Precious Blood Sisters as Immigrants and Refugees

Our 2016 General Chapter called us "to take bold action that transforms us, gives us energy and unites us in working and praying for peace and justice in our suffering world..."

At our March Community Day our discernment led us to choose immigrants/refugees as our bold action focus. This newsletter illustrates our own Precious Blood Community's experiences as Immigrants and Refugees.

There have always been migrants and refugees.
As long as one group of people has desired the territory of another and mounted a campaign to get it, there have been displaced persons.

As long as people have fled in fear of their lives and the lives of their children, there have been exiles.

We ourselves, Sisters of the Most Precious Blood, were once outcasts, refugees and immigrants. Twelve young women from Baden in southern Germany who wanted to enter religious life emigrated to Switzerland because of the hostility in Germany. They were no longer welcome in their native land... but found a home in a foreign country.

Life in the little convent at Steinerberg was busy as the sisters followed the daily routine of prayer and work. But their peace was soon shattered.
As early as 1830, efforts had been directed against the Church in Switzerland, and by 1846 events had reached a critical point.

Priests and religious were in danger.
The Steinerberg community was in peril.

The Swiss government disputed their legitimacy.
Fr. Rollfuss and the sisters were objects of suspicion and slander because of the many deaths that resulted from an unknown illness.
When the sisters attempted to establish another house, an official from the Canton Schwyz government evicted them.

In autumn of 1847, the Catholic cantons in Switzerland fell to the anticlerical victors of the Sonderbund War.
Canton Schwyz was occupied by federal troops.

Anticipating soldiers in Steinerberg and fearing for their safety, the sisters dressed in secular clothes and sought shelter in private homes.
When it was safe, they returned to St. Anne.
The sisters experienced repeated harassment from local and canton officials. They were subjected to intrusive visits and searches by the town council and the police.

Early June 1848, this notice appeared in the paper: “The Supreme Cantonal Council has decreed the secularization of the women’s convent on the Steinerberg.”

Hence the community at St. Anne was dissolved.

And so these women who had been denied the opportunity to found their congregation in their native Germany were now expelled from their home in Switzerland...

...thus sharing the fate of many women.

They settled in Ottmarsheim where they lived in relative peace for about 12 years.

And then, O happy day, they received an invitation from Fr. Kessler to come to Gurtweil to take charge of the orphanage. Here the community flourished. The number of sisters increased from 21 to 108.

The Ecclesiastical Art Department was begun.

The sisters established a teacher-training school and staffed schools in several nearby towns.

The community in Gurtweil enjoyed a good reputation.

But even as the community prospered, dark clouds of persecution were again gathering. Chancellor Otto von Bismarck dominated German politics and fostered the anti-Catholic sentiment which gradually prevailed.

Laws were passed that placed parochial schools under secular control.

Religious congregations were banned from engaging in missions, pastoral work, and teaching.

In Baden convents were secularized.

In Gurtweil, once again the sisters put on secular clothes as a precaution.

Meanwhile, in the United States, the Church saw a growing need for ministry with the German immigrants who settled in the Midwest. Fr. Blaisius Winterhalter, the pastor of the parish in Belle Prairie, Illinois, visited Gurtweil in 1866, and, with the approval of his bishop, invited the sisters to his parish.
The sisters, however, put off making a decision, hoping that the political climate would improve.

But it did not improve.

The invitation was repeated, and Mother Augusta and the sisters recognized it as a God-given opportunity to secure the safety and continuation of the congregation.

So the decision was made to send sisters to America.

Consequently, on February 2nd, 1870, nine sisters bound for America departed from Gurtweil, leaving behind them all that was dear.

Once more the sisters were refugees, expelled from their native land, driven into exile...

...as were countless refugees before and after them, and for similar reasons, namely, political and religious persecutions.

They faced a perilous sea voyage and an arduous land journey.

Today's refugees share this experience.


From Belle Prairie they moved to St. Agatha, and finally to O'Fallon, the last stop.
Sr. Seraphine Zwissig who came in 1873 in the 4th group had entered at Steinerberg and thus lived through all of the displacements—to Ottmarsheim, to Gurtweil, and then to the U.S. She is buried in our cemetery.

Today’s refugees also seek a permanent home. At last a day dawns when refugees and immigrants who found a place for themselves in their new country are granted citizenship.

This was part of our sisters’ experience as well.

During the early years in the United States, the community remained German in culture and language. Even most of the American women who entered spoke German. No thought was given to having the older members get American citizenship.

But when the U.S. entered the First World War in 1916, there was concern for our German members. Anyone who spoke German was viewed with suspicion and could be deported.

Immediately after the war steps were taken to have all the Sisters not yet naturalized apply for citizenship. After some preparation, a group of sisters went to St. Louis where they answered questions before a judge and renounced their allegiance to Germany.

Now, with mixed feelings, they were truly Americans.