



Places to meet Father

Milwaukee



Centre: Exile Shrine (built 1954); Top from left: Fr K in second office; Fr K in first office; Large window, Fr K's first office; Below from left: Mr & Mrs Horn; Holy Cross church and Pallottine Provincial House; blessing the statue for Belmonte, Rome (2010).

Fr Kentenich's leave-taking from Milwaukee, 15 September 1965:

We want to take leave of each other. What may I impress upon you at this moment? Actually there are three wishes. I will express them very simply. To start with, let me put it this way:

(1) Child, don't forget your Mother! *That is what we have engraved on our hearts most deeply in the course of these years. It is what we have taken in from childhood – a warm and deep love for the Blessed Mother. I think that this has become deeper and more vital; I think that the Blessed Mother has led us individually and as a whole more deeply into the heart of God, the Eternal Father. ...*

(2) A second statement. I think it would have to be: Child, don't forget the mercies of God, the Eternal Father, *behind which we also find the mercies of the Blessed Mother. If we consider what we have been allowed to experience in the course of the years we have been together – each one will know this the best – I think that on the whole we will all have to admit: We have become more deeply religious and stronger characters; we have learnt to oppose the spirit of the times. All in all, then, we can and should and must actually repeat what has been repeated on countless occasions by the saints: I will praise the mercies of the Blessed Mother and the mercies of God, the Eternal Father, for all eternity!*

(3) ... The third statement: Child, don't forget your wretchedness! *We know what that means. The more deeply we have grown into God's heart, and the more deeply we have grown into the reality of the supernatural world, the more deeply we experienced the dividing line between the ideal and reality, and the more we felt: We are not just a community of saints, but also a community of sinners, poor sinners. However, besides this we have learnt, day by day we learnt again, to correctly interpret precisely our wretchedness as a wake-up call from the eternal, infinite mercy of God, our Eternal Father.*

Milwaukee – Hot on the Trail of a Hidden World

The time at the disposal of a founder to call his work into existence and lead it maturity is very precious. If we count it up, we will see that Fr Kentenich spent exactly a quarter of his time as founder uninterruptedly in Milwaukee, USA. After Schoenstatt itself, there is not other place that has such deep and vital traces of his spiritual fatherhood as Milwaukee. Soon after his return from exile, Fr Kentenich indicated that “for the moment the Schoenstatt Family is not yet aware” of how important what took place during his exile was to his own heart and in the whole Schoenstatt Family. “We still don't fully appreciate how new the character of the child, father and community is that has become a reality within us.” Fr Kentenich pointed out

that the inner process of maturation and transformation reached unimagined “depths” in the last phase of his exile (Christmas Letter 1965). A few years ago the book on Fr Kentenich’s childhood surprised many and was a great gift. This will probably be repeated to a far greater extent when the hidden years of his exile are made available. We will be amazed at the extent to which grace is connected with this place and this time.

Holy Place

Actually we can only approach Milwaukee with great reverence: “Take off your shoes, ...” This is all the more important because the visible traces are so simple. If you want to do it quickly, you can get to know all there is to see in three days. The “mystery” of Milwaukee will certainly not be revealed in this way. Evidently you have to get involved with the place. It is marked by the fact that a holy priest has lived here for a long time, and made it a place where you can encounter God and the community in a special way. He touched a “mysterious depth” here, “which can only be understood to some extent in the light of faith and on the basis of a breakthrough of the divine into our Family”.

The Great Silence

Through being isolated from his Movement, and the manifold limitations imposed on him, Fr Kentenich was led into a time of profound silence. Although the inner attachment of his Family was never broken, especially the first years in Milwaukee meant that he was very lonely and silent. On top of this there was his helplessness at not being able to intervene in the battles surrounding Schoenstatt, and at not being able to support his endangered Family. He entered into the battle all the more by sanctifying his life, by prayer and by suffering on his Family’s behalf. There are a few indications that help us to guess that for our Father the Milwaukee period was infinitely worse than the time he had spent in Dachau. The years passed; he grew older, the attacks on Schoenstatt increased, the waves within the Church towered on high ... Perhaps Milwaukee will give all pilgrims the grace to enter into our Father’s inner silence and detachment, so that God could carry out his plans without hindrance.

Father’s Epiphany

Fr Kentenich’s unshakeable calm and sovereign friendliness were the one side the people in Milwaukee could see in him; his inner struggle with God’s inscrutable will and challenges were the other side, the hidden side. When someone can speak so forcefully about our incomprehensible God and the abyss of human wretchedness, it means that he must have experienced and suffered through the heights and depths, the abyss of which he is speaking. Although it was rare that someone no-

ticed the “human weeping”, because he hid it so well, it was strongly outshone by the “divine smile”. Nevertheless, the counterpart to the new and overwhelming revelation of God the Father’s mercy in him and through him to the world around, was the “ocean” of suffering and the abyss of God’s incomprehensibility. During the last months in Milwaukee, Fr Kentenich began a cycle of sermons in which he introduced his congregation into the “game of love” between our Father-God and his Father-child. At the time he indicated that these explanations summarised the “harvest” of the Milwaukee period. In Milwaukee he personally exemplified this game of love in a perfect way. One day Milwaukee will become a great place of pilgrimage where people go to pray for the grace to experience God’s fatherhood and their childhood.

If you belong to Father, you are his Family

The time of exile also had its advantages: Fr Kentenich had time for families. This was a special dispensation of Divine Providence. There were families that Fr Kentenich accompanied for many years in their personal questions and needs through weekly or monthly discussions. He was truly their Father. It was much the same as at the beginning of Schoenstatt’s history: People felt attracted to him and drawn into his inner mystery, the covenant of love; whoever was attached to Father, belonged to his Family. So Milwaukee also gives us the grace to experience that we are Father’s Family – across the boundaries of the different communities.

Contemporary Witnesses as a Bridge to Father

Unfortunately many members of the Schoenstatt Family only know the outward facts of the exile period. It almost seems as though the special “Father climate” that had grown in Milwaukee is still packed in Father’s luggage. Many contemporary witnesses in Milwaukee, who knew him well, keep silent and regard what they experienced as a very personal legacy. It is highest time to discover these witnesses and to ask them warmly to open their hearts so that later generations can begin to divine something of this “Father world”. The mystery of Milwaukee is not an idea, but our Father on a very personal level. Our Father himself has to shine through and become tangible behind many of Schoenstatt’s ideas. Our “Father and Founder” has to be experienced in a very personal way as “my Father”. Perhaps we also need new forms by which we can experience our Father at special “Father places”.

Rainer Birkenmaier