

Prisoner number

29 392

Name

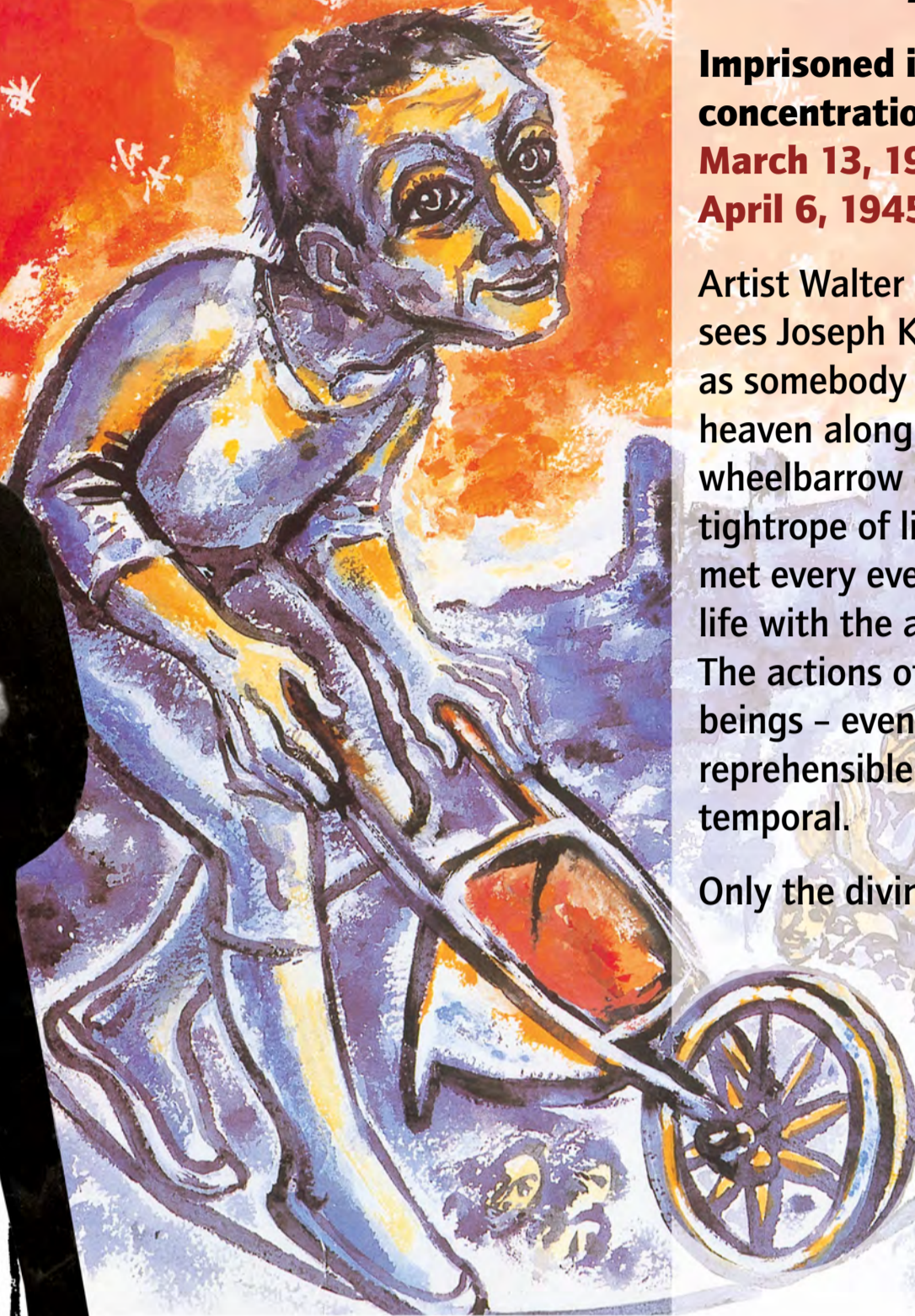
J. Kentenich

1885 - 1968

**Imprisoned in the
concentration camp:
March 13, 1942 until
April 6, 1945**

Artist Walter Habdank sees Joseph Kentenich as somebody who took heaven along in his wheelbarrow on the tightrope of life. He met every event of his life with the attitude: The actions of human beings - even the most reprehensible - are temporal.

Only the divine is eternal.



Father Kentenich, too, broke down while trying to pick something up from the ground; he, too, became ill; he, too, suffered from terrible hunger; he, too, did not know whether he would still live the next day; he, too, had to suffer through the illness and death of his loved ones; he, too, was in danger of death several times.

His Life

An Overview



From top to bottom:

The town of Gymnich on a street map

Birthplace in Gymnich

The Original Shrine in 2008 and

View of the inside with the picture of grace

Sarcophagus in the Church of the Blessed Trinity on Mount Schoenstatt

1885

On **November 16** Kantenich was born in Erfstadt-Gymnich, near Cologne, and baptized as Peter Joseph on **November 19**.

1849

Due to a difficult family background, he was brought to St. Vincent's Orphanage in Oberhausen, near Duisburg, at the age of eight and a half. His mother entrusted her child to the Mother of God. This Marian consecration would mark Kantenich's whole life.

1899

Kantenich attended the Pallottine High School in Ehrenbreitstein.

1904

He entered the Society of the Pallottines. His noviciate and theological studies took place in Limburg.

1910

On **July 8** he was ordained a priest in Limburg and worked as a teacher for German and Latin at the high school run by his community in Ehrenbreitstein. It became apparent that he was a talented educator. Therefore in

1912

he was called to the newly built high school in Schoenstatt-Vallendar to serve as spiritual director.

1914

On **October 18** he founded the Schoenstatt Movement together with young high school students in the Chapel of St. Michael, which from that moment on would be called the "Original Shrine." Kantenich dedicated his life totally to the Mother of God. The Schoenstatt Movement, a movement of renewal within the Catholic Church, grew in the following period. The number of its priests and committed lay persons increased along with its various communities. So, Kantenich was released for the ever growing movement.

1935

The Schoenstatt Movement was watched by the Gestapo. The Nazis were suspicious because of its educational work, the solidarity within the community, and the dedication of its members in the parishes. In September, a "special report" was prepared by the central office for security in Berlin, entitled "Catholic Associations" (German: "Das katholische Vereinswesen"). In this report Schoenstatt was among those organizations that are listed with a detailed profile. One of the main reproaches brought forward against Schoenstatt was the formation of an "elite leadership" for Catholic Action. It was noted that Schoenstatt's goal was the renewal of Germany in the spirit of Catholicism and therefore it was useless for the ideals of National Socialism. The first searches followed.

1936

The Schoenstatt Movement was more closely watched and increasingly pressured.

1939

The House of Studies was diverted from its intended use by the National Socialists and instead occupied as a teacher training college. In November, the Gestapo wrote an extensive report about the Schoenstatt Movement stamped as "top secret information of the Reich." Searches became more frequent and stricter.

1940

In spring, Father Joseph Fischer, spiritual leader of pilgrimages, was detained in Koblenz. After his release from prison he was arrested again in April 1941. From **June 6** on, he was in the Dachau concentration camp.

1941

In August, another close co-worker of Father Kantenich, Father Albert Eise, was denounced and arrested during a retreat in Koblenz. The Gestapo found written notes from Father Kantenich's sermons among his belongings. On **September 14**, Kantenich was interrogated by Gestapo officials in the retreat house in Schoenstatt. At the end of the retreat course that had already begun, he had to appear on

September 20

for interrogation in the Gestapo building. He was detained because he had allegedly "expressed himself in a disparaging way toward the state and by his behavior showed his negative attitude toward the current government." This was followed by four weeks of solitary confinement in the basement of the Gestapo building in Koblenz, on Vogelsang Street (im Vogelsang).

October 18

During the "preventive detention" in the Gestapo prison in Koblenz he obtained much help from the personnel. Two guards helped him with his illegal mail contact. From **December 13** on, he was able to celebrate holy Mass in secret in his cell.

1942 January 20

After a serious inner struggle and despite weakened health, Kantenich turned down all attempts on behalf of the Schoenstatt Family to save him from the concentration camp by means of a medical certificate. In a letter to his closest confidant, Father Mennigen, Kantenich explained his decision to sacrifice his exterior freedom in order to obtain inner freedom for the Schoenstatt community and for himself.

March 11

Kantenich was transported to Dachau via Frankfurt and Wuerzburg.

March 13

He arrived in Dachau and had to stay in the admission block for half a year. He would be in Block 13 until June, in Block 24 until **July 25**, in Block 17 until **August 23**, in Block 28 until **October 13**.

June 24

A commission arrived from Berlin and assembled an invalid transport of 4,000 prisoners. Kantenich was in great danger as he had not belonged to any work detail up to that point. The communist block leader Hugo Gutmann saved him by slipping him into the disinfection work detail under the command of Jakob Koch. After this danger had passed, he was officially placed into the work detail for mending straw sacks on **June 29** in Block 14 Room 3 (and temporarily Block 4 and Block 10).

July 2

Countless prisoners died of hunger in 1942. On the background of the powerlessness and lack of rights experienced by the prisoners in the concentration camp, Kantenich, who trusted not only in Mary's spiritual effectiveness, also declared her the "Mother of Bread" and "Mother of a Home," the "Queen of the Camp."

July 16

In Block 14 Room 3, Kantenich secretly founded the Family Work and the Institute of the Brothers of Mary together with his fellow prisoners Dr. Fritz Kühr and Dr. Eduard Pesendorfer, respectively.

October 13

Kantenich was moved to the priests' block, Block 26 Room 4. Soon he was asked to hold evening talks in his dormitory as he had done in the admission block before. He gladly agreed, and he gave a talk almost every evening until **April 11**, 1944. During the typhus quarantine he additionally gave a religious talk in Room 4 every afternoon, which was attended by about a hundred prisoners each day. This was too dangerous to do in the camp chapel.

1943 March 19

For his nameday he was allowed to celebrate holy Mass in the camp chapel for the first time.

March 25

Since his mail was being confiscated by the Gestapo, he decided to take up illegal mail contact as he had already done in prison before, in order to take over the direction of his Work again as far as possible.

1944 March 9/10

Together with two other priests, Hans Carl and Johann Maria Lenz, he was sent into the punishment bunker.

April 11

In Block 26 the separation of non-German and German priests was decreed. Kantenich was moved to Room 3.

October 18

In celebration of the 30th anniversary of the foundation of the Schoenstatt Movement, Kantenich gave important talks on three days (September 24, October 18, and December 8), which later would be referred to as the Third Founding Document.

1945 March 25

Exactly on this day, the locality of Schoenstatt was conquered by the Americans. The place of grace remained unscathed as by a miracle. This fact gave Father Kantenich hope for his own release. At the end of March, several priests were released. On **April 6**, 1945, Father Kantenich was released from the Dachau concentration camp. However, he could not immediately set out for Schoenstatt because of the war. After short stays in Schoenbrunn and with the Pallottines in Freising as well as in Ulm, he stayed in Ennabeuren with Joseph Kulmus, a Schoenstatt priest. On **May 17**, he was picked up there by Father Mennigen and his brother. They drove home via Stuttgart, Bruchsal, and Koblenz, stopping at St. Joseph's hospital. On **May 20**, White Sunday, Father Kantenich's homecoming was celebrated in Schoenstatt. Kantenich referred to his time in prison in many of his talks, especially during the "October Week" of 1945 and later also abroad, and thanked the Schoenstatt Family for its loyalty. He worked wholeheartedly for the moral and religious rebuilding of post-war Germany.

1947

He began his travels abroad to visit the Schoenstatt establishments cut off during the war - already since 1933 Sisters of Mary had been sent to mission areas - and to strengthen them in their development. On **March 14** he had a private audience with Pope Pius XII.

1949 - 1965

While the founder was abroad, his work underwent an episcopal visitation by Auxiliary Bishop Bernhard Stein of Trier, who affirmed the orthodoxy of the Schoenstatt Work.

Despite the fact that Kantenich's teaching was judged favorably, he had to leave Europe, as demanded by the apostolic visitor Father Sebastian Tromp, S. J., who was charged by the Holy Office with undertaking a comprehensive examination of the Schoenstatt Work (1951 - 1953). In 1952, Kantenich was sent into exile in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA, where he worked as pastor of the German community. In September 1965, toward the end of the Second Vatican Council, Father Kantenich was called to Rome. In the meantime, the institutional Church had changed its opinion about spiritual movements in a positive way. On **December 22**, he had an audience with Pope Paul VI and was able to return to Schoenstatt on **December 24**. He would be given three more years to work intensively for the Schoenstatt Movement.

1968 September 15

Father Kantenich died immediately after his first holy Mass in the Church of the Blessed Trinity on Mount Schoenstatt. This church was built in thanksgiving for his happy return from Dachau and the protection of the place of grace during the war.

September 20

He was buried at his place of death in the former sacristy, now the Founder Chapel. More than 4,000 people from Germany and abroad attended his funeral, among them the nuncio of Germany and several bishops.

1975 February 10

The process of Father Kantenich's beatification was opened in Trier.

Taking Heaven along on the Tightrope of Life

Right from the beginning, Joseph Kntenich tried to meet the merciless everyday life in the camp with faith. He went into the camp with the idea to "bring his soul back out just the way he had brought it in." What helped him was his great love for God and the Blessed Mother Mary. He entrusted her with little and big worries – for example, the request for a coat. He felt that he was supported and never left alone, also through the spiritual connection with his own in Schoenstatt.

One external means he used, for example, was always to address everyone in a formal way instead of making use of the widespread primitive expressions in the camp, in order to preserve respect for himself and others. He also wanted to animate fellow prisoners to such an attitude. During his unusually long stay in the admission block, an act of chicanery by the SS, Kntenich made contact with many people. Precisely as they took their "first steps" within the camp, he tried to support them. In spite of prohibitions, he relentlessly gave spiritual counsel. He held spiritual conversations and heard confessions on the block street. Father Fischer, a Schoenstatt priest who had already been in the camp for a while, gave him particles of the Eucharist, which he secretly distributed among new prisoners, especially priests. A French priest who asked him: "Will we ever get out of here again?" was answered: "That is secondary. The main thing is only the will of God!"

His work was always an offer to others and was never meant to constrict anyone's freedom. He helped many of his fellow prisoners in this way. He got along remarkably well with numerous communists and socialists. Some of them came to see him in order to confide in him.

Carls, Director of Caritas, wrote after being released:

"We are highly indebted to Father Kntenich, who offered us points for meditation in the evenings, be it on the block street or later in a corner of the dormitory. For a long time this was the only spiritual impulse we received." Father Kntenich even gave retreat talks in the priests' block, especially during the time of quarantine. When he was in the block of the Polish priests, he gave them religious talks in Latin. The slogan he gave the priests for everyday life in the camp was as follows: "We priests in the concentration camp of Dachau do not want to react primitively in primitive conditions but (with daring trust), and if God wants it, we want to either die heroically in the camp as strong priestly personalities or go on working zealously and fruitfully for the kingdom of God as matured priests later on."

Kntenich did not only provide the prisoners with spiritual nourishment, but also shared the sparse food with those prisoners who especially suffered from hunger. Among others, this left a lasting impression on the communist block leader Gutmann. When Kntenich received food parcels after the package embargo was lifted, he handed out everything and so saved many a prisoner from starvation. During the typhus epidemic at the end of 1944, he was able via illegal mail to obtain vaccine from the Schoenstatt Sisters of Mary working in army hospitals so that all priests in Block 26 could be vaccinated.

"Fruits of the Harvest" and "Study on St. Paul"

At the end of 1942, Kntenich's official letters from the camp did not reach Schoenstatt anymore because they were confiscated by the Gestapo. When he found out about this, he began looking for new ways. In the end, he succeeded in smuggling coded reports out of the camp using the official camp letters of Fathers Fischer and Dresbach.

At the beginning of 1943, the question of how he could go on with his work in the interest of the Schoenstatt Movement became more and more urgent. Kntenich had to experience that the spiritual unification of the whole priests' block met with resistance. He was used to thinking about whether such things might include a message from God. In March 1943, the



From left to right:

Joseph Kntenich at the age of 25

Joseph Kntenich together with his students

Imprisonment in the Koblenz prison

Imprisoned in the concentration camp

Photo at his release from the concentration camp

Photo at his arrival in Vallendar-Schoenstatt

decision had matured in him to dedicate all his time and energy from now on for the building of Schoenstatt groups within the camp and to take the risk of illegal mail contact. Father Fischer's transfer to the plantation work detail on March 25 had been an important prerequisite for this. A Polish priest who worked as a clerk in the greenhouse was prepared to smuggle the mail out of the camp via middlemen. Sisters of Mary came into the greenhouse to "buy flowers" and took the illegal mail along. As this was very dangerous, a civilian employee, Michael Siegert, agreed as of October 28, 1943, to take the mail to his home in Herbertshausen, where it was collected by the Sisters of Mary. Kntenich kept looking for a way to keep the risk as limited as possible in the given circumstances. For this reason he himself had stopped writing and instead dictated his ideas to three priests: Joseph Fischer, Ludwig Bettendorf, and above all, Heinz Dresbach. This system of communication "worked," but Kntenich was constantly aware of how dangerous it actually was. Hardly any letters were found.

As a disguise he called himself by the name of the great Apostle to the Nations, St. Paul, and wrote "studies on St. Paul" or also so-called "fruits of the harvest." In one of his first letters to the Sisters of Mary, Father Kntenich wrote on April 19, 1942: "How far has [...] come with his studies on Paul? He will only be able to understand P. when he remembers that he was living and working in a city of heathens, fools, and death." It is easy to realize what he actually wanted to tell the Sisters of Mary and Father Alex Menningen, namely, that he was describing the conditions in the concentration camp of Dachau.

Rhyme as a Disguise

Characteristic for the inner attitude which gave Father Kntenich the strength never to lose his faith in God and human beings despite the horrible terror in the concentration camp is a poem with several stanzas called the "Home Song" (German: "Heimatlied"). In the individual stanzas he creates the picture of an ideal social order with Christian values. The keystones of his vision are freedom, love, joy, purity, solidarity, justice, truth, and hope. Against the backdrop of the "city of heathens, slaves, fools, and death" of the concentration camp, the "Home Song" forms a stark contrast by showing a "colony of heaven." In addition to religious instructions and little poems with which he wanted to thank for example for packages, he also created a great many prayers, some of which still belong today to the Schoenstatt Movement's daily treasury of prayers. Already in 1945, they were published in a little book called Heavenwards. At that time, or also later on, some of the texts were composed into songs. In 2007, the CD "Heavenwards, Always" was created in the USA. Various artists also pictorially illustrated texts written by Father Kntenich during his time in Dachau – for example, Sister Roswina Hermes and Hildegard Hug. It was Maria Kiess who among other things designed the stained glass windows in the house chapel of the "Sonnenau," the youth meeting place in Schoenstatt, based on the "Home Song." At other places paintings and bronze works were designed for example by Sister Sigrig Theimann, Walter Habdank, Juan Fernández, María Jesús Ortiz and others.

www.paterkntenich.de



A Tree that shoots Forth New Branches in Winter

The encounter in the admission block with Ernst Wilm, later president of the Protestant Church in the Rhineland, strengthened Father Kentenich regarding the importance of Schoenstatt's work with families. Already before getting to know him, he had had the feeling that two further institutes were still missing in his Work: the Family Work and the Brothers of Mary. Now he saw a chance for founding them. Dr. Fritz Kühr was interested in Schoenstatt, as was his friend, the Austrian lawyer Dr. Eduard Pesendorfer. After intensive preparation, and in the presence of Fr. Eise during their work time on July 16, 1942, Father Kentenich was able to secretly found the Family Work in Block 14 Room 3 with Dr. Kühr, and the Brothers of Mary with Dr. Pesendorfer.

Kentenich did not only make every effort for the direction of his Work using illegal mail contact but was also attentive to the establishment of groups of priests within the camp who adopted the spirituality of Schoenstatt. It was especially Fathers Fischer and Dresbach who supported him in this. Kentenich gave schooling talks for the individual groups, often on rainy evenings on the camp street. All in all, about 150 priests took part, including Deacon Karl Leisner, who was secretly ordained a priest by the French prisoner Bishop Gabriel Piguet in the camp chapel on December 17, 1944. Together with a number of Schoenstatt priests he maintained a communal life as far as possible. They celebrated together (e.g. Christmas), ate together, and prayed together. As a Schoenstatt group, they experienced a family-like community again and again, through which they could sense the nearness of heaven right in the hell of Dachau.

Remembrance and Encounter

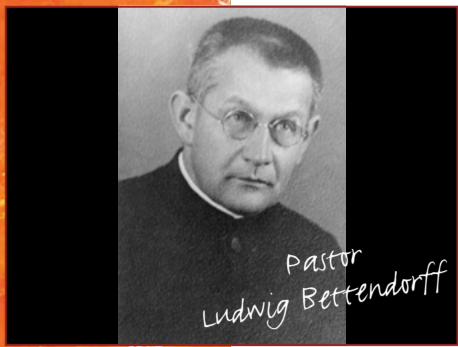
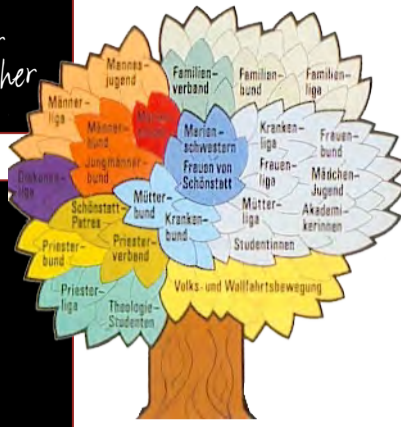
Every year, we as International Schoenstatt Family remember the time of our founder's imprisonment. Those years proved to be of great significance in the history of Schoenstatt. Externally visible signs at various places help us to remember:

In the "Father Kentenich House" on Mount Schoenstatt in Vallendar, part of the display deals with the time of National Socialism. This is also the case in the Schoenstatt Center on the Liebfrauenhöhe in Rottenburg-Neckar, in the province house in Metternich, and in Father Kentenich's birthplace in Gymnich.

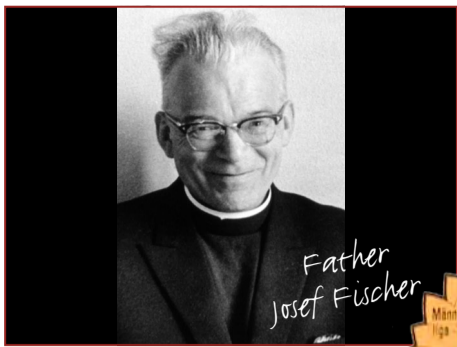
There is a memorial plaque for Father Kentenich's time in prison on Carmelite Street (Karmeliterstraße) in Koblenz as well as in the exhibition "Victims of National Socialism ..." in the Kurt Esser House.

The altar of Dachau is located in the priests' house on Mount Moriah in Simmern-Ww.

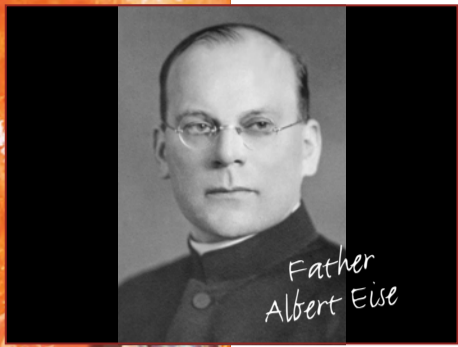
Schoenstatt groups and individuals from Germany and abroad set out to follow the traces of Father Kentenich in Dachau again and again. People all over the world trust in his intercession and let him be their guide for a life of faith.



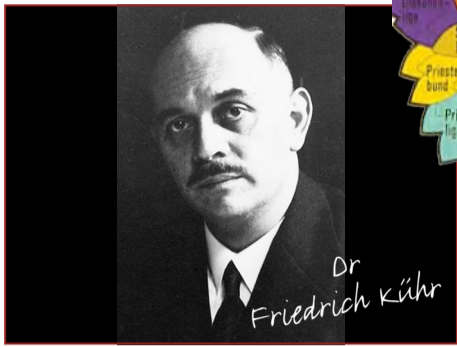
Pastor
Ludwig Bettendorff



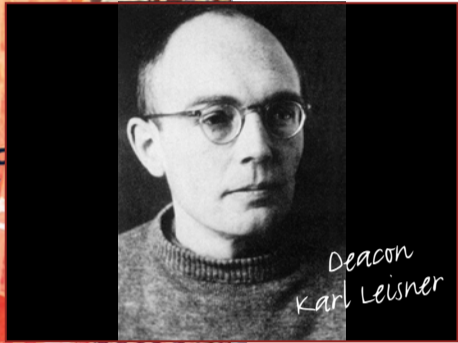
Father
Josef Fischer



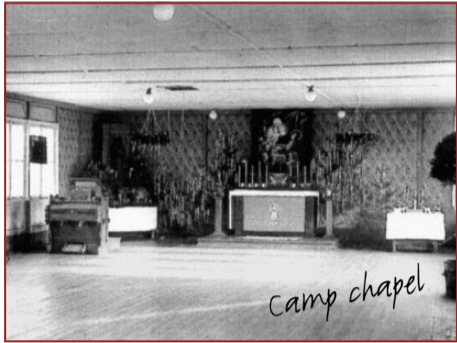
Father
Albert Eise



Dr.
Friedrich Kühr



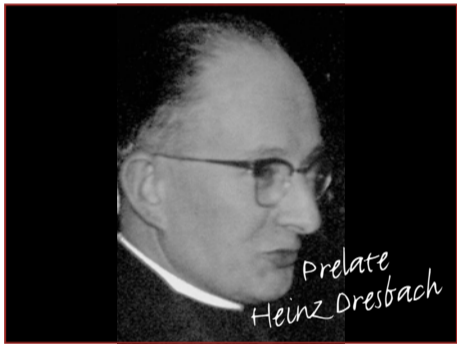
Deacon
Karl Leisner



camp chapel



1967: Father
Kentenich visits
the former
concentration
camp



Prelate
Heinz Dresbach

Dachau, 22. May 2009

Place | Date

Sch. Marie Gudrun Gärtner, Sch. Maria Theresia Kottke

Signatures

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References

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Karl-Heinz Menedodt, Gertrud Pollak, Joachim Schmiedl: *In seinem Herzen ein Feuer*, Joseph Kentenich, Bildbiographie, Patris Verlag, Vallendar 1999

Joachim Schmiedl: *Ein Gang durch Dachau*, Patris Verlag, Vallendar-Schoenstatt 1984

Translation

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Photos

Cover painting by Walter Habdank for Father Kentenich's 100th birthday in 1985; Collage: Hug, Vallendar

Archive of the Schoenstatt Sisters of Mary, Kösching

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Overall design

HC Hug, Vallendar

