

How Did the Episcopal and Apostolic Visitation in Schoenstatt Come About?

A visitation (Latin: visit) is a normal process in the Catholic Church. It does not always have to be about points of contention. For example, every bishop visits the parishes of his diocese at regular intervals. Every five years, the bishops of a country meet with the pope in Rome for what are known as ad limina visits.

In addition, special visitations may be requested from or instituted by a bishop or the pope when points of contention have arisen in a diocese, religious order, community, or ecclesiastical institution. Such a visitation is intended to prepare an objective and at the same time pastoral decision. The entire history of the Church, up to the present day, has been permeated by visitations in various forms, in which questions concerning the Church's doctrine, her way of life, discipline and concerning unity in the Church are examined and decided.

These visitations have been carried out at different times, in the respective structures that were common at the time. If the leadership of the Church was structured in a rather autocratic and authoritarian way, visitations were carried out accordingly. Thus, it is clear that visitations of earlier times, such as the one in Schoenstatt 70 years ago, were carried out much differently than is the case today. Therefore, it is not only meaningful, but also necessary to view and evaluate such a visitation in its context.

New Things Move the Church Forward

In light of a church led by the Holy Spirit, crises and points of contention should not be seen as accidents of church history, but rather as opportunities and possibilities invitations for the church to develop further and not simply continue to think and live along traditional lines. In retrospect, the church can be grateful for all those who were initially perceived as uncomfortable critics or troublemakers, and who then decisively moved the church forward overcoming her sore spots.

Excursus 1: Some Historical Notes

Father Kentenich was very aware of the importance, but also of the risks of visitations. However, he did not want a community that would continue to follow traditional predefined paths, but one that would help build a "Church on the new shore of time." Thus, the visitations did not come out of the blue for the Schoenstatt Movement, but the study of the newness of Schoenstatt was consciously desired by the founder. He wanted the Church's hierarchy to study his foundation, to examine it and to it, also legally. He saw such a process as necessary so that a fruitful work in and for the Church would be and remain possible.

Prehistory of The Visitations in Schoenstatt

Already in the years 1934/35 there was a major controversy in the ecclesial public about the so-called "peculiar ideas" of Schoenstatt. After the Bishop of Limburg, Antonius Hilfrich, had expressed serious reservations about Schoenstatt, Bishop Bornewasser of Trier commissioned Ignaz Backes, a professor of dogmatics, to prepare a dogmatic report on Schoenstatt's doctrine and spirituality. The report criticized the basic relationship of God to man represented in Schoenstatt. The General Government of the Pallottine Fathers then sent the General Councilor, Father Peter Resch (1873-1966), with the task of persuading Father Kentenich, by virtue of obedience, to renounce these ideas.

During the Second World War there was criticism from the Archbishop of Freiburg, Conrad Gröber. After the Second World War, even greater criticism was ignited by the publication of the Dachau Prayers "Heavenwards". In 1948, the dogmatic historian Auxiliary Bishop Artur Landgraf of Bamberg submitted a negative opinion on Heavenwards to the German Bishops' Conference. In the fall of the same year, the Bishops' Conference drew up a list of demands that the movement should fulfill, which, however, was initially withheld by the Trier diocese.

Excursus 2: For a Better Understanding of the History of the First Diocesan Visitation

The first diocesan visitation

On February 14, 1949, the Vicar General of Trier informed Father Kentenich's representative, Father Friedrich Mühlbeyer (1889-1959), that Auxiliary Bishop Dr. Bernhard Stein would come to Schoenstatt on behalf of the bishop for a **canonical visitation**. Beforehand, Trier had decided at the last moment not to appoint a study commission, but to hold an ecclesial visitation. Behind this was the assumption that especially the Sisters of Mary could only in this way be prompted to be completely open in their statements. In his introductory address, Auxiliary Bishop Stein attached particular importance to this point. **The visitation took place from February 19-28, 1949.**

The Second Apostolic Visitation

On April 18 and November 6, 1950, Auxiliary Bishop Stein sent two memoranda to the Congregation for Religious in Rome. In November 1950, he requested an Apostolic Visitation of the Schoenstatt Work and especially of the Sisters of Mary. It was primarily to investigate the attachment of the Sisters of Mary to Father Kentenich and his ecclesial disposition, as well as the circumstances under which the first Superior General of the Sisters of Mary, Sister Anna Pries, had resigned from her office in February 1950.

Subsequently, the **Holy Office** intervened and appointed Father Sebastian Tromp SJ, a well-known Roman theologian of dogmatics and fundamental theology and consultor of the Holy Office, as Visitor. He was Dutch and spoke sufficient German.

The Apostolic Visitation began in **Holy Week 1951** and **was authoritatively concluded by Pius XII on August 03, 1953.**

The Visitor first stayed in Schoenstatt for a week for a closer visitation of the Sisters. He then summoned Father Kentenich, who was again in South America, to Rome at the beginning of May and presented him with the choice of voluntarily resigning from his offices - otherwise he would have to expect deposition and exile from which he would not return. He would be a "persona non grata" with the German bishops. Fr. Kentenich conferred with Fr. General Adalbert Turowski (General Superior of the Pallottines) and Fr. Alexander Menningen and took the stand: "Voluntarily never, in obedience immediately." Through Father Turowski he had the answer transmitted to Father Tromp.

In decrees issued at the end of July 1951, Father Kentenich was removed as General Director of the Sisters of Mary and his separation from the Work was decreed. These decrees were made known to the Sisters in Schoenstatt on August 15, 1951. Father Kentenich received permission to still hold the large conferences he had announced for the fall (the Pedagogical Conference and the October Week 1951) and then went to Switzerland.

Excursus 3: Support for Fr. Kentenich by Fr. Turowski

But at the end of November, Fr. Kentenich was summoned to Rome and had to sign the **decree of exile** on November 27, 1951. The visitor expelled him from Europe. In mid-December Milwaukee, USA was designated as the place of residence. Fr. Kentenich received permission to arrange for visas to be obtained in South America and stayed in Argentina, Chile, and Brazil from January to June 1952. During this time, he served mainly as Delegate General for the Pallottines.

On June 21, 1952, Fr. Kentenich arrived in Milwaukee.

Literature

More details on Father Kentenich's conflicts with the Church: Schmiedl, Joachim, Der Konflikt um Pater Kentenich - Versuch eines Durchblicks, in: Regnum 55 (2020), issue 4.

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On the course of the visitations: On the History of the Pallottine Fathers and the Schoenstatt Movement, in: Regnum 45 (2011), issue 2. This is an interim report of the Historical Commission of the Pallottine Fathers and the Schoenstatt Fathers. <http://www.regnum-im-netz.de/download/hefte/REGNUM-45-2011-2.pdf>

Excursus 1: Some Historical References

Benedict of Nursia, for example, drew attention to the necessity of being at home in the time of the migration of peoples through his "stabilitas loci". Francis of Assisi, with his ideal of poverty, shook the Church, which was wallowing in wealth. Ignatius of Loyola brought new stability to the church after the turmoil of the 16th century. However, this did not prevent the church leadership, for example, from abolishing the Jesuit order for 40 years in 1773 due to political pressure and various conspiracy theories.

Excursus 2: For A Better Understanding of The Prehistory of The First, Diocesan Visitation

First: The relationship between the Ordinariate of Trier and Schoenstatt has been good and trusting over all these years. Archbishop Franz-Rudolf Bornewasser - whose first official encounter with Schoenstatt had taken place during the dedication of the Covenant Home in 1928 - was quite supportive toward Schoenstatt. The same applies to his Vicar General, Heinrich von Meurers. There were especially trusting relationships between Auxiliary Bishop Dr. Bernhard Stein and leading Schoenstatt representatives, so that Father Kentenich had come to the conviction that the Auxiliary Bishop could be chosen by Providence as a special instrument to understand Schoenstatt in its concern and to help pave the way for the Movement into the official Church.

The second point of view that plays a role here: Father Kentenich had returned from Dachau with the clear intention of doing everything on his own initiative so that the new life structure of Schoenstatt could be examined by the ecclesial authority and inserted into the legal organism of the Church.

Thus, it becomes understandable that the disputes about Schoenstatt were ultimately convenient for him. He wanted to use the occasion to encourage a thorough review. He had already suggested on his own initiative that Trier should appoint a confidant and send him to Schoenstatt. For Trier, this was also a possible way in which it could fulfill its duty of supervision after the urging of the Bishops' Conference. The possibility of a study commission was also considered.

During this time Father Kentenich was in South America.

On February 13, 1949, he wrote an official letter to Archbishop Rudolf Bornewasser asking him to send a confidant to Schoenstatt to study all pertinent questions. However, this letter came too late.

Excursus 3: Support for Father Kentenich by Father Turowski

Father General Adalbert Turowski got behind Father Kentenich and stood up for him, even though the latter had suggested that he fight through the difficulties with Rome alone, so as not to involve the Pallottines. An intense diplomatic activity began.

In the summer of 1951, Father Turowski stayed in Germany and had the opportunity to observe the Visitor, Father Tromp, at work for some time. He became convinced that he was not the right man for this task. So, he requested a new visitor in a petition in November 1951.