



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

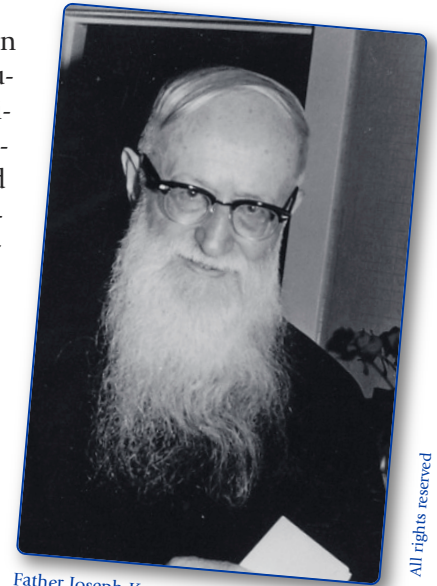
Letter of April 8, 2013,
Annunciation of the Lord

Dear Friends,

OCTOBER 1912. A storm was shaking the seminarians' residence hall in Schoenstatt, Vallendar, not far from Koblenz, Germany. The older students were protesting a school rule they believed to be too strict. Anti-establishment graffiti were all over the walls. The two priests in charge of spiritual direction resigned. A young priest, Joseph Kentenich, was hurriedly appointed to replace them in order to reestablish trust. During his first talk with the students, he introduced himself with these words: "I place myself entirely at your disposal with everything that I am and have, with my knowledge and my ignorance, with my strength and my powerlessness, but above all, my heart ... we are going to learn to educate ourselves on our own, under the protection of MARY, so we become men of firm character, men who are free and priestly." Right away, the new spiritual father and the seminarians who were rebelling a short time ago got along well. From this meeting was born the Schoenstatt movement. Who is this priest whose memory is venerated today by millions of Catholics?

Joseph was born the illegitimate son of Katharina Kentenich on November 18, 1885 in Gymnich, close to Cologne. This very poor woman, who was pious notwithstanding the extramarital relationship into which her son was born, passed on to Joseph her profound devotion to MARY. When she brought her eight-year-old son to the Orphanage of St. Vincent in Oberhausen, she brought one of the few valuable objects she possessed, a gold chain with a cross. She hung it around the neck of a statue of Our Lady, asking the Mother of JESUS to see to his upbringing from that point on, then put this cross around Joseph's neck. These years in the orphanage were difficult for the child, who ran away twice and played many pranks. But he would earn good grades at the orphanage, and more importantly, was profoundly affected by his consecration to MARY.

Joseph first expressed his desire to become a priest in 1897. Two years later, he was admitted to the minor seminary in Ehrenbreitstein, run by the Pallottine Fathers, members of a missionary congregation founded by Saint Vincent Pallotti in Rome in 1835. In 1904, he entered the Pallottine novitiate in Limburg. He expressed his spiritual process with these words in his journal: "God is my only goal. He must also be the star that guides my life." However, the novice experienced great difficulties that arose from his intellectual nature. The basic philosophical question "Does truth exist, and how can one know it?" tormented his intellect. He greatly desired perfection, but suffered from tremendous insensitivity, an inability of sorts to love God and neighbor. Devotion to MARY made it possible for him to overcome this crisis, and discover the personal love that God,



Father Joseph Kentenich

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JESUS CHRIST, and the Virgin MARY had for him, a love that was not an abstract idea, but a living reality.

Three pillars

After receiving permission in 1909 to make religious profession, Joseph Kentenich was ordained a priest in Limburg on July 8, 1910. An attack of tuberculosis prevented him from realizing his dream of going to Africa as a missionary. After arriving in Schoenstatt in 1912 under the circumstances mentioned earlier, he soon founded an association of lay people, which would become a Marian congregation in 1914. The three pillars of Schoenstatt are love for the Virgin MARY, personal sanctification, and commitment to apostolate. His superiors granted the founder permission to use the modest chapel dedicated to Saint Michael, which was disused and had been turned into a tool shed. There, on October 18, 1914, the founder gathered twenty or so young men. Here was heard for the first time the liturgical invocation that was to become the movement's motto: *Nos cum prole pia benedicat Virgo MARIA* (May the Virgin MARY with her loving Offspring bless us!) Father Kentenich's idea was to make this chapel a great pilgrimage site: "May all those who come here to pray experience the splendor of MARY!" This desire was soon fulfilled—pilgrims flocked there.

In 1915, a teacher gave Father Kentenich a picture of the Virgin and Child. In spite of the work's low artistic value, the founder was attracted by the tenderness of

MARY's gesture, pressing JESUS to her heart. He placed the icon above the altar. Venerated under the name *Mater ter admirabilis* (Mother Thrice Admirable), the picture appears in every Schoenstatt site. In the middle of the war, a magazine under this same patronage was sent to youth fighting on the front. In May 1918, a twenty-year-old member of Schoenstatt, Joseph Engling, a fervent seminarian who supported peace between nations and an apostle among his fellow soldiers, offered his life to the Mother Thrice Admirable for the growth of Schoenstatt. On October 4th, he was killed by a shell in northern France. The founder put forth Joseph Engling as an example.

Spiritual fatherhood

In 1919, Father Kentenich created an apostolic union to bring together students and teachers across Germany. The aim of the union was "the formation of lay apostles, in the spirit of the Church." Each member was to: (a) choose a priest as a spiritual director, (b) practice a written examination of conscience, (c) establish a spiritual daily schedule and abide by it, and (d) meet with one's spiritual director every month. In addition, members of Schoenstatt ask the Immaculate Virgin for "tender sensitivity for the virtue of purity." Chapels dedicated to the Mother Thrice Admirable were erected throughout Germany. In 1920, the movement was opened up to women through the Apostolic Alliance. In 1926, the founder created the Schoenstatt Sisters of MARY, consecrated women living in the world. The founder reminded the many priests who came to make retreats (1,100 priests in 1930) of their duty to be spiritual fathers. According to him, one of the primary causes of the moral crisis of our time was the absence of the father.

What is meant by the father's nonparticipation in the family? It means not raising the child, not appropriately exercising authority, and not providing an example of spiritual life, including practicing one's faith. Pope Benedict XVI alluded to this in a speech on May 23, 2012: "Today the father figure is often not sufficiently present and all too often is not sufficiently positive in daily life. The father's absence, the problem of a father who is not present in a child's life, is a serious problem of our time. It therefore becomes difficult to understand what it means to say that God is really our Father."

Father Kentenich wished to promote the development of "organic," as opposed to "mechanical" human thought. In doing so, he intended to emphasize that religion must not be thought of as an abstract system, but as a living reality deeply rooted in the human heart. At the time of the rise of the red (Communist) and brown (National-Socialist) totalitarian regimes, he rebelled against the depersonalization of man: "Confronted with the domination of matter and mass, we fight for the splendor and power of God and for men and women filled with God."

After Hitler rose to power in January 1933, the police began to keep Schoenstatt under surveillance, and its founder in particular, whom the Gestapo considered

very dangerous, given that they aimed at stifling spiritual renewal in Germany. Yet starting in 1935, it was certain ecclesiastical circles that created the greatest difficulties for Father Kentenich, by contesting his "peculiar ideas"—his Mariology seemed too eccentric to them. The founder often said that the merits of devoted souls must be offered to the Blessed Virgin, to become the "Capital of graces" on which she would yield a profit. Under this concept borrowed from modern economics, we find a classic spiritual tenet. As early as the beginning of the eighteenth century, Saint Louis-Marie Grignon spoke of the servants of MARY as "capital" that the Mother of God uses for Her actions "to the greatest glory of God, in time and in eternity." However, the criticisms against Schoenstatt continued, marked by a lack of understanding that pained the founder. "Even if the difficulties grow worse," Father Kentenich confided, "we have our little motto that works wonders: *Mater habebit curam* (the Mother will take care of it.)"

Revealing the inner void

In 1940, the Nazi persecution of the Catholic clergy intensified. On September 20, 1941, Father Kentenich was called in by the Gestapo, who quoted back to him something he had said behind closed doors, but that had been reported by an informer: "My mission is to reveal the inner void that is National Socialism, and in doing so, to defeat it." The police imprisoned Father Kentenich for a month in an unventilated room, to break his will. He was then transferred to the prison in Koblenz. Thanks to the collusion of two guards, he received what he needed to celebrate Mass there, and exchanged letters with Schoenstatt. He offered himself completely, giving to the Mother of God "an unconditional free hand," to do with him as she wished, and asking one and all to participate in his sacrifice to obtain "duration, fruitfulness, and holiness" for his spiritual family.

In March 1942, Father Kentenich left for Dachau, a concentration camp close to Munich, at the very time that living conditions there were getting worse. Of the 12,000 prisoners, 2,600 were priests. The Germans were gathered together in one barrack where they were allowed to attend Mass each day, celebrated by one of them. It wasn't until March 19, 1943 that Father Kentenich was able to celebrate his first Mass at the camp. Every evening, he gave a spiritual talk to his fellow prisoners thanks to the protection of "kapo" Guttman (the kapo was the head prisoner in each barrack), a Communist with a very violent nature, but who was fascinated by Father Kentenich's behavior. He had seen him share his meager daily ration of bread and soup with a needier prisoner. Guttman would save the life of the founder of Schoenstatt, who was fated for extermination in the gas chamber owing to his poor health. The day an S.S. doctor visited to select the sick prisoners, the kapo hid Father Kentenich. Sent to the disinfection commando, Father Kentenich could from then on move freely around the camp.

On July 16, 1942, two new branches of Schoenstatt were created in Dachau, under the responsibility of two lay prisoners—the Secular Institute for Families and the Secular Institute of the Schoenstatt Brothers of MARY. Transferred to various blocks, the founder began his apostolate each time again in spite of the personal risk he ran. During the three last months of 1944, the hardening of the Nazi regime and epidemics resulted in the deaths of ten thousand prisoners at Dachau. It was at this time that, in an astonishing act of faith full of hope, Father Kentenich, in a place that resembled hell, founded with a group of followers the international movement that extended the Schoenstatt foundation to the whole world. In December, Bishop Piguet, a French bishop who was a prisoner, ordained a Schoenstatt seminarian, Blessed Karl Leisner, in the utmost secrecy. Suffering from tuberculosis and very weak, Leisner was able to celebrate only one Mass before he died. He was beatified by John Paul II on June 23, 1996.

On April 6, 1945, with the Americans approaching, the prisoners were freed. On May 20th, the feast of Pentecost, Father Kentenich returned to Schoenstatt. He immediately set to work, to establish a barrier against the double peril the founder lucidly discerned—Communism in the East, and practical materialism in the West. His experience of internment would help him teach his followers how to maintain internal freedom. Two martyrs of Schoenstatt, Fathers Reinisch and Eise, the first succumbing to disease in Dachau, the latter beheaded by the Nazis, would often be invoked as heavenly protectors by all the members of the Movement.

Secular institutes

In March 1947, Father Kentenich, who was received in a private audience by Pope Pius XII, thanked the Supreme Pontiff for publishing the constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia* two days earlier, which created Secular Institutes. This term refers to a group of Christians, lay people and diocesan priests, living in the world and forming among themselves a society of consecrated life. The aim of these institutes is to help their members try to achieve the perfection of charity. Although not religious in the strict sense of the term, the members of secular institutes can make private vows. In October 1948, the Holy See established the Schoenstatt Sisters of MARY as a secular institute. At the same time, the founder went to Latin America, then Africa and the United States, to introduce the movement there.

However, opposition continued to mount against the movement, whose solidity and expansion aroused jealousy. The opposition was not about points of doctrine, but primarily about expressions used in certain prayers and on the founder's role, which was considered too all-encompassing. The bishop of Trier, the bishop of the diocese in which Schoenstatt was situated, ordered a canonical visitation. While the visitor's report overall spoke very highly of Schoenstatt, it nevertheless lodged

several thorough criticisms to which Father Kentenich was invited to respond. Father Kentenich believed he needed to elevate the discussion by drafting a long document on the Schoenstatt movement, which was presented as a remedy for idealism, the disease of Western thought.

Starting in the eighteenth century, this way of thinking, which came from the philosophy of the Enlightenment, radically separated ideas from concrete reality. It is still found in our time, particularly in the form of relativism, a system under which absolute truth does not exist: "To each his own truth." During the Mass for the opening of the 2005 conclave, Cardinal Ratzinger drew the cardinals' attention to this danger: "Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labeled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be 'tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine,' seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires. We, however, have a different goal: the Son of God, the true man. He is the measure of true humanism. An 'adult' faith is not a faith that follows the trends of fashion and the latest novelty; a mature adult faith is deeply rooted in friendship with Christ. It is this friendship that opens us up to all that is good and gives us a criterion by which to distinguish the true from the false, and deceit from truth" (Homily, April 18, 2005).

God speaks

For the founder, Schoenstatt was an antidote for this poison, because it was not an abstract theory but a practical application of Christian doctrine. Nevertheless, his lengthy declaration annoyed the apostolic visitor, who sent the matter to the Holy Office in Rome. In 1951, Father Tromp, a Dutch Jesuit, was appointed apostolic inspector with far-reaching powers. Taken aback by the unconventional terminology Father Kentenich used, he considered the Father a fanatic, an innovator, and even a sectarian. After having relieved him of all his duties leading the movement, he assigned him to reside in the Pallottin house in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He was prohibited from maintaining any correspondence with the leaders of the movement. Yet, undisturbed and obedient to Providence, which was acting through the ecclesiastical authority, the exile wrote, "Does God not speak clearly through events? The Church wishes to put our obedience to the test, in order to know by it whether our movement, and the bearer of the movement, are marked by God." In 1959, Father Kentenich was assigned as pastor to the German-speaking parish in Milwaukee, which included many emigrants from this nation. "He spoke to us about the Father of heaven," some of his parishioners would later report, "like no one we had ever heard before."

In 1953, some had suggested to Pope Pius XII that he dissolve Schoenstatt, but he refused to do so. The question arose regarding the status of the movement: should

it be integrated into the Pallottin congregation, or should it become autonomous? The superiors of the Order recommended the first solution, but other Pallottins thought, with Father Kentenich, that Schoenstatt was liable to deteriorate unless it was completely autonomous. In 1962, through the intervention of several bishops, Blessed John XXIII entrusted the matter to the Congregation for Religious. In December 1963, Paul VI named the bishop of Munster, Bishop Hoeffner, Schoenstatt's moderator and protector. A new apostolic visitor was appointed, who gave a positive report. In 1964, under the unanimous opinion of German bishops, a pontifical decree declared the separation of Schoenstatt from the Pallottins—this separation took place peacefully. The only thing the members of the movement had yet to do was obtain permission from Rome for the founder to return home. In October 1965, Father Kentenich was restored to his duties leading the movement. Now having reached his eighties, he was received by Paul VI a few days after the closing of the Second Vatican Council. He predicted that the council would "bear its fruit, but would have negative effects at first, owing to the uncertainty of large portions of the hierarchy, clergy, and laity with regard to the image of the Church ... this uncertainty can be overcome by turning our gaze to MARY, the first image and Mother of the Church."

During Christmas 1965, Father Kentenich, whose patriarchal face was bedecked with a long white beard, was greeted enthusiastically at Schoenstatt. His movement now included five secular institutes—the Schoenstatt Fathers, the Institute of Diocesan Priests, the Brothers of MARY, the Sisters of MARY, and the Institute of Our Lady of Schoenstatt for consecrated lay people. In addition, there were Unions and Leagues that brought together priests, lay people, and families. During the final years of his life, the founder devoted his energy to broadly exerting his spiritual fatherhood. In these years after the Second Vatican Council, an influential theology called for an "adult faith," the individual's autonomy, and the application of democratic principles in the

May Father Joseph Kentenich's example encourage us to enter into an alliance of love with the Most Blessed Virgin MARY that will make us instruments in the hands of this Mother Thrice Admirable. Through her, may all men and women go to JESUS CHRIST, the only Savior, and through Him, to His heavenly Father!

Church. Father Kentenich countered these fashionable ideas by insisting on the fatherhood of God and on the fatherhood that the priesthood should exert in the Church, particularly in the episcopate. This fatherhood, which has its origins in charity, is also the basis of authority and implies obedience. MARY's maternal care was the movement's other essential charism, which was lived out through a covenant of love with the Mother Thrice Admirable.

In a talk to the annual conference of German Catholics in 1967, Father Kentenich declared, "We are living in apocalyptic times... heavenly and diabolical powers are clashing on this earth... What is at stake in this confrontation is domination of the world—this is quite visible today." The solution is recourse to the Virgin MARY, "the special weapon in the hand of the living God." During his last year on earth, the year 1968 was marked by the rebellious spirit in the Church as in the world. Father Kentenich continually brought up this subject: "MARY's task is to bring Christ to the world and the world to Christ... we are convinced that the great crises of the present age cannot be overcome without MARY" (September 12, 1968).

Dilexit Ecclesiam

Three days later, Father Kentenich celebrated Mass in the brand-new sanctuary of the Adoration Church, which had recently been consecrated on Mount Schoenstatt. Six hundred Sisters of MARY attended the ceremony. When he returned to the sacristy for the prayer of thanksgiving, the celebrant suffered a sudden heart attack. He received last rites and died several minutes later. His mortal remains rest in the very spot where he breathed his dying breath. In accordance with his wishes, "*Dilexit Ecclesiam*" (*He loved the Church*; Eph. 5:25) is inscribed on his tomb. Today, the Schoenstatt movement, active in more than 100 countries, numbers about 100,000 members and exerts an influence on millions of associates. The founder's process of beatification began in 1975.

Dom Antoine Marie o.s.b.

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