

# PAST STILL PRESENT

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## REV. KARL ROLFUS, FOUNDER

**We mark 170 years from our foundation in 1845. This issue features Father Karl Rolfus whom we revere as our founder, along with our foundress, Mother Theresa Weber.**

Karl Maria Rolfus, son of the town-surveyor, Melchior Rolfus and his wife Regina, nee Gassenschmidt, was born in Freiburg on January 24, 1819. Of his boyhood, little is known except that he and his younger brother, Herman, attended the Lyceum [grammar School/high school] in Freiburg.



Portrait of Pope Gregory XVI (1765-1846) Date 1831 Josef Kriehuber [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Upon finishing their schooling, both brothers started their preparation for the priesthood. But before he began his theological studies, Karl traveled to Vienna. As a seminarian, in 1839, the 20-year-old Karl and two friends made a pilgrimage on foot to Rome. The trio spent sixteen days in Rome, during which time they enjoyed the privilege of an audience with His Holiness, Pope Gregory XVI. The following year he went to the Tyrol. His travels not only gave him good life experiences and matured his judgments, but helped him develop a deep appreciation for the religious and monastic life.

Karl studied theology at the Seminary at St. Peter, a town near Freiburg. He was a forceful opponent of Wessenbergerism, prevalent at that time. Because of his outspoken opposition of Ignaz Heinrich von Wessenberg's principles advocating a German National Church somewhat loosely connected with Rome, some of his professors at the Seminary who favored Wessenberg's rationalistic views on religion wanted to deny him ordination. However on August 24, 1842 Karl was ordained by the Most Reverend Archbishop, Herman von Vicari of Freiburg, who held him in high esteem.



Freiburg Cathedral By Detroit Publishing Co. license from Photoglobe Zürich [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons  
Insert Freiburg Cathedral interior Benutzer:AlterVista CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons  
Bishop & priest-adapted from [http://newsite.augustiniancanons.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/DSC\\_492.jpg](http://newsite.augustiniancanons.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/DSC_492.jpg)

In a document titled *The Foundation of the Convents of Steinerberg/Ottmarsheim, [the] Rolfus Chronicle* (written retrospectively), Fr. Rolfus describes Glottertal:

"Glottertal is a magnificent valley in the Schwarzwald with homes scattered here and there; the people are probably of the middle class. ... Luxuriant pastures, magnificent forests, stock-farming, fruit, and buildings flourish here."

Glottertal was the hometown of Magdalena Weber who



View of Glottertal from the northwest. The parish church of St. Blaise is at the far left.

By ireas (Own work) [CC BY-SA 4.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

was the leader of a number of young women desirous to grow in the spiritual life.

Looking back from the vantage point of many years, Fr. Rolfus describes her thus: "She was the daughter of a middle class weaver who had a small farm near the weaving mill.... Magdalena Weber was of medium height, slender and delicately built, gentle and beautiful as an angel." Fr. Rolfus was also much impressed with her piety and the spirituality of her companions. They made known to him their desire to enter religious life.

Many of the German clergy had grown lax, having been influenced by the rationalism of the age which belittled



the role of liturgy and sacraments. In Glottertal, however, young Fr. Rolfus zealously promoted more frequent reception of the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Communion; he said that he had more ways of reaching people in the confessional than in teaching and preaching. He was reprimanded for frequently coming late to the classroom because he spent too much time in prayer. He also encouraged the conducting of missions, retreats, and pilgrimages to holy places — activities which at this period were looked on with disfavor by the liberal clergy.

In the *Rolfus Chronicle*, Fr. Rolfus describes his tenure in Glottertal: "As might be expected, my presence and work in the parish created much rumor. There was no lack of insults and ridicule. ... My life clearly was no longer safe. The Reverend Pastor, otherwise a good man, considered the more frequent reception of Communion as an abuse and foolishness. ... The pastor took the tabernacle key away from me. Soon I was accused to the Most Reverend Ordinary, had to defend myself, received a day's house arrest, which truly was mild, but I was transferred four hours away into the lowland (Neuhausen in Pforzheim) where I was completely unknown. ..."



In Neuhausen as he had in Glotterthal, Fr. Rolfus encouraged the reception of the sacraments. Again complaints were brought against him. Barely two years in the priesthood, he was again called before diocesan authorities at Freiburg, severely reprimanded, and again confined to the rectory there.

Fr. Rolfus continues: "A similar year in banishment had again passed by. Then [in 1844] I came as vicar into the midst of the Schwarzwald. In this vicinity there still lived a Christian core of people.

Many of the entire region were already attending the Missions; generally a religious disposition prevailed, and the people had the means and the good will to support church undertakings. ... The parish is called Friedenweiler. ... From here it was only about eight hours from my first vicarage at Glotterthal, to the joy of my spiritual children there. ... Soon the whole Schwarzwald came alive. By the hour, the good people crowded together here to attend to their devotions. Nearly all day I had to sit hearing confessions, and the crowd always became greater...."

Fr Rolfus persisted in encouraging his parishioners in the spiritual life in spite of being admonished by the bishop to curb his enthusiasm for the celebration of the sacraments; the bishop said that people concerned about their salvation should find their own way to heaven.





Rev. Karl Rolfus \*

\*About this picture of Fr. Rolfus: there is no portrait of him as a young man. This picture represents an attempt to 'youthen' the portrait of him done in his 80s. See p. 4.

Magdalena and the other young women continued to seek Fr. Rolfus' spiritual direction. They steadfastly maintained their desire for religious life. Since there were no convents in Baden to which he could send candidates, the only solution appeared to be the creation of a new foundation. Two occurrences would converge to make this possible.

1) Francesco Albertini founded the **ARCHCONFRATERNITY OF THE PRECIOUS BLOOD** in 1808. Fr. Rolfus had visited Rome before his ordination and had become acquainted with the *Missionaries* and the *Archconfraternity*. He himself was enrolled in the *Archconfraternity*. At the same time, devotion to the Precious Blood became fervent in Germany. Fr. Rolfus zealously promoted the devotion among his many directees, including Magdalena Weber.



Francesco Albertini

2) **URSULA BEHRINGER** made a pilgrimage to the **SHRINE OF ST. ANNE IN STEINERBERG**

and thought the location was the ideal place for a new foundation. She approached Fr. Rolfus with this information. Since nothing in his seminary training prepared him for establishing a congregation of women religious, he sought advice from the Precious Blood Fathers at Drei Aehren in the Alsace, then made visits at several established convents, gathering information and receiving encouragement; finally he came to the Benedictine Abbey of Einsiedeln, where he met Fr. Claudius Perrot O.S.B., who years later would write the biography of Mother Theresa [Magdalena] Weber. From there he went to Steinerberg where he and the two Steinerberg priests made the decision on the 20th of June, 1845, to establish a religious Community under the title of



**"CONGREGATION OF THE SISTERS OF THE MOST PRECIOUS BLOOD FOR THE ADORATION OF THE MOST BLESSED SACRAMENT."**

Because of his audacity in founding a religious community—and in Switzerland yet!—Fr. Rolfus was again the object of criticism and ridicule, and once more imprisoned. Again he suffered ecclesiastical trial and punishment.

Fr. Rolfus records: "...as a result of articles in papers hostile to religion, because of our lack of a better foundation and some setbacks, I was deserving of four weeks of imprisonment in the clerical seminary in St. Peter, even though the reverend pastor of Friedenweiler gave the best possible testimony on my behalf. ... During my short imprisonment,...the young women in Glotterthal packed and traveled with Magdalena Weber to Steinerberg. There they arranged everything according to the prescribed statutes and began the perpetual adoration."

By **SEPTEMBER 8, 1845**, Ursula Behringer and the young women from Glottertal, the core of the new community, had set up convent life in the sexton's house/inn/tavern→



Niederwühl, parish church, interior view with altar  
<http://img.istocking.net/7580/16632839/0/n/5595282/Alt-Niederwühl-Pfarrkirche-innenansicht-mit-Altar.jpg>

owned by the parish. Magdalena Weber arrived sometime later and shortly afterward was named superior of the fledgling community. Fr. Rolfus served as their spiritual director.



However he again suffered imprisonment, after which he was transferred as vicar to Niederwühl on the border of Switzerland, where he remained for several years. By the time he left Niederwühl in 1849, the sisters were living and dying in Ottmarsheim as they had in Steinerberg of an undiagnosed disease. Fr. Rolfus was accused of giving them poisoned hosts in order to acquire their dowries.

Letters written by Fr. Rolfus during these years are filled with details of the various accusations and his imprisonments. For example: "May 8, 1849 - Meanwhile a lot has happened in Ottmarsheim. You know that seven Sisters, all of whom came from Steinerberg in dying condition . . . died quickly one after the other. ...This started the old rumor again. The old newspaper lies from Baden were revived and appeared in the French newspapers and as a result I was arrested twice." [Back in 1847 a vicious article had appeared in the South German newspaper which Fr. Rolfus, calling it "calumny, detraction and slander," refuted at great length in three replies, also published in that paper. Nevertheless, the damage was done.]

"July 7, 1849 - However, I have another cross because of the insistence of the diocesan chancery in Freiburg...the Rev. Bishop of Strassburg felt himself compelled to take away my faculties. Finally, I'm not even allowed to say Mass....If only I were allowed to say Mass...."

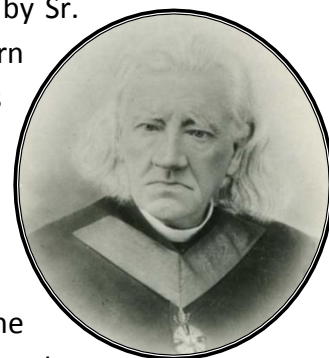
In these years Fr. Rolfus had limited contact with the community because of his involvement with the authorities. In 1852 the Precious Blood Superiors in Rome replaced him with the Rev. F. X. Behe, the Pastor at Ottmarsheim, as the spiritual director.



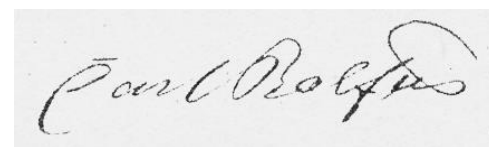
Statue of Fr. Carl Rolfus with a boy,  
St. Josefshaus, Herten

After years of struggle and assignments to many parishes as assistant, Fr. Rolfus finally was given his own parish at Herten [Herthen] in November of 1871. When he was 60 years old, in 1879, at the urging of Sr. Maria Theresia Scherer, founder of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross, Ingenbohl, Switzerland, he established the Sankt Josefshaus, a home and school for children with severe disabilities. By the end of the first year, twenty children were in residence. At the time of his death, St. Josefshaus held 550 residents; at present, seven locations serve 900 people with disabilities. Ten years ago, St. Josefshaus began caring for the elderly as well.

Fr. Rolfus had no further contact with our sisters until he was in his eighties. Then in 1903, two sisters from O'Fallon surprised him with a visit. Sister Corona Striegel narrates the story as told her by Sr. Ludovica Karbach: Sr. Ludovica and Sr. Raymunda Krekel were sent to Europe to learn embroidery. While in Germany, they visited Fr. Rolfus who was then very old and frail. "As they entered his room they saw Father Rolfus sitting erect in his chair near a small table. However, he was too feeble to rise.... Father Rolfus was very happy to see them and asked them many questions concerning the Sisters he remembered, our foundation in America, the health and growth of the Sisters, and the welfare of the community as such. After this the Sisters asked him to bless them and the community. Tears were flowing as he told them how happy they made him by their visit, and he regarded this visit as proof to him that God was pleased and had blessed his many efforts and sufferings during our years at Steinerberg and Ottmarsheim...."



Father Rolfus died March 2, 1907 at age 88 and is buried in Herten. His work with the neglected and handicapped won for him the title of "Father of the poorest of the poor."



Condensing the life of Fr. Rolfus to fit in four pages hardly does him justice. Readers may be interested in perusing the sources used for this newsletter. The main ones are *Foundation and Progress*. [1925]. and Lake, Jean Thomas C.P.P.S. *A Time to Sow* [1972]. *Karl Rolfus Verein [Association]*, biography of Karl Rolfus, translated from German, [http://www.karl-rolfus-ev.de/html/karl\\_rolfus.html](http://www.karl-rolfus-ev.de/html/karl_rolfus.html). Rolfus, Carl. Correspondence 1845-1851, 1900. Trans. by Sr. Loyola Kohnen. Unpublished manuscript. Rolfus, Carl. *The Foundation of the Convents of Steinerberg/Ottmarsheim*, [the] Rolfus Chronicle (written retrospectively). Trans. by Sr. Paula Volkerding, 1983. Unpublished manuscript. Striegel, Corona C.P.P.S. *The Reverend Carl Rolfus*. Unpublished manuscript, nd. Life of Mother Theresa by Claude Perrot O.S.B., edited by Sr. Virginia Volkerding.

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