

Why Was There Silence for So Long?

In connection with the present confusion about the person of Father Kentenich and about his work as the founder of the Schoenstatt Movement, many members of the movement are asking questions such as: Why have we heard little or nothing about this? Why has there been silence in the past decades about what is now gradually coming to light? And many add the sentence: I want to know the truth!

These questions are connected with a feeling of disappointment. The image of Father Kentenich that is now emerging in public does not at all match the image that was conveyed about the Founder in the movement and that has also become the personal image of many people. The trust that many placed in Father Kentenich is being put to the test, is being questioned, or even destroyed. Certainly, these questions and the feelings associated with them should not and must not be pushed aside.

An Honest Look at The Founder

On behalf of all the branches and communities of the International Schoenstatt Movement, we wish to state clearly: Nothing should be concealed, nothing should be swept under the carpet of silence. It is necessary to find and share an honest, truthful, and differentiated view of the founder and our history.

But finding the truth is a difficult, complex undertaking. In finding the truth, it is not enough to arbitrarily publish and interpret discovered writings without knowing their context and how they came about, and to point out connections that cannot be found from the text alone. It requires patient detailed work to uncover and understand such connections. Nothing less than this has been the goal of various commissions within the Schoenstatt Movement. Little by little, results of this intensive work will be presented on this website.

Why Has Not Everything Been Said?

Does not publishing something always mean covering it up? Today, we are rightly overly sensitive about covering up delinquent or assaultive behavior. At the same time, there is a demand for absolute transparency. How did it come about that some things were not dealt with in public?

After Fr. Kentenich's death, preparations soon began for the opening of a beatification process. It is part of the orderly process of such a trial that all the documents concerning the person and life of the candidate are gathered, as well as pro and con testimonies. All this is done in a non-public setting in order to ensure the greatest possible objectivity on the part of those involved.

Couldn't it be assumed at that time that old accusations had been settled after Father Kentenich's return home from exile? After his arrival in Schoenstatt at the end of 1965, after the opening of the beatification process by the very bishop who had carried out the first visitation and initiated the second one; and after the "Nihil obstat" for the process from Rome?

The knowledge that "everything" entered the process - positive as well as negative voices - and thus was subject to the judgment of the church authorities, may have contributed to the fact that these complicated questions were perhaps not yet approached proactively. In addition, there was the opinion that documents included in the trial files were also under lock and key outside the trial. The fact that this is not true in every case has only been clarified recently.

Why No Proactive Information About This Time?

There are a number of approaches to investigate and present the history of the founder and the movement with historical accuracy. Nevertheless, some backgrounds, contexts, personal data remained hidden until now. These are efforts that still require many more steps and will certainly occupy future generations in Schoenstatt.

Why didn't more information come earlier? One reason is certainly that earlier generations lived in completely different contexts and therefore evaluated individual events differently on their time-related background. For example, Father Kentenich's illegitimate origin at the end of the 19th century was a stigma whose depressing consequences we know today only from hearsay. This stigma had social and even ecclesiastical consequences. According to the ecclesiastical code of 1917, an illegitimate child could not become a regular priest. That is why the young Joseph Kentenich went to the Pallottine Fathers, who offered those concerned the possibility of working as priests in the mission. Father Kentenich himself never publicly addressed this biographical detail. At times he made hints that he was waiting for a sign to speak about it. His first biographies followed this example - not to hide the truth, but probably out of a reverence for his person and his work as founder.

The reason, the "Epistola perlonga" and the "Apologia pro vita mea" as well as other writings written in exile were not widely circulated is clear from their genesis. Most of these extensive documents were written for the archive. At that time, this was the only possibility for Father Kentenich to present the events and contexts from his point of view clearly and without embellishment. The writings reflect what he perceived from the various sides and how he himself judged them.

In addition, some of these writings contain clear and unsparing criticism of ecclesiastical authorities and of the superiors of his community. He sent the "Apologia", his justification writing, which he wrote for the bishop of Trier the year of his golden jubilee as a priest, was first sent to the bishop of Münster with the request for advice. The latter replied to him that if he felt he had been treated unjustly; he should bear it in silence for the sake of his work. Father Kentenich would have preferred a clear response, but he followed the bishop's advice.

Assessment in Context

The Protection of the "Forum Internum" and of the Person

Why were such things not spoken about earlier in the Schoenstatt Movement? For the same reason that they were not spoken about in the Church in general. What happened in the area of confession and spiritual direction, then called guidance of the soul, was absolutely taboo and was subject - as it still is today - to confessional seal. The so-called forum internum was subject to absolute nondisclosure.

If someone wanted to communicate with another person about what she or he had experienced in confession, it was his or her responsibility. However, it was usually not to be negotiated in public. Since confession and spiritual direction deal with highly personal issues, hardly anyone would want his or her most private secrets to be discussed or even published in large circles.

As far as the publication of personal letters and other written material is concerned - as has now happened - the consideration must be even more differentiated. Many contexts must be taken into account if one wants to gain a reasonably fair picture of Father Kentenich's conduct. It is not a matter of justifying or downplaying various of his procedures, but rather of understanding the mentality of the time.

There is the problem that today, some 70 years after the relevant events, we apply completely different criteria to behaviors than did the persons affected at that time. The concept of spiritual abuse

and spiritual abuse of power as we understand it today did not exist back then. In the sensitized situation today, we set completely different standards for behavior and the use of official authority than the church did in the 1940s and 1950s. It was taken for granted that penitents would be denied absolution if they did not behave according to the norms of the Church. Therefore, no one would have thought of doubting the authority of confessors.

Furthermore, forms of penance and penitential exercises, such as self-chastisement as an exercise in penance for one's own sins, were widespread at that time for which we have little understanding today. The latter was still common practice in some religious orders in the 20th century.

With regard to Father Kentenich, it is now the task to evaluate his behavior in the context of the time and of his pastoral and pedagogical intention as well as his mission. Exaggerations and wrong behavior must be named, classified accordingly and, if necessary, one must distance oneself from it. This is especially true where human failure has played a role.

Now here lies another reason no one attempted to search for and publish personal letters in the archives of the Sisters of Mary, for example. Besides the respect for the internal affairs of a community, it was, above all, the right of a person to inviolability of privacy. For example, it did not occur to anyone to dig up personal incriminating material about Sister Georgia, who is now the talk of the town, and to reveal it to the public.

This right to the integrity of the person has been violated with all severity in recent publications to discredit Father Kentenich. Now, what should the next step be? Should all the material about that sister be brought up, for example, in order to uncover the real background and possibly gain a completely different light on certain events? This is where a gulf opens up between what we understand today as the right to privacy in the digital age and the demand for complete clarification, even if precisely such rights to privacy are being violated. A tension is emerging that is difficult to resolve.

Some Initial Important Steps Towards Clarification

With great honesty, an attempt will now be made to work on individual accusations against Father Kentenich in the mentioned sense, in order to come closer to a clarification of the inquiries.

In doing so, it should also be taken into account that undeniably the framework of confession or spiritual direction can open up a space in which abuse is possible. The hasty publication that Father Kentenich committed sexual abuse is not tenable. The remaining accusation that he abused his position as founder, spiritual director, and confessor with sisters in order to suppress these sisters spiritually and in part in a way that was contemptuous of humanity remains to be examined. This accusation should be further investigated despite the manifold experiences in the Schoenstatt communities that Father Kentenich met people with an attitude of extraordinary respect.

At this point we ask all members of the Schoenstatt Movement to trust in our sincere effort to work out new and realistic perspectives with reverence for all persons concerned and to make them accessible to all.