

Searching Love is on the Way

Advent is a time of searching – following the star which leads us to the Saviour of the world. Advent is a time of shelter seeking- God wants to find a home in our hearts. Advent is a time of change – our God transforms the manger of our hearts into the temple of his sacred presence. Advent is a time of hope – a light in the darkness lighting up our way. I like to welcome you here tonight in our Advent search for meaning - your search and mine for God in your and my life. Advent is a time where Love is on the Way.

This year our Advent talk falls within the Year of the Shrine. You may know that the Schoenstatt Movement is looking forward to celebrating its centenary - one hundred years of the Covenant of Love. As part of the preparation for this celebration we focus for a year on the Shrine as a place of pilgrimage because for us the Shrine is a sacred place of God's presence. The heart of our meditation tonight is the original Shrine where Father Kentenich started with young college students what was to become the beginning of the Schoenstatt Movement. Their experience was that the little disused chapel really was to become a place of pilgrimage, a place of grace. This give rise to the question what makes a place sacred, how do we know when somewhere is holy? In human - naive terms - we could say: we want to give God a home in the Shrine and we search to encounter him in our hearts, in our lives and in the world around us. This Year of the Shrine is an invitation to focus on the Shrine and to consider its significance in our time. We look through the prism of Advent to go deeper into the meaning of the Shrine for us. Advent reminds us of the promise kept by an ever-loving Father. We rejoice as we say God is here. God is near and God needs us. Love is on the Way!

In one of the Readings in Advent we hear from the prophet Zephaniah (*Zephaniah 3:14-17*)

Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has cast out your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear evil no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: "Do not fear, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst... he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.

God in our midst. A shrine of God's sacred presence at the heart of our lives. In Ezekiel 37:28 we read: "And when My sanctuary is in their midst forever, the nations will know that I am the Lord who sanctifies Israel." The fulfillment of God's promise to his people, Israel, to be with them in their Temple finds its ultimate high point in the gift of Christ, born of Mary the Virgin in the stable of Bethlehem. Jesus

is the new and real temple of God's presence in the world, in Christ heaven meets earth and humanity is given new birth in God's Spirit. Immanuel God in our midst!

Throughout the History of Salvation we find reported encounters of God with his people and the pattern evolves that God chooses a place which through his presence becomes holy and then becomes the sacred place of encounter for all people of faith. The encounter of Moses in the desert near Mount Horeb shows us the rules of this perennial Advent.

Moses and the Burning Bush

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."

When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am."

"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them.

So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

Let us go through this encounter step for step to appreciate the 'rules of encounter' with the God of history and of our lives. First of all let us just stop for a moment and bring into our minds when have you and I been in a holy place and what such a holy place means for you and for me.

My Favourite Place

Take a moment to think a place holy to you - a precious holy place. In your heart journey there and take up your favourite seat. Think of what this holy place means to you. Throughout history God has sought us and encouraged us to seek and find him in his holy place. Inwardly we take off our shoes, we find ourselves with the God who accepts and loves us. He is the one who can change our lives and allow us to become Apostles of his Good News. In a talk from Daniela Mohr-Braun given in the October Conference in Germany to inaugurate the Year of the Shrine we have a wonderful meditation on the significance of the Shrine. She begins with the story of the burning bush in the Book of Exodus and points out the three important aspects of this encounter of Moses with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

God is here.

God is near (God loves).

God needs Moses (God sends out).

We will come back to the meeting of Moses with God but first let me describe a parallel of this experience with the beginning of Schoenstatt. Our starting point is the core-religious experience of Schoenstatt's founder, Father Kentenich. This experience of Fr. Kentenich is comparable to the core experience of Moses: God is here - God loves - God sends out. In Fr. Kentenich's case his core experience has a Marian form

Mary is here

She loves and

she needs me and she sends out.

The pilgrimage of faith for Moses

Considering the context of Moses' finding the burning bush we see that the shepherd now settled in exile in the desert of Midian had experienced God's guidance in his life thus far. When all new-born Hebrews were under threat of death his mother along with the midwives of the people of Israel was to defy Pharaoh and hide her son and in a last desperate attempt to save him literally handed him over to God's care, placing him in a wicker basket in the Nile for him to be discovered and saved by the daughter of Pharaoh. In reacting to oppression of the poor he was to kill a member of Pharaoh's guard and put himself in life-threatening danger. This led to his escape and eventual new beginning in the desert as a happily married man looking after the flocks of his priestly father-in-law. It could almost have been that Moses thought this was to be his life. That was when his life took a dramatic turn in the encounter at the burning bush. Moses was drawn in by this strange event but his response was one of openness when it became apparent what was happening. On hearing the voice from the bush Moses was to give the classic response recurrent in the story of God's calling throughout history: "Here I am". The depth and significance of this answer becomes apparent with the run of events that followed. Moses was back on mission even if at first reluctantly - "Here I am".

His willing response allowed God to reveal Himself and bring Moses into His presence. Moses was now to make the central experience of his life. God is here (Take off your shoes). And the God who reveals himself in this desert is the God of his Fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses hid his face and was asked to take off his shoes - respect for God's presence makes the place of his appearing holy. His presence was in an all-consuming and yet not-destroying fire - purifying but leaving intact.

But it does not remain at an encounter from a distance. God is the one who in revealing himself does so personally and showing his deep knowledge and concern for the Hebrews. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is near to his people and out of love shown in true compassion he hears their cry of need and wishes to respond. Moses experiences that his God is near, He suffers in solidarity with His chosen people and He loves them. He is a God who wishes to save.

Thirdly to this end God needed Moses and wanted to send him to Pharaoh. It was God who chose this weak and at first unwilling instrument to be his envoy and he empowered him with the gift of Himself in the power of His Name.

These are the three main statements of content experienced in Moses' encounter at the burning bush: God is here. God is near and God needs him and sends him.

The pilgrimage of faith for Father Kentenich

As mentioned earlier Danielle Mohr-Braun draws a parallel of experience of Moses and the beginning of Schoenstatt. Our starting point is the core-religious experience of Schoenstatt's founder, Father Kentenich. This experience of Fr. Kentenich is comparable to the core experience of Moses: God is here - God loves - God sends out. In Father Kentenich's case his core experience has a Marian form - Mary is here - She loves and she needs me and she sends out. This experience goes very far back in the life of Fr. Kentenich. It was a first memory from his childhood and a continuing theme throughout growing up. It was there long before the Original Shrine and it was for him a life-changing experience which remained pivotal for his life and the perception of his mission in life. From autobiographical statements we understand that this experience in the young life of Joseph carried him through life - particularly through the difficult patches - it changed him, healed him. This experience saved him in spirit and soul. The interior process the young Joseph Kentenich experienced was at the heart of him finding spiritual and psychological integrity - a young man who had every reason to remain a lifelong 'invalid' considering his background, the fate he suffered especially in childhood and adolescence and the personal disposition he possessed. He said of himself, that he would have been in danger of becoming mentally ill had he not had Our Lady and his love for Our Lady as the balancing influence in his life. As advised by the author of "The Cloud of Unknowing": He always returned to the well - his source of grace and life. As we will see the Shrine was to become the embodiment of this deep encounter.

The pilgrimage of faith leading to the Shrine

At this point we can ask ourselves the question: What has all this got to do with the Original Shrine? The simple straightforward answer is everything! On the occasion of what was later to be called the third milestone in Schoenstatt's growth, Father Kentenich was to say in the Shrine in Bellavista, Chile:

At this moment we are surrounded by something like the air at home. It may seem to us that angels are among us and call out to us:

"Take off your shoes, because the land on which you are standing is holy ground!" (Ex 3,5)

Indeed, it is holy, it will become more and more holy, holy ground. It is holy ground because the Blessed Mother has chosen this little spot; it is holy ground because in the course of the years, in the course of the decades, in the course of the centuries, holy and saintly people will flourish, grow and become fruitful at this little spot. (Joseph Kentenich, Bellavista, Chile, 31 May 1949)

Mrs Mohr-Braun said in a succinct way: to a certain extent we can say that the Shrine became the embodiment of the Father Kentenich's pivotal religious experience - Mary is here, Mary is near and loves me. Mary needs me for and sends me on a mission. At the time he asked if the love and spiritual efforts of himself and the young students could not exert 'gentle force' on Our Lady and invite her 'to take up residence' and through her presence turn the Chapel of St. Michael into a place of pilgrimage, a place of grace. The Shrine was to become that holy place of grace through Mary's election to be there. More than that the Shrine was to be the place of continuing encounter of a God who is here, a God who is near and a God who sends us out through Mary's presence. The Shrine was also to be the extension of Father Kentenich's own heart and all that his heart had experienced in the journey of faith. When we enter the Shrine we can say we enter Father Kentenich's heart, we become part of the landscape of his soul and in the Shrine we have the summary of his deep religious experience - his healing through the love of Mary; the Covenant of Love between him and Mary. Father Kentenich always used the image that

Mary was Shelter Seeking when she found a home in the Shrine. We could also conclude she took up residence in the Shrine because she had first found a home in the heart of Father Kentenich.

If this is the case then the core experience in Father Kentenich's heart was to become a continual gift to those who visit the Shrine. Each should experience that God is here because the Mother of our Saviour is here. God is near because of the love of Mary each receives and through this love is changed and made open for her Son and the work of His Spirit within us and each should feel the call to work in building God's Kingdom because as at Schoenstatt's beginning Mary says again in the hearts of each of us: "I will draw youthful hearts to myself. I will educate them to become useful instruments in my hand".

Through the Shrine this core experience of God being here and near, takes on a community dimension - this living cell of the Church which was to become the Schoenstatt Movement found its source in the Original Shrine and the grace of this holy place was to be the foundation of their belonging together. This was to be articulated in the Covenant of Love which formed the heart of a new spiritual way of living our faith. We belong together because we belong to Christ through Baptism. In the Shrine we belong together through our Covenant with the Mother of Jesus. So the Shrine is the real symbol that we have a mother in Mary. Our Covenant we share with Father Kentenich, the young students of almost one hundred years ago and all those who have made their Covenant since then. The Shrine is the hub of all this spiritual movement. We can say we have a mother in Mary and a Father in the founder of Schoenstatt. We have a Shrine which we call home and this Shrine becomes the sacred space of a common experience of God's nearness and is the root of a new spiritual way in the Covenant.

Let's take a step back: How does a place become holy?

Before we continue with our thoughts about the Shrine as the sacred space where our Advent Search can reach its goal, let us consider what makes a place holy or what makes one place holier than another? Celebration of 'holy places can be found throughout thousands of years of tradition. Interestingly is the persistence of reservation of a sacred space, for example the Temple Mount in Jerusalem; holy to all three monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Mohammedan. Or the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul changed hands in historical procession of who had conquered and was ruling the Eastern Empire. However it did and has remained sacred - reserved space handed over to God.

God's People built an Altar to the Lord

When we look at the journey of faith of the Patriarchs we see that they had the tradition of establishing holy places as part of their ownership of the land. When Abraham was put on the journey to search for the land promised him by God he was to set milestones of winning over the land into his (people's) ownership by setting up altars to the Lord and thus reserving the land for Him: "Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and

pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the Lord." (Gen. 12:6–8)

Abraham's action reserved the land for God – Beth-el meaning God's House. The land is to become holy because of God's appearance and His continuing presence at this spot. Jacob was instructed by God: 'God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau." ' (Gen. 35:1) The place is purified in God's presence and from then onwards reserved for Him. Eventually in the City of David the Temple was to be build by Solomon and became sacred because God choose to set up His throne their: "As soon as Solomon had finished building the house of the LORD and the king's house and all that Solomon desired to build, the Lord appeared to Solomon a second time, as he had appeared to him at Gibeon. And the Lord said to him, "I have heard your prayer and your plea, which you have made before me. I have consecrated this house that you have built, by putting my name there forever. My eyes and my heart will be there for all time. (1Kings 9: 1–3) The Kings and Prophets were to bear witness to God's presence and from that Holy Place the people of God were to be sanctified. Their Covenant Journey of faith was to be a 'roller-coaster' of promises made and broken by a fickle people who allowed themselves to be distracted and loose their way. Their journey to the temple was to remind them of God in their midst. However this temple was to be superseded by the new Temple of God in Christ.

The New Temple in Christ

In St. John's Gospel we read of the encounter of the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well with Jesus as he was on his way to Jerusalem and here we have to put the question: Do we still need sacred places in the time of Jesus and the time of the Church until he comes again?

The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he." (John 4:19–26)

The culmination of sacred space is in the coming of Christ. The Samaritan woman asks the question where can we encounter God? Neither here (Gerizim) nor in Jerusalem will God be worshiped because the Sacred Place has taken on a new dimension – in Christ God will be worshiped in spirit and in truth. We can say that Jesus is the 'sacred space' in which we encounter the living God and there and there alone can he be worshiped. Her second question focuses on the definitive change occurring in Christ's coming. The Messiah will reveal truth and spirit. To this question Jesus says: "I am he." Of course this revelation is about Jesus being the one true saviour of the world however there is also reference to the encounter

at the burning bush of Moses with the one true God “I am who I am”. In Christ the Samaritan woman meets the Messiah and encounters the living God. Jesus has become the place of all holiness. In the Book of the Apocalypse we hear that the New Jerusalem has no Temple and has no need of one: “I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.” (Rev 21:22)

The Key to Holy Place in the Time of Christ and the Church

Does this mean that we can all go home and not bother taking renewed ownership of the (Original) Shrine? Danielle Mohr-Braun suggests we go one step further in our meditation. The key to sacred space and to Holy Places lies within the great mystery of Incarnation. When the Son of God became man and was born into our world, all of creation and all of history was brought back to God. God had searched for his people and wished to bring his creation back to himself out of love. Love was on the Way! This new beginning in Jesus was in the sacred space of God’s Love and so the Christ was not making a cursory tour of the planet. He was to seek out the lost. Teaching in Nazareth Jesus quoted the messianic promise found in Isaiah (Is 61: 1-2)

“And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’..’Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’.”(Luke 4:16-18.21b)

Jesus was to fulfill the promise made by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to Moses at the burning bush – “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them.” He was the sacred space of redemption, healing and forgiveness. He was to search in every corner of human existence and suffering to find the lost and bring them home to the Father. In the Gloria of the Dachau Prayers of Heavenwards Father Kentenich prays:

“Love has called the world to resemble a stairway of love, effectively leading us heavenwards into the heart of God. We see streams of love flowing, pouring down richly on earth and heaven, coming from Eternal Love and returning to their source.” (HW 20)

Now our Sacred Space takes on a whole new dimension. Instead of Holy Places going out of fashion we now seek to bring the whole of creation back to God in Christ and make our world holy while redeemed. In the Church, in Sacred Space and Sacred Symbols, we are brought into the Presence of God and allowed to share in his life of grace and experience his gift of love. Jesus who gave all there is to give on the cross on Golgotha and rose again, remains with us in the mystery of the resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In the Church we experience in these Holy Places and receive in the Sacraments the God who is here, the God who is near and the God who needs us.

The Original Shrine – our burning bush: a sacred space where heaven touches earth

Let's get back to the Shrine and ask the question where does this all fit in? Our belief is that on the 18th October almost one hundred years ago Our Lady responded to the 'gentle force' of the young students with Father Kentenich and set up her throne of grace in the Shrine. Now this place should be the cradle of our sanctity and the heart of our calling as apostles for our time. When Mary the Mother of Jesus is present in the Shrine then she brings with her and carries in her heart the whole mystery of redemption. She becomes our guarantee of God's presence and his loving nearness binds us to his merciful heart and empowers us to respond to the call of God who needs us. Because of Mary, who is Mother of the Church, we can say that our Shrine reflects Mary as heart of the Church - Cor Ecclesiae. Daniella Mohr-Braun compares the time of Christ to the "big bang" at the beginning of the universe. Our history is carried in the dynamic of the expanding new creation from the mystery of Incarnation and Resurrection. Our expanding universe bears the hallmark of Christ.

Of course this grace of being at home, experiencing change in God's grace and being schooled in spirit as an apostle, is a specific grace and receiving this grace comes from the pilgrimage in faith to this Holy Place, to the Shrine. Father Kentenich reminds us that in the Shrine Our Lady has particular interest in forming saintly apostles who will go out and win many for Christ. The grace and charism of the Shrine is one of education through God's grace in finding God in our lives and following his plan in the service of his kingdom. On various occasions Father Kentenich describes it as the grace of childlikeness, the grace of a living faith in Divine Providence and the wish and conviction that Mary needs us and wishes to form us as useful instruments in her hands.

The Original Shrine and the network of Shrines

In the meantime there are almost 200 Shrines world wide and a network of Home-Shrines and Heart-Shrines and the Pilgrim Mother. This is not just a pastoral plan. This is a network of grace, holy places where we can encounter the God who is near the God is near and the God who needs us to spread his word. The Network of Shrines is a network of Holy Places. When we consider the Dachau Prayers of the Hours we read that the Shrine carries the names of Holy Places in the History of Salvation. Again this is not an empty gesture or simply poetic license. The Shrine as the place where Mary sets up her throne of grace embodies the on-going presence and the commemoration of the great events in salvation through Christ.

With Mary we pray

Your Shrine is

Our Nazareth of the Annunciation

Our Bethlehem where Christ is born

Our Nazareth of the life of the Holy Family

Our Tabor in the glories of Mary

Our Bethany where our heart carries the mystery of God

Our Golgotha in the iniquity of suffering

Our Cenacle in the hope of the coming of the promised Spirit

Our Sion in the glory of life in God's presence

Year of the Shrine and our Advent search for Love on the Way

This Advent we consider the Significance of the Shrine in our midst. May our Shrine truly become our Bethlehem where Mary and Joseph can find a home in which Christ can be born again for our times. The Shrine a holy place: "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." (Heb 4:16)