

Peter Wolf

So that the Joy Remains!

Recollection Day according to Joseph Kentenich

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My dear Confrères,

In their pastoral work many priests experience times of joy and fulfilment, and periods when they are exhausted and unable to cope. Some days they feel supported and fulfilled by what is entrusted to them as priests. Then there are days and periods that simply cost all their strength and that they find difficult. They experience that the spiritual purpose for which they joined the priesthood can be completely blanketed by their service. The need to care for a number of parishes means that many confrères bear a double burden, and this gives rise to discontent in the people they are caring for, and as well as in themselves. The experience of being burnt out, and the feeling that they are always having to give, increases, along with the consequent feeling of running spiritually dry.

Earlier generations of confrères have also given of their best, and have taken up the challenge of their vocation. They spent many hours in schools and sat for many hours in the confessional. This

also exhausted them. Today so many occasions have become exceptions – every marriage, every baptism, every home visit – that they give rise to stress. And we simply never see the end of our work. The pile on the desk grows constantly. Many things are left for the parish priest. Often it is what others don't want to do: administrative questions, staffing, tensions between colleagues that always have to be clarified or settled. People push the unpleasant things in our direction. We become managers and organizers. Yet we all became priests because we wanted to engage in pastoral work and somehow lead a spiritual life. How can we do so? How can I take countermeasures? How can I add the spiritual dimension and see to it that I don't lose my joy in my calling?

Years ago Fr Kentenich considered ways and means to counter these problems. It is possible that his counsel in this regard is more precious than at that time. All around us individual confrères, various groups of priests and communities of priests belonging to other spiritual movements are looking for help, and ways and means. They have developed oasis days, desert days, recollection days, and similar measures. In our Schoenstatt communities for priests, and in the Schoenstatt communities, we know the practice of the monthly "recollection day". This is what our founder called them, and he advised us not to succumb to the onslaught of life today, or allow ourselves to be simply swept away by the rush of life.

Experience shows that we have to plan and secure such times in our diaries. I have learnt to take the hours of my recollection day seriously, and to treat them like any other important appointment that simply cannot be deleted without substitution, even if it collides with an appointment that cannot be postponed. In our community we have experienced for many years that it is a good idea to set aside five hours for our recollection day. We agreed that we wanted to keep to this framework. Fr Kentenich introduced this

practice already early on and encouraged his confrères to take five hours for this purpose. At the same time he considered the element of relaxation and having a sleep to be very important. He saw it as a very natural condition for making the best use of this time. In 1952 he spoke on this subject in Santa Maria, Brazil. He said, “These are things I so often advised in the past. Do what you know from experience. The best thing for me is to run away from life and the pressures of life. For example, go to a nearby convent or monastery, or some place where I am undisturbed, so that I can have my recollection day. Suppose I have five hours as my disposal, I then decide to sleep for three hours. So part of my recollection day consists in sleeping for as long as I can. Then in the short time left to spend with God, you will achieve what you wanted to achieve. The meaning of the recollection day is to renew our spiritual life, to again become more awake to the divine, to the religious life.”¹¹ It is interesting to see how he describes the actual meaning of the recollection day: “The meaning of the recollection day is to renew our spiritual life, to again become more awake to the divine, to the religious life.” Obviously he knew from experience that certain very natural conditions have to be met if we are to achieve this goal. I have to have had sufficient sleep; I have to again become myself, I have to have peace and quiet, in order to become wholly open for God and the divine.

In what follows I want to try in the spirit of our founder to mention the steps I have practiced and experienced for years for a day of recollection. My hope is that each one will add his own experiences and compare his own practices with mine. How do I do it? Are there other forms? Or, could these tried and tested suggestions for a recollection day, which have become a custom in Schoenstatt’s priests’ communities, help me to arrive at a new and consistent practice in my spiritual life?

¹ 1 J. Kentenich: Brasilien-Terziat – Brazilian Tertianship, Santa Maria 1952, Vol II, p. 175.

Step One: Create Distance and Chill Out

For me, the first step is to create distance and to calm down once more. You need to distance yourself from your usual work, so don't remain at your desk, or in front of the computer and near the telephone. It is best not to be in the office, perhaps not even in the presbytery where the next doorbell will catch me and the next telephone call tear me away from what I want to do in the next five hours. For some, the home shrine could be the place where he can withdraw. Perhaps there is a chapel, a shrine, nearby, or a church where I can withdraw. Fr Kentenich spoke about places of holy solitariness and a "nearby monastery or convent". At the start of my recollection day I often go away physically; I walk or drive somewhere in order to create distance. A change of location or houses is often a help. It does us good simply to be unavailable for a time. During my recollection day I want to have time for myself and God! "I indulge myself" we are told by the advertisement of a tour operator. It helps me during my recollection day to go on a short pilgrimage, or simply to take a short hike and enjoy the fresh air in order to feel really free.

Step Two: Look Back and Digest

The second step for me is to look back on the month that has ended or is about to end. I want to review the fullness of what has happened in that month. This is not meant to be an examination of conscience. I simply want to look at what happened. I want to look attentively and re-experience what took place in these four weeks. Already while I am walking along, or on pilgrimage, the first memories return. I simply allow these memories to emerge, and each time I am amazed at how much has happened in the space of a

month. Sometimes I look at my diary and notice that I can no longer remember some events. Often it was so much that one event was simply superimposed on another. I think we have all experienced this. Our appointments are often so closely packed that the one blots out the others. So it can happen that we are often no longer able to remember the pleasant and successful conversations or events. They have been replaced and hidden by the following appointments.

What is the point of this survey? I want to allow the individual events that went to make up the month to echo in my soul. In the long run our motto cannot be: Press on regardless! However, the pressure of work often means that one impression displaces the others. So it can happen that because of all our work and appointments we have often only cleared our desks, but are no longer able to enjoy it if things have worked out well. Often we never get a chance to realise how much we have meant to people and to God. Much in our priesthood can honestly give us cause to rejoice. There are encounters that have really enriched us. Many a Holy Mass can touch us deeply, for example, the joy of the children, or the happiness of a couple at a wedding. Or there was a requiem that really moved us because so much genuine humanity became visible. But then we have to leave quickly for the next appointment.

That is why our founder advised us to “follow up and savour”² these events afterwards. We have experienced that so many events follow one on top of the other that we are no longer able to take in the flavour of the individual events. In this context our founder used an image we can easily remember, “Each event in my life makes me aware that it can be compared with a cathedral, a church, with God standing at the highest point. I have to put up a

² Cf. J. Kentenich’s method of meditation, *Victoria Patris* Vol. 1, p. 47.

ladder – a ladder for mind and heart: A ladder for my mind in order to become aware of God; a ladder for my heart in order to embrace God with my heart in everyday life.” A wonderful image! When I think of it I often visualise the tower of the Freiburg Minster. At the moment there is a huge metal ladder there. The last time I was there it reminded me vividly of what our Father had said: Climb up and embrace the God of Life at the top.

Much that we do in our pastoral work can honestly give rise to joy and gratitude. However, the hectic rush of life prevents us from getting so far. We can catch up. Savouring what has happened may and should make us happy. So don't begin by looking for our faults and all that is negative so that we can beat our breasts. Of course, this will also happen. We must also look at these things, but not as our first task. We mustn't copy the dung beetles which first of all look for the corpses at the wayside. First of all we have to discover the beautiful and positive things, just like a butterfly, our father and founder tells us in a talk he gave to the Schoenstatt girls.

At the end of the month I often discover how much has taken place. I am sometimes amazed at all that became possible. And then joy emerges – joy and gratitude for encounters, for news, for letters, for celebrations. Sometimes this becomes a real litany of thanksgiving. And as I thank my joy grows.

Then I look at those things that weren't good in the past month. I don't need to repress anything that annoyed or burdened me in this month, or that made me sad. We also need to turn our attention to the things that gave rise to anger, or disappointment remains about things that failed, or where criticism was expressed. Let us allow also these memories to return, along with the feelings they occasioned. There can be months when our feelings were in chaos. I think it is good and necessary to present these things to God, and to express them clearly to ourselves, in order to be set free from them and to release them from our souls. There is also

something like caring for the hygiene of our own souls. It is sometimes not a bad thing to consider all that is unloaded on us in the course of a month. I think that if we always did this we would protect ourselves from getting stomach ulcers. This calm and open acceptance of what has happened can help to prevent the next minor cause or hurtful word from being the last straw. Some people explode and are surprised that it happened just when there really was no occasion to do so. It happens because there are so many undigested impressions in our souls.

In this context our father said something strange. I found it in a Tertianship for confrères. He spoke about allowing “wounds to bleed dry”.³ I believe that underlying it is the experience that there are spiritual or psychic wounds that have to bleed dry. He reckoned with these experiences in our vocation and in our communities. He wasn’t surprised that we are wounded in our communities, even if we want to be as holy as possible. Our father and founder asks us and invites us to allow such wounds to bleed dry. Even the picture on its own helps us not to simply pass over such hurts heedlessly, but to hold them out to God, the Blessed Mother, the Pieta.

At the end of a month everything should be allowed to fade away – the beautiful things and the difficult things. They should fade away into a Magnificat or a Miserere. Sometimes I imagine that I am sitting at a really big organ in a beautiful, large church. I turn off all the lights – also on the organ – and intone a Miserere or a Kyrie on the pedals, followed gradually by a Magnificat or an Alleluia up on the Manual. Both melodies may break through and be recognizable. They have to blend and in the end fade away, ending in harmony. At the end of a month I would want such a melody to break through in my heart.

³ J. Kentenich, USA Tertianship 1952, 17th Conference in: USA Tertianship, Vol. II, Berg Sion 1991, p. 8.

Step Three: Feed the Soul (Geist nachlegen)

I like to call the third step “feeding the soul”. I think that a recollection day has to have something to do with nourishing the spirit from which we live. Feeding the soul has become for me the concept for what has to happen in the middle of the recollection day. In his educational work and spiritual guidance our father and founder repeatedly highlighted the cultivation of the spirit. He tried to solve many problems by renewing a person’s spiritual motivation.

We shouldn’t remain with looking back or even with reckoning up what has happened. I have to prepare myself for the next section of the way, for the next month, so that I retain my joy in my calling. It is good to prepare some spiritual input beforehand. At any rate, I don’t want to waste the precious time in the middle of my recollection day with searching through my library, or paging through books for ages looking for something that will uplift me spiritually, and perhaps help me to put heart and soul into what I am doing. It is a good idea to set aside for the next recollection day a text I came upon at some time during my study of our Father’s works, for example, or a chapter that struck me in a book or article that appealed to me. In this third hour of my recollection day I like to read the notes I made for myself during an earlier retreat. Since I have done this, I have the feeling that the retreats have an effect throughout the day and become fruitful through the year. In this way what our Father meant when he spoke about “finding a home” in a great idea becomes a reality that upholds and fills us.

Step Four: Leave Time for Prayer

It has become important to me to leave a longer period for prayer during my recollection day. As priests we celebrate the Eucharist every day. We try to pray the obligatory Office Hours. Many of us know the practice of taking half an hour for meditation every day. Each of us knows that our spiritual life is often very restricted, and that we are sometimes happy if we have still managed this half hour. So it is good on our recollection day to have plenty of time to really immerse ourselves in prayer.

It does us good to spend an hour doing this during our recollection day. I look for a place that helps me to remain in prayer and not have to run away again. It helps me, over and above the Liturgy and the Office, to come into personal prayer. I am happy to have an opportunity to go into the nearby shrine. Some of us will go into our church in order to pray before the Blessed Sacrament. I choose a place I know has really helped me to pray properly, to re-collect myself and my thoughts and be with God. We could also ask the Blessed Mother and the saints to surround us with their self-surrender and their concentration, so that we can really remain in prayer. I find it helpful to imagine that I am in the Cenacle to join Mary and the apostles in prayer.

The goal I keep in view for this time of prayer is what Fr Kentenich sometimes almost described as a definition of prayer: concentrated self-surrender to God.⁴ It is not the point here to use many words, or to complete an allotted time in prayer. What matters is that God become the focal point of our lives, that we are at home with him and again come into contact with him. This is the form of prayer that St John Marie Vianney wanted to explain to his people

⁴ J. Kentenich, *Vollkommene Lebensfreude – Perfect Joy in Life, Retreat for Priests*, Vallendar-Schoenstatt 1984, p. 413.

in a sermon when he told them about a man who sat in the church and said to him, “I look at him and he looks at me.”⁵

After such a time of wordless prayer we can again pray in a way prescribed and suggested by our vocation. As parish priests and pastors we always have many people in view. We aren't singles or private people. We didn't become priests for ourselves, but for others. So our prayer may always be influenced by those who have been entrusted to our prayer, that is, actual people with names. To me, simply mentioning their names, and presenting to God whatever comes to mind about them, means that I am praying like a shepherd. We mention people by name to God and the Blessed Mother, because we will again be concerned about them in the time ahead. Our pastoral work includes our commitment to those whom God has entrusted to our care. If we have prayed in this way for someone, things will somehow be quite different when we meet them again, they will be much more intensive. In connection with the image of the shepherd, Jesus spoke about his own. This is how things should be with us – that as time goes by we begin to speak of “our own” or “my own”. We are pastors and there are people who have a justified longing to be known and loved by their shepherd.

Step Five: Secure for the Coming Month

Then comes the final step, the fifth step in our recollection day. It concerns securing my spiritual life for the coming month. Towards the end of the recollection day I feel urged to register something, for example, by writing something in my diary that I want to read again at the end of the month. Secure the renewal. I try to follow up the basic thoughts and to record what moved me during my re-

⁵ Quoted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, § 2715.

collection day and generated a response in my soul. Has anything new grown in me, or been given to me? What do I think will be of assistance to me in the coming month? What has become important to me? Record this in a diary. Often it is the most extensive entry in a month, because at the end of a day one is often very tired, and it is often very late. Fr Kentenich repeatedly suggested that we should decide on and record what we want to strive for in the coming month. He didn't recommend a whole range of good resolutions, but one point that will be important for me in the month ahead. It is better to secure one point than to write down many resolutions, because the way to hell is paved with good resolutions. It is a good idea to concentrate on something that is possible and which we hope will really be a help to us. Our father adopted a concept used by the Jesuits to describe this: the Particular Examination/PE or special resolution. He encouraged us to draw up a personal spiritual daily order that can help us to remain spiritual people in our circumstances in the actual world, not on Mount Athos, or in a contemplative convent.

There is another support I have discovered through our founder. He advised us not to count upon our own good will in order to secure our spiritual lives and striving, but to choose a confrère to whom we can give an account of our striving, and who can offer to accompany us spiritually. Let us not forget or have a low opinion of this "Security Rope" of the monthly report and spiritual guidance. From time to time it will be a good idea, or even necessary, to phone our spiritual guide or confessor on this day and make an appointment with him. This too is an external safeguard by which we secure our spiritual lives. Simply because so much tears us apart, because we are so subject to the demands of others in the course of a month, we need such help. Since we have so many appointments, it is important to have this inner, spiritual security and bonding.

So that the Joy Remains!

I want to do something to ensure that my priesthood remains wholehearted, and that it can repeatedly be regenerated and renewed. I don't want to lose my joy in the calling I set out to answer. The recollection day is a wonderful help in this. It helps to prevent the danger of burn out, of relapsing into routine, and the creeping destruction of the spiritual life. It helps to ensure that we never lose our joy!

Prayer to the Holy Spirit

Holy Spirit,
you are the soul of my soul.
I humbly adore you.
Enlighten me, strengthen me,
lead me, console me.
Reveal your wishes to me
as far as this is in accordance
with the plans of God the Eternal Father.
Let me recognize
what Eternal Love wishes me to do.
Let me recognize what I should do.
Let me recognize what I should suffer.
Let me recognize what I should
humbly and thoughtfully assimilate, bear and endure.
Yes, Holy Spirit, let me recognize
your will and the will of the Father,
for my entire life must be nothing else
than a continual, perpetual yes
to the wish and will
of God the Eternal Father.⁶

⁶ Fr Kentenich, based on a prayer by Cardinal D. Mercier.

Cincture Prayer

Bind me, Lord, and have mercy on me.

Bind me to yourself and your love.

Bind me to your Mother.

Bind me to my vocation.

Bind me to ...

Unbind me, Lord, and have mercy on me.

Unbind me from centreing on myself.

Unbind me from all that draws me downwards.

Unbind me from all that robs me of my freedom.

Unbind me from ...

Connect me, Lord, and have mercy on me.

Connect me with my bishop,

Connect me with my confrères.

Connect me with my spiritual family.

Connect me with my parish.

Connect me with ...⁷

⁷ Based on a suggestion of Fr Kentenich.

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Adsum Prayer

Do you want my work?

Adsum!

Do you want all my mental powers
to waste away?

Adsum!

Do you want my death?

Adsum!

But see to it

that all whom you have given me

love our Lord,

live for him and learn to die for him.⁸

⁸ J. Kentenich, In the Gestapo Prison, Koblenz, 5 January 1942.