



21. “Our History is our Holy Scripture”

“Our history is our Holy Scripture” was a fundamental category in Fr Kentenich’s thinking, which he often spoke about. It has to be understood correctly. He also saw and treated documents, such as the Founding Document, as though they were a revealed scripture. Nevertheless, even such documents have to be understood in the context of the historical background out of which they arose, and they have to be interpreted in the way Divine Providence unfolded them in the time that followed. So the fundamental category is always God’s activity in history by which he reveals his will and invites our co - operation. This general law becomes particularly significant in particularly dramatic times, such as a “turning point in time”, and through special divine initiatives, such as a process of foundation.

At bottom this way of thinking and this praxis are nothing else than an application of Church teaching on the relationship between Scripture and tradition to the concrete instance of Schoenstatt’s foundation. In the years that followed Dachau and the Second World War, Fr Kentenich encouraged various initiatives that confronted the leading circles of the Movement with the event of 20 January 1942 and his fundamental attitude at that time, and challenged them to respond to it. One result was that the Pallottine Fathers who were working in Schoenstatt, and representatives of the Schoenstatt Diocesan Priests, undertook the so-called “Gefolgschaftsakt” (Act of Discipleship) on 20 January 1949. For this occasion, Fr Kentenich began a letter on 1 January 1949 in Nueva Helvetia, Uruguay, in which he described the process of 20 January 1942 and interpreted the Act of Discipleship of 1949. It is known as the “Letter for 20 January 1949”. This extract is the introduction to the first instalment, but the text was never completed. In the introduction he enlarged on his understanding of history as salvation history, and provided criteria for understanding it. It has been taken from the publication: Texte zum 20.1.1942, 1. Teil, Sion Patris, Schoenstatt 1973, 163 - 172, (Texts on 20 January 1942, Part I).

[1. Our “Holy Scripture”]

You all know what is meant by Scripture in our context. We know that there is not only a written Word of God, but also one that he has wrought. For us, both are an incarnate idea and wish from God. This is how we have always understood the life and fate of the individual person and of peoples until now. Our own Family history, which God has decreed and brought about as an answer to our times, has therefore become something like a “Holy Scripture”, “God’s Book”, that has to be read carefully, interpreted and answered.

It has three characteristic features:

it is very comprehensive,
it cannot be readily understood by everyone,
and, it confers serious obligations.

[1.1 A comprehensive history in a short time]

Although we have not existed for very long, the short history of our lives falls into an epoch that is so riven with tensions, and shot through with such great and important events, that under normal circumstances it could be compared with centuries. Since we are a careful mirror of our times, a clear answer to its needs, and a net that captures all that is great and valuable, we are connected to it by countless subterranean threads and tiny roots. This explains our position in the world and Church, and our growing conflict with both. Whoever wants to write our family history is forced to include a complete survey of the contemporary history of the Church and world. Added to this is the fact that the original spiritual currents within the Family are manifold and comprehensive.

Thus a total historical structure stands before us that is, on the one hand, self-contained and an entity in itself, and, on the other hand, points in every least detail to the gigantic, contemporary events in the world.

Within this structure the 20 January [1942] towers upwards like a mountain peak. It can only be understood within its whole context. In the book of our family history, which has many chapters with a wealth of information, it has to be given a comprehensive section that in its turn can only be understood in connection with the other sections of the book.

Whoever wants to depict and understand the heap of comprehensive material has to be prepared for the academically trained historian and clear-thinking philosopher to have his say. Both present weighty reservations. The historian requires the watertight summary and critical examination of the extant sources. The philosopher of history points out that we can only reasonably enquire into the leading ideas and driving forces of an historical epoch if we have reached sufficient distance from it. This distance is not there, the sources have not yet been sufficiently collected, and, to the extent that they are available, I do not have them to hand. So I have to regard myself as dispensed from carrying out the wish you have presented to me. If I nevertheless take it up, I believe I may do so because I bear the material spiritually within myself, and, led by a higher power, I have consciously kept the reins in hand all these years as I guided the fate of the Family – naturally after I had gained an insight into the plans of Divine Providence.

Still, you will all do me a service if you nevertheless examine critically what I have to say. Even if I am no longer a beginner in interpreting God's plans, as they have been made known in history and life, mistakes can easily slip in. Every word of God – whether written or wrought – can be compared to a treasure whose value can only be recognized in all its fullness later on, or to a seed that can only be evaluated correctly when it has spouted and borne rich blossom and fruit. Look at how much the Prophets of old have written. They themselves were quite unable to understand its significance! How many historical events have been wrought by God that could only be understood and placed in the right light after years, decades and centuries of developments had taken place!

So, also we are only now beginning to understand our First Founding Document correctly. There you can read the innocent statement,

„Whoever knows the past history of our Sodality will not find it difficult to believe that Divine Providence has something special in store for it.“

In 1914 we interpreted the foundation of Schoenstatt's secret as "God's special objective". By 1929 it had already taken on worldwide proportions. At that time the statement was first made,

„In the shadow of this shrine the fate of the world and Church will be essentially co-determined for centuries.“

In 1939 the content of this statement had become fuller. The Second Founding Document states,

„We all feel that we are approaching a great world catastrophe and turning-point in time, and the question arises within us time and again: Is this the time for which Divine Providence has constructed the ark of

our Family ...? So we are entering upon a time that can be seen as the final link in four hundred years of development. We do so as a spiritually united and operational phalanx with strong spiritual armour, filled with the hope and expectation that we are being allowed to help the Blessed Mother to carry out the great statement about the shadow of the shrine at a time of collapse.“

The “Carmel Letter” I wrote at the turn of the year (1941/1942) takes up the same idea, but places it in the context of an outline of a great vision of the future,

„On the horizon, slowly becoming clearly recognizable, we see the great structural lines of a new world order. An old world is being consumed by flames. We see it all and evaluate it only in the light of our *ceterum censeo*. Our faith, hope and love may be subjected to the most severe trials, body and soul may be subjected to violent tortures – for us there is only one thing: our *ceterum censeo*. Meanwhile millions from present and future generations stand before us and reach out their hands to our ark to save them and carry them over the great flood to the shores of heaven ... In such fateful times only one thing can and may exist for true ambassadors: our mission, our Family, our *ceterum censeo*.“

Another letter written for Christmas 1941 adds the following,

„The development of the Family until now convinces me again that the saying about the shadow of the shrine will come true... And heroes are growing in our ranks. God is educating them for himself and will sooner or later use them for his purposes.“

My May Letter²²⁵ points out that the Church has allowed us to influence the contents of the *Constitutio*²²⁶ to some extent. Mary's month in 1948 brought our Sisters their diocesan erection, and October their papal recognition as an Institutem saeculare. Both open the way for a similar development in our other Institutes. Only those will understand the significance of this vital process who know the meaning and purpose of the spiritual current started and promoted by the Constitution.

Who would have thought in 1914 that this would be what Divine Providence was intending for our Family? And how will we understand it after another 30 - 40 years? All the central thoughts of the First Founding Document can be highlighted in this way, and new light shed on the developments of the past years.

We can hardly guess today what great riches are connected with the Third Founding Document and the events surrounding it. The coming years and decades will discover that it is a goldmine that is not so easily exhausted. So I will not be surprised when later generations see my present attempts at interpreting it as really narrow, inhibited and amateurish. Historical facts often explain and correct themselves, and sooner or later show that false and partial interpretations were absurd. So the saying: World history is the judgement of the world, takes on a unique meaning.

[1.2 Only to be understood in the light of faith]

We have to take this into account all the more because we are dealing here with a structure that reaches deeply into the supernatural world. We know this best ourselves. What was written in a fateful hour as an explanation and directive may be seen as a key to our whole family history. It deciphers the mystery of our development, our being and activity, and has to be preserved as our greatest treasure for all time. We are dealing here with a high degree of openness to the next world, the divine and supernatural world, and the growing breakthrough of the divine into the Family. Both appear with particular clarity on 20th [January 1942].

„Please understand this answer through faith in the reality of the supernatural and the interweaving of the destinies of the members of our Family (20 January 1942).“

„The important thing for me is that through circumstances we all grow very deeply into the supernatural. That is why I am constantly on the watch to prevent the devil gaining access to the Family either through a

²²⁵ “May Letter 1948” on the occasion of the Papal recognition of the Schoenstatt Sisters of Mary, in, *Sie kam – sie sah – sie siegte (She came – she saw – she conquered.)* in *Lehrbriefe (Didactic Letters 1948)*, Berg Sion 1997, 37ff.

²²⁶ 226 The Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesiae* of Pope Pius XII (2 February 1947) created the framework so that the Secular Institutes, which were coming into existence at the time, could be incorporated into the organism of the Church.

hole or through a crack. That is why I am immediately there when even a tiny cloud of danger appears on the distant horizon (February 1942).“

„We now have the most favourable opportunity to dare to throw the dice into the supernatural with an heroic gesture. Help me to lead the Family to these heights. You yourself will gain the most as a result. I consider it an exceedingly great act and proof of trust on the part of the Blessed Trinity and the Blessed Mother that they are not answering our prayers so quickly. They all believe we are capable of bearing it. They would not do so unless they had laid a solid foundation for the supernatural building of our life of virtue. So always remember:

Firstly: Live the Inscriptio fully.

Secondly, again and again: Trust against all trust. Believe against all belief.

A great deal is at stake. In the background the idea that naturally exerts sovereign power is this: Everything, including our freedom ... as and how God wills. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.²²⁷

Supernatural realities presuppose that we have an antenna for the supernatural. They [the supernatural realities] can only be understood with the eyes of faith, so they are not accessible to just anyone. At one time these eyes were wide open. Have they been dazzled and blinded in the meantime? Times of calm and safety allow what is instinctive in us to awaken to new life, and along with it the cravings of the senses and the constraints of purely natural reasoning.

Such reservations are less than justified. Eyes that have got used to capturing supernatural light for decades cannot so easily be dazzled and attracted downwards to what is purely instinctive. Besides this, the conditions do not apply. We – neither you nor I - have lived in the meantime in a safe and gentrified era. On the contrary, only those will understand what we have done in the post - war period who know St Paul's saying, *Justus autem meus ex fide vivit. Conversatio vestra in coelis.*²²⁸ In a way that has rarely found such clear expression, we have seen ourselves both during the war and in prison, as well as afterwards, as a colony of heaven. We have always looked at this world in the light of the next, which has determined the measure, rhythm and dynamism of our lives.

[1.3 Including serious obligations]

Since our family history expresses not just God's ideas, but also his wishes, their interpretation includes serious duties. In the Carmel Letter around Christmas 1941 we read:

„To have been given a great mission by God is certainly an act of trust that can make us very happy, but it is also a call and obligation to die constantly in a mystical and real sense. What Paul said about God's word – that it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow (Heb 4,12) – also applies to those words that he speaks to little people through such a calling.“

Something similar may and must be said about the words God speaks to us through the family's history.

Such considerations and convictions admonish us to be careful. If we were dealing here with just a non-binding academic investigation, it would be easier to philosophize and interpret it. However, this is not the case. If obligations or counsels are imposed that penetrate more deeply into human life, or even touch the ultimate vital nerve – as in our case – the utmost restraint and prudent circumspection are called for.

[2. The exegete]

This applies above all when the person who is interpreting the text – as is the case here – is himself the focal point of all life processes. So I do not take it amiss if anyone doubts my credibility, reliability and impartiality. However, let me point out that from 1912 - 1942 I took the utmost care to ensure that I personally retreated and remained hidden behind the idea, work and shrine; that for years I would not allow myself to be photographed, and later only rarely – and then only as a result of extraordinary external pressures – and as far as possible prevented photos being circulated. So there must have been a sound reason why, since 1942, and particularly after my return from prison, my attitude changed. The reason is well known. Since that time I have not seen myself with my intrinsic value, but with my symbolic value. Countless events give

²²⁷ 227 Another “Carmel Letter”, undated, probably written in February 1942.

²²⁸ “The just man lives by faith” (Hebr. 10,38). – Our citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3,20).

me the right and duty to do this. However, they also show me that the wellbeing of the Family, and its advance into a depersonalized future, require it. Whoever puts themselves, or allows themselves to be put into the limelight, without being specially called by God to do so, must be very stubborn. How long will they put up with the hailstones that every religious leader can expect in rich measure today? The few roses they are allowed to pluck offer little compensation. As a result of my new fundamental attitude I do not find it difficult to talk about myself in an impersonal way. The past years have been a good school for this. Insights and experiences while I was imprisoned have seen to it that my independence from human favour and human judgement has intensified, and my dependence on God and God's evaluation has grown.

However, this does not mean that the dangers of self - deception and self - adoration have been permanently and completely overcome. ... The ancient wise man was right when he said: *Homo sum, nihil humanum a me alienum*.²²⁹ So it is fitting that I impose prudent reserve on myself, make no statement without proving it, and repeatedly try to re - examine what has been said.

Besides this, I have been asked to interpret texts at a moment when urgent duties allow me only very brief moments for thought. Making careful use of these moments is not helped by sweltering heat and disproportionate changes in climate and food. This excuse is mitigated by the statement that we are not dealing with new research, but simply with passing on the well - known results of research.

Finally, you can grant me a certain skill in interpreting the signs of the times. It is a fact that until now I have been right in my assumptions in this regard. All the decisions and arrangements in the Family have always been an outflow of this source of knowledge, and have on the whole proved to be God - willed.

Thus the Pre - Founding Document was essentially co - determined in its content and its educational demands by the imperative of that time. The same imperative, in connection with the historical fact that a converted lawyer, Bartolo Longo, had been allowed to call a place of grace and pilgrimage into existence, inspired the First Founding Document. The Marian Sodality in Ingolstadt, and its fruitful activity in Southern Germany, motivated us to understand parts of the Founding Document more deeply, and to carry it out with greater confidence. It was the needs of the times that caused us to open the Movement to women and allow the two elite Institutes of the Sisters of Mary and women's Institute of our Lady of Schoenstatt to develop out of the groups. The voices of the times called for our Brothers of Mary and the Family Movement. The collectivistic threat to the world helped us to extend our educational system and make our organization durable. The flood of National Socialism [Nazi] motivated the spirit of the Family to rise to the heights of the Blank Cheque and Inscriptio. Spiritual currents in the communities of the Priests' Federation and Women's Federation revealed God's wish to us that they should be made independent.

So you can understand that with us practical faith in Divine Providence takes up the same position as Don Bosco's visionary dreams, and that decades of practice have given me a certain sureness of touch, so that I can go to work with holy nonchalance and hit the nail on the head. Nevertheless, every care has to be taken. Especially in this regard strong reservations can arise, because we are dealing here with the interpretation of my own history. The ancient law: *nemo iudex in propria causa*²³⁰ remains eternally valid.

²²⁹ I am a man, so nothing human is unknown to me.

²³⁰ No one is the judge of his own cause.