



4. Education for Freedom

In our founder's childhood, youth and personal structure we not only find the foundations for his organic approach and his supernatural orientation, which included his discovery of the Blessed Mother's special mission; we also discover the basis for his pedagogical approach and his image of the human person, which is mainly determined by freedom and autonomy.

The following text from the "Brazilian Tertianship" (Vol II, p. 222ff), given in February/March 1952 in Santa Maria for the Pallottine Fathers in Brazil, testifies to the last two points. Fr Kentenich was already on his way into exile in Milwaukee. This may have encouraged him to tell them more about his own life and his personal educational practice. The text is autobiographical and tells us about the pedagogical steps taken by the young Kentenich at the time of Schoenstatt's foundation.

Schoenstatt has taught us how to overcome the mass man
firstly, as a programme;
secondly, in theory;
thirdly, in practice.

What does it mean when we say that it has taught us how to overcome the mass man in practice? I am sure you have heard about the so - called Pre - Founding Document. There you have the programme that has been the norm for our educational work until now, and will remain so until the end of time.

First question: What is the programme?

It is this: "Under the protection of Mary we want to learn how to educate ourselves to become firm, free and priestly characters." Notice that it is a single, great programme of self - education according to the ideal of the person who is truly and inwardly free.

The programme has never changed; it has only been expressed in different words here and there.

I have just spoken about becoming autonomous on the way to taking the initiative. That is why the programme states that we want to educate ourselves, we want to take the initiative in our education. Self - education, therefore, means that we are not prepared to surrender ourselves to the crowd; we personally want to take the reins in hand when we are part of the crowd.

Second question: How did the programme come about?

First of all, as a result of the structure of my soul. What I have explained to you in these days as the double form of [Schoenstatt's] charismatic mission came into force in the programme. Do you still remember the two forms of our charismatic mission? The general form is the new person in the new community at the service of the universal apostolate. And the other? It is the person who is wholeheartedly attached to the ideal, who is inwardly attached to the community, and who has committed himself or herself to the universal apostolate.

I have to admit that this has been my personal, fundamental attitude from childhood. You will understand that from the moment I officially became an educator, I could do nothing else than proclaim this idea: Do away with all formalism! What we have to form is the person who is attached to the ideal and who is committed to the universal apostolate. Do away with all formalism!

[...]

In order that you can understand how strongly I was motivated from the first to create people who stand on their own two feet, who are autonomous, I would like to tell you briefly how I worked when I was a teacher. Before I became spiritual director, I was a teacher.

As a teacher I kept the goal constantly in view. The students had to acquire clear, independent knowledge, not engage in rote learning. The class I was given was half a year behind where it should have been. So I had to work through a year - and - a - half's subject matter in a year. Humanly speaking I should have become nervous and put the poor students under pressure, "Get going, you still have this to learn and that to learn!"

Let me tell you how I went about it. I only want to highlight the idea of standing on one's own feet and being autonomous with regard to acquiring knowledge. I can do nothing with mass - minded people, I can only work with autonomous personalities – men or women – people who can form their own judgement and stand up for it. Do you think it would have been possible to call such a large movement into existence if I had done anything else, that is, if I had thought, 'Just influence the masses'? I only want to describe briefly the method I applied at that time as a teacher.

Firstly, in the lessons I never took a book into my hands, I always stood freely before the students.

Secondly, when I had to teach Latin and German, I tried to let them find the rules for themselves. This cost a great deal of time, but a teacher may not become nervous, even if he has to work through the subject matter that should be taught over a year - and - a - half. I fear the person with one great thought.

Thirdly, When I put a question and one of the students could not answer it, I taught the class the method of coaching the student in question until he got onto the right track. I never asked anyone, "What is the answer?" I always said, "Help him to find the right answer". This often led to them asking a number of leading questions. My concern is and was to educate them to be autonomous. Away from the masses!

I can well remember how we wrote our first class test. At the time it was usual for the students to cheat. Do you know what I did? I gave them the test and left the room. Later I was repeatedly told that from that time on they never cheated. That is the application of a pedagogy of trust. Of course, there has to be a certain atmosphere, or it will go wrong.

I am telling you this so that you can see that my goal has been the same from the beginning. I can only use autonomous people – people who are autonomous in the religious life, but also academically.

When I wanted to reward the students, I fitted in a lesson during which we discussed only questions about life, which we then solved from a moral, ethical and religious point - of - view.

About every three months we held a competition. Two camps were formed. One camp put a question. If someone in the other camp was able to answer it, the one who had put the question received a point,¹⁶ and if the other side was unable to answer the question, the student who was first asked had to be helped to find the answer. The contest moved to and fro. I don't want to go into details here. I would only like you

¹⁶ In all probability the opposite rule was applied: The one who answered the question received the point.

to discover the serious attempt to educate autonomous people who could stand on their own two feet. By the way, this so - called *concertatio scientifica* is not something I discovered. It is the way the Jesuits taught.

Let me summarize. How did this programme of self - education to overcome mass - mindedness come into existence? The answer is this: The first and deepest origin is my personal structure, which transferred the academic autonomy of the teacher and the students to the moral and religious level. The immediate reason for this programme was the revolution among the students. At the time our “relic”¹⁷ was also a revolutionary.

[...]

We taught and lived the way to overcome the collectivistic person in theory and practice. The programme later went down in Schoenstatt’s history as the Pre - Founding Document.

It actually contains the heart and centre of the life of my soul. I would have set up the programme – perhaps in another form – if the historical reason for doing so had not arisen. The occasion was the revolution I encountered when I became Spiritual Director. I think I may take it that you all know about this revolution. Fr Carlos is pointing in the general direction of our “relic”. It is a silent request, “Come over and tell us what sort of revolution was taking place at that time!” I want to support this request, because it will save me time. I only want to highlight two elements. Fr Alfons can tell you later about the “Vegetable Garden Plot”.¹⁸ It was not a plot that concerned the vegetables, as thought they were not satisfied with this or that vegetable. The plot was hatched in the vegetable garden. It was based on the thought, “We want to be free as our forefathers were free!” How were their forefathers free? Fr Alfons will tell you how free the “forefathers” in Ehrenbreitstein were.¹⁹

Secondly, merely to characterize the whole force of the situation at that time: there is a lovely booklet entitled “More Joy”. In it you will find the sentence, “A boarding school without joy has to be closed tomorrow; because if a boarding school is not governed by an atmosphere of joy, it will be dominated by the atmosphere of the swamp tomorrow”.²⁰ Later, when we talked about a pedagogy of ideals, we added: An essential component of a pedagogy of ideals is *Laetitia* pedagogy, a pedagogy of joy. At that time our disgruntled band of revolutionaries went about with gritted teeth and wrote this text on bits of paper, which they “lost” everywhere – on the stairs, in the passages – so that the superiors could find them. A rebellious band!

Now I must tell you something in praise of our “relic”. If I add this praise, I only do so in order that he will be all the more inclined to tell you about what happened. A number of stages preceded what I am about to tell you. I had, first of all, to ensure that the students had a correct understanding of obedience. I had to see to it that our youth saw and lived the correct idea of obedience freely and of their own volition.

Expressed in pedagogical terms this involved taking up the elemental drive to be autonomous, baptizing it and integrating it into the framework of Catholic structures. This elemental self - assertion, which showed

¹⁷ One of the participants in the Tertianship was Fr Alfons Weber, a German Pallottine, who was working in Brazil. He was one of the founder sodalists, and was therefore called – probably by Fr Kentenich himself – their “relic”.

¹⁸ The reference here is to a “conspiracy” between some of the students in the College. They met in the vegetable garden in order to prevent the foundation of the Marian Sodality – which they disrespectfully called the “blue ribbon association” – with all the means in their power.

Fr Kentenich praised the “Vegetable Garden Plot” – and often quoted it as an example – for the courage and initiative of some of the students to stand up in inner freedom for what they wanted. It didn’t take long before the members of the plot joined the Sodality. Some of them became enthusiastic supporters. (cf. MTA, IV, S 34ff. – also available in English).

¹⁹ Before the College in Schoenstatt was built in 1912, the senior classes studied in an older house in Ehrenbreitstein. It was built on the mountain slope and had creaking floorboards. Above all it had more opportunities for evading the discipline of the house. When the new building in Schoenstatt opened in 1912, the house rules were stricter and it was easier for the superiors to enforce them.

²⁰ Paul Wilhelm von Keppler, *Mehr Freude*, Freiburg 1921, p. 114 (First edition 1909).

as rebellion, had to be taken up and harnessed to the chariot of obedience. I could also have said, "What are you thinking about, you rebellious horde? Where is the whip? What are you about? Get out of here! Go to the devil!" But that is wrong, you may not do that. If you have had a lot to do with young people, you will know that the most rebellious elements are often the best. The masterstroke of education consists in taking up young people's idea of strength, purifying it, and once it has been purified, baptizing it. Later I had to do the same thing with women. With them it was not the idea of strength, but of self - surrender and beauty. The masterstroke consists in taking up the fundamental drives in woman's nature, purifying and baptizing them – that is always the principle.

I am sure you will remember what Fr Maximo [Trevisan] worked through with you on the personal ideal. The first stage is the purification of the drives – the idea of beauty, of strength, of self - surrender. It is also possible to train young people like animals. The aim of education is not to control animals, but to inwardly lead people and their drives to God.

That was the first task I had to carry out at the time. I had to do so on my own at first. I quickly saw to it that I found collaborators among the students themselves. When I was ready, I began with the ethical purification of their drives with their help. At this point the supernatural attitude began.

At the time there were two spiritual currents in the young community. The one was the Mission Section, the second the Eucharistic Section. The Mission Section had the goal of ethical purification; the Eucharistic Section aimed at supernatural "baptism". Do you know who was one of the leaders? Our "relic" – *sanctus, sanctus, sanctus*! He was the first leader of the Eucharistic Section. I must tell you that I never did anything without the autonomous and free co - operation of my young men.

At the moment I am battling with the German bishops. They cannot understand that one man can have so much influence without being a dictator. The bishops think that all who are on my side are mass - minded people. That is the masterstroke – to educate autonomous people who, out of inner conviction, uphold their idea and go with you through thick and thin. But they do so on their own initiative and of their own free will.

Let me be brief. Ask Fr Alfons to tell you something about the revolutionary situation at that time.

The rebellion of the students was the reason why I proclaimed my ideas about autonomy and strength of character. I would have done so anyhow, but in that situation they suddenly sounded quite different. My task consisted in taking up the powerful urge to conquer, which underlay the rebellion, and harnessing it to the coach of obedience. That is to say, I had to show them that obedience was not a sign of weakness, but of enhanced strength, the summit of sound strength. I had to show that the most perfect expression of strength lay in mastering their drives. So the programme contained in the Pre - Founding Document states, „We have to educate ourselves to become firm characters. We took off our baby shoes long ago. At that time our actions were determined by our moods and feelings. Now, however, we have to learn to act according to firm and clearly recognized principles ...“

With men you have always to appeal to clearly recognized and firm aims, even if you are often only dealing with wimps.

„Now, however, we have to learn how to act according to firm and clearly recognized principles. Everything within us may be shaken. Times will surely come when everything is shaken ...“

Please take note: "Then religious exercises will no longer be able to help us ..." I was fighting a formalistic spirituality of practices. That was not a battle against formal spiritual exercises as such, but against an exaggerated spirituality of practices. Later we often said that a pedagogy of ideals is a pedagogy of attitudes, as opposed to a mere pedagogy of practices. Let me repeat,

„Then religious exercises will not longer be able to help us. Only one thing can help – firm and relentlessly clear principles.“

Here we see the powerful struggle for strong characters, independent personalities. It goes on,

„We have to be free characters. God doesn't want galley slaves, he wants free oarsmen ...“

Now follows a naughty expression. It was meant for the hearts of the young people at that time. That rebellious horde had seen obedience as bootlicking. Can you understand that as the educator I had to adapt myself to their way of talking? Our young people at that time were not at all religiously minded. If I had sung a hymn of praise to a religious attitude, not one of them would have understood me. Public opinion in the college was based on the conviction, "We won't obey! That is slavery!" So I had to adapt myself to their way of thinking and speaking; hence the following sentence,

„Let others toady to their superiors and lick their boots, and be grateful if they are kicked ...“

I then took up another feeling in the young people, that is, the awareness that they were autonomous people. We are no longer juveniles, we are strong men! Now listen to those words, "We are well aware of our dignity and rights ..." Others can creep to their superiors, we won't. We in the senior class also have rights, and we are aware of our rights. – Now comes the masterstroke: to turn everything around and make use of this awareness of their dignity and strength in order to learn childlike obedience. Listen to the next sentence,

„We submit to the will of our superiors not out of fear or compulsion, but because we freely want to do so...“

In practice this meant appealing to what they had valued so highly – their freedom. We don't want to be slaves; we want to be free people! Moreover, through every act of free submission our freedom grows, our autonomy, our greatness grow. I have to repeat the whole sentence,

„We submit to the will of our superiors not out of fear or compulsion, but because we freely want to do so; because every act of reasonable submission makes us inwardly free and autonomous.“

Can you understand the method underlying this? I would now have to tell you how I educated our junior students, who were still very young, to obey. You may be surprised when I tell you that I read them the book about little Nelli.²¹ Nelli was a young child who was unusually gifted and thoroughly supernatural in her attitude.

So with the students who had not yet entered into puberty I spoke in thoroughly supernatural terms, just as you speak to children. And with our men, who had started to grow a beard, whose voice was breaking, and who were happy if they could growl during community prayers, I only spoke about strength. I repeatedly did this later – I told the students exactly what was happening inside them.

May I mention a remarkable fact just by the way? It happens very often that educators who were personally real louts, and took it to the extreme, are later unable to educate students when they enter puberty. The masterstroke consists in adapting yourself very sensitively to the life of your followers, not just in the way they talk, but also in the way they think and live, that is, to tell them about their churned up drives, and then how to purify these drives and baptize them – that is the method.

So how can I educate my young people to be autonomous and free? We call our method the ethical purification of the drives. To illustrate this you can easily point to the animals – elephants, lions, bears. You then explain: If human greatness consisted in blindly enforcing your will, then the elephant would be greater than every human being. Human greatness consists in controlling the power of the drives.

²¹ Nelli Organ (1903 - 1908), a young girl whose unaffected faith is described in the book: Bihlmeyer, *Klein Nelli vom heiligen Gott* (Little Nelli of God). See J. Kentenich: *Childlikeness before God* (Waukesha, 2001, p. 229).