

PAST STILL PRESENT

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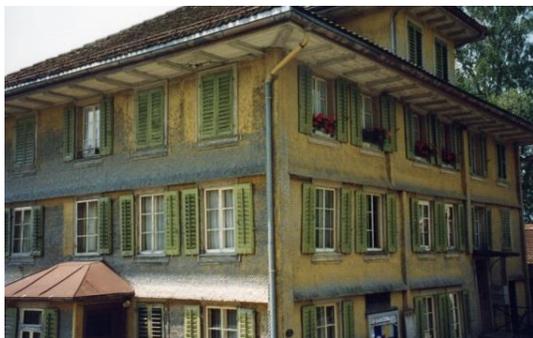
OUR FOUNDATION IN STEINERBERG, 1845, PART TWO

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



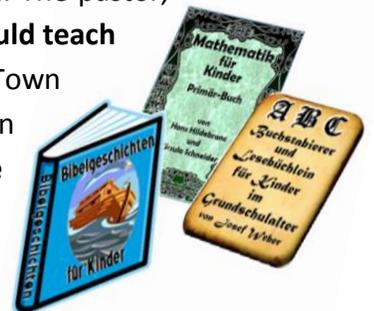
I [the editor] have often thought that the history of the Steinerberg years reads like a serial with cliffhanger endings: "Will this young congregation survive? Tune in next week and see." The fledgling community faced so many obstacles and reverses that we may be sure that only by the will of God did the congregation continue to exist. Read on....

As we know, the group of young women, German natives all, made the foundation in Steinerberg, in the Catholic Canton of Schwyz, because in 1845 their native **Germany was hostile to the formation of new religious congregations.** Steinerberg seemed ideal. However, **when they arrived, there was no convent.** The young women began conventual life in the inn belonging to St. Anne's parish—really a tavern—with the bar room to the left, and the sisters' rooms to the right.



Undaunted by the location and by the **lack of beds or stove or kitchen utensils**—the sexton provided meals for a time—they quickly took on the tasks of organizing and forming their new religious community. In October, Magdalen Weber (Mother Theresa) was elected Superioress of the Congregation. By November the sexton and his family had moved out, **the inn/tavern was vacated, and the building was theirs—with a string attached.**

At that time the parish was schooling about eighty boys and girls in one classroom. The pastor, Father Loser, saw a solution to this crowding in the arrival of **young women who could teach the girls.** Accordingly, plans were made and submitted to the school board and Town Council: the parish would pay for furnishing two classrooms; the remaining rooms in the janitor's house (the inn) were given to the sisters. **The sisters would teach the girls without pay,** and, in addition to teaching, the sisters were to care for the church, the altars and linens, and pay the janitor an annual rent of about sixteen dollars. **The school board and Town Council approved this arrangement.** The sisters were given permission for Perpetual Adoration which began on January 1, 1846. They prayed two by two by day in the church and by night at a window in a corner room from which they could see the tabernacle light burning. While at adoration in the church, they were not to disrupt parochial services by singing or praying aloud.



Two Sisters, Sr. Josepha (Catherine) Kuery and Sr. Aloysia (Maria) Algayer, passed the state teachers' examinations and were placed in charge of the school. The other Sisters, for a time, were considered their boarders. **Such an arrangement was necessary to satisfy the local government.** Thus in September, 1846, the young congregation combined the active work of teaching with the spiritual work of prayer.

Although the Town Council had approved the sisters' residence in the fall of 1845, in February of 1846 the District Council questioned the presence of this group of women who in spite of the prohibition of contemplative congregations had appeared to establish one. The assistant pastor, Fr. Holdener, wrote a careful letter, denying that the women had formed a religious congregation in the literal sense [i.e., public profession of religious vows, a Rule approved by the Church, and a well-established means of support]. He further pointed out how the group benefitted the town by supplying teachers for the girls' school. The District Council accepted Fr. Holdener's explanation and forwarded it to the government council, but insisted that a religious corporation must not be established under any conditions.

And so the matter was settled for a while.

But there was trouble coming....and it came in the form of **illness and death.** Twenty-six sisters including Mother Theresa died of an unknown cause. The first to die was Sr. Meinrada from Steinerberg; she was buried on her 21st birthday. These deaths prompted much speculation and slander against Fr. Rolfus who was accused of luring young women to the convent and poisoning them in order to obtain their dowries. Only many years later was it determined that they died because waste from a nearby privy had leaked into the sisters' water supply and contaminated it.



Memorial plaque honoring the sisters who died at Steinerberg



ZUM GEDENKEN AN MUTTER M THERESA WEBER UND IHRE 25 SCHWESTERN VOM KOSTBAREN BLUTE DIE IN DER ZEIT VON 1846-1848 AUF DEM FRIEDHOF NEBEN DIESER KAPELLE BEIGESSETZT WORDEN SIND.

In memory of Mother M. Theresa Weber and her 25 sisters of the Most Precious Blood who in the time from 1846-1848 were buried in the cemetery next to the chapel.

This memorial stone is in the cemetery at Steinerberg.

As a result of the **deaths and the gossip and suspicion surrounding Fr. Rolfus, many began to distrust the fledgling community.** In October 1846 the Commission of Education filed a petition with the Canton Schwyz council government stating that since the two sister-teachers at Steinerberg had passed the state



examinations they could not be denied their teaching permits. However, the petition notes, other places have engaged members of religious orders as teachers. The Commission requested that the Canton Council make a decision about this practice. On November 4, 1846, the **Council ruled**

that **“Teaching permits may be granted to religious only if they belong to an order which is officially approved by the Church.”** Curiously, the decision was not made public until later, so the sisters continued to do what they were doing, but were carefully observed by the government.

Already in June of 1846, the Steinerberg community had submitted their petition for incorporation with the Roman community of the *Adorers of the Blood of Christ*, established by Mother Maria de Mattias. The Council decision made this affiliation imperative, if the young community was going to survive as a religious congregation. The incorporation was accomplished in August of 1847 and would remain in effect until July of 1875.



In spite of the many deaths and the disapproval of the various Swiss governmental bodies, women were eager to join the community. **The number of candidates exceeded the space for them.** The convent at Steinerberg was, in Mother Theresa's words, "filled to over-flowing." **An additional home had to be found.** One possibility was in **der Au bei Steinen [the meadow near Steinen]**, in an old abandoned convent whose various buildings



had been recently renovated. Only about 6 miles distant from Steinerberg, it seemed ideal to accommodate the overflow. However, in September of 1846 when Mother Theresa and several other sisters went there to make final arrangements, **an official of the Canton Schwyz government arrived and told them that they must leave before nightfall.** Though allowed to keep the property, the sisters apparently were never allowed to live there for more than a few days.

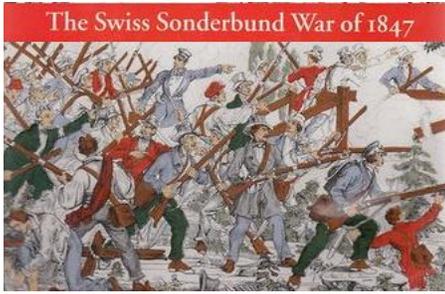
Mother Theresa had better success the next summer, June, 1847. The overcrowded conditions at Steinerberg had not improved and it was imperative to find additional housing. By good fortune, a young woman from Seelisberg in Canton Uri applied for admission to the community. Her parents recently deceased, the woman offered to turn the family homestead over to the community when she was accepted. **There was a snag—the Canton Uri officials did not permit nonresidents to purchase property.** A friend bought the property in his own name and then turned it over to the sisters who had to secure the right of residence from the local government. **A further snag—the sisters faced opposition from some of the members of the cantonal board** who called a parish meeting to voice their disapproval. The parish, however, voted to accept the sisters in residence. There was room for 20 sisters, some of whom were engaged in teaching the parish children.

The Steinerberg convent was still over-crowded and so Mother Theresa tried again in the summer of 1847 to occupy the convent in Au. She and ten others sisters walked to **Au in Steinen**, but **a local constable forbade them to stay**, and the sisters, all but Mother Theresa and a companion, had to return to Steinerberg. Mother Theresa had taken ill, and so she and another sister were allowed to stay until she felt well enough to return to St. Anne's.

It is evident that **the sisters experienced repeated harassment from local and canton officials and police** but not all encounters had such grim results. After the first expulsion from Au, the sisters were informed that the **District Council had ordered an inspection of the Steinerberg convent.** When police-director Hodiger demanded entry, Mother Theresa received him graciously and showed him through the house. The sisters had been working assembling bouquets of artificial flowers. Mother Theresa spontaneously gathered bouquets as gifts for his wife and daughters. Her action may have charmed or confused him. What report he made to the District Council is not known, but the sisters suffered no ill consequences. One source says that he "changed from an opponent to a true friend and pleader of the sisters."



During the autumn days of 1847, the situation was dire for the sisters. In November the **Sonderbundskrieg** occurred. Seven Catholic cantons (including Schwyz, Uri, and Lucerne) formed a “separate alliance”



[*Sonderbund*] to protect their conservative interests against a centralization of power. The war lasted only three weeks—the Alliance being defeated—with a minimum of loss of life on both sides. However, the effect on the townspeople and sisters was significant. Because the men were at the battlefield, no one was available to cut trees for wood, so **the sisters and others had no wood for cooking or heating. There was little food anyway**; a crop failure shortened the food supply and sent prices soaring and the sisters had no money. When one of the sisters died, there was a problem getting a coffin for her; finally they succeeded in getting a coffin from a distant town.

Mother Theresa was critically ill in the convent in the Au; Father Rolfus was again in jail, and no communication with him was possible because the political situation closed the borders. The sisters were quite conscious of the perilous conditions at the time, but they persevered in prayer and hope, and God provided. Father Rolfus managed to send a man to the sisters with 200 *gulder* (about \$70).



The defeat of the Alliance brought more problems to the sisters. Canton Schwyz was occupied by federal troops who were scheduled to enter Steinerberg. Anticipating the soldiers and **fearing for their safety, the sisters put off their habits and, dressed in secular clothes, sought shelter in private homes**, asking that the townspeople take two or more of them together. Those that were too ill to leave St. Anne stayed there with Sr. Caecilia and some of the town’s women caring for them. The two sisters died that same day and were buried secretly and quietly the following dawn with only a few sisters in lay dress attending.



The soldiers entered the town November 26, 1847. They assured the sisters that they would not be molested. So the sisters returned to St. Anne and resumed their convent life including teaching in the school.

But not without grave inconvenience. The sisters were told to house a number of soldiers in the convent and to provide food for several families. They had no food and no room. What were they to do? They asked Mother Theresa, sick as she was, to return to St. Anne to guide them. So Mother Theresa in her bed was put on a sled with a cow in front to pull, and up the hill they went. Such a parade! The soldiers laughed them to scorn. But Mother Theresa endured it all with a smile and gentle patience.



In December the sisters were subjected to several investigations during which the soldiers rummaged through every room in the convent looking for “persons in hiding or war materials being hoarded.” **The sisters were informed that the community was soon to be dissolved.** All religious institutions were distrusted and the community at Steinerberg especially so because of the many deaths, allegations against Father Rolfus, suspicions, and repeated inspections.

It was clear that their days in Steinerberg were numbered. Father Rolfus, foreseeing this, had already begun looking for a place of refuge and had found it in the Alsace, France. Late in December a group of ten Sisters left Steinerberg to seek a new home there. Thus the year 1847 ended in uncertainty.

[Material for this newsletter was gathered from A Time to Sow, Segmüller’s History of the Community of the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood and the diaries.]