



41. Interpretations of our Times

The following text is an extract from a letter written by Fr Kentenich to Fr Menningen on 9 December 1953. It has been published in: Mach heimisch in ihr Führerfähigkeiten – May leadership abilities find a home in them (Ed. Heinrich Hug), Berg Sion 1997, 42-49.

In this letter our founder tried to answer the question: What must someone do who wants to and has to lead the Family according to God's plan? His answer: "On the one hand, he has to keep his gaze immersed in the souls of its members, on the other hand, [he must also keep abreast] of the spiritual currents of the times." What matters, therefore, is to discover God's wish in souls and in the currents of the times.

The statements made in the text follow three arguments:

- 1. The method to be pursued in order to recognize God's will requires that the voices of the times have to be attentively observed and correctly interpreted. It is possible to learn how to interpret the times to some degree. The letter offers practical advice on how to do this.*
- 2. As far as the content is concerned with interpreting our times, Fr Kentenich's great hermeneutic key has to be upheld, because it will remain valid also in the time to come. For a long time the mentality of "mechanistic thinking" has haunted our culture. It shows in the reduced ability to live soundly and holistically. This is the challenge for pastoral leadership in which education leads consistently from knowledge to love.*

Fr Kentenich had courageously pointed to mechanistic thinking, living and loving in his "Epistola perlonga" of 31 May 1949, in which he answered the findings of the Visitation of the Sisters. It put in a nutshell the founder's analysis of the worldly spirit (Zeitgeist) and the dangers for the Church and Schoenstatt's mission connected with it.

- 3. This challenge of an education that cultivates organic loving was addressed above all to the leaders of the Movement. Fr Menningen is asked to train them and make them more able to carry out such educational work. May all the members of the Pars centralis et mortix, especially the Schoenstatt Fathers, feel particularly addressed by this document.*

In order to discover God's plan for a person and the community, it is insufficient only to look into

the souls of individual members and then channel what is alive in these souls into community life. Seeing the times correctly and interpreting the times correctly has to be added.

There are two main reasons for this.

1. We are very familiar with the first. It discerns God's voice in the voices of the times. Hence the well-known saying: *Vox temporis – vox Dei*.²⁰⁶ Since faith in Divine Providence is the extraordinarily strong and characteristic foundation of our Family, we are particularly dependent on these calls from our times. It is not difficult to show that our Family history in fact always received its original features in this way.

2. The second reason: The interpretation of the times is important for us because the people we are allowed to form do not live in a vacuum, nor do we. They and we are children of our time, so we depend profoundly on both the worldly spirit (*Zeitgeist*) and the positive spirit of our age (*Geist der Zeit*).²⁰⁷ Together with us, these people have been given the great task to overcome the worldly spirit and to assimilate the spirit of the times.

If you now ask me what the currents of the times are like today, and to interpret them, allow me to point out that our vision of the times and our analysis of our times, which we have made on countless occasions in the course of the past forty years, are by far not superseded. They are still valid today in every detail.

That is to say, I am expressly directing you and your co-workers to this vision of our times.

In order at least to offer concrete directives, I would like to point out that still today – as it was years and decades ago – the battle surrounds the different concepts of human beings: the vitalistic, mechanistic, materialistic, liberalistic and existentialist images of the human person. In contrast to them all we envisage the Schoenstatt person and the Schoenstatt community as our ideal.

[Ways to interpret the times]

Instead of discussing this once again, I would prefer to say a few words about the methods we can use in order to learn how to be autonomously and creatively active in this regard.

Whoever has a psychological “nose” has been endowed by nature with a unique sense that is able to truthfully signal, assimilate and digest every fluctuation in the fabric of life, and the feeling for life, in an era, and hand them over to philosophers and theologians for further study. Whoever is endowed in this way needs no special methods or training. He or she will automatically grasp things correctly. What for others is an existential question²⁰⁸ could serve them as a control or improved security check for the soundness of their instincts.

There are two or three main means in this regard that we could apply without particular exertion.

²⁰⁶ The voice of the times is the voice of God.

²⁰⁷ Fr Kentenich gave his own meaning to *Zeitgeist*, for which the dictionary gives a neutral meaning – the spirit of an age – and coined the expression *Geist der Zeit*, giving it his own meaning in opposition to *Zeitgeist*.

²⁰⁸ This probably refers to those people who have to make a conscious effort to tackle such questions, and who have to struggle to acquire such knowledge.

1) The first means consists in the careful and constant application of our preferred method of meditation: reviewing and savouring, previewing and anticipating God's mercies and our personal miseries in our lives.

Once this process – of making our little, personal lives transparent, so that we can see God through them – has become second nature to us, we will not find it difficult to see and interpret the events of the times from a similar perspective.

2) A second means consists in inwardly capturing characteristic concepts that suddenly burst in on the scene like flares, and light up the situation of the times for wide sections of the population.

Allow me for the sake of instruction to mention a few very briefly.

Pinsk²⁰⁹ recently got excited about Fatima, because the Blessed Mother pointed to the Rosary and not the sacrifice of the Mass. For the same reason he shook his head in disbelief at the actions of our present Holy Father.²¹⁰

Isn't that a clear symptom of a definite mindset within the Church? What does it have to tell us, and to what does it draw our attention?

For the informed the answer is easy. They soon discover that everywhere – in this way or that – they concern the head and shrine²¹¹ in their intrinsic value and their symbolic content.

It is not difficult to apply this statement to the complex of questions we have touched upon.

To continue, Bishop Paul Rusch of Innsbruck writes in his book, "*Wachstum im Geiste – Growth in the Spirit*",

"Have you found the great love in your life? The love without which all life is unfulfilled and undeveloped? A woman once asked a priest, 'Father, do you actually love anyone really and truly?' The priest looked down, he wanted to try to remember. He didn't answer. He didn't know."

This process speaks volumes. It suddenly lights up the state of soul of countless religious people – I wouldn't even like to think of the un-religious and irreligious. What is mainly at issue here is the host of extreme intellectuals or philosophical idealists. Our concern here is with the large number of people who are mechanistic in their thinking and living. They struggle obsessively for a time to love God, but then have to reckon with plunging like Icarus²¹² to earth because the sun has burnt their wings. To put it more precisely, it is because they have never learnt to love properly on the

²⁰⁹ Johannes Pinsk was a well-known pastoral theologian. His special subject was the liturgical homily. Cf. his book *Cycle of Christ*, the Mass texts interpreted in the spirit of the liturgy, 1966 (Amazon).

²¹⁰ Pope Pius XII (1939-1958).

²¹¹ *Haupt und Heiligtum*: Two of the three "contact points" that became evident during the founder's exile. Schoenstatters spoke about the 3 Hs: *Herrin, Haupt und Heiligtum*, which gets lost in translation – literally Queen, Head and Shrine (sometimes rendered as Head, Heart and Home, meaning Mary, the Heart; Fr Kentenich, the Head, and the shrine as Home).

²¹² A character in Greek mythology. He and his father Daedalus tried to escape from Crete by means of wings made of wax and feathers. Daedalus warned Icarus not to fly too close to the sun or the sea. Icarus did not heed the warning, the sun melted his wings and he fell into the sea in an area named after him – the Icarian Sea south-west of Samos.

natural level, either to prepare for, or as the effect of, genuine divine love. Here too what is at issue is the organism of bonding, that is to say, the natural and supernatural organism of bonding as such, and their interaction.

To continue: When Duesseldorf ²¹³ proclaims joy as the year's motto for youth, what does that mean? Is there ever such a thing as genuine, invigorating, liberating and satisfying joy, without our being at home in human hearts and God's heart?

I am sure you can understand how I mean this. Our times provide starting points, they shoot up flares by which we can repeatedly see and learn how to interpret the world around us correctly.

Listen to our times and be attentive to the plaintive sounds of countless people who writhe in the deepest loneliness and isolation. Despite all outward prosperity and sharing the same table, they never come to rest and cannot understand how to live in one another, and to climb up to God together.

Think of the army of people who are existentialist in their mindset, think of the fragmentation of the Christian social order. Contrast – I am now speaking the language of St Augustine – the *Corpus Christi Mysticum* and the *Corpus Diaboli*.²¹⁴ Today the *Corpus Diabolicum* destroys every inner bond, every way of living in one another in the depths of our souls, with almost unstoppable power and force, while with an inner vital tendency the *Corpus Christi Mysticum* attempts to highlight the way we can live in, with and for one another in the depths of our souls, and at the same time our inner togetherness on the way to God.

Unfortunately we have to add that the elemental divine impetus is forcefully held back by the leaders. It is forced into negative denial, superficiality, materialism and isolation, and in this way becomes the destructive source of a chaotic state in human hearts and society. Think of all that I said in the past when I used the harsh expression of preparing the way for a Bolshevistic spirituality, or atomic bomb, in God's kingdom.

Please don't forget that love is not primarily and directly a matter for cold rationality, or merely objective volition, but simultaneously involves the heart. So there is both affective and effective love. Love takes hold of and enlightens the mind in a uniquely profound way.

Study once again the laws we discussed together in the past. We asked the double question: Is knowledge the measure of love, and how can our knowledge become the object of love? St Francis de Sales pointed out emphatically that knowledge has to precede the first love, but the degree of knowledge is by no means the measure for the degree of love. At that time we explained in very simple terms that a little knowledge can lead to great love, and a great deal of knowledge can give rise to little love. We talked about people with swollen heads and shrivelled hearts.

Once again we are confronted with worlds into which we once dared to enter, and with which we fell in love, but desperately little has become the common possession of the leading circles of the Family. The Family as such has been even less able to influence its life creatively out of love. How happy I would be if you were to wake up spiritually and bear the heritage of all these great realities and earlier traditions onto the stage of our Family history. How happy and joyful I would be if

²¹³ The centre for the "Association of Catholic Youth Organizations".

²¹⁴ The Mystical Body of Christ and the body of the devil.

your immediate collaborators were to sit down with you to re-conquer the great, unknown and undigested spiritual heritage of the past decades, to awaken them personally and inwardly to new life, and to make them the strategic guiding theme for education and leadership.

To continue: a German priest complained that we are forced to copy what the Holy Father has done in a personal fit of emotion. He is referring to the Consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

Similarly, the Marian Year will on countless occasions place leaders and those they lead before the question as to the Blessed Mother's objective position in God's plan of salvation, and the inner relationship between love for Mary and service to Christ. This opens up the way for a study of the fundamental relationship between the higher and lower orders that has often been described in studies. Unless we train each other it will be difficult for us to educate a number of canny leaders who can think for themselves and grasp things correctly, so that we can then throw them into the battle.

Personally I have always exchanged a few words before a course with at least one of the participants, in order to take the opportunity in this way to look to the ground of that soul to discover which spiritual currents were alive in it. During a talk it became second nature to me to read from the response in people's eyes what was going on in their souls. I then latched onto this in order to develop the subject and enlarge on it, and in this way slowly but surely helped to create a community climate in which the individuals felt at home, and by which they were carried along and formed.

Please don't say that this is an art that cannot be learnt. On the contrary, I would like to say that if you personally live a spiritual life; if you are faithful in practicing the above mentioned method of meditation; if you guide souls as we have briefly indicated; if you try to arrive at a philosophical synopsis of ultimate truths and realities, and steadfastly remain at home there; if, at the same time, you strive to be inwardly detached from self and open for the character and weaknesses of others, for the needs and striving of others, you will sooner or later acquire finesse in detecting how the law is implemented in every psychological field: *habitus fit per repetitionem actuum*.²¹⁵ If you add to this a profound love for the other person, this mysterious art will be quickly learnt.

3) The third means is to study books which in their way have set themselves the task to explain the times.

This also more or less includes making contact with the people, especially the people for whom one has permanent responsibility.

Others would tell us that reading modern novels, or making use of films and television, are the absolutely essential means to learn to understand people. I have personally not worried about these things for decades; on the contrary, I have carefully avoided them in order to have more time and strength to take in the thinking and feeling, the love and life of my followers without interruption. So I have managed excellently with the above-mentioned means.

²¹⁵ A habit is created from the repetition of acts.