

TRANSLATION

Fathers (dads) can do this.

Manipulation, sexual abuse: the reasons why Father Joseph Kentenich had to abandon the community he founded.

With the opening of the Vatican files from the period of Pius XII's pontificate (1939-1958), several well-kept secrets have been revealed. One of them concerns the Schoenstatt Family, especially the Schoenstatt Sisters of Mary, whose founder, Father Joseph Kentenich (1885-1968) was separated from his work in 1951 by a decree of the Holy Office and had to leave for the United States. The true reasons for Kentenich's exile were not revealed by him, or by the Sisters of Mary during the last seventy years, so, the files that are now being published can clarify the situation.

The first visitation to Schoenstatt was made by Auxiliary Bishop Bernhard Stein in February 1949, and from his report a fundamental benevolence towards Kentenich's work and especially towards the Sisters of Mary can be seen. Among other things, he writes that he found among the sisters, without exception, "valuable people and, in part spiritually at a great level," but also "only a few marked personalities with an autonomous thought and a true interior freedom". In the sisters, he recognized "a characteristic inner dissatisfaction, lack of independence and insecurity". His main concern is to free the sisters from the situation not allowed by the canon law - a man cannot lead a community of women - without wanting to destroy Schoenstatt's spirituality.

There is much material from the visitation carried out between 1951 and 1953 by a professor from the Gregorian University, the Dutch Jesuit Sebastian Tromp, who later became the secretary of the Theological Commission of the Second Vatican Council. During the visitation he spoke repeatedly with the sisters and also left long notes of his repeated conversations with Father Kentenich himself. The material shows also in this case, a completely positive basic visitor's attitude, who does not have serious theological doubts about the Work.

However, Tromp describes very clearly the painful situation he encountered. In it, the serious violation of the canon law in the Sacrament of Penance - the sisters were partly forced to confess to the founder - is only one side of a well-documented abuse of power, often coupled with psychological pressure. If Schoenstatt's spirituality wanted to represent the conditions similar to those of a family, then the father, that is, F. Kentenich, should not have acted in such an overpowering and dominant manner. Because according to the descriptions of this family structure, a weak mother was configured who is completely at the mercy of the father and defenseless adult women who are humiliated to become children, who even have to ask the father when they are allowed to go to the bathroom, change their underwear and sanitary napkins.

This father is charismatic and loving, but he literally "owns" the family, and manages this "property" at will. This also includes, as the record shows, sexual abuse. One of the sisters, who tries to resist, writes to the general superior: "He calmed me down and said: fathers may do this. "

Indirectly, she mentions a witness what happened: her confessor refuses to absolve her. This is not, as one might think of the Church of the 1940s, because she has committed a sin of "chastity" and shown herself to be unrepentant, but because the confessor wants to be allowed to report Father Kentenich's behavior to Rome, otherwise the sister should do it herself. So the sister writes a letter to the general superior, who - this is indicative of the climate and what is described - sent this immediately to Fr. Kentenich. The general superior is sure that the sister is possessed by the devil, just like the other six or

eight who also wrote and whose letters she has destroyed. Because the "father" (Herr Pater), who must be called "father" (Vater), is considered a saint already in life, and his worship is eagerly incited by him, as proven by the songs, the "prayers" and later also the performances.

Thus, there was a "family secret" among the Sisters of Mary, and don't anyone dare say anything! The sisters who spoke with the visitor were still ostracized years later, so Bishop Matthias Wehr of Trier intervened decisively in 1953 and revealed all the hardship of these women. But even more revealing are the many letters that the sisters addressed to the Pope: anyone who opposes the "father" and dares to criticize him is slandered in the worst possible way. In the archives, letters are preserved until the time of the Vatican Council, and in fact they are evidence of a pathological relationship with the founder. Last but not least, it is Kentenich himself who, in letters that are always extremely long-winded and manipulative, responds to everything that is demanded of him and yet does not obey the instructions of the Church, which had forbidden him to have contact with the sisters. The sexual abuse denied at first was later explained with the statement that Kentenich had only wanted to resolve the sexual tensions of the sisters by the "method of deep psychology".

Tromp had clearly explained in his letters to the superiors of the community, the reasons for the measures taken, and also that he tried not to destroy the founder and the founding generation. It was important for him and for many people involved in Schoenstatt that the responsibility of the Church, especially for the Sisters of Mary, be assumed in such a way that they regained their freedom of opinion and conscience. He tried, and this is really surprising in the middle of the last century, to "liberate" women who were trapped in a relationship similar to that of an abused wife who refuses the hand of the one who wants to help her and cannot end the relationship with the abuser.

The Sisters of Mary had an opportunity that they were unable to take advantage of during the period studied; perhaps, they could not take advantage of it. It is shocking that - as far as we can read in the archives - only the Visitor of the Holy Office listens to the abused sister, believes her, encourages her and removes the doubt that it was right to speak. Tromp writes down in his records, that she did not suffer any further sexual assaults later. For the Holy Office, other reasons were still sufficient to justify the separation of Father Kentenich from his work. The Roman Congregation (the Holy Office) did not expose the sister and did not "use" the report in its justifications. The Church under Pius XII protected the abused woman, but at that time, the Sisters of Mary, instead of obeying the official guidelines of the Church, preferred to follow a clearly questionable figure as described in the archives.

The author is a Church historian and is currently researching The Age of Pius XII in the Vatican Archives.