

# *“Paul” - No Coincidental Alias for Joseph Kentenich*

*Excerpt of a Talk given by Msgr. Dr. Peter Wolf - Sermon on January 20,2009*

## AN INNER CLOSENESS TO THE DESTINY OF THE APOSTLE OF THE PEOPLE

In the 1940's, the closeness to Paul grew through the experience of being jailed, which for Fr. Kentenich and those close to him, must have suggested itself as a parallel to a similar and comparable destiny. The first evidence pointing in this direction come from the letters written in the Gestapo prison located on Carmelite Street in Koblenz. Directly after his four weeks of solitary confinement, on 21 October 1941, the Founder wrote to Fr. Muhlbeier. “Moreover, in answer to the question as to what he should do, Paul receives the meaningful advice: “how much he will suffer for the sake of my name...” (cf. Acts 9:16) A letter to the Schoenstatt Sisters a week later, held more references to Paul. The Founder wrote with reference to the letter to the Galatians, that he often makes use of the possibility to speak to God about others “like Paul had done” (Gal 4,19). He wished the Sisters strength toward obtaining “the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4,13) and then writes: “With Paul, I pray: I bend my knee before the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ..” then follows the entire prayer from Ephesians 3,14-19.

Towards the end of the letter there is again a passage which points directly to the situation of the imprisonment of Paul. “We do not want to belong to those who know how to say much about total surrender in prayer, but who pull back the

reigns of all the horses in the world to reverse the wagon when God takes our prayer seriously and does with us what He will. That happens especially when he takes us into the school of suffering. Paul accepts it as self understood that, as members of Christ, we would be united with Him in his suffering and that this suffering not only means a collapse of humanity but also and most importantly, a start of Divine Strength and thereby signifies the rich fruitfulness of our life and action. (Col 1,24 ; 1Cor 4,9)”

A short message of significance is sent from prison at the beginning of December 1941,: “Every day I read Philippians 1” . ; alluding to the beginning of the letter to the Philippians, that Paul wrote from prison and in which he prays for his community and expresses his deep and heartfelt bond with them. In such a situation, the words of the Apostle begin to speak themselves anew, filled with their original authenticity and upholding their original emphasis. Thus, do letters from 2,000 years ago once more speak and awaken similar life.

## LEADING TOWARD BEING “GRIPPED BY CHRIST”

After Christmas 1941, The Founder took the risk of writing and then smuggling out of prison, talk after talk for a group of Sisters who were about to make their course consecration in the community and had chosen “Sponsa” (Latin for “Spouse”) as their course ideal. These talks, which were later published as “Sponsa Thoughts”<sup>1</sup>, contain yet again the invitation “to enter the school of St. Paul”. With noticeable enthusiasm, he presents Paul to them: “what made Paul, the man with 1000 hearts, so immeasurably great and strong and fruitful is his Personal Ideal – ‘The new person in Christ’.”

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<sup>1</sup> J. Kentenich, Nova creatura in Jesu et Maria. Vallendar-Schönstatt 1991

It is a highly stimulating introduction to the Pauline image of Christ - into his participation in the “exhilarating and overwhelming aspects of the Lord’s life”, which page after page arrived in Schoenstatt from the prison. The situation showed that he understood Paul, as it were, from the inside out. At this point, it appears to be that someone who shared in a similar destiny as Paul, studied Paul at the same time. Fr. Kentenich had in his cell a bible and a book about Paul, well-known and current, written by Joseph Holzner. The book was published in Freiburg in 1937 and was reprinted 14 times by 1940.

Paul’s meeting with the risen Lord was a truly new happening which changed his life in a basic way. He became a “new person”, a “new creation”. His new life is a life in and with Christ. Paul had undertaken in his letters to enter into this reality in a new way and to describe it with words. Joseph Kentenich is captivated by the efforts of the Apostle and attempts, with the theology of his time, to take this reality seriously, spiritually evaluate it and to pass it on to his followers. He wants to help them to grasp the relationship to Christ not only as a bond in the moral sense, but as a new reality, given as a gift at baptism, which we need to apply and base our life upon. Our relationship to Christ should develop into a being “gripped by Christ” which has its basis in a new reality of “membership in Christ”. This fact paves the way for all our striving and efforts.

With the concept of membership in Christ, we come to the central point of the teaching of the school of the holy Apostle Paul. For Kentenich, it is not one chapter next to others, but a thought which Paul made the central idea of his teaching and his life. It is his original point of entrance to Christ, which he, in contrast to the other apostles, did not know from an experience as a follower of the historical Jesus, but from the overpowering encounter with the Risen

Lord. We know this from the authentic witness of Paul in his letter to the Galatians and from the narrative and embellished description in the Acts of the Apostles.

This encounter after Easter, changed his existence into a “being in Christ”. This meant a new basis for living and from which grew a new way of existing. From out of this “following after” - which in the language of the evangelist denotes a disciple - came the expression in Paul’s letters “to be in Him”. The concept of the body and its members helped Paul to express, think through and hand on to others the consequences of this so called “in each other” and “for each other”.

It is important for Paul and Kentenich to use the reality given in Baptism as the launching point for our relation to Christ and our Christian life. How strongly Joseph Kentenich weighed these thoughts of Paul can be seen in the “*Sponsa Gedanken*” (“Thoughts of a Spouse”) and in the prayer book “*Heavenwards*”<sup>2</sup>. How consistently Joseph Kentenich held onto these Pauline formulations, becomes quite clear, in that in preparation for the first incorporation into the community of the Sisters of Mary, he planned a four week retreat centered on the theme of membership in Christ. Until today, the Spirituality is bound to these perceptions sent from prison on Carmel Street in Koblenz.

## “PAUL” AS AN ALIAS FOR KENTENICH

Following the imprisonment in Koblenz, Fr. Kentenich was transferred to the concentration camp of Dachau on 13 March 1942 , where he remained until he was released by the Americans on 6 April 1945. Already in his first letter written from the concentration camp he wrote: “You surely

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<sup>2</sup> Vgl. dazu: Peter Wolf, Gebetsschule Himmelwärts, Geistlicher Kommentar zu den Dachauer Gebeten von Pater Josef Kentenich, Vallendar-Schönstatt, 2. Aufl. 1995, S. 394-394

have waited a long time for my first letter from my new home. That's why I am using the first opportunity to fulfill your wish. How am I going? Paul would answer 'I can do all things in him who strengthens me'..." (22 March 1942)

In the concentration camp "Paul" (or simply "P.") became the alias for Joseph Kentenich. In a letter dated April 19 of the same year he says, "He would only understand P. when he adhered to the fact, that he lived and worked in a city of pagans, fools and death..." Looking back at that time, the Founder described: "Around the camp was a big ditch, as well as a live electrical fence, in addition to SS with trained dogs. It was practically impossible to send any message out. That is why, in the beginning, I sought to rule the whole Family by only using lawful correspondence, which could be written each fortnight. What had I all written there: Studies about perfect, loving surrender; the abandonment and demands of love; studies about the Transfiguration for the "Transfiguration Course" of Sisters. I have not kept quiet. I wrote everything possible from the camp, naturally everything was undercover – Letters of St. Paul! Everything went exactly as written through the censors"<sup>3</sup>.

At the same time, there are texts in which Kentenich reflected about the different demands of prison at Paul's time versus those at hand in the Concentration camp. When one pulls all this evidence together, it becomes clear how pervasive the analogy to Paul was lived through and experienced.

The text of the sermon is published here in the English translation of a part of a conference given by Msgr. Wolf in 2008. Translation: Fr. Dennis Foley, Sr. M. Angela Macari

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<sup>3</sup> J. Kentenich, Triumph der Bündnistreue, in: Texte zum 20. Januar II. Teil, Sion Patris, Schönstatt 1973 S. 199-200