

PAST STILL PRESENT

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OUR FOUNDATION—SEPTEMBER 8, 1845,

Congregation of the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood of O'Fallon, Missouri

HOW IT ALL BEGAN...

Fr. Karl Rolfus, a young German priest, was ordained in 1842 and assigned to the parish in the small village of Glotter Thal aut Waldkirch, Baden, Germany, the birthplace of Magdalena Weber. He

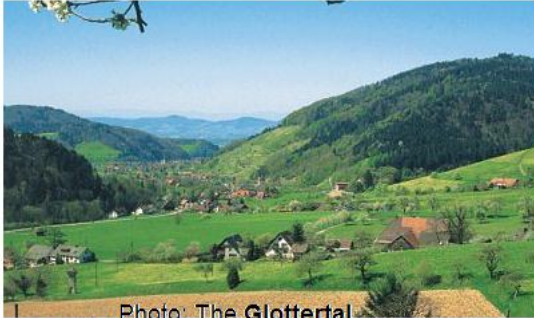


Photo: The Glotterthal
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became the spiritual director for Magdalena (later known as Mother Theresa) and several other young women who were interested in entering a convent.

Early in 1845, Fr. Rolfus visited the convent of Perpetual Adoration [Norbertine Sisters] on Mt. Sion in St. Gall,



www.premontresisters.com/index.php?id=orders/sankt_gallen#C20

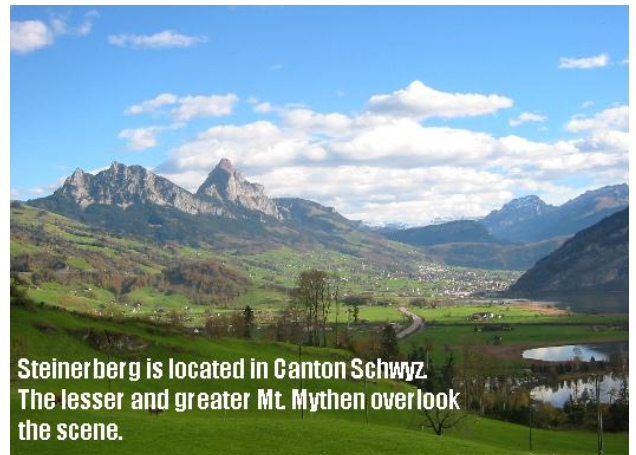
Switzerland. So impressed with what he experienced there, he decided to begin a similar congregation with the young women under his spiritual direction. But where? And when?



A young woman from Wellendingen, Baden, **Ursula Behringer** (later known as Sr. Xaveria), made a pilgrimage to the church of **St. Anne in Steinerberg, Switzerland**. Inspired by the beauty and serenity of the place, she spoke to the parish priests about the possibility of some young women living together in the parish and devoting themselves to prayer. The pastor and his assistant were eager to establish perpetual adoration in the parish and welcomed the idea of a convent being founded there. She then approached

Fr. Rolfus with the suggestion that St. Anne's would be the ideal place. At the urging of

Magdalena and the other women, Fr. Rolfus visited Steinerberg. The two priests welcomed him and together they determined that a convent would be established in the parish.



Steinerberg is located in Canton Schwyz. The lesser and greater Mt. Mythen overlook the scene.

■ [Note: Because of rampant hostility toward the Church, German convents could not accept new candidates at that time. So these young women had to go elsewhere. Divine Providence led them to Steinerberg.]



Ursula was the first to go to Steinerberg, arriving there on September 5, 1845. Three days later, September 8, the other young women joined her, bringing the number to twelve. **Their “convent” was established in the inn across the street from the church.** The inn belonged to the parish. Although the sexton [or janitor] lived there, he and his family had a home in the village. Fr. Loser, the pastor, offered this building to the sisters for their convent.

Fr. Rolfus described the unique accommodations in these words: “The sisters began their convent in a tavern...; the bar room was to the left, and their quarters to the right.”

Conditions were far from ideal. The young women, crowded into a small part of the building, lived in extreme poverty. There were no beds; they slept on the floor. They had no stove or kitchen utensils with which to prepare meals so the sexton provided them with meager fare. Nevertheless, according to various sources, they were undismayed and cheerfully embraced conventual living.



Fr. Rolfus appointed a superior, the oldest woman in the group and one who had had experience in a convent. Sadly, she proved to be an unfortunate choice. Fr. Claude Perrot in his biography of Mother Theresa described this superior’s manner of religious life as one in which the sisters “prayed a little, talked a lot, and enjoyed a prolonged afternoon coffee session.” — Hardly what the young women wanted!



On September 27, several other young women arrived; among them was **Magdalena Weber**. Fr. Rolfus dismissed the provisional superior and the young women elected Magdalena [**Mother Theresa**]. She led the small community until her death in 1848, and so is considered the foundress of our community.



- *[Note: This is the only picture we have of Mother Theresa.*
- *The several pictures of Fr. Rolfus all show him as a man in his 60s or later.]*

By October the sexton and his family vacated their quarters and the sisters were able to begin living in privacy. On November 4 the door of the inn/tavern was locked and the convent bell was hung.

In the four months between September and January the young congregation was kept busy with the organization and formation of a new religious community. Fr. Rolfus wrote a Rule for them. The Rule emphasized the community’s dedication to the Most Precious Blood through perpetual adoration.

Perpetual adoration began on January 1, 1846. The sisters prayed by day in the church. All the sisters came to church where they sang a hymn of praise and knelt in adoration. They prayed the Rosary of the Precious Blood and the Seven Offerings. They received Holy Communion before Mass and then attended the Mass. After more silent prayers all but two of the sisters returned to the convent. All day a pair of sisters would come to the church, hour by hour, for a period of prayer until 8:00 in the evening.



Steinerberg, Innkreis der Wallfahrtskirche
Interior of the parish church of St. Anne, Steinerberg, circa 1900

Then during the hours of the night the sisters would pray at a window, two by two. From one of these corner rooms [which one is unknown] the sisters could see the tabernacle light burning.



Although the sisters intended to be a contemplative congregation, the Swiss government prohibited all strictly contemplative orders. However **the pastor needed teachers for the girls in his parish.** Sr. Josepha (Catherine) Kuery and Sr. Aloysia (Maria) Algayer both had the necessary credentials and were qualified to take the state teachers' examinations. They were examined—and found competent—in religion, arithmetic, and grammar, so **the two sisters took on teaching duties.**

The new year brought other developments. One welcome development: on January 24, **Mother Theresa received the habit** that Fr. Rolfus had designed. It was a one-piece robe of loosely-woven coarse black material held in place at the waistline with a cincture. A pelerine or short cape was worn over the shoulders. As a symbol of the Sisters' association with the Precious Blood devotion a red cross with seven drops of blood was stitched on the left side of the pelerine. In February, eleven sisters received the habit and in May all **received the veil.** This black veil was attached to a bonnet and wimple. Thus all the sisters dressed as Mother Theresa dressed in the picture of her above.

Another not-so-welcome development was the interest of the Swiss government. The Town Council had approved the sisters' residence in the fall of 1845. But in February of 1846 the District Council demanded an explanation concerning this group of women. The assistant pastor, Fr. Holdener, wrote a careful letter, denying that the women had formed a religious congregation in the strict sense [the strict sense entailing the public profession of religious vows, a Rule approved by the Church, and a well-established means of support—none of which the group had yet achieved]. He further pointed out how the group benefited the town by its educational endeavors. The District Council accepted Fr. Holdener's explanation and so the matter was settled for a while.



But there was trouble coming... [to be continued]