

RECONCILING THE CROSS IN THE THEOLOGIES OF EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX AND IVONE GEBARA

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[The author explores areas of consonance and contrast in the backgrounds and methodologies of Edward Schillebeeckx and Ivone Gebara, especially as these are illumined in their respective approaches to the symbol of the cross. While both critique the ways that this central Christian symbol has functioned to contribute to oppression, they diverge in their views of its inherent redeemability. The juxtaposition of the thought of Schillebeeckx and Gebara on this issue reveals a fundamental tension in the Church and in theological thought today, even as it expresses a potentially unifying intuition.]

IVONE GEBARA, a Brazilian Sister of Notre Dame, is a leading ecofeminist philosopher and theologian in Latin America. She taught for many years at the Theology Institute of Recife, Brazil. Gebara is well-known internationally by members of grassroots women's groups and congregations of women religious, among whom she is a sought-after speaker and facilitator of theological reflection. Her published works include *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation* (2002), *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (1999), and, with Maria Clara Bingemer, *Mary: Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* (1989). Gebara lives in a barrio outside Recife where her communion with the poor informs her scholarship. She holds the conviction that transformative truths arise from within the experience of suffering. For her, the particular sufferings of women and the earth give rise to a devastating critique of a male-dominated Church's view of reality as a hierarchy based on dualisms.

Whether Gebara has ever read Edward Schillebeeckx is uncertain. The absence of any reference to him in her writings leads me to believe that she

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has not. My interest in placing the two in conversation arises, however, from my experience of reading Gebara and hearing a persistent echo of Schillebeeckx. At times, I found myself thinking: “Yes, Schillebeeckx levels that same critique.” Or, “What you are saying here is a clear illustration of Schillebeeckx’s notion of negative contrast experience.”¹ But, the strongest evocations of Schillebeeckx I found in Gebara’s work were actually my own experiences of negative contrast. I found myself simultaneously agreeing and disagreeing with an assertion of Gebara’s and wanting to point out that Schillebeeckx asserts the same, but in critical continuity with a tradition that Gebara seems to eschew. The particular theological issue over which this sometimes dissonant convergence crystallized was the theology of the cross.²

Edward Schillebeeckx upholds the cross as the symbol of the “superior, defenseless power of vulnerability.” Ivone Gebara decries the cross as a patriarchal symbol that has contributed to the oppression of the most vulnerable in this world, especially women, the poor, and the earth itself. She critiques the hierarchical system’s use of the cross to manipulate guilt and impose sacrificial behavior in ways that have permeated Christian belief and practice in realms both personal and public. Schillebeeckx, too, critiques the damaging interpretations of the cross that have too often prevailed in Christian life, and he warns against naïve proclamation of the cross’s reconciling power without reference to real human experience.

Both Schillebeeckx and Gebara are grounded in phenomenological method, and both espouse a narrative theology that privileges the experience of suffering. Schillebeeckx’s work suggests the path Gebara so concretely forges. The places where the two of them diverge reflect the sometimes radical divergence from what the Church names “Tradition” expressed by modern feminist theologians and those in economically challenged countries. For some, this constitutes an irreconcilable crisis. It is timely, therefore, to analyze the ways in which Schillebeeckx’s theology

¹ “Negative contrast experience” in Schillebeeckx’s theology refers to those experiences of evil and suffering that evoke protest and transformative action. Such experiences are also the occasion for imaging and articulating a vision of salvation in counterpoint to what should not be. See Edward Schillebeeckx, “Church, Magisterium, and Politics,” in *God the Future of Man*, trans. N. D. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968) 155–56.

² Elizabeth Dreyer reflects upon the infrequency of discussion of the cross in the recent past. She posits possible reasons, including correction of an overemphasis on the theory of atonement. On the other hand, she notes renewed interest in the cross in certain contexts, especially due to increased awareness of global suffering, the “turn to the particular,” and interest in the “underside of history.” She cautions that we need also to “turn to the particular” in the details of the past that nuance and illumine historical understanding (“Introduction,” in *The Cross in Christian Tradition*, ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer [New York: Paulist, 2000] 6–7).

might contribute both to the advancement and constructive critique of emerging voices such as Gebara's. To that end, my article explores areas of consonance and contrast in the respective theologies of Schillebeeckx and Gebara in relationship to the symbol of the cross.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD AS NARRATIVE SOURCE

Schillebeeckx and Gebara share a formative philosophical background in phenomenology. In its simplest terms, "phenomenology" may be defined as "the setting forth and articulation of what shows itself."³ The field of phenomenology is concerned with an exploration of the intentionality of consciousness and a description of phenomena as they give themselves, free from cultural, ontological, and philosophical bias. The starting point of knowledge, in other words, is the givenness of experience.

Edward Schillebeeckx

In 1937, Schillebeeckx began his philosophical study under Dominic DePetter, with whom he studied the phenomenology of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger from a Thomistic perspective. In particular, Schillebeeckx was permanently influenced by the thought of Merleau-Ponty. Here, he developed his enduring critique of the Cartesian dualism that dominated much of the modern philosophical tradition. The phenomenological centrality of the body in perceiving and expressing reality is pre-eminently incarnational. This sensory apprehension of reality echoed, for Schillebeeckx, the Thomistic construct of human participation in/experience of the divinely created world. In those formative years, Schillebeeckx devoted himself to a critique of the conceptualism that characterized philosophical and theological endeavors. In contrast, as Erik Borgman points out: "Schillebeeckx described philosophy as reflection on an intuitive lived contact with reality and with the divine in it."⁴

Ivone Gebara

Ivone Gebara's phenomenological method is transparent in her writing. Indeed, she makes it so, repeatedly articulating her methodology and describing how it shapes theological conclusions at odds with patriarchy. Though she notes that she draws freely from the insights of Husserl, Ricoeur, and others, she emphasizes that it is not her intention to develop

³ F. J. Crosson, "Phenomenology," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1967) vol. 11, 256–60, at 256–57.

⁴ Erik Borgman, *Edward Schillebeeckx: A Theologian in His History*, Volume I: *A Catholic Theology of Culture (1914–1965)* trans. John Bowden (New York: Continuum, 2003) 45.

a systematic phenomenology as they have. Here I detect echoes of Schillebeeckx's assertions that he is not interested in developing "a system." In particular, Schillebeeckx and Gebara both acknowledge the pervasive influence of Paul Ricoeur on the hermeneutical development of their work. What in Schillebeeckx's theology has been called an "experience-centered, relational ontology" is present in Gebara's work with an intentionally ecofeminist focus.

Gebara devotes the first chapter of *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* to elaborating an ecofeminist epistemology. Here she contextualizes her own phenomenological approach to reality with an analysis of the "Hierarchical, Anthropocentric, and Androcentric Bias of Patriarchal Epistemology." She notes that these biases do not necessarily mean that traditional philosophies of knowing are false, but rather that they have been all too limited: "They refer to the experience of a part of humanity as though it were the experience of all."⁵ If experience is the locus of theology and, indeed, of all knowledge, then what is known and proclaimed as truth must begin with a broader and more diverse experiential base. Gebara expresses the alienation of women and the poor when she asserts, ". . . what we call theological truths are experiences some people have had and have tried to express within their own cultural settings. We repeat them as if they were ours, but often we do so without making them our own."⁶ In *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, she states the case more forcefully: "Knowledge that scorns the contribution of women is not only limited and partial, it is an exclusionary knowledge."⁷ Patriarchal attempts at inclusion have subsumed the experience of women and people of diverse cultures under the cloak of Western male consciousness. This amounts to genuine oppression that is experienced as diminishment, negation, silencing, and the suffering of violence. The antidote, Gebara indicates, is obvious by contrast: "It is now necessary to stress an inclusion that will reveal the other, that will unveil it and make it appear in its own original form and with proper dignity."⁸

Gebara enacts that process of inclusion in *Out of the Depths*. Articulating the suitability of phenomenology to a feminist approach to the subject of evil, she notes: "A phenomenology must rely on the data of concrete existence, on things that appear in the field of our experience."⁹ To grasp the ambiguity and the complexity of the problem of evil, it is necessary to work at understanding the particular. Gebara states, "My work takes its

⁵ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, trans. David Molineaux (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 25.

⁶ *Ibid.* 49.

⁷ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, trans. Ann Patrick Ware (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2002) 73.

⁸ *Ibid.* 72.

⁹ *Ibid.* 14.

direction from words about particular lives, that is, women's lives. . . [it is] an attempt to explore women's experiences, especially the harmful ones."¹⁰ Asserting the power of personal witness and identifying the narrative act *as* interpretation, Gebara draws upon the texts and lives of distinct women experiencing distinct forms of evil in situations related to ownership, power, value, and skin color. Even in those situations where evil and suffering continue, Gebara affirms that the act of relating the experience itself functions as the beginning of liberation or salvation from suffering's grasp. Here, it seems, she both concretizes and develops the power of story that Schillebeeckx also asserts.

THE ROLE OF SUFFERING AND THE SYMBOL OF THE CROSS

If experience is the locus of theology, the experience of suffering is, for Schillebeeckx and Gebara, theology's privileged locus. The theology of Schillebeeckx, in fact, unfolds in response to the concrete reality of suffering, such that suffering shapes both the content and the methodology of his corpus. His technique of articulating a theology of salvation in counterpoint to situations of evil and suffering, known as negative contrast experience, finds a parallel in Gebara's method. That is the logical outcome of each one's phenomenological approach from within a unique historical and cultural situatedness.

Schillebeeckx's situatedness spanned two World Wars, the ferment leading up to and following the Second Vatican Council, and the related political and religious conflicts in Europe. From his earliest beginnings, he struggled to articulate a theology of culture that overcame the dualisms of a tradition to which he nevertheless sought to be faithful. Ivone Gebara's situatedness encompasses the ongoing instability and poverty of Latin America, her own coming-of-age as a woman theologian in relation to the very particular sufferings of poor women of her native Brazil, and her own conflicts with political and ecclesiastical authorities. As experiencing subjects themselves, Schillebeeckx and Gebara each participate in the subjectivity of the suffering others whose experiences ground their theology.

The articulation of suffering and salvation in relation to the Christian symbol of the cross is the place of tension upon which we now wish to focus. Schillebeeckx stands squarely within the Christian tradition in his reflections upon the cross, though he is vehement in correcting those distortions of the tradition that have produced cults of suffering or excessively atonement-centered spiritualities.¹¹ Gebara, on the other hand, based on

¹⁰ Ibid. 13.

¹¹ Schillebeeckx notes how the notion of Jesus as the prototype for the suffering masses of the Middle Ages, though authentic, led the Christian interpretation of

what she has experienced and witnessed in the lives of oppressed women, sees these cults, excesses, and the guilt associated with them, as part and parcel of the tradition. She calls for a revolution in symbolism, beginning with the symbol of the cross. I propose to engage the category of "obedience" as the lens through which to analyze how the symbol of the cross functions respectively for Schillebeeckx and for Gebara.

"Obedience" in Schillebeeckx's Theology of the Cross

Schillebeeckx insists that the symbol of the cross never be removed from the entire triptych of the Paschal Mystery. He goes so far as to say that, taken alone as an isolated focus on Jesus' suffering and death, the cross loses its critical and productive power. The cross gains its meaning from the life in which Jesus both preached and embodied the reign of God, a life lived in obedience to God unto and through death on the cross, culminating in the Resurrection. Now, Schillebeeckx's understanding of "obedience" is what concerns us here. For him, "obedience" is the relationship of trust, of loving fidelity and communion that exists between Jesus and the One he calls "Abba." In fact, Schillebeeckx's interpretation of the cross can only be understood in conjunction with the centrality of Jesus' "Abba experience." Jesus' relationship with God is the defining experience of his life, the ground of his being and the source of his mission. That mission is the proclamation of the reign of justice and love, the fulfillment of the eschatological promise. It is precisely here that Jesus' concrete particularity finds its force and meaning. And it is here that we come to understand Schillebeeckx's insistence that God is the positive ground and horizon of all negative experiences of suffering. In Jesus, we encounter a God "bent on humanity." Jesus' manner of living and relating made tangible the message he proclaimed. In particular, the characteristic scenes of Jesus at table reflect the relational ground of his being in, with, and for God . . . a God who is for humanity. Schillebeeckx suggests that there is no possible ground in the human history of disaster for the assurance of salvation that Jesus imparts; there is no basis for the hope of a future that he proclaims—except in the experience of contrast which Jesus knows in the depths of his own being-in-relationship with God. Jesus thus "identifies himself in person

suffering into "a phase in which the symbol of the cross becomes a disguised legitimation of social abuses, albeit to begin with still unconsciously. . . . 'Suffering in itself', no longer suffering through and for others, took on a mystical and positive significance . . . instead of having a critical power. . . ." *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1980; orig. Dutch, 1977) 699.

with the cause of God as that also of humanity, and with the cause of humanity as God's cause."¹²

Thus, the rejection of Jesus' message and ministry affected the decisive turning point of his life. The unutterable depth of his experience of the world's resistance lay in the union of his life and purpose with God. His deepest core was shaken by reality's defeat, not of his plans, but of God's plan, a plan for humanity's wholeness and well-being. This experience of the defeat of God's plan in him was the beginning of his experience of death, and his sustained trust in God in the face of all resistance was the beginning of his experience of Resurrection and the vindication of God's plan. It is in the face of the world's negativity that we see and experience the power of Jesus' unbroken trust in God. This inviolable thread of communion with God standing in resistance to the evil of the world is the heart of Christian faith. This, for Schillebeeckx, is what Resurrection faith proclaims.

In the context of Resurrection, the cross becomes a symbol of obedience unto life. Jesus' lived manifestation of God's "pure positivity" not only remained intact, but achieved its greatest intensity during the crucifixion experience. In sharing the lot of the poor and the outcast who were his chosen companions, he opened himself to the suffering he sought to alleviate. "Like God, Jesus preferred to identify himself with the outcast and the rejected, the 'unholy', so that he himself ultimately became the Rejected, the Outcast."¹³ Jesus' unbroken communion with God empowered the preaching that challenged structures of evil and oppression and thus brought him to the cross. It is Jesus' love to the point of death, rather than death itself, which is salvific. This is the relational meaning of obedience in Schillebeeckx's understanding of the cross. And this is why Schillebeeckx says, "we are not redeemed thanks to the death of Jesus, but despite it."¹⁴

"Obedience" in Gebara's Theology of the Cross

Ivone Gebara locates obedience at the center of her discussion of religious symbols. While acknowledging that religious symbols are essential in the life of faith, she points out the inescapable maleness of Christianity's primary anthropological symbols. We are called to "be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect," and to "imitate the life of Jesus and the apostles."¹⁵ She reiterates Dorothee Soelle's assertion that "the cardinal virtue in any

¹² Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskyns (New York: Crossroad, 1979; orig. Dutch, 1974) 269.

¹³ Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1985) 2.

¹⁴ Schillebeeckx, *Christ 729*.

¹⁵ Gebara, *Out of the Depths* 105.

patriarchal religion is obedience.” And, she notes, the hierarchy that enforces the culture of obedience is primarily a sexual one, albeit crisscrossed by other hierarchies.¹⁶ Such authoritarian religion is typically imbued with a pessimistic vision of the human person, and an emphasis on God’s power that functions to displace God’s tenderness and love.

According to Gebara, the culture of obedience, which functions differently for women than it does for men, has been built up around an instrument of punishment that has become a symbol of sorrow. The cross, an instrument of torture in the Roman Empire,¹⁷ is a symbol that today brings together different evils or sufferings. The symbol of the cross in life always signifies a burden, a weight endured, something negative, something not chosen. At the same time, “the cross as an object or symbol of worship also means a call to restored life, a call to redemption and salvation.”¹⁸ While Gebara acknowledges this positive dimension of the symbol of the cross, she seems unconvinced that it actually functions this way for women in the contemporary world. Despite the ways some theologians have confronted the symbol’s contradictions through the centuries, Gebara finds that its primary function today is still negative and debilitating. Delineating the historical instances in which the symbol of salvation functioned rather as a symbol of domination, notoriously in Latin America, Gebara critiques the Christian tradition for continuing to uphold the cross without “introducing a change of meaning.” Finally, and most damagingly, “Jesus’ suffering on the cross has often served as an excuse for justifying the misery imposed on the poor and especially on women.”¹⁹

In her evaluation of the function of obedience, Gebara notes “submission to male authority has been presented as a duty based on obedience to Jesus, who was obedient to his Father even to death and to death on the

¹⁶ The reference is to Dorothee Soelle, “Fatherhood, Power, and Barbarism,” in *The Window of Vulnerability: A Political Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), quoted in *Out of the Depths* 105.

¹⁷ Regarding the origins of crucifixion, Martin Hengel notes that, while Persia is commonly cited, ancient sources show that “crucifixion was regarded as a mode of execution used by barbarian peoples generally, including the Indians, the Assyrians, the Scythians, and the Taurans. It was even used by the Celts . . . and later by the Germani and the Britanni, who may well have taken it over from the Romans . . . Finally, it was employed by the Numidians and especially by the Carthaginians, who may be the people from whom the Romans learnt it. Crucifixion was not originally a typically Greek penalty; however, the Greeks did have related forms of execution and partially took over crucifixion. Both Greek and Roman historians were fond of stressing barbarian crucifixions, and playing down their own use of this form of execution.” Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, trans. John Bowden, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 22–23.

¹⁸ Gebara, *Out of the Depths* 112.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 113.

cross. [Women's] sacrifice finds its value there and in the case of disobedience legitimizes their guilt. Disobedience is flouting the authority of God and his representatives, and disobedience is subject to punishment."²⁰ And, among poor women, the cross is "not just the suffering of their daily lives in poverty but also their condition as women. Christianity taught them to bear and even welcome their cross rather than to look for ways to be rid of it."²¹ While conducting workshops for poor women in barrios of Brazil, Gebara heard over and over again that "women's cross was heavier than men's, and that there were times in their lives when they wished they were men."²²

The reality of women's experience that Gebara witnesses leads her to describe the symbol of the cross as fate:²³

The cross as fate, like the evil of being female, has not engaged theologians. . . . The issue is to recognize that the salvation experienced by Jesus, as well as our own salvation, does not occur through the cross imposed by an imperial power but through promoting relationships of justice, respect, and tenderness among human beings. In this way we know that the cross is temporarily laid aside, even as we know that it will reappear again in other forms.²⁴

It is, I believe, this interpretation of the cross as fate that defines Gebara's critique of its centrality as a Christian symbol and shapes her analysis of obedience as an oppressive function within a relationship of male dominance. It is a troubling image, and presents, I think, the pivotal challenge in our attempt to "reconcile" the cross in the respective theologies of Schillebeecx and Gebara.

CONSONANCE AND CONTRAST

Schillebeecx's definition of "obedience" as relationship—the trusting and free communion between Jesus and the one he called "Abba"—is ultimately and ideally correct. Jesus' embrace of the cross as the cost of embracing life—the Divine life into which he invited his companions—is the only notion of obedience—or of the cross—that can have anything to do with salvation. However, Gebara's definition of obedience as an instrument of patriarchal oppression is, unfortunately, all too often the operative one in the Church, past and present. Her analysis of the way the cross has

²⁰ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ I believe that what Gebara means by "the cross as fate" has engaged Schillebeecx under the rubric of passive contrast experience. See Kathleen A. McManus, O.P., *Unbroken Communion: The Place and Meaning of Suffering in the Theology of Edward Schillebeecx* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003) 100–102.

²⁴ Gebara, *Out of the Depths* 113.

²¹ Ibid.

been wielded evokes an admission that it remains in many places the instrument of torture that it was prior to becoming a Christian symbol. To speak of the cross as fate is to speak of the cross imposed. It is to speak of evil born and suffering succumbed to without choice, without dignity, without even the possibility of resistance. Gebara speaks of the ways the cross was used to colonize Latin America. She speaks also of the colonization of women's bodies, and notes the role of Christian ideology and obedience in that occupation through the dimensions of time and space: "The worst part of colonization is losing self-confidence and one's cultural values, placing oneself in the hands of the other in a submissive and uncritical manner. It is even worse to forget one is colonized and to accept things as they are as fate or the nature of life as predetermined by a mysterious and divine will."²⁵

In her desire for a revolution in symbolism, Gebara raises the question of whether we should give up the cross as the supreme symbol of Christianity. She clearly would like to, but acknowledges the impossibility of removing what is so indelibly ingrained in Christian tradition and experience. While tempted to say "yes," Gebara acknowledges instead the reality of impasse. She concludes that she would rather say "yes" and "no" "in order to try and maintain the tension between what we want and what is possible. . . . To escape this impasse with finesse we need to help each other to see not only the results of our behavior, but also the way to make our most profound beliefs explicit. This is a matter of healing and educating our relationships."²⁶

Gebara's analysis indicates that one aspect of this reeducation is the reeducation of our relationship to the cross itself. What she decries is the universality of Jesus' cross, the cross of a male martyr dying for a cause. This exclusivity legitimates the dominant symbol of heroic male suffering in public, to the diminishment of the value of female suffering, so often in private, so characteristically without heroism, and tragically often for no good cause. Gebara would prefer to speak of multiple crosses and multiple salvations. If we cannot eliminate the cross as a supreme symbol, then we need to speak in the plural, so that the cross of Jesus becomes one among many. "Crosses are always present, but different creative forms of redemption are present, too."²⁷ If there is anything in the symbol of Jesus' cross that women can relate to, it is the call for salvation that receives no answer—no answer except the solidarity of those who remain with him. "His cross does not stand alone. The surrounding community shouts 'no' to the

²⁵ Gebara, "Ecofeminism," in *Ecofeminism and Globalization: Exploring Culture, Context, and Religion*, ed. Heather Eaton and Lois Ann Lorentzen (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003) 170.

²⁶ Gebara, *Out of the Depths* 120. ²⁷ *Ibid.* 115.

crucifixion. . . There are followers. . . who declare by their solidarity that death does not have the last word."²⁸

DEATH DOES NOT HAVE THE LAST WORD

When the requisite “no” to evil and suffering is without effect, when the cry for salvation here and now is not answered, the relational praxis of human solidarity becomes the sign of God’s presence and the down payment on hope’s future fulfillment. Gebara’s statement echoes Edward Schillebeeckx’s oft-repeated assertion that evil and suffering do not have the last word. Where human beings fight evil and injustice and remain in hopeful solidarity with one another, they en flesh the image of the God who remains, holding the sufferer’s hand—as God remained through Jesus’ felt abandonment upon the cross. Schillebeeckx affirms that, wherever human beings remain in solidarity with one another, God is present.²⁹ Gebara, too, affirms this. The distinction I see between the two on this point, however, is this: Schillebeeckx firmly and pervasively maintains that the God who dwells *in* the world is revealed in creation; the God who relates intimately to men and women also dwells beyond this world. Schillebeeckx upholds God as the power of pure positivity, often known in the dialectic of the negative contrast experience of suffering. Gebara, on the other hand, projects the ambiguous mix of suffering and joy, good and evil, love and degradation, into the being and substance of God. Her faithfulness to the phenomenological method sees in the materiality of the body’s experience-in-the-world, indeed in the materiality of the Sacred Body of creation itself, a blueprint of Divine Life. The problem with this blueprint, it seems to me, is that it limits God to the conditions of human experience and human knowing in the created world.

For Schillebeeckx, the cross testifies to the power of evil within the limits of this world. On the cross, in the finite human flesh of Jesus, God experiences vulnerability and defenselessness. And, it is in and through that vulnerability that God’s “superior power” breaks into the world, making death itself a path to life—and so, robbing death of its final power. Gebara’s theology resonates with what Schillebeeckx calls the “superior power of defenseless vulnerability.” That, it seems, is precisely what she means when she speaks of the cross mixed with resurrection in the ordinary

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Precisely at the place where human existence is overwhelmed by suffering, Schillebeeckx evokes the mysticism of the cross as judgment on our own views of what it means to be human and what it means to be God. He asserts that “salvation can also be achieved in suffering and in an unjust execution” (*Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden [New York: Crossroad, 1990] 126). For further analysis of Schillebeeckx on this point, see *Unbroken Communion* 111–12.

experiences of daily life. Her discussion of “daily resurrections” includes potent images of suffering mixed with solidarity. In personal and collective human experience, “the cross and resurrection coexist in the same body; in the same body they intermix and form one element.”³⁰ Schillebeeckx, too, affirms fragments of salvation mixed with suffering in daily life.³¹ With Gebara, he celebrates the saving, creative power of a meal shared, a tender gesture, a bunch of flowers.³²

There are, indeed, areas of consonance and contrast in the theologies of Schillebeeckx and Gebara. Perhaps the fundamental contrast lies in the distinct images of God that I have noted. These distinct images have profound implications for our understanding of Jesus whose identity is defined in relationship to God, and therefore for our understanding of the cross. The differences between Schillebeeckx’s classical, yet relational image of God, and Gebara’s seeming identification of God with creation itself determine the contrast in their theologies of the cross. Schillebeeckx and Gebara share in common, however, a theological anthropology that provides trajectories for a potential resolution. In spite of my critical evaluation of Gebara’s theology of the cross and the image of God that seems to inform it, I am caught by her occasional acknowledgment of the tension between the already and the not-yet, her nod to something like an eschatological fulfillment beyond this world. The possibility is a faint and elusive suggestion in her writing, but it is perceptible.³³ Perhaps the contrast between her and Schillebeeckx is simply that the latter is assertive about the reality of the eschatological promise. For Schillebeeckx, that promise is the prior ground of creation. It is the absolute given on the basis of which we experience evil and suffering in this world. Because we live from that ground, we resist evil and hope for salvation. What we hope for is a reality already given in God, though not yet enfleshed fully in our experience.³⁴ Gebara eschews the metaphysical base that Schillebeeckx, despite his phe-

³⁰ Gebara, *Out of the Depths* 114.

³¹ “Essentially . . . we experience redemption and liberation only in finite fragments, in a history which *stands open* towards eschatological consummation: ‘In hope we are redeemed’ (Rom. 8.24)” (Schillebeeckx, *Christ* 819).

³² Schillebeeckx speaks of the importance of human gestures of love as “grace-made-visible” even in his early writings. See *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, trans. Paul Barrett (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963; orig. Dutch, 1959) 77.

³³ Though her predominant emphasis is on daily salvations in life’s most elemental experiences, Gebara observes that “there is always a dialectic to be maintained between micro- and macro salvation, between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’” (*Out of the Depths* 125).

³⁴ Schillebeeckx describes the mystical experience of God, whether in the darkness of extreme negativity or in joyful experiences, as “mediated immediacy.” See *Christ* 814–17.

nomenological method, retains. But she takes Schillebeeckx's emphasis on lived, historical experience seriously. She probes the ambiguity of human experience that Schillebeeckx himself asserts. And she insists that theologians take with utter seriousness what Schillebeeckx also asserts, that God wills our healing, wholeness, and flourishing now. By articulating this insistence from within the situatedness of women's experience, especially poor women in Latin America, Gebara carries significant strands of Schillebeeckx's theology into the future. Despite key theological differences, profound aspects of Gebara's work enfold the unfolding of intuitions present in Schillebeeckx's project.