

Home Shrine Congress
June 27-30, 2013

**A Journey Through the Historical Development of the
Home Shrine**

Presentation by Victor and Olga Alegria

As a Universal Church, we continue celebrating together the *Year of Faith*, which opened in October of last year and ends this November 24th on the Solemnity of Christ the King. During a visit to the Shrine of Our Lady of Loreto, a week prior to the opening of the Year of Faith, Pope Benedict the XVI formally entrusted to Mary the world Synod of Bishops and the Year of Faith. The Pope was marking the 50th anniversary of Blessed John the (23's) XXIII's visit to the Marian shrine when he entrusted to Mary's care the Second Vatican Council, which began on October 11, 1962. Pope Benedict's homily focused on "*Mary as the best possible example of following God's will and bringing Christ to the world*". At the end of his homily, he turned to Our Lady of Loreto with several petitions. He said, "I wish to entrust to the Most Holy Mother of God all the difficulties affecting our world as it seeks serenity and peace." He prayed for Mary's intercession in responding to the problems of the many families who look anxiously to the future and for young people just starting to build their adult lives.

It seems providential that this year we are also celebrating the 50th Jubilee of the founding of the home shrine which also is a response to the needs and problems of many families today. In this gift of the home shrine we are entrusted to follow our Founder's mission of proclaiming the glories of Mary through the home shrine. What a wonderful gift we have been given!

Our presentation will focus on the historical aspect of the home shrine as well as Father's vision of what he came to call the third order of the Schoenstatt shrine. The information we will present perhaps is familiar to many of you, but it is important and necessary to recall how the home shrine evolved and how, through Divine Providence, the concept of the home shrine came to be. Our Father and Founder's conviction of faith, faith in the special activity of our Blessed Mother in her Shrine was deep within him from the early beginnings. Let us journey through these historical events and see how Father, as a true child of Divine Providence, was always attentive and patiently waited for the "open door".

You may have wondered at one time or another - Where did the idea of the Home Shrine come from and when did it all begin?

Let us recall the pre-founding years of Schoenstatt. In 1912, Father Kentenich began his work as spiritual director of the Minor Seminary. The aim he presented to the young boys at that time was:

“Under the protection of Mary we want to learn to educate ourselves to become firm, free, priestly personalities”.

The focus on self-education and formation of a community of firm, free, priestly personalities was and continues to be an essential part of Schoenstatt even today. Two years later, on October 18, 1914, we hear from the Founding Document, “Would it then not be possible for our little sodality chapel to become for us the Tabor on which the glory of Mary would be revealed? Undoubtedly, we could not accomplish a greater apostolic deed or leave our successors a more precious legacy than to urge our Lady and Queen to erect her throne here in a special way, to distribute her treasures, and to work miracles of grace... I would like to make this place a place of pilgrimage, a place of grace for our house and for the whole German province, and perhaps even further afield.” Early on we can begin to see something unfolding with the statements, *under the protection of Mary and erect her throne here in a special way.*

Fifteen years later, another significant occurrence in the history of the home shrine took place when Father Kentenich gave a talk in 1929. He spoke to a group of Sisters about a phrase he had read. It dealt with the importance of the shrine for the future of the Church. Through faith in Divine Providence he made the following statement,

“In the shadow of the shrine the fate of the Church will be essentially decided for the coming centuries in Germany, indeed, even beyond!”

He knew without any doubt that this small chapel was a place of special activity of the Blessed Mother. Father Kentenich attributed an almost “prophetic” character to the statement about *the shadow of the shrine*. He made this statement his own and repeated it again and again in the course of the years. He later enhanced the statement to read:

“In the shadow of this Shrine, the destiny of Church and world will be essentially co- determined for centuries to come.”

Again, these words provide us with an early hint of our Father’s vision, that the shrine would be the source for the renewal of the world. On one occasion Father talked about this statement when he spoke to the Girls Youth in Schoenstatt in the 1930’s. These are his words to the girls:

“You know how many Schoenstatt families were married in the past few years here in our little shrine. We have Schoenstatt Girls and Schoenstatt Boys. Both have gone through Schoenstatt’s school of life and now want to give each other their hand in the covenant of their lives here in our little shrine, which is dear to both their hearts, so that they can form truly deep Schoenstatt families.

You have also certainly observed how more families have a ... ‘Lord God’s corner’ – a Schoenstatt picture in their homes as an exterior symbol; Schoenstatt prayers, Schoenstatt songs.

Those great words, ‘In the shadow of this shrine the destiny of the Church will be essentially co-determined for centuries to come,’ will only gain their full meaning when we succeed in founding in a comprehensive and multi-faceted way just such Schoenstatt families, such marriage islands”. (The Birth of the Home Shrine, Second Edition, Fr. J. Niehaus, p.22)

As we mentioned earlier, Father Kentenich made the statement, “in the shadow of the shrine”, when he spoke to the Sisters a year earlier. He brings the statement up again with the girls and he also speaks about “marriage islands” for the first time. It was also during the early 1930s, that Father Kentenich gave Father Albert Eise the task to get involved with the renewal of families. He worked with the families for several years until he was sent to the concentration camp in Dachau in 1941 where he died a year later. Nevertheless, the first major development of the Family Work took place under the guidance of Father Kentenich. One of his early contacts in Dachau included Dr. Fritz Kühr, who was very instrumental in helping him found the Family Work on July 16, 1942. Dr. Kühr was unable to continue with the Family Work after his release from Dachau due to health reasons.

Another important aspect to point out in the development of the home shrine is the building of the first Daughter Shrine.

Up until this time, the Original Shrine was the only shrine that existed. When World War II broke out, there was no communication from Germany with the foreign countries. Due to the lack of physical contact with the Original Shrine and the need to continue building up the Schoenstatt Work, the inspiration to build a Daughter Shrine in Uruguay was born. The decision to build the shrine was difficult. Nevertheless, they continued with their plans and in 1943, the first Daughter Shrine in the world was dedicated in Nueva Helvetia, Uruguay. Father Kentenich received the news the following year in Dachau. He later confessed that he had never thought about a Daughter Shrine. In a letter Father wrote in 1947, he explained how important this Daughter Shrine was for the foundation of an international Schoenstatt. Up to this point, the Schoenstatt Movement was experiencing the graces of the Original shrine and now also of the Daughter Shrine.

The third order of the Schoenstatt shrine was yet to come, although early signs of the concept of the home shrine slowly continued to unfold. Now we go to post-war Germany in the years 1945-49. For Germany as a whole, these years were the most trying in history. The Allied bombings in the final stages of World War II had decimated practically every large city in Germany. Twelve million Germans were driven from their homes. Germany was divided and occupied. Against this background, a new beginning was taking place in the Schoenstatt Movement in Germany - the Schoenstatt Family Work.

Shortly after the war, in September 1945, Father Kentenich assigned Father John Tick the task of building up a branch for Schoenstatt Families. What did Father Kentenich mean to accomplish by extending the Schoenstatt Movement to include families? Years later he clearly explained the reason. In 1967 at the Silver Anniversary celebration of the founding of the Family Work, he noted,

“Even then in 1912, I was thinking: I want to create a new community, one borne by this spirit [of the new man in the new community]. These thoughts, as I have already pointed out, became clearer to me in the 1920s when I gained an insight into the father in our modern Western society....” Quoting 1932, “What is the central

problem of daily life? It is marriage and the family. What are we doing to create holy marriages and families? The ideal for which we are working here is to create Islands of Catholic marriages. In the same way as did the early Christians we must lift ourselves up by the Catholic ideal of marriage from our heathen surroundings....

Something like a storm should rage through our country—a *storm of holy self-surrender for the renewal of families*. A large religious movement of elemental significance should come into being.” The idea of islands, holy islands of Catholic marriage, came to play an important role. (The Birth of the Home Shrine, Second Edition, Fr. J. Niehaus, pgs 4-5)

Three years after Father Tick was given the task of building up a Family Branch, the Family Work had grown to the point where it was now possible to found the League for families. The date for the act was set for Trinity Sunday, May 23, 1948, in the Original Shrine in Schoenstatt. Father Kentenich was in Santa Maria, Brazil at that time and was unable to attend. However, he wrote a letter to Father Tick, dated April 15, 1948. Father addressed his letter to Father Tick – for the Family Work. This letter was later referred to as the Founding Document of the Family Work. In it Father Kentenich referred to the mysteries of Pentecost, the Blessed Trinity, and the Holy Family, and he alluded once more to the idea of islands.

The following statement unfolds a more concrete idea of what Father Kentenich had in mind in order to form and educate families. In the letter Father said,

“The present time... driven on all fronts to uproot existing forms of life across the board, wreaks its greatest havoc in the sanctuary of the family...”

“Anyone who is familiar with life today and is aware of the frightful catastrophes which stand before the Church and world, is deeply convinced that the entire Schoenstatt Family, both as a whole and in its individual parts, cannot fulfill its task unless all its waters and strength ultimately arise from and flow back into holy islands of Schoenstatt families which join together more and more to form a single, united Family Work.”

Towards the end of his letter he states quite clearly,

“Therefore, we unite and beg and petition with great fervor for a new and effective miracle of transformation.

Take the picture of the Blessed Mother with you and enshrine it in your homes. Then they in turn will become little shrines where the venerable picture will prove to be a source of grace, create a holy family atmosphere, and form holy family members.”

It is important to note that when Father Tick read the letter, he had difficulty understanding Father Kentenich’s idea. *How could a family represent a Schoenstatt Shrine?* Father Tick “quickly noticed that this rested on an entire world of values. First of all, a shrine... is God’s house and applied to every church. There God is present... and in particular in the Eucharistic Presence of the Blessed Sacrament. And what is marriage? ... By virtue of its sacramental nature it draws Christ into the picture, for there is no sacrament without Christ. Marriage is consequently a three-way covenant involving three partners: husband, wife, and Christ. ‘This was a new discovery for me, even though I knew from my studies that Christ had to be present in every sacrament,’ said Father Tick. His conclusion was that if every sacramental marriage is... a three-way covenant, then it is a house of God, a true shrine where Christ is present and active. ...Where Christ is, there is his Mother ...that the Blessed Mother, too, has a special presence there in the family, not least of all when husband and wife seal Schoenstatt’s covenant of love with her.” (Ibid, pgs 7-8)

Here we can make a connection or parallel to what Father Kentenich referred to earlier as holy islands of Catholic marriages. The concept of a home shrine was taking form. We recall the words of Father in the founding of Schoenstatt when he begged the Blessed Mother to “erect her throne here in a special way and distribute her treasures and work miracles of grace.” Why couldn’t she take up residence and erect her throne in the homes of families? This was an entirely new idea. That a corner of the house can become a “shrine” is not entirely without precedence, not least of all in the German culture. A longstanding German tradition was to hang a crucifix and a picture of Mary and/or other saints in one corner of the main room. This was a sign of God’s presence in the house and was called the “Lord-God’s corner.” (Ibid, pg 21)

The picture of Mary took up her place of honor in the Lord-God's corner or the Schoenstatt corner and soon a life stream developed in response to the families' efforts of making their home into a little shrine. Two years after writing his *Letter from Santa Maria*, entreating the families to take the picture of our Mother into their homes, Father spoke to couples in 1950 in Schoenstatt, Germany about the family becoming a "living shrine". He said:

"In the strength of the covenant our family should represent a church in miniature." (*The Family, 1983 Edition, p. 11*)

"We believe that in these times everything depends on the growth and transformation of our families into miniature churches, domestic churches." (*Ibid. p.32-33*)

"Our family life should be a living shrine of the Mother Thrice Admirable. Sooner or later our attachment to the shrine will become evident in our family. The shrine is built of dead walls, but we are living stones: all the symbols of the shrine should come to life in my shrine, in my family." (*Ibid, p. 28*)

The blossoming of the Family Work soon began to bear fruit in distant places, such as in Argentina. The arrival in 1935 of the first Schoenstatt Sisters of Mary in Argentina gradually attracted families to the Movement. By the end of the 1940s, groups began to develop. One particular group consisted of German immigrant families who were guided by a young German Pallottine priest, Father Carlos Boskamp. The spirit of those founding years is captured in an account written by Alfredo and Odette Vallendor—one of the German immigrant families in Argentina that Father Carlos worked with. They would later have a special mission in connection with the home shrine. They reported: "It was Christmas 1948, the day of our engagement, one of Alfredo's uncles who lived in Germany, sent us a crucifix as a gift, typical for the Lord-God's corner." Shortly before their wedding in a corner of their little apartment they placed the crucifix along with a picture of the MTA, and so the first Schoenstatt Corner was born in Argentina. Later they met with their group and with Father Carlos for the blessing of their little corner and also to consecrate themselves as husband and wife to Mary.

Father Carlos accompanied them for many years and in a short time it was completely natural that the couples would erect a Schoenstatt corner. Several

mothers also joined this life stream, and one of these even wanted to have a copy of the shrine in the Schoenstatt corner. The corner was a place of praying, offering their daily contributions to the capital of grace, offering up joys and sorrows, giving the liturgical feasts a special flavor, and offering up the baptisms and first communions of their children. Several years later, with the transfer of Father Carlos from Argentina to New York in 1960, a new phase in the history began. As a farewell gift, the existing groups gave him an album with a picture of each couple in their Schoenstatt corner. Soon after arriving in New York, Father Carlos visited Father Kentenich in Milwaukee. He showed him the album and explained the life stream of the Schoenstatt Corner in Argentina. In 1964, Father Carlos wrote to the Vallendors:

“We expect many great things in this jubilee year, 50th anniversary of the founding of Schoenstatt. One will interest you for sure, as well as the MTA. Just as the Dachau years showed Father the significance of the daughter shrines, so have the Milwaukee years shown the significance of the home shrines, or the Schoenstatt corner, as we have called it. I only need to let the enclosed picture do the talking then you know enough. Make yourselves into active apostles of this new crusade.” (The Birth of the Home Shrine, Second Edition, Fr. J. Niehaus, pgs 44-45)

In 1965 the Vallendors visited Father Carlos and Father Kentenich in Milwaukee. It was during that time that Father Kentenich gave them the mission of the home shrine in Argentina. It was on this occasion, that Father Kentenich’s prayer for the Vallendor family gives an interesting parallel between the Pentecost storm and the home shrine stream in the needs of our modern era. Father prayed:

“The Father’s eternal love has allowed a Pentecost storm to come into being for the modern era, so that the Church can find her way through the modern storms of the times... Thus you have sent a family here today that has been loyal to you for many years. They, too, want to be drawn into this Pentecost storm. You, our Mother Thrice Admirable and Queen of Schoenstatt, want to present this Pentecost storm to the Church of today through your shrines.”

The Vallendors did indeed become apostles of the home shrine in Argentina and their history gives us key insights into the home shrine life stream. They

had a very active Schoenstatt corner, which Father Carlos compared to the home shrine when he was informed about the birth of the home shrine in Milwaukee.

The Vallendor's encounter with Father in 1965 included their adoption of the living shrine, the taking of personal symbols from the shrine by each family member. (The Birth of the Home Shrine, Second Edition, Fr. J. Niehaus, pgs 40-42) It was also around this time in June of 1965 when Father Tick was able to ask Father Kentenich the question that was particularly on his mind. He asked Father, "Did you really foresee the home shrine in all its fullness in your original letter to the families in 1948?" Father answered, "That's what I meant, but it didn't sink in so deeply."

Now, in order to understand the birth of the home shrine in Milwaukee, an overview of certain events is necessary. In 1952, when Father Kentenich was exiled to Milwaukee, Divine Providence presented him with another open door. In time couples began to come to Father Kentenich seeking spiritual direction in their lives. For quite some time Father was able to visit families in Madison. Shortly after in Milwaukee, Gilbert and Joanna Schimmel came to know Father. Then in 1955, Father Kentenich began to meet with them and other couples every Monday night. From then on, nearly every Monday evening during his years of Exile in Milwaukee these couples would come to Father for his guidance. These talks are published under the title, *On Monday Evenings – Speaking to Families*. During this time the home shrine stream began in Milwaukee.

In the fall of 1962, another significant occurrence came about when Sister Winfriede met with some couples at the Gilbert Schimmel residence in order to look for concrete ways to apply Father Kentenich's inspirations to the present situation of the families. During the meeting, Sister Winfriede recalled and shared experiences she had while working with families in Germany. In the years 1948-49, she had worked with a particular family who had found a unique way to apply the words of Father Kentenich's 1948 letter to their family striving:

Take the picture of the Blessed Mother with you and enshrine it in your homes. Then your homes will become little shrines. In the spirit of the living Schoenstatt shrine, each member had chosen a symbol from the shrine and adopted it as his or her part of that "living shrine". As a result of this meeting with Sister and the couples in Milwaukee, a small idea became a

new impulse for the families there. During the years 1962-63, this would lead to the life stream of the living shrine, the beginnings of the home shrine. Father was able to observe daily family life. He could now work closely with the families and learn of their struggles and needs. In October of 1962, - the great question was asked of Father by two families.

Due to the great need and urgency that the parents felt in raising their children, two mothers in particular asked Father, “Couldn’t we ask the Blessed Mother to really come down into our homes like in the shrine?” This was the open door given by Divine Providence that Father was waiting for. Father never imposed his own ideas – he waited for life. One of the most intriguing aspects of the history of the home shrine is the awareness of how much Father Kentenich actually anticipated. He always allowed himself to be led by life, by what took root in those entrusted to his care. Throughout the following year Father observed intensely the life within the families – especially that of the living shrine.

Then finally at a Monday Evening talk on November 18, 1963, Father Kentenich spoke the words that have come to be known as the “founding document” of the home shrine. He said:

“What do we mean by “home shrine”? Many of us have not only dedicated their house to the Blessed Mother in general, but also offered it to her as a Living Shrine. Now you must pay careful attention. What I am about to say is of elementary importance for the future:

Everything which holds true for the Original Shrine and for the daughter shrines also holds true for the home shrines.”

One of the Sisters who was present asked, “Did Father really mean it that way?” Father’s answer was, “Yes”. She then asked, “But if that’s the case Father, the shrine can be endlessly multiplied?” And Father answered her, “Yes, that is true. And beyond that, the shrine cannot be destroyed. Collectivism can close or destroy all the churches, close or destroy all our shrines. But the home shrines – no one can destroy them!”

Another Sister relates her story about going to Father as one of those who was skeptical about this new development of the home shrine – she went to him with her doubts and complaints. Father responded to her by saying:

“The whole family will witness a tremendous in-break of grace into the Schoenstatt Family through the home shrine. Its message will capture the whole world. The home shrine will bring about a renewal of church and society.” (The Exile Legacy Book, Edited by Fr. J. Niehaus, from a talk by Sr. M. Carol Winkler, pgs 39-40)

Reflecting on these powerful words, we realize that once again Father was proclaiming to all, *“In the shadow of this shrine the destiny of the Church and world will be essentially co-determined for centuries to come.”* Father spoke of the formation of father and mother and children in the home shrine. His concern for the intensive formation of the family in the home shrine, especially in light of the future, was evident when he said:

“The absence of a religious atmosphere will prove to be a very great threat. The individual families and their homes will then have to be the place where a religious atmosphere is cultivated and from where it must emanate. On the occasion of home shrine blessings, I like to compare these shrines to floating islands. The image does not suggest a compact mass, but rather, small islands where the spirit of Christ or the spirit of Schoenstatt takes root.” (The Birth of the Home Shrine, Second Edition, Fr. J. Niehaus, pg. 70-71)

Then in a talk on April 24, 1966 to the Schoenstatt Mother’s and Women’s League of Bavaria, Father said:

“If the renewal of the world has and must have its beginning in the renewal of the family as the nucleus of the shaken social order, then everything depends, on the family - and our family, too – growing completely into the supernatural world. So that this can take place more easily, there is not only the daughter shrine, but also the home shrine....One room in our home wants to be seen above all others as a shrine.” (The Exile Legacy Book, Fr. J. Niehaus, pg. 136)

In recalling the Documents of Vatican II in 1964, they also recognized the dignity of marriage by declaring that families were genuinely Church. The Council restored the ancient concept of domestic church as it declared:

“The family is, so to speak, the domestic church. In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children.” (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, #11).

When the Second Vatican Council used the term domestic church in *Lumen Gentium* to describe the ecclesial reality of marriage and family life, it set the theology of marriage and family on a path few would have guessed at the time. Father Kentenich was one of those few who knew that through the home shrine our Blessed Mother could have a tremendous effect on the life of the family as a domestic church. *In the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes*, The Joy and Hope, as this document is called, attempts to discover the many signs of our times and point all of us towards building a solidarity between the Church and the entire human family as the domestic church. Again, our Founder saw the signs of our times and gave us the means by which the family could be sanctified. Back in 1950, Father was already speaking about the family as a domestic Church, nearly fifteen years before Vatican II unfolded this reality more fully for the entire Church.

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the founding of the home shrine, we rejoice and are grateful to our Mother Thrice Admirable for the abundance of graces that she has bestowed on us through our home shrines. There are numerous stories where she has worked many miracles of grace. She has brought family members back to the faith and to the sacraments; she has given families the perseverance and hope to work with family members who have addictions, such as alcohol, drugs, gambling or pornography. She has given parents the strength to deal with difficult illnesses and death of their children and she has brought about the conversion of persons who have been in prison. These are all difficult and real life situations of our world today. She has come to our aid to guide us and to lead us to her Son. Our home shrines are certainly places of tranquility and serenity where we encounter God. They are special places in our homes where we experience a haven in the midst of our profaned world, an oasis for our children and family. It is a place where husbands and wives imitate the self-sacrificing love of Christ for the Church.

It is a place where our family and friends have experienced “something special” or “something different” in our homes. A place where we are sheltered from all the evil that is present in our world.

In the Heavenwards Home Shrine prayer, Father describes the reality of the Domestic Church:

My home is a shrine...where the spirit of the world cannot enter as in the eternal city of Sion; where peace reigns and happiness laughs because God's angel keeps diligent watch; where Christ rules and is triumphant and leads the whole world to the Father.

This is in fact the lived expression of the domestic church that the Fathers of Vatican II were calling forth. This home shrine stream has now swept through the entire Schoenstatt world across oceans, continents and cultures creating a living net of attachments in our one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church. What a great hope for the Church of the future!

We would like to conclude with words from our beloved Fr. Jonathan Niehaus, who researched the history and wrote about the home shrine:

“One of the most important fruits of Father Kentenich’s years of exile in Milwaukee was the home shrine. This fruit matches the needs of the United States and the times so exactly that it cannot be seen as anything other than a particularly precious gift of Divine Providence.

There is something here which touches the heart of the mission of Schoenstatt for the United States and the United States for Schoenstatt.” (The Birth of the Home Shrine, Second Edition, Father. J. Niehaus, pg vi)

This was the place Divine Providence chose for all of the streams of life to come together – through all of the years, from all of the experiences of the different countries. Divine Providence spoke – giving the answer for a world in need.