

**ANALYSIS OF AN ESSAY ON THE TEACHING
AUTHORITY OF ALL: A REFLECTION ABOUT
THE STRUCTURE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT BY
EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX.**

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1. INTRODUCTION:

Edward Schillebeeckx, born 1914, a member of the Dominican order, was one of the most influential theologians of his day; he is remarkable for having explored traditional concepts in the modern age of the 20th century. In his essay on “the teaching authority of all: a reflection about the structure of the New Testament,” he identified that there are two distinct teaching authority in the Church: the teaching authority of all in the sense of the community of faith and the teaching authority of the official Church.¹ The study to follow examines his thesis and arguments as well as explores how Schillebeeckx reflects these two forms of teaching authority in relation to Tradition and structure of the New Testament.

2. THESIS:

Schillebeeckx’s thesis can be extracted from the title of his essay; both forms of the authority in the Church, the community of faith and the teaching office of the world’s bishops in unity with the pope have a mutually normative, critical and complementary function with regard to the recognition in faith of the Church’s content of faith as the fruit of God’s activity.² He proposes the connection of the canonical Bible with both forms of teaching authority as a reflection of Jesus’ authority in the community of faith of the Church.³

3. THE TEACHING AUTHORITY OF ALL:

Schillebeeckx argues that not only the Old Testament but also in the New Testament, Jesus’ own disciples desire to understand Him just as the early Christians determine for an understanding of the authority of the apostles. Jesus left no writings from his own hand and the only ‘documents’ is in the reflection provided by his followers as a portrait of Jesus and it has been orally handed down to us⁴ and we called Tradition. The process of interpretation of the tradition is called the ‘New Testament’. According to Schillebeeckx, Jesus’ question of ‘Who do you say that I am?’ has a theologically significant meaning and it is the vision of the canonical New Testament itself.⁵

The teaching authority of all is revealed in Jesus' message about God that is integrated into his active, liberating association with his fellow-human being as in the example of Zacchaeus. This example clearly indicates that our knowledge in faith of Jesus cannot be dissociated from knowledge of others' reaction to Jesus' call; Zacchaeus, after his liberating encounter with Jesus, lets the poor share in his possessions. Therefore, this testimony has a share in the authority of Jesus. It is in the form of this testimony born again and again in time by believers that Jesus' authority radiates as in a reflection.⁶

In summary, teaching authority of all is sourced from Jesus, reflected by his followers as well as the people who encountered Jesus and transformed by Him; it is then orally handed down through generations as "Tradition". The process of interpretation of the tradition is then called the "Scriptures".

4. TEACHING AUTHORITY AND ITS BRIEF HISTORY:

Early Christians in Jerusalem were driven out of Jerusalem and migrated to Syria where they founded their Church in Antioch. Christological view of the Church was very widespread in the early years of Christianity and this tradition was recorded in the New Testament through Paul, Luke, Mark and a few others.

"Teachers of faith" in early Christian era could be either lay-persons or clergies. They chose to become teachers on their own initiative and by the gifts of the Spirit as Eusebius describes and Jerome explains that from the very beginning laypersons were teachers of faith in the Church. The bishops, however, took over all teaching in the middle of the third century. The history of the university lecturers as an ordained office is growing, clericalization of the 'teaching authority' in the Church. That teaching authority was narrowed down at that time exclusively to the teaching office.⁷ Although a non-official teaching office had clearly been accepted earlier in the Church, another process of narrowing down of the universal teaching authority of believers' intellectually to scholars as defined by Thomas Aquinas. According to

Aquinas, “priests are the masons of a cathedral, their bishops are the work superintendents and theologians are the architects.” On the other hand, he also said that a simple lay-person could have a deeper insight into faith than the greatest theologian. Schillebeeckx warned there is always a danger that ‘leaders’ theologians and office-bearers will behave like a Shiite religious leader, often one who takes an important political as well as religious role. That is why the model of the contemporary forms of liberation theology is so attractive.⁸

Schillebeeckx clearly stated that academic theology has the task of integrating the new experiences and the new praxis as well as reflections of local communities and basic groups into the whole complex of the ‘Church’s memory and into the great reserves of experience and faith of the entire Church. It therefore at the same time prevents these new experiences, in which a new and increasing ‘consensus is manifested, from remaining merely sporadic or from tending to disintegrate the Church. In this way, academic theology ‘mediates’ the rich traditions of the Church’s experience throughout the centuries down to the basis and at the same time prevents that basis from becoming cognitively isolated as a sect.

5. CONCLUSION:

Schillebeeckx’s precisely instructs both forms of teaching authority in the Church are mutually complementary functions with regard to the recognition in faith of the Church as they are a reflection of Jesus’ authority in the community of faith.⁹ Besides “the successors of the apostles who are the college of bishops teaching in union with the pope” (*Lumen Gentium*, 25), other form of church teaching done by university professors of theology is highly regarded; a prime example is Professor McManus, OP, Ph.D. of the University of Portland who I am grateful to have learnt from tremendously this semester.

6. PASTORAL QUESTION:

You are teaching an Adult Ed class on “The Magisterium” and a student in your class request your comment on Schillebeeckx’s statement: “With the result that the teaching authority of the community of faith (the authority of all) even now is treated with only negligible justice and sometimes even suffers from the power of office in the Church, from the ecclesiological point of view, this is not in any sense a normal situation.” Please state your opinion.

7. NOTES:

¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., *The Language of Faith: Essays on Jesus, Theology, and the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 225

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 226.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 227.

⁶ Ibid., 228.

⁷ Ibid., 230.

⁸ Ibid., 232.

⁹ Ibid., 226.