LIFE IN THE CONVENT OF ST. ANNE IN STEINERBERG, THE FIRST YEAR

Early in September of 1845, twelve young women from Baden, Germany gathered in the parish inn [or tavern], the building across from St. Ann church in Steinerberg, Switzerland. Their quarters were crowded; they had neither beds nor cooking utensils. In September, the janitor [sexton] and his family were still in residence. They moved out at the end of October, giving the sisters both privacy and a little more room.

Under the guidance of their spiritual director, Fr. Karl Rolfus, the months from September to December were spent establishing the routine of religious life.

Magdalena Weber and her companions arrived in late September. The young women were deeply impressed with her fervor and elected her as their superior. She was then known as Mother Theresa.

Because the community was founded for the purpose of contemplative prayer, especially in the form of perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, Mother Theresa and the Sisters eagerly began their adoration quietly during the course of the day.

The pastor, Fr. Leonard Loser, as spiritual leader of the parish, wanted to prepare the parishioners gradually for a more public form of prayer by the Sisters, that is, praying before the Blessed Sacrament exposed in the monstrance. By December, he felt that the parish was ready, so exposition of the Blessed Sacrament was introduced on December 10th. Adoration was conducted silently.

On the first of January, 1846, the Sisters began praying audibly to the edification of the priests and people.
The Sisters rose at 4:00 or 5:00 a.m. [accounts differ]. Rising early was not so difficult since these girls had been used to being ready for work in the fields at sunrise on their parental farms. One of the Sisters awakened the rest with the greeting, "Gelobt sei Jesus Christus" [Praised be to Jesus Christ]. They spent the early morning at home in prayer and meditation.

Then the Sisters crossed the street to the Church of St. Anne where they would spend time in prayer before Mass.

Entering the church, they gathered in the aisle in front of the high altar. Mother Theresa intoned, “O Sacrament Most Holy,” and the Sisters prostrated and then knelt for some time in adoration.

After filing into their pews, they recited the Chaplet or rosary of the Precious Blood, and the Seven Offerings. They prepared themselves for Holy Communion which they received before Mass. They received Communion daily. The Sisters prayed silently during Holy Mass but afterwards they said an act of adoration in common and continued for some time in silent adoration. Afterwards they left as they had entered with a hymn of praise.

Two Sisters remained in Church for their appointed hour of adoration; the others went home for breakfast.
By January of 1846, almost thirty young women lived together in the convent. Life alternated between prayer and work. Following their breakfast of hot soup [or porridge], they made order in the rooms and then assembled in the community room. Here they were given their daily assignments such as sewing, spinning, knitting, crocheting, embroidery, lace-making, and other handicrafts. Some of the young women were able to make artificial flowers from silk and paper; these the community used or sold as winter decorations for church and family feasts. Mother Theresa often gave these artistic flowers to benefactors and other visitors.

The convent had no yard, and so the Sisters had no place for a garden—and no fields nearby where these young farm girls could work the soil. They worked indoors exclusively, and in silence. When the clock struck the hour, they stopped what they were doing, knelt, and prayed for dying sinners and made an act of Spiritual Communion. Every hour two Sisters left the workroom to replace the two who were in adoration before the tabernacle in the parish church.

In imitation of the Hours of the Breviary, the Sisters had prayer in common several times a day. In the morning they prayed the Seven Offerings of the Precious Blood and the rosary to which they added at each decade, "All praise and blessing to the Most Sacred Heart and the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar."

After the noon meal and recreation they went to church to pray the Way of the Cross. Evening prayer included the rosary and a litany, perhaps the Litany of the Precious Blood. There were also many novenas to St. Joseph, to the holy angels, and to other saints

Adoration was held in the Church until 8:00 p.m. As the Sisters came in and as they left, they prayed the familiar prayer, "Eternal Father, we offer you the Precious Blood of Jesus . . ."

During the evening and night hours the Sisters prayed in the convent in a room where a window faced the parish church: from that window [which one is unknown] they could see the light of the sanctuary lamp. Two Sisters prayed aloud continually.

Sometimes the Sisters sang religious hymns in their home as well as in church, and on one occasion they sang at divine services. Mother Theresa was said to have had a beautiful, clear, melodious voice.

Although prayer was the predominant activity and housework and handwork a close second, there were other activities. The Sisters took turns in the kitchen as cooks and at the door as portresses.

In January, two of the Sisters, Sr. Aloysia Algaier and Sr. Josepha [Katherine] Kuery, went to Schwyz to be examined in the presence of the Commissar in order to obtain a teacher’s certificate. Successfully passing the questioning, they undertook the education of the parish girls.

Sr. Aloysia had to do a lot of writing. One day, she noticed that her ink bottle was almost empty, just a little covered the bottom of the bottle. With the community’s poverty, how would she buy ink? The next morning, she found a thick sludge in the bottle, to which she added water. Each time she did this, she had enough ink for the day.
One evening close to supper time, the cook asked Mother Theresa what kind of soup she should make. Mother Theresa told her to make “flour soup.” Alas, there was no flour in the barrel. So Mother Theresa told the Procuratrix, Sister Maria Anna Diesch, to take a sack and go begging door to door for flour. As she left, she found a beggar at the convent door asking for flour. Laughing, she told him that she had none; indeed she was going begging herself. But at each house she was told that the homeowners had no flour either. Meanwhile, the sister cook revisited the barrel, hoping that maybe she could scrap up sufficient flour for the soup. There she found flour! When she reported her find to Mother Theresa, Mother said that the Blessed Mother must have urged St. Joseph to blow sufficient flour into the barrel so the Sisters to have their soup. Sr. Maria Anna returned home empty-handed but with the message that someone would be bringing a package. From then on, there was enough flour for the Sisters and for the poor who came often and in numbers to the convent door.

The Sisters routinely shared what they had with the poor. As often as they could, they gave each person who came a slice of bread and a bowl of warm soup, sometimes depriving themselves of the last piece bread to do so. Although the convent at St. Anne had no granary, no cellar, no pantry, literally nothing, still the Sisters were somehow able to continue to give food, and even a bit of money and clothing.

In June, death visited the little community for the first time.

Sr. Meinrada (Maria Anna) Kamer, the first young woman from Steinerberg to enter the community had been ill and on the Wednesday after Pentecost took a turn for the worse; it was evident that she was dying. She received Holy Communion. A little later her mother visited her. The whole community assembled around her as she died. She was buried on June 5, 1846, her 21st birthday.

Then a second death occurred: in August, Sr. Francisca Muehlhaupt died.

The same day that Sr. Francisca died, a Countess who was a member of the Roman Congregation of the Precious Blood came to Steinerberg. She had heard about the Sisters at St. Anne while visiting Einsiedeln. She told the Sisters how the Precious Blood was venerated in Rome and exhorted them to pray often the prayer “Eternal Father, I offer Thee the Most Precious Blood....” Mother Theresa then introduced the prayer to the community.

On the anniversary of the foundation, September 8, 1846, two sisters received the veil. One of them was Sr. Casparine Meise who years later in Gurtweil, in 1860, was elected superior general.

These are but a few of the events that occurred in the first year in Steinerberg.

Resources for this newsletter:
- Foundation and Progress
- A Time to Sow
- Chronicle of the Congregation of the Most Precious Blood, 1845-1860, ... Trans Sr. Praxedes Schnitzmeier. 
- Steinerberg Diary, 1846-1848, trans. Sr. Marie Klein