



## 61. Our Type of Asceticism

*The following text certainly merits to be read and meditated on a number of times. In keeping with our subject, it deals with our typical asceticism in comparison with and contradistinction to the austere asceticism of the tradition of the Orders. In the way it is presented, however, it clearly shows the larger context from which Fr Kentenich arrived at his final conclusions about Schoenstatt's asceticism.*

*To start with, it highlights the image of the new person, who does everything wholeheartedly, and who is guided by the aim of "the proclamation of the inner life", a concept coined by Fr Kentenich as early as 1919 (Cf. Text 15).*

*It is clear – even though the talk was given to priests – that Schoenstatt's spirituality contains a lay asceticism. It is marked by everyday sanctity that strives to do "ordinary things extraordinarily well", and is oriented to valuing and using all created things correctly, while also making us independent of them.*

*Finally, the understanding of asceticism presented here was spoken at a time when the usual processes of everyday life were becoming increasingly burdensome and difficult: The demands at work were constantly increasing, placing people under more and more pressure. The organism of the family was being increasingly burdened and even threatened with dissolution. The human personality was becoming ever more differentiated, and was exposed to ever expanding possibilities and stress. So people were becoming far more sensitive and touchy than in the past, and consequently found it increasingly difficult to find themselves, to become themselves, and to mature. All this is included when Fr Kentenich speaks of the cross of our work, the cross of the family, and the cross of the personality – in very truth a great challenge to our present and coming eras.*

*The dangers inherent in affirming what is natural, and emphasising greater freedom in the face of increasing possibilities, and in a person's decisions, are clearly indicated. Fr Kentenich was always concerned with the question of the interplay of bonding and detachment, of transference and transmission for the individual and the community. That is our typical asceticism!*

*The text presented here is the whole of the last talk given during a congress for priests from 20-22 January 1941 on the subject: Growth into the Higher Levels of Prayer,<sup>182</sup> which is the title under which this congress was published. The tenth and final conference starts on p. 137.*

## [1. The degree of our inner life]

1.1 When we think of the preparation for the grace of mystical contemplation, and remind ourselves of the point-of-view developed under “practicing active living with God”, we could perhaps try not only to look up to God very often, not just in what he effects, but also to contemplate with faith that he is mysteriously living within us. When the light of contemplation, this blissful and consuming light, breaks in one day, it will show us the Triune God within us. From this follows that we may prepare ourselves by way of the usual spiritual exercises for what God may one day give us in more profound measure. So we have to remind ourselves thoughtfully of what *Everyday Sanctity* tells us: **We are a little church of the Blessed Trinity; we are not just dedicated to the Trinity, the Blessed Trinity also dwells within us. I am a temple of God, the Triune.**<sup>183</sup>

1.2 **Make demands on myself and those entrusted to my care!** I have to appropriate the full force and seriousness of sound, ancient asceticism. I have seriously to resolve to make demands on myself. Before God gives us the grace of contemplation, he seriously requires us to take the usual graces very seriously, but this does not mean that we have to co-operate with him compulsively. The law of gravity too easily tempts us to sink into our comfort zone, and we quickly rationalise it by talking about the organic union of nature and grace. We confuse spontaneous, primitive behaviour with natural and enlightened action as soon as we are satisfied with eating and drinking, and being a primitive society. This primitive society doesn't lead us onwards, it doesn't lead beyond itself. A sound family of men that wants to achieve something is also an austere community.

A few years ago we coined the austere saying: The family table is not a table for getting drunk, or a table for smoking, or a table for pleasure. We may enjoy these things in moderation. We may rest. But then we must again move on. The family table is a table of sacrifice; it serves to ennoble our temperament. These things have disappeared to some extent from the Family. We have to return to them with moderation. It is necessary to make people thoroughly moral. It doesn't do us any harm if we return to things that made us enthusiastic when we were young. However, in the process we may not confuse what is natural with what is primitively spontaneous. Only the sound and thoroughly spiritual person can be profoundly divinised. Unless from time to time we allow a certain austerity to break through, we won't manage. Without an austere and serious life we simply won't progress. Augustine said something like this: Do what you can, and pray for what you can't do! I can learn from my faults by grounding myself in God. How beautiful it is to be a thoroughly divinised person at a time when people don't want to have anything to do with God!

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<sup>182</sup> German title: *Wachstum im höheren Gebetsleben*, Vallendar-Schoenstatt 1977.

<sup>183</sup> M.A. Nailis, *Everyday Sanctity*, Book 1, p.14ff. (Johannesburg); p. 18, 23-25 (Waukesha).

1.3 When we have crowned the Blessed Mother, she must first of all be the Queen of our own heart. We crown her on behalf of our parish, but we seldom crown her with corresponding fervour in our own, inner realm **The Blessed Mother has to become the Queen of my own heart: My Queen, my Mother!**

I could well imagine that this has awakened the feeling here or there: Doesn't that ask too much of us? Doesn't that contradict our nature? We want, after all, to be people whose nature is perfected. My answer to this is: But the perfection of nature doesn't mean becoming primitive.

## [2. The form of our inner life]

We asked about the degree of our inner life, now we have also to ask about the form of our inner life, and our everyday life. What difficulties do I mean? Doesn't our system of the harmonious connection of nature and grace require us to leave as much scope as possible, and cultivate austerity only slightly, while remaining as strongly united as possible, but making life as comfortable as possible? Karl Adam<sup>184</sup> wrote an article entitled, "Remain true to the earth!" If we want to remain true to the earth, how are we to harmonise it with also remaining true to heaven?

How can we describe our way of decontaminating our nature, making it thoroughly moral and divine?

2.1 We don't demand greater outward strictness of the community.

Our way doesn't ask us to turn away from the world in a radical sense. If we made the gesture of outward strictness, we could attract many people. We don't want to use this means. Our greatness is at the same time our weakness. The people of today bow down in submission to outward austerity and strength, to hurting themselves massively and physically.

When I returned from a visit to the Trappists in Mariawald, what was my impression of them? To start with, I was impressed by their austerity and faithfulness. In the outward way of life of the Trappists we obviously find the opposite to what we regard as our ideal in Schoenstatt. This exceedingly austere, outward strictness. An old Father, he was 71, told me: If they commit a fault, even a tiny one, the Abbot gives them the penance to kneel down before each confrère and kiss his feet. On certain days incarceration is foreseen, as well as scourging. Except for the superiors, no one is allowed to speak. Day and night they wear their habit, they even have to sleep in it.

What have we to say about this austerity? "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence."<sup>185</sup> There is no doubt that this is true. In the Family we don't have this form of austerity, we reject it for the community as a whole. As a community we don't want to have vows, but each one can do this privately.

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<sup>184</sup> Karl Adam (1876-1966) was Professor of Catholic Dogma at Tubingen from 1919-49. In this time he was known all over the world as one of the most prominent theologians, especially because of his books on Christ, and his new approach to a theology of the Church.

<sup>185</sup> Cf. Mt 11,12.

Now the first examination of conscience: Can we become holy without sacrifice, without austerity? No! If we look at and examine the life of the medieval Orders with an open mind, since they still exist today, we don't want to close our eyes to what is valuable. If, to start with, this impresses us, we nevertheless don't want to adopt this way of life. However, we have to ask ourselves all the more seriously: Where do we find austerity with us?

At that time I found three answers. Let me repeat them and try to apply them.

2.2 Our austerity consists in **carrying a threefold cross**. We have to try to do this in every respect, otherwise we will be living from being intoxicated with ourselves and deceiving ourselves. *In cruce salus!*<sup>186</sup> *Crux stat, dum volvitur orbis!*<sup>187</sup> There

are three forms of cross:

the cross at work,

the cross of family life,

the cross of our personality.

2.3 Introduction: God determines the nature of a community through the needs of the times, through tasks for the times, and the situation of the times.

How did the Trappists come into existence at that time? They are a branch of the Benedictine Order. The Benedictines had suffered a great loss of identity, especially among the Cluny Benedictines. So a counterbalance came into existence. People said: We have to be austere.

Essentially the Benedictine way is our way: the union of nature and grace. Our way includes the danger of softness and worldliness. Austerity includes the danger of becoming soulless and mechanical. The Trappists came into existence in response to their times. They had vitality, because they still exist today.

What are the needs of our times today?

Our times have become

firstly, godless,

secondly, deprived of the family,

thirdly, impersonal.

From this we can understand the fundamental tone of our Family. Since the world is uprooted and deprived of the family, we feel urged to create a family spirit. However, we may not confuse a sound family spirit with a primitive family spirit. Our family spirit has to be enlightened, strong and austere. Sitting together constantly isn't what creates a family. Here and there it can be a loose community, but that cannot be the essential task of a community of men who want to conquer the world.

We have to emphasise the distinctive personality to an enormous extent.

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<sup>186</sup> In the Cross is salvation.

<sup>187</sup> Literally: The Cross stands while the globe revolves. That is to say, the Cross remains firm even in the chaos of the times.

I could now ask myself: But didn't the Trappists also have these crosses, and besides these three crosses, didn't they also carry the cross of severe penitential exercises? Yes, that is true on the whole. The cross of their work and the cross of their personality is also their cross. The cross of family life is much heavier with them, because they have a *vita communis perfectissima*.<sup>188</sup>

However, human strength is limited. Since we do not invest our forces in outward austerity, we have to invest them all the more in carrying these three crosses heroically. Otherwise something wishy-washy will result.

## **[2.4 A detailed description of these three crosses]**

### **2.4.1 The cross of our work**

We are a distinctively apostolic Family. All my vitality is devoted to the apostolate, whether I am in the mood for it or not, whether I have success or not, whether my nature is tired or not. If I, as a Schoenstatt Priest, want to become holy, I have to be an apostolic priest *per eminentiam*.<sup>189</sup> I may not be governed by ease and comfort.

In my personal needs, everything has to be adjusted to the apostolate. What a tremendous example Ignatius is in this regard! He told his students: Study hard, that is your sacrifice! If I notice that studying serves the apostolate, I must be austere and set myself to study. It could be easier to scourge myself than to study hard. Profound austerity has to be added. Without austerity there is no success. The Novice Master of the Trappists told me that with them relatively the same number of souls end up with a profound inner life as those outside. That is the voice of practical life. So the way of life as such doesn't do it. Love, combined with strictness, does. However, the strictness doesn't have to be exactly the same strictness as practiced by the Trappists, otherwise the Trappists would have to have many more saints. All my strength is devoted to the apostolate!

When there are difficulties in the apostolate, if I see that God requires it through circumstances, then I simply get on with it.

However, the cross of our work is also to be found in working together with our confrères in the apostolate. I have to carry this cross. If I don't carry it, but scourge myself instead, it would be wrong. I have to hang on the cross of my calling.

Or my relationship to my housekeeper is either too close, or the opposite. I want to have a hard time. I want to see the road leading upwards strewn with thorns. That is the austerity we all have to accept.

### **2.4.2 The cross of family life**

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<sup>188</sup> An absolutely complete community life, that is, they are never on their own.

<sup>189</sup> To an eminent degree or in a distinctive way.

In what does our cross of family life consist? If we see ourselves as a Family, the cross of family life consists in our dependence on the leaders of our Family. That is a cross that is always present when we are dependent on superiors. Besides this, our fraternal relationship with one another: The community doesn't always have something on offer, so I want to stay away. No, I carry the cross! Or, think of our system of controls.<sup>190</sup> That is our family cross.

### 2.4.3 In addition, there is the cross of our personality

We want to help to create distinctive personalities. That is our most urgent task today.

#### 2.4.3.1 The cross of the organism

The idea of the organism sounds easy, but it is very difficult to apply it correctly! There is no perfection of nature without the sacrifice of nature. So must I now strive to perfect my nature or to sacrifice it? I have to rely on myself – so which form of mortification do I have to apply? For some this cross is so heavy that I can say: Only a very few see the idea of the organism correctly in theory, and far fewer can apply it in practice.

#### 2.4.3.2 The cross of deciding

Our Family has been built up in such a way that we are left free to decide about countless things. Look at how many decisions I have to make! That is a cross. We have to see to it that a decision means being free from something and free for something. The education to be able to decide soundly, and to decide willingly – not just the will to carry something through – in the way God requires through circumstances, is a cross.

#### 2.4.3.3 The cross of helplessness

How deeply we experience this! We have to bear with our weaknesses and accept them, and nevertheless climb upwards into God's heart.

#### 2.4.3.4 The cross of loneliness

We should really pause here for a longer time. A certain loneliness is part and parcel of a vocation to the priesthood. So many of us fall away from the ideal of the priesthood because we cannot live soundly and austere on our own. We cannot live our celibacy unless we can call a certain austere loneliness our own.

How can we describe this loneliness? It isn't meant to be isolation. A person who grows into God is always lonely on this earth. The lonely person is always the most fruitful person. Such people have grown into another world, they come from the next world. Loneliness is not isolation. The isolated person is a cripple. The lonely person is the person who is "two-gether"<sup>191</sup> with God, a strong personality that has an uplifting effect on others. How heavy the cross of loneliness can

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<sup>190</sup> The reference here is to the written control of our spiritual daily order, or schedule, and the report we give to the superiors, the confessor, or the group leader.

<sup>191</sup> *zweisam*.

become, so that we hang heroically on this cross!

### 3. We try to combine renunciation of the world with openness for the world.

3.1 Let us meditate on the Trappist way of life for a moment: Austerity and strong renunciation of the world. For example, music for the Trappists has to be as simple as possible. A monk may not be drawn away from God by what is pleasurable in music. The church and everything else must be as simple as possible; apart from this they never pass beyond the cloister walls. On the one hand, this is impressive, on the other, the danger is great that this renunciation of the world gradually becomes soulless, making people dull, hollow, and brutal, in particular the Brothers. They may never speak!

We not only emphasise renouncing the world, but also openness towards the world. God created things. He has let down created things like a rope. According to the law of organic transference and transmission, we may attach ourselves to things and creatures. We may and should enjoy them. However, we have to be aware that our openness to the world does not become enslavement to the world, or our openness towards people enslavement by people.

3.2 So what must we consciously do to live our lifestyle in contrast to the austerity of renouncing the world?

3.2.1 See to it that our attachment – our attachment to our work and our bonding with people – finds profound expression in **prophetic detachment from our work and people**. We have to hear the prophetic language of things and answer it. Although it is right in theory, it is not easy in practice.

3.2.2 So a second aspect: In the long run we can only apply our prophetic attachment to our work and people if we also cultivate **detachment from things**. Unless we learn to do without things at times, as an obligation, but also to do without things we may allow ourselves, attachment to our work and people will not become a *sursum corda*.<sup>192</sup>

### 4. Overall assessment of our way

4.1 **Firstly**, we have to become aware that we have a unified lifestyle that is utterly Catholic, because it not only speaks of love, but also of austerity. We may become enthusiastic about this lifestyle.

4.2 **Secondly**, should I warn you against this enthusiasm? It isn't necessary. However, I must warn you against something: being too strongly primitive in volition and action. Some of us would have grown far more deeply into God, and worked far more fruitfully, if they had experienced in principle that their primitive way of taking things easy is a weakness.

Does that mean that we shouldn't come together in a relaxed way? That is included. But beyond

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<sup>192</sup> Lift up your hearts! (The priest's invitation before the Preface).

this we may not overlook that what is primitive, instinctive,<sup>193</sup> must become natural, and the natural must become spiritualised. Look up what is written in *Everyday Sanctity* under the concept of primitive or instinctive love, etc.

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<sup>193</sup> *Naturhaft.*