catharina Halkes, Ad Willems, Kees Waaijman, Jacques van Nieuwenhoven, Marinus Houdijk and Hermann Haering.

Among those still active in the university and with the Schillebeeckx Foundation were Nico Schreurs, Wil Derkse, Hans van de Ven, Toine van den Hoogen, Jean Pierre Wils, Pamyre Oomen, Maaïke De Haardt, Gerrit Steunebrink, Erik Borgman, Stefan van Erp, Carl Sterkens and Joop Vernooij.

Lieven Boeve was there from Leuven, as were Anton Houtepen and Anton van Harskamp from Amsterdam. Thomas Eggenesperger and Ulrich Engel came from the Congar Institute in Berlin, as did Dietmar Mieth from Tuebingen. Johann Baptist Metz had planned to be there, but the trains were not running in most of Germany due to the bad weather.

There were of course many others, including his three surviving sisters and the extended Schillebeeckx family from Belgium. Edward had a brother in the United States; none of that part of the family was able to attend because of lack of places on flights from the U.S.

Further News

Photos from the funeral and the text of Erik Borgman's reflections are on the Dominican website (www.dominicanen.nl), as well as obituaries. Testimonials can also be found on the website of the Schillebeeckx Foundation (www.ru.nl/Schillebeeckx). An obituary from *L'Osservatore Romano* caused some stir, since it could give the impression that the author was saying that Schillebeeckx had not been heard from since the *Church* book in 1989 and that his era had passed. A good number of people took umbrage at it. My own take was that the author (who had written his dissertation on Schillebeeckx in the 1980s) was critical, but relatively even-handed, especially considering where it was being published.

The University issued press releases at Edward's death, but purposely stayed in the background for the funeral services itself. There will be a formal academic convocation in Schillebeeckx's memory at the University in the Aula on February 2, at which time the University will duly remember him.

I was able to visit on Tuesday morning with Ted Schoof, Schillebeeckx's secretary of more than twenty years and on Tuesday afternoon with Hadewych. (It should be noted that Hadewych was duly recognized at the funeral service for her care for Edward over the past ten years). It was a time of sharing memories not only of one of the great theologians of our time, but also of a dear friend. In the words on the Dominican website, Edward was "blijmoedig en vrijmoedig"—good-natured and also willing to stand up for what he believed in. A good way to remember someone who was such an influence on and blessing for so many of us.

Chicago, January 11, 2010