



36. Schoenstatt and its Shrine: A Place of Grace

Communication between God, a pure spirit, and human beings, who are bound to matter, is a fascinating subject on its own. By communication we do not mean only spiritual perception, but an holistic exchange of life, which includes the senses and the heart, and which aims at the most perfect possible interpenetration of nature and grace.

Its climax and source of unity is the God-Man, God's Word made flesh. God took countless initiatives on the historical way to this climax and in its unfolding, during which he connected his action and his grace to special places, things and actions. The Sacraments and the many places of grace are telling examples of this. They are embedded in the feeling found in all religions that God is particularly at work at special places and through special signs.

In the study, "Schoenstatt as a Place of Grace", of which a few extracts are given here, Fr Kentenich dealt with the question whether God – through the Blessed Mother – is particularly at work in Schoenstatt, the place, and in the Movement that formed there.

This study was written in July 1944 in the concentration camp at Dachau, at a time when the German front lines were collapsing during World War II. As a result Schoenstatt was in outward danger.

In the process the founder had to pursue the question as to the criteria by which God's special activity can be recognised, if it is not accompanied by extraordinary phenomena, such as miracles and visions, and if, according to a recognisable historical process, it can be traced back to human initiative and inspiration within the normal divine ordinance.

A short passage is attached to the Study that again elucidates how much Fr Kentenich believed in the special working of grace from our shrine. On several occasions he compared it with the Biblical account of the cure of the Chamberlain, Naaman, who had to bathe in the Jordan, and not in the much more beautiful rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, in order to be healed; simply because God's healing power was connected with this river and place.

The following text is taken from "Texte zum Verständnis Schönstatts" (Texts to Understand Schoenstatt), Vallendar-Schoenstatt 1974, S. 101-139; here passages are taken from pp. 101, 102f., 104-106, 108-110, 115-118, 122f., 138.

The reference to Naaman, with its interpretation of places of grace in God's plans, is taken from the 39th Conference of the USA Tertianship 1952, Vol III, p. 98f.

The discussion surrounding Schoenstatt sooner or later ends up with the cardinal question: Is it possible to prove that Schoenstatt – both as a place and as a vital structure – really is what it has considered itself to be from the beginning, and what has given it momentum in every situation: A distinctive work of God?

I have mentioned the place and the vital structure in the same breath, because both are inseparably connected. They developed and grew together, and have always shared the same fate. What can be said about the place applies equally to the vital structure.

For the thinking and feeling of critically interested authorities the related problems come to a head in the question:

May Schoenstatt be looked upon as a place of grace?

[...]

A comparison with Fatima again makes us very clearly aware of this. In the context of our faith that Schoenstatt is a work of God, I have only emphasised one point of comparison: the sources of knowledge here and there.¹⁴²

Particularly at a time when irrationalism and mysticism are triumphant, a time when faith and the life of faith have become consumptive, there are many people who depend for their inner conversion on extraordinary miracles and signs that can be seen and grasped over a long distance. In his kindness and wisdom God seems to have taken them into account through Fatima.

Others have the strength and grace to master life even in the most difficult circumstances through taking the usual, solid truths of our faith seriously. They should be able to find strong support in Schoenstatt, which has never invoked either visions and prophesies, or miracles in the physical order. There everything is based on God's wish and activity in a way that is easily accessible to every Christian in everyday life and world events through faith in Divine Providence.

[...]

1. When we call Schoenstatt a place of grace, this can have three meanings:

We speak of our shrine as a place of grace, just as is every other church or chapel where people pray and Holy Mass is celebrated. No one can object to that. Nor can they object to our seeing it as the focal point of a religious movement that originated there, and that has found a spiritual home there through the courses that are constantly conducted there. They provide a continuously bubbling source of nourishment, as well as deeply penetrating religious experiences on a personal or community level.

¹⁴² That is, in Schoenstatt and Fatima.

Since these two interpretations give rise to no difficulties, they can be excluded from the discussion. This then centres on the question: May our shrine be seen in a similar way to other places of grace and pilgrimage, where the Blessed Mother has set up her throne “in a special way”?¹⁴³

2. The Schoenstatt Family affirms this opinion and invokes the Founding Document, and its interpretation, in the light of faith in Divine Providence, of the historical development of the organized Movement based on it.

a) The Founding Document comes to a head in the words,

“It seems to me that at this moment, here in the ancient chapel of St Michael, our Lady is speaking to us through the mouth of the holy Archangel,

‘Do not worry about the fulfilment of your wish. *Ego diligentes me diligo*. I love those who love me. First prove to me that you really love me, that you are serious in your intention. You now have the best opportunity to do so. Do not think that in the present serious and great time it is something extraordinary when you make higher demands on yourselves than former generations, indeed if you increase them to the highest. According to the plan of Divine Providence the world war with its powerful impulses is meant to be an extraordinary means for you to facilitate your self-sanctification. I require this self-sanctification of you. It is the armour you are to put on, the sword with which you are to fight for your wishes. Be diligent in bringing me contributions to the capital of grace: through the faithful and most faithful fulfilment of your duties and a zealous prayer life earn very many merits and place them at my disposal. Then I will gladly descend to you and distribute plentiful gifts and graces; then in future I will draw youthful hearts to myself from here, and educate them to be useful instruments in my hand ...’” (for an organized and all-embracing movement of renewal).¹⁴⁴

b) As should be evident from the whole context, the rhetorical form may not mislead us from seeing the opinion about God’s plan it expresses, and which is here unveiled and presented. The source of knowledge was neither a visionary dream, as often happened to Don Bosco, nor a vision, as often happens at the beginning of movements of renewal, but simply the fact that already “often in world history what is small and insignificant has become the source of the great and greatest things”. The conviction gained from the *vox temporis et historiae generalis et specialis*¹⁴⁵ indicated that “Divine Providence still had something special in store for it (the young Marian Sodality)”.¹⁴⁶

The immediate motivation for choosing the concrete form of a place of grace was the history of the foundation of the famous Italian place of pilgrimage, Valle di Pompei. Bartolo Longo founded two large institutions for orphaned girls and the children of prisoners on the ruins of the ancient

¹⁴³ *Founding Document*, §7.

¹⁴⁴ *Founding Document*, §10f.

¹⁴⁵ God’s voice heard from world history and the history of a specific development.

¹⁴⁶ “You can guess what I am aiming at. I would very much like to make this place a place of pilgrimage, a place of grace. ... All who come here to pray should experience Mary’s glories and confess: It is good to be here. Here we want to build our dwellings, this must become our favourite spot. A daring idea, almost too daring for the public, but not too daring for you. How often in world history has not what is small and insignificant been the source of the great and greatest things? Why should this not be the case with us? Whoever knows the past of our Sodality (this refers to the Marian Sodality in the College) will not find it difficult to believe that Divine Providence has something special in store for it” (*Founding Document*, §7).

pagan city, as well as a large place of pilgrimage. Cyprian Fröhlich wrote a report for the "*Allgemeine Rundschau*", Nr 29, of 18 July 1914, p. 521f., and added, "How did all this happen? It is simply a miracle. If the Madonna di Pompei had not irrefutably worked miracles ... it would be the greatest miracle that an unknown Advocate could found a place of pilgrimage on the ruins of a pagan city in modern Italy after the year 71."¹⁴⁷

It was and is of crucial importance to us to be given a clear answer to the question: Have we interpreted the plan of Divine Providence correctly, or have we mistaken our own wishes and dreams for God's intentions?

From the beginning we consciously based ourselves on miracles in the moral order, not the physical order. This was in keeping with the spirit and wording of the Founding Document, which only talks about treasures of grace and miracles of grace.

[...]

It was and is in keeping with Schoenstatt's character to be an educational movement of educators, and its distinctive spiritual character, which constantly took its bearings from the two passages in the Bible, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and everything else will be added to you".¹⁴⁸ "To those who love God, everything works out for the best."¹⁴⁹

It was and is in keeping with Schoenstatt's central task, which emerged with constantly growing clarity: to exemplify the strength and power of a deeply rooted and enlightened faith in Divine Providence with a Marian colouring, to a time and world that has weak faith and is infected by atheism, pantheism and deism.

Whoever knows all this will understand the proof that has been repeated on countless occasions since 1919, after we had happily survived the world war. It has grown year after year in content and credibility. It centres on the thought: Schoenstatt bears the three criteria of a work of God on its forehead:

the insignificance of the instruments and the means,

the magnitude of the opposing difficulties,

the depth, duration and scope of the fruitfulness.

Whoever applies these three criteria critically to Schoenstatt's history, after he has gained a deeper insight into the details; whoever meditates believingly on the powerful stream of life that sprang from tiny trickles and asserted itself, despite the greatest restraints from all sides and a lack of human and effective means and impetus; whoever knows how much heroism was awakened in all the sections of the Movement, so that countless numbers offered their lives and freedom to the Blessed Mother for her work, will not find it difficult to believe our statement. It spontaneously and credibly consolidates itself to become a *certitudo moralis*.¹⁵⁰

[...]

¹⁴⁷ F. Kastner, *Unter dem Schutze Mariens*, Paderborn 1941, p. 288.

¹⁴⁸ Mt 6,33.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Ro 8,28.

¹⁵⁰ Moral certainty.

The history of places of pilgrimage shows that God often makes use of the piety of ordinary people to bring them about, although legendary miracles are often added at a later date. The fact that through its ability to believe in Divine Providence Schoenstatt has guided this piety purposefully and carefully, while observing its effects and fruits, in order to hear a clear echo from above, does not contradict the nature of sound faith in Divine Providence. It means that conscious and enlightened self-activity played a great role in this process. This self-activity gained its timeless and timely importance, and received enlightened and effective confirmation, through our Holy Father's encyclical, which we have already mentioned, about the necessity of human co-operation with grace. The notes he struck are so well known and familiar to us that we discovered the language of the Founding Document in it. This is how strongly the thinking on both sides is related. I shall quote a few passages:

“No less remote from the truth is the dangerous error which endeavours to make our mysterious union with Christ the basis of an unsound system of quietism, attributing the whole spiritual life of Christians and their advance towards virtue, solely to the action of the divine Spirit, to the exclusion and neglect of the co-operation which we must provide. No one evidently can deny that the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ is the only source from which all supernatural power flows into the Church and its members; for as the Psalmist says, ‘the Lord giveth grace and glory.’¹⁵¹ But the unremitting perseverance of men in works of holiness, their eager progress in grace and virtue, and their strenuous efforts, not only to reach the summit of Christian perfection themselves, but also, in the measure of their power, to spur others to a similar achievement – all these effects the heavenly Spirit will not produce unless these men do their part with constant and energetic application. ‘Divine blessings,’ says St. Ambrose, ‘are not granted to those who sleep, but to those that watch.’”¹⁵²

A fleeting examination of the Founding Document shows how strongly this continual, indeed heroic, co-operation was stressed. It was given as a condition for the Blessed Mother's special signs of grace.

The Pope points in unmistakable terms to what we call contributions to the capital of grace. He declared,

“For, though the treasure of graces which our Saviour merited for His Church by His bitter Passion and painful death is quite unlimited, yet God's providence has so disposed that these gifts of grace shall be bestowed upon us only little by little; and their greater or less abundance depends in no small measure upon our good works by which this rain of heavenly gifts, God's free bounty, is drawn down upon the souls of men. This gracious rain will be brought from heaven in abundance if we pray earnestly to God, especially by taking part devoutly, and daily if possible, in the Eucharistic Sacrifice; and if we strive to relieve the sufferings of the needy by the duties of Christian charity. But it will descend in greater abundance still if, in addition to all this, we prefer imperishable goods to the transitory things of this life; if we tame this mortal flesh by voluntary mortification, denying it what is unlawful and even imposing upon it what is unpleasant and difficult; and, finally, if we submissively accept the trials and sufferings of this present life as coming from the hand of

¹⁵¹ Ps. 84,12.

¹⁵² Pius XII, *Mystical Body of Christ*, § 86, CTS, London 1951.

God. For in this way, the Apostle tells us, 'we shall fill up in our flesh those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ, for his Body, which is the Church.'¹⁵³¹⁵⁴

The relationship between God and human beings, between God's activity and human activity is shown in an enlightened way. This prepares for and deepens our understanding of the *contractus bilateralis gratuitus*,¹⁵⁵ about which we will talk later. The Encyclical states:

"The exalted position of Christ the Head, however, must not lead us to suppose that He does not require the help of the Body. For what St Paul says of the human organism is true also of this mystical Body: 'The head cannot say ... to the feet: you are not necessary to me'.¹⁵⁶

That Christians stand in absolute need of the divine Redeemer's help is clear enough, since He himself has said: 'Without me you can do nothing,'¹⁵⁷ and the Apostle tells us that all increase of this mystical Body for the building up of itself is from Christ the Head.¹⁵⁸ And yet it is also certain, surprising though it may seem, that Christ requires His members. The first reason is because Jesus Christ is personally represented by the Sovereign Pontiff who, in order not to be overwhelmed by the weight of his pastoral office, must call many others to share his responsibility, and also needs daily to have his burden eased by the prayers of the whole Church. But also in His capacity of direct and invisible ruler of the Church our Saviour wants to be helped by the members of His mystical Body in carrying out the work of Redemption. This is not due to any need or insufficiency in Him, but rather because He has so ordained it for the greater honour of His immaculate Bride. Dying on the Cross, He bestowed upon His Church the boundless treasure of the Redemption without any co-operation on her part; but in the distribution of that treasure He not only shares this work of sanctification with His spotless Bride, but wills it to arise in a certain manner out of her labour. This is truly a tremendous mystery, upon which we can never meditate enough: that the salvation of many souls depends upon the prayers and voluntary mortifications offered for that intention by the members of the mystical Body of Jesus Christ, and upon the co-operation which Pastors and faithful, and especially parents, must afford to our divine Saviour."¹⁵⁹

[...]

The way of reading the Founding Document mentioned above unmistakably bears the character of a covenant of love between Schoenstatt and the Blessed Mother. Schoenstatt declares itself ready to strive seriously and conscientiously for holiness out of love. In return the Blessed Mother wants to show her love by making Schoenstatt a place of grace, and by calling the Schoenstatt Movement into existence, leading and inspiring it.

¹⁵³ Col 1,24.

¹⁵⁴ Pius XII, *Mystical Body of Christ*, § 106.

¹⁵⁵ The reciprocal and gratuitously given contract.

¹⁵⁶ 1 Cor 12,21.

¹⁵⁷ Jn 15,5.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Eph 4,16; Col 2,9.

¹⁵⁹ Pius XII, *Mystical Body of Christ*, § 42.

Moral theologians call a covenant of love *contractus bilateralis gratuitus*, to distinguish it from a *contractus bilateralis onerosus*.¹⁶⁰ Since they are often mistaken for one another, it is easy for confusion and uncertainty to arise. So let me stress once again that we always speak only of a covenant of love, a *contractus bilateralis gratuitus*. The Founding Document is characterised as such by the words, “*Ego diligentes me diligo*”.¹⁶¹ That is to say, if you love me and prove your love for me, I will prove my love to you. The following text, “First prove that you really love me ... I will then gladly come down to be with you,” determines the exact content of the reciprocal covenant of love.
[...]

Whoever takes the trouble to think about and examine these summarised ideas will not be able to close themselves off from the conviction that faith in Schoenstatt as a place of grace and work of God rests on a solid foundation, which is in keeping with the *sensus catholicus*.¹⁶²

Now I want to return to our covenant of love, to the centering of our whole Family on a place. One thought needs to be mentioned to deepen [what has been said]. We wanted to place the centering of our covenant of love on a place into the context of a theology and psychology of places of grace and pilgrimage.

The theology of places of grace and pilgrimage is a *theologia absolutae independentiae divinae* and a *theologia humilitatis humanae*.¹⁶³

What does God want to say to us by planning places of grace and pilgrimage? Haven't we been told by the teaching of the Church that the sacraments are the normal vehicle of grace? Without a doubt! However, because the sacraments are a general institution of which we can say that as soon as matter and form are in place, grace follows, we have also to concede that as a result God has limited himself in a certain way. So wherever a priest sets matter and form in place in the correct way, God is “obliged” to give the corresponding grace connected with them.

Beyond this, God obviously wants to document his sovereign actions more strongly. How does he do this? From our perspective he “arbitrarily” connects certain graces with certain places. Must we not in fact admit that if we see the theology of places of pilgrimage in this way, we are confronted with the unique sovereignty of the living God over his creatures?

Of course, this *theologia auctoritatis absolutae vel independentiae divinae* has to be complemented by a *theologia humilitatis humanae*. Don't you think it requires a great deal of humility, perhaps also a deeper spirit of faith, if we beg for his graces at places of grace rather than through the sacraments? At any rate, what God wants is to make us recognise his sovereignty repeatedly, and to elicit our dependence in some way or other. He can do this, he does it, and has done it superbly through what we call the theology of places of grace.

¹⁶⁰ A free bilateral contract. An obligatory bilateral contract.

¹⁶¹ I love those who love me. First Founding Document, §11, (Prov 8,17).

¹⁶² Catholic feeling.

¹⁶³ A theology of absolute dependence on the divine and a theology of human humility.

Hengstenberg¹⁶⁴ is a professor, a modern philosopher, a convert from Protestantism. He is battling in a similar way as I do against philosophical idealism, that is to say, against a system that simply nourishes itself from great thoughts, but does not consider life sufficiently. He stresses the thoughts I have just touched upon in a most beautiful way. This is more impressive than if a priest had written these words.

“By Christian realism we understand our unconditional self-surrender to God in Christ without consideration of our own wishes and dreams. This self-surrender includes the readiness to accept graces from God that we can in no way expect at a certain place, at a definite time, or with rational prediction. We have learnt that we receive graces in the sacraments. But it irritates us that at places of grace we receive graces that are distributed nowhere else, and under conditions we have in no way set or influenced. People bear a grudge against God for this ‘illegal’ distribution of graces. And in fact, the acceptance of such graces, and recognising them, requires a special humiliation of us, which could not otherwise be achieved by subjection to a spiritual authority.

Yet it is just this humiliation that we need today in order to overcome the idealistic rationalism that has infiltrated our spiritual lives. It is part of Christian realism that we surrender ourselves unconditionally to God in Christ. Isn’t it profoundly meaningful that there are such places of grace, although we have Christ with his divinity in the sacraments in every church? Christ is to a certain extent given over to the power of the priest. The priest determines the time and place of the transubstantiation. Isn’t it something like a necessary balance and humiliation that God gives graces at places we have not chosen? At the places of grace God wants to show that he gives graces to whomever he wills and whenever he wills; that we have to seek God where he shows himself; that we have to listen to him wherever he speaks, and that we have to listen when he determines the time for us to do so. That is the Christian and realistic meaning of places of grace.

The following experience shows that places of grace are often an annoyance to the well-educated, but this merely reveals the shortcomings in their ‘educated’ spirituality. A learned theologian asked another theologian, ‘Why should it not be possible for the Mother of God to appear in Fatima? In principle we cannot exclude it completely.’ ‘Of course she can do so,’ was the answer, ‘but in the same way I could also box your ears!’

What we need today is the obedience of the Syrian from the East who was told by Elisha: ‘Wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, then you will be healthy again.’¹⁶⁵ It was a surprisingly simple command. The Syrian could say, and did say at first, ‘Aren’t there enough rivers in my home country? Did I have to come here to hear that? Don’t I wash at other times?’ But by obeying, he was cured.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Hans-Eduard Hengstenberg (1904-1998).

¹⁶⁵ 2 Kg 5,10.

¹⁶⁶ Hengstenberg, *Die Marienverehrung im Geisteskampf unserer Tage* – Devotion to Mary in the intellectual battles of our days, Würzburg 1948, S. 81-83.