



*The following nine texts follow Fr Kentenich's life, but they do not concentrate on dates and the historical order of events. The intention is far more to shed light on what was going on in the founder himself, to the extent that this is accessible to us and attested by himself.*

*Fr Kentenich liked to use a picture to characterize Jesus' words. He said they were like a "hole in a rock" – such as you find when climbing mountains, for example – that suddenly open up the view onto a vast landscape. So we may see the following texts also as a "hole in a rock" that give us an insight into the landscape of the founder's soul.*

## **1. Schoenstatt's Roots in Fr Kentenich's Childhood and Youth**

### ***The importance of the text:***

*The outward course of Fr Kentenich's life with all its dates and events is well documented. The beginning of his life as a priest – at least from the time he was appointed Spiritual Director of the College in Schoenstatt in Autumn 1912 – is practically identical with Schoenstatt's foundation. So it is natural that the unfolding of Schoenstatt's spirituality at the same time gives us an insight into the founder's life and spiritual development.*

*However, the people of today who are strongly influenced by psychology want to examine things more closely. They want to know: What actually went on in Fr Kentenich's mind? Where in his childhood can we find the biographical roots of Schoenstatt's spirituality?*

*Fr Kentenich was personally very reticent – indeed even shy – when it came to talking about himself, his own history, and above all his childhood.*

*So the text that follows is a particularly valuable testimony that tells us in an authentic way where the founder himself saw the roots of his spirituality, and how it matured through his personal crises.*

### ***The historical background to the text:***

*1954 was the 40th anniversary of Schoenstatt's foundation. It was not possible to think of a jubilee celebration, because the founder was already in exile in Milwaukee. In some circles his name could only be mentioned with great caution and restraint. The relationship to the Pallottine Society had become so fraught that the question had been raised whether St Vincent Pallotti, rather than Fr Kentenich, was really Schoenstatt's founder.*

*In order that the jubilee might not pass unnoticed, Fr Menningen wrote a study entitled "Founder and Foundation."<sup>1</sup> Although he did so out of personal gratitude, he at the same time wanted to defend Fr Kentenich's*

---

<sup>1</sup> Fr Alex Menningen (1900 - 1994) entered the Pallottine Minor Seminary shortly before Schoenstatt's foundation. He eventually played a leading role in the Marian Sodality. Soon after his ordination, Fr Kentenich called him to work at

authority as the founder in view of the Church policies already mentioned. Only a very few copies of this study were in circulation at that time.

The study developed the thesis that Schoenstatt's foundation had to be understood as "the extended self of the founder". In this context, Fr Menningen discussed Fr Kentenich's childhood and youth, to the extent that he knew about them, in order to discover the roots of Schoenstatt's spirituality there.

Fr Kentenich wrote an answer to this study in a personal letter dated 14 September, 1955, in which he described his childhood and the crisis of his youth. This text is known by its title, "Answer to 'Founder and Foundation'". In February 1960, in the context of the Golden Jubilee of his profession (24 September 1959), and in preparation for the Golden Jubilee of his ordination to the priesthood, Fr Kentenich wrote his "Apolo-*gia pro vita mea*" in his self-defence. The following text can be found in this document (page 162 ff.). For the German original see "Zum Goldenen Priesterjubiläum" (Sion Patris), Berg Sion 1985, pp.162 - 171.

## Introduction

Linguistically, historically, psychologically, and theologically this study is a masterpiece.

It makes me aware again that I do not have the right to regard or treat my personal spiritual history as a secret. On the contrary, it is my duty to consider it the common property of the Family.<sup>2</sup> The reason for this, which can be proved, is that the whole history of the Family is an extension and repetition of my own spiritual history. I hope that at the right time I will have the opportunity to carry out this obligation. At present there just isn't the time. Therefore the notes that follow should merely record some thoughts so that later, on another occasion, they can be enlarged upon and completed to form a single picture.

I shall limit myself to a few historical and psychological hints.

## Historical hints

It should be upheld as a sort of 'dogma' that in the entire history of our Family I have never appeared on my own. On the one hand, whatever I do, I do in the most vital contact with the Blessed Mother; on the other, I never act without the same close and most intimate union with my followers. I am, therefore, fully justified in saying that as far as I am concerned the words "nothing without you" apply not merely to the Mother of God, but also to my followers. Hence, all that has developed is our common work in the sense indicated.

Nor have I used the spiritual lives of my followers as a source of insight and as arable land more by chance and inadvertently, or for tactical reasons. No, I was always consciously aware of a definite, divine plan. We are not concerned here with what is simply or mainly a working, or task-oriented, community. The basis at all times has been a profound and comprehensive spiritual community – a unique way of living spiritually in, with, and for one another. Rather, we are concerned with a life-process that has an extremely strong and creative force. That is how it has been since the beginning.

So what broke through with elemental force in 1942, and that has since then sought perpetuation in the "Follower's" or "Child's Acts",<sup>3</sup> should merely be seen as the climax of a tendency that has grown in volume

---

the Centre of the Movement, and he became one of his most trusted collaborators. During Fr Kentenich's exile he was active in defending the founder and an "integral" understanding of Schoenstatt. As a result, he was transferred away from Schoenstatt and forbidden to take part in meetings. For the time of his absence Fr Kentenich appointed him the "representative head" with the authority to take final decisions. While Fr Kentenich was in prison in Koblenz in 1942, he had spiritually cast his "prophet's mantle" around Fr Menningen as a symbol of this position.

<sup>2</sup> The Schoenstatt Family.

<sup>3</sup> A further development of the original covenant of love, which was entered into with the Mother of God, and through her with the Triune God. In the course of time, and especially after 20 January 1942, Fr Kentenich became aware of his God-willed position in this covenant. He therefore accepted the inner urge of his followers to enter into the covenant through him, their father and founder. This is a practical application of his teaching on the key position of secondary causes as the contact points with God and the divine. In the priests' communities this development of the covenant of love was called the "*Gefolgschaftsakt*" – literally, the act of discipleship, or of followers; in the women's branch, in particular with the Sisters of Mary, it was called the "*Kindesakt*" – literally, the act of the child. In both instances it was

from year to year, and that has finally broken down all dams and dykes. The ideal of the Family had lived in us more profoundly for a longer time before it was consciously proclaimed. All in all, therefore, I do not appear in our family history as an isolated individual, but always as the head of the Family.

There are countless ways of proving the existence of the inner community and identity that exists between my spiritual history and the history of the Family. I shall highlight only two. I am thinking, first of all, of an ejaculation that developed slowly in me, the origins of which reach back to my early childhood. It was later formulated in Latin:

*Ave Maria, puritatis tuae causa  
custodi animam meam et corpus meum,  
aperi mihi cor tuum et cor Filii tui;  
da mi animas et cetera tolle tibi.*<sup>4</sup>

It should not be difficult to discover in it the rootstock out of which the whole spirituality of the Family later developed and was nourished.

A second proof is provided by the event which the Study calls a consecration to Mary,<sup>5</sup> which impacted on the life of the nine - year - old, and which was to exercise an influence throughout the course of time. I do not yet want to lift the veil from this event. If we are to speak of a consecration to Mary, we have to add that it has a character all its own. Historians will later be able to show quite easily that, in fact, the whole of Schoenstatt was already germinally present in it.

Two elements in the Study specifically need to be confirmed. The one is my total inner loneliness and isolation and the attendant inability to enter into deeper contact (*Kontaktnot*) with this world, and the other is the interpretation of this phenomenon. Without doubt there are many people whose developmental years have been similarly marked. However, I believe that after objective scrutiny it is possible to state that the degree, extent, and duration – when compared with available data – took on extraordinary proportions. In retrospect it is easy to understand its purpose. My soul was meant to remain as untouched as possible by outside influences, especially by the influence of human beings, so that every fibre of my being might remain receptive to the real teacher in my life, to her formative power and to her educational wisdom. By this I mean the Blessed Mother. She has played this part in my life not just in the recent or more distant past. I have been consciously aware of her presence in my spiritual life from this point-of-view since my very earliest years. It is difficult to pin down the exact point in time from which I have regarded and appreciated myself as her work and instrument. The process can be traced back to my early childhood. Against this background it should be understandable why I later barred myself against Pallotti's influence. As far as possible I wanted to be, and remain, dependent on the Mother of God. Of course, the Blessed Mother always has to be seen as a symbol of, and in connection with, our Lord and the Triune God. On countless occasions in the past, therefore, I have seen myself as a hermit in a vast desert, while at the same time always connected to the Mother of God as the great teacher of both my inner and outer life. Ever since the Family came into existence, it has been and remains my most fervent desire to keep it in the most intimate contact with the Blessed Mother. In the years that followed I often announced courses on various subjects, but in the end could not decide to hold them, because I thought I could see little clouds in the distance which indicated that the Family was in danger, if not of losing, then of loosening the ground in which it is rooted: its

---

an acknowledgement of Fr Kentenich's fatherhood, with all that this implied for both sides. These acts were one of the most controversial points in the Visitation that began in 1949 and led up to Fr Kentenich's exile.

<sup>4</sup> Hail Mary, as you are so pure, keep me pure in body and soul, open wide to me your heart and the heart of your Son; give me souls and take everything else for yourself. (Cf. Text 2)

<sup>5</sup> On 12 April 1894 his mother brought him to the orphanage in Oberhausen. In a talk of May 1914 he relates, "Quite some time ago I saw a statue of the Mother of God in an orphanage chapel. It had a gilded cross and chain around its neck. The cross and chain were a mother's memento of her First Communion. Unfortunate family circumstances had forced her to bring her only child to the orphanage. She could no longer mother her child. What could she do in all her anxiety and worry about the child? She went to the statue, took the only valuable memento of her childhood – her Communion memento – and hung it around the neck of the Mother of God with the fervent prayer, 'Educate my child! Be his Mother! Carry out my duties as his mother for me!' Today this child is a zealous priest, and his work for God's honour and glory, and that of his heavenly Mother, is richly blessed". (Cf. *New Vision and Life*, p.22)

love for Mary. This is how the saying *Servus Mariae nunquam peribit*<sup>6</sup> has to be understood. In whatever I did, I and my plans were never in the foreground – there was always and only the Mother of God in her being, her mission and her work – and later in the way she is connected with Schoenstatt as a place and as a Family. It was only the Visitation<sup>7</sup> and the controversy it raised about me personally which made me consciously aware of my original character, position, and mission. During those years, whenever I attempted to discern God’s plans for me, I always did so united in the depths of my soul with the MTA, even when I did not draw attention to it outwardly. This is how marked the development was of my awareness of being a Marian instrument with a Marian mission.

In summary, the two elements I wanted to emphasize are my loneliness and isolation, and the awareness of being Mary’s instrument.

[...]

### **Psychological hints**

It is difficult to interpret correctly and to pass on in context something that is filled with life. Without going into too much detail, I shall refer to the Study only very briefly and in passing in order to take my direction from it. For the rest I shall briefly try to describe the development and structure of my personal spiritual life.

It is necessary to emphasize how important the time of puberty and the crisis of puberty were during this process. To start with, it must be noted that my soul was never touched by sexual problems. My exceptionally strong transcendental mentality, which appeared at an unusually early age, rooted me so strongly in the next world, and since my earliest childhood has so profoundly freed me from all that is earthly and sensual, that no woman ever made any impression on me. I never thought of marriage. It was as though the idea of becoming a priest simply grew and developed in me without any tangible outward inspiration or influence. The ideal of virginity, therefore, is simply part of the structure of my whole being.

Since my childhood it has filled me so strongly that it even regulated my behaviour towards my female relatives to such an extent that I harshly rejected any attempt to touch me either inwardly or outwardly. As far back as I can remember, I have never accepted signs of affection, much less allowed myself to show signs of affection to anyone else. Yet this was not a sacrifice for me, it was simply a part of my being. If, for example, my eighty - year - old grandmother wanted to kiss me, I rejected this harshly and said, “I don’t want to be touched, I have given myself to God”. So no other course remained to her than to take my hand when I wasn’t expecting it and secretly kiss it.

This all - embracing spiritualization of my whole person, this orientation toward the next world, has never changed. I have never felt a need or desire in this regard. When contact took place, it was always the result of a decision in principle and the expression of a *‘Paternitas’*<sup>8</sup> that was close to life and at the same time distanced from it. This tension between spiritual closeness and spiritual distance made it impossible for me to tolerate in my presence a woman who was in any way suspect. After my ordination, I adopted the principle that in as far as it depended on me, I would not engage in a deeper pastorate with women before the age of 35. I carried out this principle to the letter. When in 1917 Baroness von Boullion asked me to become her spiritual director by correspondence, I refused out of hand and referred her to Fr Kolb, my Provincial Superior at the time. All that changed once the set period had passed, that is, from 1920.

Neither did my transcendental mentality allow me to enter into a deeper personal relationship with someone of my own sex. If a teacher or superior wanted to favour me because of my abilities, my reaction was always one of harsh rejection. In the lower classes at school we were given the opportunity to take piano lessons. A number of our class applied, but only Max Groesser and I were chosen. My immediate answer was, “No thank you! I don’t want preferential treatment.” Since I was so successful in my studies, many older students tried to make friends with me. However, I never responded in any way. My desire to remain

---

<sup>6</sup> “A servant of Mary will never perish.” These Latin words appear in the light frame around the MTA picture in the shrine. They express the experience and conviction of the founder generation.

<sup>7</sup> Episcopal Visitation, 19 - 28 February, 1949; Holy Week 1951, start of Apostolic Visitation, ended 3 August 1953 by Pope Pius XII.

<sup>8</sup> Fatherliness.

untouched and alone, and my extraordinary, almost exaggerated transcendental mentality, made anything else impossible.

I can vividly remember an episode that illustrates this clearly. The top classes once had a drinking bout. One of the students, who was constantly trying to make friends with me, came to my cell late at night in a tipsy state and sat down on the edge of my bed. The next day he sent me a page from his diary, which I have kept all these years without any special intention. This is because the episode left such a strong impression on me. Among other things he wrote – I can recall it word for word, “Next morning I looked my friend in the face. His voice thundered at me, ‘Away, you shameless one, you have forfeited my friendship forever.’” It should be noted that he had not overstepped the mark in any way. I simply would not allow anyone to come closer to me than was absolutely necessary. This did not change until after my ordination. What then germinated in me was a comprehensive ‘Paternitas’, which ultimately motivated me to become creative only through serving and loving others. It was creatively awakened by the people who came to me, and led further. I am almost inclined to say that the whole untapped force of love in me was then transformed into a fatherly love that irrigated the extensive areas of the world that were available to me, without in the least infringing upon the law of inner and outer integrity.

From what has been said it should be easy to understand that my youth was marked by an extraordinary alienation from this world. On the other hand, my whole being was forcefully drawn towards another, supernatural, world in order to be rooted there with every fibre of my being. So it is not surprising that the battles of my youth, which began with mathematical precision when I entered the Novitiate – there had been nothing before that – had to be spiritual and intellectual in nature. To put it succinctly, I would have to say that precisely because my mind and soul were alienated from all that is earthly, from all that is truly human, from all that is of this world, the whole of me was inwardly tortured and tossed to and fro by total scepticism, exaggerated idealism,<sup>9</sup> destructive individualism, and one - sided supranaturalism. I have usually said that the battles of my youth were battles of faith. Such a statement should be understood in very general terms. To be more precise, my struggle involved scepticism and all the other - isms, in particular idealism and individualism. During these years the essential question was: Is there truth, and if so how can we recognise it?<sup>10</sup> The whole edifice of the faith was only indirectly drawn into this process. The individual truths of our faith as such were not in question, but rather the whole complex edifice of the Church’s teaching on the super - natural. Underlying this scepticism was an extremely strong fascination with the truth. This fanatical search for the truth became a driving force that determined everything I did. Even with regard to our professors, this inner passion for the truth often led me to overstep the bounds of tact.<sup>11</sup> To put it another way, I was allowed to savour to the full the same mental anguish that people of today do. It is the anguish of a mechanistic mentality, one which separates the idea from life (idealism), one person from another (individualism), and the supernatural from the natural order (supranaturalism).

During these years my soul was kept in balance to some extent by a personal and deep love for Mary. My experiences during this time led me to state later that the Mother of God is simply the point of intersection

---

<sup>9</sup> Although philosophical idealism as such is not referred to, Fr Kentenich saw the affinity between his one - sided and exaggerated fixation on ideas as such – that is, on abstract ideas unrelated to actual life – and the philosophical school associated with Hegel. It is an expression of what he called mechanistic thinking, that is, an intellectual construct that resembles a machine in which parts can be removed and replaced at will. The machine continues to exist. Organic thinking, however, sees life as something whole. It is not possible to remove a part without affecting or even destroying the whole. There is an interplay and interrelation between all the elements that make up the whole.

<sup>10</sup> During a discussion with Fr Boll in Milwaukee, Fr Kentenich enlarged on what he called his fanaticism for the truth. He was searching for absolute truth, an absolute proof of truth, similar to scientific proof. He was so gripped with this need to discover absolute certainty about the truth that he was unable to “switch off”, he was unable to divert his attention to something else. His questions, therefore, went far beyond the normal bounds of tact or good manners.

<sup>11</sup> To illustrate his point, Fr Kentenich, in the above - mentioned discussion, related an incident from his student days. At the end of the academic year it was customary to hold a public debate on a certain subject. In this debate a student had to set up a thesis, which he had then to defend against other students. Only the best were chosen for this debate. One year he was chosen to set up and defend a thesis. His defence was so brilliant that he silenced his critics within a few minutes. The professor jumped into the breach only to find his arguments demolished as quickly and thoroughly. For the professor it was a public humiliation.

for this world and the next, the natural and the super - natural. She is the balance for the world, which means that through her being and her mission she keeps the world in balance.

At the end of my studies I was given the new task of teaching and educating, and this immersed me deeply in life. Anyone who is versed in psychology will take it for granted that my extraordinarily strong transcendental mental set, with all its ramifications, began to be balanced by this contact with life. Not only was my own soul completely healed by this alliance between idea and life, or by an organic way of thinking and living; I also discovered with extraordinary clarity what my real task in life was: to overcome a mechanistic way of thinking and living. If you add to this the inner role of love for Mary, it should be possible to see my battle for the idea of the organism in the right light. After I had given full rein to the metaphysical tendency of my soul during puberty, contact with life developed my ability to empathize with others on the psychological level, and to form and mould them. My actual creativity, which I increasingly developed in the course of the years, consists in bringing about the harmonious combination of the natural and the super - natural, and their interaction.

The Study is of the opinion that my difficulties before my Perpetual Profession lay in my integration into the community. This is only partly correct. My superiors were faced with a twofold problem. On the one hand, they were afraid that I would have difficulties with the faith; on the other, they feared that my critical search for the truth would also affect my subordination to authority in practice. I can well remember how Fr Kolb explained this to me, and how I answered clearly and definitely, "You don't need to worry about that. *Facie ad faciem*<sup>12</sup> you will always find that I am open and frank with you; behind your back you are absolutely safe with me".

I had already formulated an educational principle that I later constantly proclaimed: Frankness and openness towards one's superiors; reverence and discretion behind their backs.

In conclusion, let me remind you how mercifully Divine Providence has directed my path through life. It had been planned that I should continue on to University after I had completed my theological studies. From all that has been said, it should be clear that it would have been a mistake if such a plan had been carried out. The solution to my problems was not to be found in occupying myself with abstract knowledge, but in contact with life, or, to be more precise, in the alliance between this world and the next, between the ideal and reality. This gave me the direction for my task in life. This alliance soon matured to bring about purified "verism"<sup>13</sup> (as opposed to scepticism), comprehensive realism (as opposed to idealism), durable "solidarism" (as opposed to individualism). In brief, an organic way of thinking and living.

---

<sup>12</sup> Literally, face to face

<sup>13</sup> Fr Kentenich coined these terms from their Latin roots. „Verism“ comes from *veritas* – truth; „solidarism“ from *solidare* – to make solid or firm, consolidate.